

'The National Question' in American Literature, 1913 – Present

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Aimée Lê, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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ABSTRACT

Aimée Lê: 'The National Question' in American Literature, 1913 - Present

Dating at least from Joseph Stalin's 1913 paper, 'Marxism and the National Question,' the issue of how to integrate minority groups into a nation – or whether distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups should form their own autonomous nations – has been crucial not only to visions of statecraft but also to national literatures. Prior to the 20th century, American national literature had been articulated in contrast to the 'Old World' of continental Europe. However, after the Second World War, and with the advent of the Cold War, American writers' workshops took up the mantle of Western tradition, emphasising the centrality of individual psychology to liberal democracy in contrast to collective projects like communism and fascism, in the process producing particular, agonistic – yet still American – nationalisms. This thesis explores writers' relation to 'identity' and the project, both formal and political, of national identity. My first chapter explores the influence of post-war Jewish intellectuals, particularly Philip Roth, on a newly Americanised 'Western canon' but also on American ethnic literature. The second chapter takes up the national question as it engaged two generations of left-wing black writers, through a comparison of the work of Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka. The third chapter discusses writer and translator Linh Dinh's project *Postcards from the End of America* (2017), which explores the flight of capital from American cities in terms of the Third World. The fourth chapter, and my own writing practice, develops the concern with an individual voice towards broader questions of subjectivity, autobiography, and description under contemporary capitalism. The resulting works discuss 'a poetics and politics of indexicality'; tracing the usage of incidental details from their use in 19th-century realism and modernism, through a period of mass representation in the early 20th century, and into their present ubiquity as a technique of identity-production or *autopoiesis*.

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‘Well if you acknowledge me in a positive way you should also acknowledge me in a negative way.’

– Nathan Clack

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Introduction: The Cold War, Dead White Men, and the Writing Programme

Mark McGurl, in his recent book *The Program Era*, argues that the largest single influence on American post-war literature has been the development of institutions designed to teach creative writing.¹ These degrees (more centrally the Master of Fine Arts and to a lesser extent the undergraduate major in creative writing) have become nearly compulsory for American writers. Although McGurl's study focuses on prose, the MFA degree has been even more obligatory for poets, given the limited independent literary market for poetry. The hegemonic presence of these institutions suggests that those who have not studied creative writing are nevertheless impacted by its terms of production. The MFA's prominence has also led to criticism – and the formation of counter-institutions – directed not at the writing workshop *per se*, but toward those who form the dominant voices within its pedagogy. Junot Diaz, of his own experience at Cornell, writes, 'That shit was *too white*,'² leading him to inaugurate another writing programme, VONA (Voices of Our Nation), which describes its mission as taking 'writers of colour from the margins to a community where their work is centralised and honoured.'³ A number of similar programmes for non-white writers now exist, which, along with a flood of essays and editorials,⁴ evidences if nothing else the ubiquity and centrality of writing programmes to American national literature. Nevertheless, there is something of specific interest in the name chosen, Voices of Our Nation. The metaphor of voice has been central to the creative writing programme, as McGurl notes: one of the three main dictates of writing workshops is to 'find your voice.' But the crucial term introduced here, within the parameters of the discourse of 'marginality,' is that of the nation.

The process of 'finding one's voice' is part of a broader aesthetic system founded within the political context of the Cold War.⁵ Indeed, the Iowa Writers' Workshop articulated its 'creativity' in deliberate opposition to Soviet 'conformity.' With the emergence of America's rivalry with a Soviet bloc whose official aesthetic was socialist realism, the Writers' Workshop (funded, in part, by the CIA) promoted a psychological, individuating style to demonstrate democratic, liberal values. The

¹ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

² Junot Diaz. 'MFA Vs POC.' *The New Yorker*. April 2014. Web. Accessed March 2015.
<<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mfa-vs-poc>>

³ 'Home.' *Vona/Voices*. Web. Accessed March 2015.
<<http://voicesatvona.org>>

⁴ Elif Batuman. 'Get a Real Degree.' *London Review of Books* 32 no. 18 (2010): p. 3-8. Web. Accessed March 2015.
<<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n18/elif-batuman/get-a-real-degree>>

⁵ Bennett, Eric. *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing During the Cold War*. Eds. Samuel Cohen. Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2015.

current proliferation of creative writing courses, including alternative programmes like VONA, thus, could be seen as a legacy of the deliberate construction of American soft power. It is equally difficult to comprehend the development of post-war innovative writing, such as LANGUAGE poetry, without the implicit coordinates of American intervention abroad (the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the end of the USSR), protest against which was articulated through writing that negated the personalising imperatives of the creative writing workshop.⁶

As the Cold War initiated a shift away from prior ‘mass’ and popular perspectives, the central impetus of American literature of the post-war era and onward became the articulation of a ‘national’ character in terms of the individual identity or achievement. This is not to say that writers such as George Oppen, Muriel Rukeyser, Langston Hughes, or indeed the early Saul Bellow did not depict and express the character of the mass; but in general, the model of literature moved away from these aims, as a comparison of Hughes’ poetry with that of Amiri Baraka (addressed in my second chapter) will suggest. This expression was by no means necessarily realist in style, and indeed many post-war critics (two of the most influential groups being the New Criticism and the New York Intellectuals) championed a vein of depoliticised modernism, through which a repudiation of proletarian literature and popular culture could be keenly felt. McGurl’s study, which is limited to prose, segments the products of the writing programme into three main strands: lower-middle-class modernism, technomodernism, and high cultural pluralism, each of which bears a greater relation to modernist modes than realist ones, perhaps an inevitable outcome of a ‘writer’s workshop’ model which emphasises critique of style over the use of source material. Nevertheless, regardless of the artwork’s claim to be representative of *reality*, it was nevertheless marshalled to serve a representative purpose. The writing programme, then as now, produced work intended to exhibit the depths of the individual psyche.

My study will focus on work which McGurl calls ‘high cultural pluralism’ or ethnic literature, particularly in its simultaneous status as national literature. The agonistic production of literary nationalism as identity-creation means that, despite the conflation of nationalism with *Volksgemeinschaft*, the contemporary writers (like Diaz) who most self-consciously invoke the nation are often ‘from the margins.’⁷ Indeed, a significant amount of the most prominent American writing

⁶ Ron Silliman. *The New Sentence*. New York: Roof Books, 1987.

⁷ Recent works of this nature include Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, francine j. harris’s *allegiance*, Danez Smith’s *principles* (one might also invoke my 2011 collection with Fiona Chamness, *Feral Citizens*). When Smith announces ‘let us move the

in the post-war era takes a critical stance towards national tradition.⁸ This may raise the question of what is, in fact, marginal about such writing, beyond its articulation of its own marginality. Instead, we see, through the text that articulates itself *as* marginal, in contrast to the presumed canonical, a kind of minoritarian nationalism. In some cases, these claims to divergence have obscured writers' continuity with the history of American literature. (That the presumed canonical *also* articulates itself through this form of 'difference' is the subject of my first chapter.) The Black Arts movement for example, emphasised the orality and contemporaneousness of its practices in contrast to the stultifying written word – as did Ralph Waldo Emerson in defining American literature nearly two centuries prior.

That this insurgent nationalism has not necessarily developed a Romantic aesthetic or a right-wing politic, as European nationalism did, is inseparable from its enmeshment, in an American context, with questions of race and political enfranchisement.⁹ A broad range of 20th-century political ideas influenced American minoritarian nationalism: decolonial struggles, the Comintern's 'domestic colony' thesis, the various strands of Black Arts nationalism (cultural, religious, economic, and political), Garveyism, and indeed, through Sufi Abdul Hamid and other racial nationalists, models adjacent to Nazism.¹⁰ One must also mark the strong shaping influence of an anti-Communist, 'America First' mainstream (which in its criticism of the New Left of the 60s reiterated its approach to the Old Left of the 30s and 40s). Yet the common consensus between defenders and critics of an Americanised 'Western Canon' (and distinct from European Romantic nationalism) is the absence of significant 19th-century predecessors, in keeping both with the modernist ethic of 'the New' and the country's unprecedented post-war role as architect of imperial global policy.¹¹

The issue of how to integrate minority groups into a nation – or whether distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups should form their own autonomous nations – has been crucial not only to visions of statecraft but also to national literatures. Although the question of minority

mountain/because the mountain must move,' citing Langston Hughes' 1926 essay 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,' he connects the poem's political concerns to a nearly century-old discussion of the black literary canon.

⁸ This sense of having been peripheral to American national concerns, and the need to reconfigure the mainstream of American literature and thought, animated many of the influential contributions of the New York Intellectuals, for example.

⁹ A more cynical reading would argue that minoritarian nationalisms are treated as performative, rather than substantively political – one exception which reads interwar black literature politically is Thompson's *Black Fascisms*.

¹⁰ Mark Christian Thompson, *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture Between the Wars*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2007.

¹¹ While this may sound tendentious, it merely recapitulates a relatively uncontroversial assessment of America's role during the time of the Cold War. Irving Kristol, for example, wrote 'Imperial powers need social equilibrium at home if they are to act effectively in the world,' in reference to Vietnam War protests (see Alexander Bloom, p. 356).

'nations' within the U.S. had been formulated before the 20th century (for example, in Sutton Griggs' 1899 novel *Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Race Problem*), my study dates from the 1913 publication of 'Marxism and the National Question',¹² an essay (which then went on to inspire a political programme – the Comintern's Black Belt Thesis) directly influential for a number of black writers affiliated with the American Left.¹³ While Lenin contributed his own, more thoughtful and politically complex, 'Theses on the National Question' in 1913 as well,¹⁴ it was in 1928 (during the Stalinist 'Third Period') that the Comintern resolved to adopt black Marxist Harry Haywood's proposed 'Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States,' namely, that black people in the South comprised an oppressed nation with the right to self-determination.¹⁵ While the Black Belt Thesis was not particularly politically influential for the masses (and the events of the Second World War led to a sequence of opportunistic policy shifts by the Comintern which led to its abandonment in 1944, although the policy was later re-adopted), it influenced a number of black writers and intellectuals' continued militancy and commitment to left-wing nationalism.

In the 1940 novel *Native Son*, Richard Wright observed the growing tide of nationalistic feelings among 'Negroes'; who, he suggested, might turn to either fascism or Communism, and whom he personified in the character of Bigger Thomas. In Wright's view, millions of black Americans shared Bigger's inability to directly identify with the nation of which they were citizens, which produced 'a wild and intense longing (wild and intense because it was suppressed!) to belong, *to be identified*, to feel that they were alive as other people were' [my italics] and especially 'to feel the clean, deep, organic satisfaction of doing a job in common with others.'¹⁶ This was not merely an external observation: Wright was a member of the Communist Party in the 1930s and 40s. What drew Wright and many other black writers (including editorial writers, like Claudia Jones, outside of the direct purview of this study),¹⁷ to Communism *was* (albeit not exclusively) 'the national question':

¹² Iosif V. Stalin, 'Marksizm i natsional'nyi vopros'. *Prosveshcheniye* no. 3-5, 1913.

¹³ Steven Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. See also William T. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

¹⁴ V. I. Lenin, 'Theses on the National Question'. *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 19. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977. Lenin Internet Archive. Accessed August 2017.

<<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/jun/30.htm#fwV19E085>>

¹⁵ Jess Lemere. 'The American Negro and Marxist-Leninist Self-Determination: The History, Development, and Application of the Theory of Self-Determination for African-Americans by the Communist Party of the United States 1928-1959.' McIntyre Library: University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, 2010. B.A. Thesis.

¹⁶ Richard Wright. 'How Bigger Was Born.' *Native Son*. New York, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1968, p. 9. (First published 1940.)

¹⁷ Mary Helen Washington. 'Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front,' in Bill V. Mullin and James Smethurst (eds), *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism and 20th Century United States Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

It had been Stalin's *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* that had captured my interest. Of all the developments in the Soviet Union, the way scores of backward peoples had been led to unity on a national scale was what had enthralled me. I had read with awe how the Communists had sent phonetic experts into the vast regions of Russia to listen to the stammering dialects of peoples oppressed for centuries by the czars. I had made the first total emotional commitment of my life when I read how the phonetic experts had given these tongueless people a language, newspapers, institutions. I had read how these forgotten folk had been encouraged to keep their old cultures, to see in their ancient customs meanings and satisfactions as deep as those contained in supposedly superior ways of living. And I had exclaimed to myself how different this was from the way in which Negroes were sneered at in America.¹⁸

As we can observe, in the attempt to articulate race and nation, *the international* – colonialism, (anti-)imperialism and internationalism – served as an implicit third term. While American literature referred to Europe as a situating presence through the 19th century, the struggles of the 20th century were equally, if not more related to the Soviet Union and the Third World. Wright's engagement with Stalin and then with an international Communist movement directed from Moscow exemplifies the internationalist scaffolding supporting the energy of many American writers, especially those who were 'marginal' to the white national norm, with the articulation of the national. However, the political events of the 20th century would drastically shape the way American writers mobilised internationalism. After the Second World War, America's emergence as the dominant military and economic superpower was in explicit opposition to Soviet Communism, and the state put black writers, even those unaffiliated with the Communist Party, under surveillance as potential subversives.¹⁹ That many of the black writers actively associated with Communism in the first half of the twentieth century later renounced their views is somewhat overdetermined: Claire A. Culleton has argued that the trajectory of modernist writing during the period cannot be understood without reference to the House Un-American Activities Commission and the FBI's intervention in literary practices;²⁰ however, this cannot be separated from the alienating policy shifts of the Communist Party and the growing awareness of the repressive character of the USSR. Even if some writers defended Stalin (notably the poet Frank Marshall Davis), most Communist literary organisations

¹⁸ Richard Wright, in *The God that Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman. New York: Harper Colophon, 1949, p. 130. When Wright is accused of being a Trotskyist, he responds with this passage on the significance of Stalin's essay to his political development.

¹⁹ William J. Maxwell. *F. B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African-American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

²⁰ Claire A. Culleton. *Joyce and the G-Men: J. Edgar Hoover's Manipulation of Modernism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

which had supported black writers were shuttered, and Wright emigrated to France, where he would live for the rest of his life.

Today, the ‘national question’ of Stalin’s 1913 writing taken up by Wright and others has transformed almost unrecognizably into the question of representing marginal voices. This is essentially the problematic foundational to postcolonial studies’ readings of Marx’s use of ‘vorstellen’ and ‘darstellen,’ both translated simply in English as ‘to represent,’ in *The 18th Brumaire*.²¹ These terms each deserve specific explication: firstly, ‘representing,’ which plays on the word ‘representative’ to mean both ‘a representative’ of one’s interests, the sense in which an artist deliberately ‘represents’ something, and finally, perhaps most insidiously, the way in which one thing or person ‘represents’ another, the way in which one thing (cultural emphasis) might come to *stand in for* something else (political enfranchisement).

The second term, ‘marginal,’ is perhaps even more theoretically loaded. If it seems as if this question of ‘marginalised’ persons has something of a textual echo in the margins of a page, this is even more to the point – as artists have repeatedly grappled with the role of art itself in the work of writing about the nation – a function conceived from the extremes of passively ‘hearing’ and ‘recording’ to actively ‘propagandising.’ However, I have significant doubt that the idea of the margins, (or indeed, ‘difference’) is theoretically adequate to encompass the political categories at stake. The writers that I address in this thesis are concerned with difference in race, language, and nationality; however, they problematise the location of the ‘centre’ as well. When Richard Wright pulls the inspiration for *Native Son* from a small column of text in the margin of the newspaper,²² and depicts Bigger’s flight across that newspaper, the vision of Bigger’s destruction in the white man’s world is concomitantly ironised by a text which places him front and centre, which indeed pictures him *reading the very text in which he simultaneously had existed in the margin*: ‘He looked at the paper and saw a black-and-white map of the South Side, around the borders of which was a shaded portion an inch deep. Under the map ran a line of small print: Shaded portion shows area already

²¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. 271-313.

Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Karl Marx. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1937.

Recent scholarship has revisited these foundational texts and questioned their political interpretations, as well as intervening in the question of ‘representation.’ One could consider Nivedita Majumdar’s ‘Silencing the Subaltern: Resistance and Gender in Postcolonial Theory’ (*Catalyst* vol 1. no. 1, 2017), or Peter Hallward’s recent remarks on the concept of ‘mass sovereignty’ (lecture, Kingston University, 23 March 2017).

²² Wright (1940). ‘Many of the newspaper items and some of the incidents in *Native Son* are but fictionalised versions of the Robert Nixon case and rewrites of news stories from the *Chicago Tribune*.’

covered by police and vigilantes in search for Negro rapist and murderer. White portion shows area yet to be searched.²³ As we can see from this excerpt, rather than locating him in the margins, Bigger's location is called into question through his engagement with textuality. Through Wright's depiction, one must actually reckon with what is focused on and what is marginal *in the text itself* as well as the presumed outside world. Wright's choice to use the newspaper as a device throughout the novel, and to make Bigger capable of reading, comprehending and struggling against – albeit not fully capable of altering – his own fate, suggests not only an implicit relation to the Soviet literacy policies he admired, but the possibility of political emancipation through textuality more generally.

Narration (and, to a lesser extent, figuration) requires *locating* the 'subjects'; both within the authority of the text and within larger literary formations such as genre and influence. Given the lack of an antiquarian text which could provide a mythic history of the nation, and in contrast to the folk and romantic nationalisms of 19th-century Europe, American writers in the 20th and 21st centuries have not been able to use language – the vernacular – as the primary vehicle of literary nationalism.²⁴ Rather, they have had to use political and social analysis to express the peculiarly national, which leads formal questions of description to take on the political emphasis accorded to 'representation.' The technical aspect of this problematic of representation suggests that the words under discussion must have an impact on the world – if not in terms of realistic style, then in a metaliterary sense in which the text 'stands for' an intervention in the literary sphere. Confronting the incongruities between the abstractly political and the specific descriptions of material life that writers utilise, I ask: How have writers sutured the one to the other, sought to 'describe' and 'represent' the nation – and which techniques have been seen as appropriate to do so? The metaphor of voice has perhaps drawn attention away from an examination of the ostensibly inert objects and scenarios presented by the voice as descriptive 'material' or background detail: the newspapers that clutter *Native Son*, for example. Formal analysis of 'subject material' and use of descriptive detail will occupy much of my analysis in chapters to come.

This study relies upon a loose intellectual history of the Cold War era to track larger movements in American literature, as well as incidental studies of groupings, institutions, and journals most influential to the writers I discuss. This breadth also limits the extent to which internal comparisons can be made – for example, between writers like Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert

²³ Ibid, 284.

²⁴ Although some writers, from Twain to Zora Neale Hurston, have attempted to use American dialect as a distinct literary language, it cannot be connected to a mythic past.

Hayden to the more visibly ‘representative’ Hughes and Baraka, or between Roth’s ‘Writers from the Other Europe’ series and Soviet literature. I do not have the resources here to delve into James Smethurst’s invaluable studies of the various institutions which supported black poetry in the 30s and 40s and during the Black Arts movement, or provide a full chronology of the influence of the New York Intellectuals and the New Critics, much less grapple with the past several decades of patronage towards writing outside of and within the writing programme. Yet without a gloss of these forces the political content of seemingly incidental descriptive choices would be indiscernible. My aim here is to relate the level of the social and the level of the technical. The layer that would traditionally be seen as standing between these two is the theory of the ‘work’ and its formal consistency. I examine canonicity (and marginality) from an inherently intertextual vantage point, through larger political and social developments, rather than focusing on relationships of influence between works. In connecting the gestures of the text with the question of nationalism, I am essentially bypassing an attempt to compare works on their own terms; fundamentally many of the writers I discuss operate within aesthetic and canonical spaces which are often assumed to be mutually exclusive, which I have attempted to rout in order to get them into the same room (where they actually, empirically, were, in some cases).

If we examine the chronology Benedict Anderson sets out regarding the development of nationalism,²⁵ we can observe that the Americas did not have the conditions of the later 19th century romantic nationalism (linguistic nationalism). This suggests that language was not necessarily the staging ground for the American project. Political, economic, and geographic concerns, far more than language, shaped the ‘creole nationalisms’ of the colonial Americas; however, although language itself did not serve as the staging ground for these nationalisms, *publication* did (as a cursory glance at the literary record of the early leaders of the American Revolution proves). Anderson links the birth of nationalism in the Americas to the experiences produced under colonial political limitations which created more locally autonomous networks of circulation of power, including of publication, in contrast to the relative freedom and therefore diffusion of the mainland colonial administrators.

The newly formed United States was a different unit from the sites of the colonial Creole nationalisms that Anderson identifies, but it engaged no less with questions of literature in its efforts to define itself nationally. Literate Americans were preoccupied with articulating their national

²⁵ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

identity against and in contrast to the ‘Old World’ of continental Europe – and one of the key sites of difference was in the relationship to literature, specifically printed literature and books (the high-cultural pole of the ‘print capitalism’ that Anderson argues for as an enabling condition of nationalism). While European countries engaged in new archaicism, reaching back into the medieval or antiquarian past for an epic work – *Beowulf*, the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Nibelungenlied* – that might demonstrate the age-old foundations of their renovated national self-identities, America defined itself precisely as New and without the baggage of the past. As alluded to previously, Ralph Waldo Emerson might be seen as exemplifying this view in his 1837 address ‘The American Scholar,’²⁶ where he repeatedly links *books themselves* with ‘the past’ and warns against the stultifying effects of ‘bibliophilia,’ the tendency of book-fetishism to petrify the potent thought that writing seeks to preserve – by contrast, Emerson rhetorically remarks that he can discern how much life there is in a man by his *speech*, which, when combined with the fact that ‘The American Scholar’ was delivered orally before it was published, suggests that Emerson’s influential treatise positions American literature as in some sense proudly anti-literate. The foundations of 19th century US engagements with the question of ‘national literature’ lay in embracing the national as a transgression of the merely literary.²⁷

Emerson’s speech dealt almost immediately with the question of divergent forms of labour and the different social roles taken by individuals in the society, attempting to integrate them by suggesting that they were all like ‘fingers of one hand.’²⁸ The ‘writer’ was not a writer, but a *thinker* who had to preserve his thoughts in writing, and this thinking ought to take the form of action, through (among other things) motivated labour. While the lack of a consolidated working class in the US, enabled by mass immigration, slavery, and westward conquest, created significant political chaos and, as W.E.B. Du Bois suggests, led to a weakened labour movement in comparison with European proletarian struggles,²⁹ the upheaval in ideas of class also gave Emerson the ability to identify the intellectual directly and unmediatedly with the everyday man, the labourer, the farmer, the shopkeeper – as vast quantities of labour had to be poured into expanding and building the new

²⁶ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. ‘The American Scholar.’ Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1838.

²⁷ Mark Twain is another clear example of this phenomenon, no less clearly aware than Emerson of Europe as the implicit background to his descriptions of American life. His book *Life on the Mississippi* begins explicitly with the relationship of the Mississippi River to the Thames, as well as juxtaposing colonial chronology with the better-known history of the monarchy. Further, Twain’s representations of American orality, including his own pseudonym, should be seen as attempts to innovate a more distinctly ‘national’ literary language.

²⁸ Emerson (1838).

²⁹ Du Bois. *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935.

nation, so did the intellectual take on the task of building a new literature. We can also see Emerson's distinctly modern comparisons as a repudiation of domestic and pastoral imagery, comparing a well-functioning work of art to an 'air-pump' that could never be perfectly 'efficient.'³⁰

One genre of the time which encapsulates the kind of contemporaneousness Emerson sought was the slave narrative, but, ironically, as a specifically black, autobiographical, and political form, it was not analysed for its literary significance. However, while slave narratives are an extreme case of literary exclusion, even writers such as Poe and Melville were only dubiously recognised as great American writers long after their deaths. The regionalism within American writing of the 18th and 19th centuries, which had begun with 'Yankee' and 'New York' writers but which quickly developed into a number of local centres, and the question of whether these local centres could represent the whole nation, particularly during the Civil War, might suggest some of the difficulty facing American writers who had to describe their own local setting while extending their fame across the whole country.³¹

As the population and territory of the country drastically shifted, the 'mass' and the 'crowd,' as well as the use of specific local detail, began to be figured in 19th century American literature in a manner that would prefigure these terms' emergence throughout the 20th century (and indeed, into today), bringing forward anxieties about how to reconcile internal difference within a larger body or form. In this the work of Walt Whitman might be particularly instructive. Whitman's vision of America is inexorably multiple, consisting largely of lists. Yet he obeys a quite explicit synecdoche through which his 'representation' of this multiplicity is unified under a national theme. In this there is no archetypal 'American' (yet), and while indeed these diverse groups are voiced through the figure of the poet, they have to be appealed to as a plurality. While there are clear contradictions in Whitman's ability to realise his own project (slavery serving as a signal example of an irreconcilable antagonism rather than a heterogeneous set of differences), his work nevertheless served as interlocutor for a great deal of black American 20th century writing.³²

Without ancient literary predecessors which Romantic writers could plumb for nationalist inspiration, the American canon has had to look to the 'people' (Hubbell, for example, cites the influence of popular newspaper polls which ranked writers' importance in the canon).³³ Many of the

³⁰ Emerson (1838).

³¹ Jay Broadus Hubbell. *Who Are the Major American Writers?: A Study of the Changing Literary Canon*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1972.

³² *Whitman Noir*, ed. Ivy G. Wilson. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2014.

³³ Hubbell (1972).

questions most incumbent upon American nationalism in the 20th century relate to questions of modernism. The ‘autopoetic’ investment in novelty and innovation, as well as the nation’s ascendancy throughout the 20th century to the status of global superpower, placed significant stakes upon the creation of new literary forms of representation which could reconcile the political antagonisms of the century: ‘(How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)’ queried Hart Crane.³⁴ Perhaps the most identifiable generic tendency of 20th century American ‘national’ literature, in this vein, is the desire for literature that transcends the literary. This ‘extra-literary’ emphasis is more important to my study than the generic distinction between poetry and prose, although both exhibit the ‘heteroglossia’ that Bakhtin found characteristic of the novel (for example, in Langston Hughes’ 1961 *Ask Your Mama*, which takes the form of a score for musical performance for multiple voices).³⁵ Nearly all the writers I address in this study wrote across genres. Fundamentally, in the effort to compete with popular entertainment (the other American ‘national literature’), literary writing reaches towards other forms: film, journalism, propaganda, performance, advertisement, postcard, not merely as a source of formal inventiveness but to allay a concern latent within American literature’s inception, from Emerson onwards: the need for literature to have immediacy and to depict the nation anew.

Thus, we must largely skip the folk and romantic nationalisms of 19th century Europe and proceed directly to the challenge of Stephen Dedalus, to ‘forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race’³⁶ – a recognizably nationalist sentiment, but which uses a distinctly modern term, that is, ‘race.’ (Joyce’s characters, while not American, were nevertheless also navigating their peripheral relationship to the Anglophone literary canon.) This formulation leads us directly to the ‘national question’; the character and mode of articulation of a still-provisional national identity.

My first chapter will focus on the work of Philip Roth as indicative of the contradictions between ‘margins’ and ‘centre.’ Roth has been one of the most emblematic American writers of the past century. Writers like Roth and Saul Bellow, as well as the group of critics known as the New York Intellectuals, not only navigated the question of assimilation into mainstream American identity as contrasted with ethnic particularity, they did this through implicitly reconstructing

³⁴ Hart Crane, ‘To Brooklyn Bridge.’ *The Bridge*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1930.

³⁵ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, and Michael Holquist. *The dialogic imagination: four essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Langston Hughes. *Ask Your Mama: 12 moods for jazz*. New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1961.

³⁶ James Joyce. *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*. New York: Viking Press, 1964, p. 253.

canonical relationships (as seen in, for example, Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*) that would shore up American culture as successor to Europe after the Second World War and in response to the rise of the Soviet Bloc. That what we might call, ironically, Bloom's 'neo-canon' is acknowledged and criticised by Junot Diaz and others as a continuation of tradition simply underlines the success of the New York Intellectuals at reconstructing American political and cultural thought throughout the 20th century. Another line of argument would suggest figures like Roth as the early predecessors of today's ethnic literature – making space for, and indeed setting the terms for, writers like Diaz himself – given that Roth's writing was never simply an address to Western 'universalism,' but on the contrary, built on forms of exceptionalism and specificity.

My second chapter works to connect the politics and aesthetics of Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka, figures who became emblematic to two different movements of black American writing, who are often treated separately or even pitted against one another due to their relationships to dominant forms of political life (Communism and the poetics of the Popular Front in the case of Hughes, and Black Arts, as well as a later Third-World Marxism, in the case of Baraka). However, while Hughes did not envision a specifically Black nation, as Baraka did, this hardly makes him a conservative figure. Both Hughes and Baraka shared concerns around mobilising a black political base and developing an aesthetic that mediated mass culture and the avant-garde, as well as attempting to facilitate connections between internationalist political movements and the everyday lives of black people. The periodisation that limits Hughes as a historical figure of the New Negro Renaissance, thus, eschews his significance as 'an important if almost unconsidered progenitor of what came to be known as the New American Poetry.'³⁷ As James Smethurst argues, Hughes' creation of a 'popular modernism' influenced not only Baraka, but other writers such as Allen Ginsburg, Bob Kaufman, and Frank O'Hara, all of whom used contemporary diction, invocations of mass culture, and other devices of American Popular Front poetics championed by Hughes. Furthermore, Hughes' late writings, particularly the 1961 work *Ask Your Mama*, have rarely been discussed as innovative literature contemporaneous with the New American Poetry.

After these two studies of canon-formation, the third chapter moves from the post-war era to the present in discussing the work of Vietnamese American writer, artist, and translator Linh Dinh, specifically his project *Postcards from the End of America*. This project combines over 9,900 photographs with textual production, sometimes journalistic, sometimes poetic. Despite the

³⁷ Smethurst (1999), p. 163.

descriptive techniques of photojournalism, they eschew ‘documentary realism’; Dinh’s ‘postcards’ ironise and critique the ostensible evacuation of public space through bringing forward the aesthetic principles within daily life. Capital has fled, but people and objects remain organised by it. The internationalist lens of the series observes American life non-synecdochally, depicting the viewpoints and survival strategies of specific Americans in an alienated way, without rendering them metonymic of the nation. Dinh’s work is also relatively singular in being disconnected from the writing workshop and from the imperatives of ‘well-made’ lyric production, and could be understood as a challenge to the workshop aesthetic through the problem of combining the popular and the avant-garde.

The fourth chapter moves from the study of nationalism to the formal implications of this study, introducing the question of autobiographical reading and production in the context of the writing program’s predominant trends towards modernist *autopoiesis*. While 19th century realism and modernism used detail to depict ‘another’ (Zola, Flaubert, Proust) it is increasingly impossible to separate a realm of unthought, habitual ‘life’ from the exigencies of *producing* life under neoliberal capitalism. The obligation to consume, and the concomitant signification of commodities, branding, and media, which serve to produce ever-more complex layers of ‘particularity’ and identity, indicate that contemporary life in consumer society is lived through the constant aesthetic practice (even ‘labour’) of self-narrativisation. Thus, art’s practice of estrangement (*ostranenië*)³⁸ must not merely render objects visible through detailing them (dehabitualising them), it must also develop formal strategies for dehabitualising our production and complicity with the identities of those objects. This is essentially a narrative, rather than a lyric, question, as it relies upon building larger structures of description (as well as a critique of those structures). The fifth section, ‘It occurred to me –’, should be understood as a preliminary attempt to articulate, rather than resolve, this problem of autobiography, while ideally providing some possibilities and forms, such as multiple first-person narrators, numbered sequence, and extended, discontinuous prose narrative, which could certainly be developed further.

³⁸ Viktor Shklovsky. *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher. Dalkey Archive Press, 1991.

Chapter One: ‘Mongoloid hieroglyphs’

In Philip Roth’s *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), the third in a series of novels centred on the character Nathan Zuckerman (ambiguously Roth’s alter ego), Zuckerman’s mother, who has a brain tumour, ‘was able to recognise her neurologist when he came by the room, but when he asked if she could write her name for him on a piece of paper, she took the pen from his hand and instead of “Selma” wrote the word “Holocaust” perfectly spelled.’³⁹ This moment has been analysed extensively in relation to Holocaust fiction. Yet far less studied is the mother’s name, ‘Selma,’ the initial location of the Alabama Civil Rights marches, site of violent clashes, arrests and killings. The over-writing of ‘Selma,’ in favour of ‘Holocaust,’ indicates Roth’s shift from an earlier identification with the ethnic ‘periphery’ (often symbolised by blackness) towards an American, yet still Jewish, centre. While the Holocaust ushered in an era of pessimism for European (and particularly European Jewish) thinkers marked by the obligation of historicising fascism, for Roth it was also a fantasy of identity and initiation. Earlier in the trilogy of novels, Zuckerman imagines marrying Anne Frank, who is designated by the novel’s title, *The Ghost Writer* (1979): ‘If you doubt me, just look at her smile, listen to her laugh. Remember the shadowed eyes innocently uplifted in the clever little face... Anne, says my father – the Anne? Oh, how I have misunderstood my son. How mistaken we have been!’⁴⁰ This chapter explores the influence of post-war Jewish writers, particularly Roth, on a newly Americanised ‘Western canon’ but also on American ethnic literature. Within his lifetime, Roth has been the subject of a remarkable amount of critical inquiry and praise. There is a journal of Roth studies, for example, and a Library of America edition of his complete works. Roth also bears the distinction of being one of the writers chosen by Harold Bloom as part of a contemporary canon, by which he means works likely to become canonical after perhaps another century and a half.⁴¹ Five of Roth’s novels, as well as *Zuckerman Bound*, a sequence of three novels and a novella (*The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, and *The Prague Orgy*), make Bloom’s list – since 1994, Roth has written other works, such as *Sabbath’s Theater*, *The Human Stain*, *American Pastoral*, and *The Plot Against America*, which might conceivably have been added.

The book in which Bloom delivers his canonical ‘prophecy’ is his landmark work of literary criticism *The Western Canon*, which has been so influential over the past two decades, and so

³⁹ Philip Roth. *Zuckerman Bound: A Trilogy and Epilogue*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985, p. 447-448.

⁴⁰ Roth (1985), p. 159.

⁴¹ Harold Bloom. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994, p. 448.

seemingly centred on the dead, that it is often difficult to recognise the contemporariness of its concerns, or indeed the actual nature of its concerns. Bloom decries the expansion into cultural studies, relativism, and ‘theory’ of the contemporary university English department – developments which are only a few decades old – and envisions it, ideally, shrinking to resemble a modern-day Classics department (that this introduces a paradoxical relationship toward Bloom’s chosen ‘canon’ – Shakespeare, Freud, Dr. Johnson, and Neruda, to take some examples, all ‘popular’ as well as historical – he does not address). We might be reminded of another book, by Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, with foreword by Saul Bellow, which introduced much the same set of concerns in 1987. A shared line of influence between the fantasy of a contemporary Classics department (in which we could include Roth’s hero Coleman Silk, who as part of his racial departure from blackness also becomes a Classics professor) and Allan Bloom’s assertion of society’s decline into cultural relativism is the philosophy of Leo Strauss, who, as Bloom articulates, ‘was dedicated to intransigent seriousness as opposed to popularisation.’⁴² Yet, once again, the paradox should be noted. Surely the New Left, Black Power, feminism, and the other forces against which these assertions of the Western Canon arose were themselves responses to and critiques of the conservative academic consensus from the late 40s to the early 60s, not mere expressions of relativist decay? Furthermore, the emphasis, which has been characterised as both liberal and neoconservative, on an embattled transcendent philosophy (influenced by Strauss) neatly evades the reality that Bloom (Harold), Bloom (Allan), Strauss, Bellow, and the broader community of the New York Intellectuals and their circle (*Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *The Public Interest*, etc.) hardly secluded themselves from popular consensus, but bitterly fought to shape it over the course of the 20th century. This was, in large part, their century and their America.

It is also, thus, their canon, a historically specific one, rather than a transcendent or self-evident revelation of ‘white’ or Western values. Writers like Roth and Bellow, for example, opened major debates over the nature of American literature: assimilation, belonging, American identity and voice, the relationship to Europe and the Soviet Union, and the question of the canon and of marginal literature. Roth’s career, in particular, tracks with these concerns, and it is notable as well that he occupies a location on both sides of the ‘debate’ around the canon: he has been marshalled among the pantheon of canonical writers, but could also be said to anticipate the concerns of many ‘peripheral’ writers who followed him and staked their claims to literary greatness in similar terms.

⁴² Allan Bloom. ‘Leo Strauss.’ *Political Theory*, vol. 2 no. 4, 1974, p.372.

Realistically, while one cannot really be included in the canon while still alive, we can at least acknowledge Roth as both an exemplary ‘canonical’ and an exemplary ‘minoritarian’ writer. The divergence between these two literary stances requires that we unsettle the seeming contradiction between them.

Harold Bloom has so flippantly depicted the positions of his critics as marginal (for example, ‘feminist cheerleaders proclaim that women writers lovingly cooperate with one another as quilt makers’),⁴³ that he (and the New York Intellectuals more generally) are much less frequently discussed in their context as bellicose arrivistes. Rather than presume – as both he and his critics tend to – a form of uncontroversial continuity between, say, the Bible, *King Lear*, and *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1967), I would like to emphasise the discontinuities within Bloom’s canon, and the still-ambivalent historical resituating of American writing as a continuation, rather than a repudiation, of European tradition. Surely Bloom’s canon is so catholic, and so distinctly modern, that his critics are right to recognise ideology at work in his relative neglect of non-white writers, for example. Yet criticism has tended to focus on the aspects of Bloom which are exclusive (a process which he has undoubtedly encouraged), rather than the ways in which Bloom is radically *inclusive* – and how his identity as an American liberal Jew of the post-war generation was hardly incidental to the shaping of an entirely contemporary form of cultural politics (Bloom’s analysis of the Bible as primarily a work of fiction, for example, is an attitude aggressively distinct from that of prior generations of critics).

The literary sequence championed by Bloom could not have been inclusive of contemporary writers like Roth in the same order as classical antiquity without the re-centring of American culture as the heir to a failed European project. Indeed, without American intervention in the Second World War and the subsequent imperial politics of the Cold War, this sense of America’s centrality to the West would be inconceivable. About America, Bloom writes, ‘We are the final inheritors of Western tradition.’⁴⁴ If this implicitly invokes the Final Solution and seems dependent on World War II as a morality play which decimated Europe’s claim to supremacy, we can see other echoes of the Holocaust in Bloom’s writing: ‘There is always guilt in achieved individuality; it is a version of the guilt of being a survivor and is not productive of aesthetic value.’⁴⁵ Or ‘The Western Canon is a kind of survivor’s list.’⁴⁶ Yet this also must acknowledge America’s position, not as a ‘survivor’ but as an

⁴³ H. Bloom (1994), p. 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 44.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 24.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 38.

‘inheritor’ of something which others have abandoned. As Michael Rothberg comments, ‘to use a term inspired by Roth, the Holocaust is something like the “counter-history” of American life.’⁴⁷

The history and politics of the Soviet Union, initially inspiring for many Jews worldwide, would culminate in disenchantment and horror. The 20th century pitted three world-systems against one another: Communism, fascism, and capitalism. For Hannah Arendt, as for many American thinkers who followed her, the problem could be summed up in two terms, rather than three: the ‘totalitarian’ systems of Communism and fascism, in opposition to liberal democracy.⁴⁸ Yet before the Second World War, many of the young intellectuals associated with the *Partisan Review* were still explicitly Marxist. The admiration of Lenin, and particularly of the Jewish Trotsky, can be seen, albeit through irony, in Bellow’s first novel *Dangling Man* (1944): ‘Some men seem to know exactly where their opportunities lie; they break prisons and cross whole Siberias to pursue them. One room holds me.’⁴⁹ Anti-Stalinism, not anti-Marxism, marked the New York Intellectuals’ initial approach toward politics and aesthetics. Their opposition to the Popular Front and to proletarian literature took the form of a defence of the modernism of Eliot or Pound (despite their political beliefs) as more stylistically radical than the conventional narrative structures of socialist realism.

The Second World War was the turning point for many of the Intellectuals. Many of them had opposed, been ambivalent about, then critically supported American intervention in the war. The *Partisan Review* initially followed a left-wing line critical of U.S. imperialism, publishing a statement by the League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism: ‘We loathe and abominate fascism as the chief enemy of all culture, all real democracy, all social progress. But the last war showed only too clearly that we can have no faith in imperialist crusades to bring freedom to any people.’ Three years later, they ‘took a pro-war line based on a lesser-evil notion.’⁵⁰ After the war, the transition complete, their approach to ‘totalitarianism’ led them to equate the Soviet Union with Hitler, and thus unambiguously support further U.S. military interventions, as well as domestic persecution of Communists.⁵¹ One index of the completeness of this transition is the retroactive clarity of the pro-war position and denunciation of Nazism. It is interesting to compare the actual history of the *Partisan Review*’s positions on the war, for example, with Roth’s novel *The Plot Against America*, which

⁴⁷ Michael Rothberg. ‘Roth and the Holocaust.’ In *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed. Timothy Parrish. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966.

⁴⁹ Saul Bellow. *Novels 1944-1953*. New York: Library of America, 2003, p. 65.

⁵⁰ Alexander Bloom. *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 131.

⁵¹ See ‘Liberal anti-Communism,’ in Alexander Bloom (1986), pp. 209-273.

associates anti-war sentiment with anti-Semitism – in the book, it is Charles Lindbergh’s peacenik stance that enables him to gain popularity and build fascism in the US. Yet the writers for *Partisan Review* were Jews, and many of them were sceptical of the war. Walter Benn Michaels argues that *The Plot Against America*’s essential question, *What if it* [i.e., Nazism] *happened here?* relies on fantasising the visitation upon the Jews of racial oppression which actually occurred to black Americans throughout the decades described. In other words, as Benn Michaels suggests, ‘it did happen here, only not to the Jews.’⁵² His analysis of Roth’s counterfactual history is compelling, but we could also expand the range of inquiry toward Roth’s rewriting 1940s political sentiment to exclude the facticity of left-wing Jewish life and the nascent influence of the Intellectuals.

Turning toward America (and initiating what Philip Rahv, editor of the *Partisan Review*, would describe as ‘the [Henry] James boom’),⁵³ the New York Intellectuals had to navigate their relationship to the broader modernist canon – whose signal writers, such as Pound and Eliot, were virulently anti-Semitic – as well as the history of English-language writing. A *Commentary* symposium in 1949 posed the following question:

As a Jew and a writer working within the Anglo-American literary tradition, how do you confront the presence in that tradition of the mythical or semi-mythical figure of the Jew, as found, for example, in the works of such writers as Chaucer, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Trollope, T. S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, Thomas Wolfe, Henry Adams, etc.? Do you find this an important block or barrier to your full participation and integration, as a writer or a person, in the literary or cultural tradition involved?

The need to examine a tradition of racist portrayal also motivated analyses of James, Poe, and Hemingway by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, and Melville in her brief essay ‘Melville and the Language of Denial.’⁵⁴ Yet Morrison’s writing clearly differentiated her analysis of these writers from her own production, informed by a sense of a black canon which preceded her. The New York Intellectuals, on the other hand, did not generally come from an identifiable heritage of English speakers or writers. Thus, their need to create, or assimilate

⁵² Walter Benn Michaels. ‘Plots against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism.’ *American Literary History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Summer, 2006), pp. 288-302.

⁵³ Alexander Bloom (1986), p 132.

⁵⁴ Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Toni Morrison, ‘Melville and the Language of Denial.’ *The Nation*. 7 January, 2014.
<<https://www.thenation.com/article/melville-and-language-denial/>>

to, a broader tradition was in a sense more urgent. Claudia Roth Pierpont's biography of Roth, *Roth Unbound*, notes that after being grilled about misogyny by his students, Roth responded:

making a parable of his answer, [Roth] tells students that...he found that there were very few Jews in literature at all, aside from some figures 'to make fun of' in T.S. Eliot or Ernest Hemingway. How could he be expected to 'identify' with the characters of a Christian writer like Dostoyevsky? How? Through literature itself, he tells them—literature, in which we can identify with anyone and become larger than ourselves.⁵⁵

This not only evades the question of misogyny, it also avoids a central problematic of all of Roth's writing, the difference of position between character and author. While Roth was certainly well-aware of Proust and Joyce, he did not address some of the most vivid Jewish characters in Western literature, Charles Swann and Leopold Bloom. Perhaps some of this comes from their position outside of the American tradition, but this questionable selectivity might indicate more clearly Roth's search for *writers*, not just characters, with whom to identify. For the New York Intellectuals, the way out of this dilemma was simply to identify their own position, their own heritage, between Europe and America, as that of the modern: "The second-generation Jewish writer has learned to be aware of a tradition immediately his, that is European and American at once; he is *himself* the guarantee of the singleness of Europe and America."⁵⁶

Claudia Roth Pierpont's biography of Roth suggests it is 'the moral battle that these immensely varied works have in common. One might say the moral battle was essential to Roth's sense of being Jewish.'⁵⁷ The 'moral battle,' however, is precisely not what Roth wages. Despite his criticisms of the Vietnam War, for example, in *Our Gang* (1971), Roth's work does not seem to suggest that Communism and capitalism are value-systems which one must struggle to choose between. Nor does Roth depict his *characters'* struggles as battles in the sense that they might become subjectively animating or transformative. For all his existential deliberation, Hamlet had a choice to make, a situation into which he was thrown, surely, but one for which he had to choose whether or how to become responsible and what next to do. (That writers have re-approached Hamlet's impacts on other characters in the play, such as Ophelia, or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, suggest a contextualisation which deepens the implications of Hamlet's agency.) For Roth, the question of whether one is responsible for, or capable of, choice, is itself undermining of this 'moral battle.'

⁵⁵ Claudia Roth Pierpont. *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013, p. 239-240.

⁵⁶ Alexander Bloom (1986), p. 150.

⁵⁷ Pierpont (2013), p. 88.

Indeed, the conclusion his later works reach is precisely that because one is, in a sense, ‘born’ to one’s subject, one is unable to act upon it or alter it (he reserves, however, the right to complain). Perhaps the signal example of this naturalisation is the description of Alexander Portnoy as a syndrome in *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). In *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), the ‘syndrome’ is sudden and inexplicable pain; in *The Breast* (1972), it is David Kepesh’s Kafka-esque transformation into a human breast. In other instances, as in *The Counterlife* (1986), there seems less of a ‘moral battle’ than a striving against nature – figured by heart disease and the possibility of losing one’s erection. Later, in *Exit Ghost* (2007), we see Zuckerman’s struggle with incontinence. The adversary, if there can be said to be one, is seemingly inevitable: the inevitability of death, ageing, impotence, and so on. But then none of these are truly battles, or truly ethical in any existential sense, simply illustrations of the futility of overcoming one’s essential nature, in which we might sense the diluted influence of Leo Strauss’ preoccupation with natural right.

The effort to naturalise his subject, and yet to struggle to overthrow it, situates Roth’s entire project. As McGurl suggests, one of the dictates of the writing programme is ‘write what you know.’ The question that pervades Roth’s oeuvre might be paraphrased as: is it really possible to write great art about Jews from Newark, New Jersey? In many ways, Roth articulates, he had almost no direct predecessors in describing his life (a position that Harold Bloom mocks when it comes from ‘African-American and Chicano literary activists’).⁵⁸ The anxiety present about the seeming ‘constraint’ of life itself, and the claustrophobia of ethnic affiliation, the particularity of Newark and Jewishness, is taken up by Pierpont: ‘Roth’s way into a story is through a particular voice, a pair of eyes. But it’s what these faculties convey that matters. ...there is an endless human carnival to be observed—a carnival of men and women, too. If the klieg lights are anchored in wartime New Jersey (they have to be anchored somewhere, don’t they?), their beams sweep the sky.’⁵⁹ The frustration Roth exhibits with limitation might be contrasted with the writing of Isaac Babel (whom Zuckerman revises in *The Ghost Writer*, to Babel’s phrase describing the Jewish writer with ‘spectacles on his nose and autumn in his heart’ adding ‘and blood in his penis’).⁶⁰ While Babel, on advice from Gorky, committed himself to documentary writing, there is a passivity and impersonality to his observation that cannot be found in Roth. When Babel writes, ‘the chronicle of our everyday crimes

⁵⁸ H. Bloom (1994), p. 8: ‘African-American and Chicano literary activists go even further in asserting their freedom from any anguish of contamination whatsoever: each of them is Adam early in the morning.’

⁵⁹ Pierpont (2013), p. 240.

⁶⁰ Roth (1985), p. 49.

oppresses me as relentlessly as a bad heart,⁶¹ there is no sense that there is, or should be, any remedy for this. Babel's religiosity and mysticism implicitly connects the specific destruction in the Polish-Soviet war, 'the smashed stones of your synagogues,' in the town of Brody, to the fabled destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.⁶²

'Jewishness' in Roth, unlike Babel, is distinctly open to reinvention. Furthermore, from being a religious, or historical identity, it has become, in Roth's America, primarily an ethnic one, or what Lionel Trilling described (in reference to himself) as 'minimal' Jewishness.⁶³ Indeed, in *The Counterlife*, Zuckerman as an alienated, Disraeli-like Jew, exhibits that 'minimal difference,' ontological rather than social: 'England's made a Jew of me in only eight weeks. ... A Jew without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol, a Jew clearly without a home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple.'⁶⁴ The place of the Jewish American comes to seem involuntarily 'naturalised' in the body, and Roth's bodily dramas, in a sense, play out the ambiguous significance of a Jewish ethnic identity that precludes agency. In the case of *The Human Stain*, with a main black character, Coleman Silk, who passes as 'white' *by pretending to be Jewish*, it is precisely the struggle between the 'accident' of particularity and the ability to make autonomous choices, including the choice to disappear from this particularity, that is figured through race. Yet Coleman Silk is not the narrator, but the central character, of *The Human Stain*, which is a significant authorial decision. For the agency that concerns Roth, and Zuckerman, the agency of *writing*, is dependent on expressing the 'material' of life experience. When this nearly-physical source of identity disappears, writing becomes insignificant: 'What he'd made his fiction from was gone – his birthplace the burnt-out landscape of a racial war and the people who'd been giants to him dead. The great Jewish struggle was with the Arab states; here it was over, the Jersey side of the Hudson, his West Bank, occupied now by an alien tribe. No new Newark was going to spring up again.'⁶⁵ The point of this comparison, uniquely accessible since Zuckerman, as a writer himself, formulates it directly, is the question of the loss of a historical 'subject.' However, what contradicts this, interestingly, in Roth's own oeuvre is that his earlier works do not exhibit a single seamless world of 'material'; in fact, the world is marked by division.

⁶¹ Isaac Babel. *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*. Ed. Nathalie Babel, Peter Constantine, and Cynthia Ozick. New York: Norton, 2001, p. 237.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 238.

⁶³ Alexander Bloom (1986), p. 20.

⁶⁴ Philip Roth. *The Counterlife*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1986, p. 324.

⁶⁵ Roth (1985), p. 445.

It is interesting to track the development of Jewishness *as particularity*, or as exhibiting ‘particularity’ in general, in Roth’s work along the lines of simultaneous political developments in the U.S., and with the trajectory of Roth’s own career. *Goodbye Columbus*, set in Newark, is a class satire based on tension between two different strata of Jews. If the Jew is ‘the object itself, like a glass or an apple,’ we ought to remember that fruit is the primary symbol of class connotations in *Goodbye Columbus*, from the protagonist Neil Klugman fighting with his aunt over canned or fresh fruit to the refrigerator at the Patimkins’ with ‘greengage plums, black plums, red plums, apricots, nectarines, peaches, long horns of grapes, black, yellow, red, and cherries, cherries flowing out of boxes and staining everything scarlet...and on the top shelf, half of a huge watermelon.’⁶⁶ Some Jews are trying to efface the things by which one can identify them as Jewish (Brenda’s nose job and white tennis clothes), while ‘I thought of my Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max sharing a Mounds bar in the cindery darkness of their alley.’⁶⁷ There is a sense of inevitability to the collapse of the relationship that Neil is aware of from the beginning, and his harsh treatment of Brenda seems like his attempt to mark himself on a world which will eventually erase him. The analogous case of the young ‘coloured boy’ in the library, and Neil’s furtive attempts to help him, acknowledges a partial solidarity in exclusion, a form of knowledge that those with greater privilege who attempt to behave ‘innocently’ do not share.

However, Zuckerman, more ambitious perhaps than Neil Klugman, achieves upward mobility and wild success in his life with the novel *Carnovsky* (a thinly disguised *Portnoy’s Complaint*) and there is a similar upward drift to the literary horizons within Zuckerman’s reality. In *The Ghost Writer*, for instance, Zuckerman, in applying for University of Chicago, has to go through an arduous process in order to secure a coveted recommendation from Judge Wapter. However, by the next novel, Zuckerman’s lower-achieving brother Henry is introduced as having gone to Cornell. From the vitriolic satire directed at Ivy Leaguers in *Goodbye Columbus* (by the Rutgers-Newark attending Neil) to introducing an Ivy League member of the family shows the terrain that Jews can expect to traverse has shifted. The integration of a bourgeois frame of reference with a Jewish one – in other words, assimilation – has consequences for how Roth views ‘Jewishness’ itself; namely, by reifying it.

The attempt to reach across class divides, in *Goodbye Columbus*, is represented as physical. The upper classes are ‘refusing to share the very texture of life with those of us outside.’⁶⁸ There is not, in

⁶⁶ Philip Roth. *Goodbye, Columbus: And Five Short Stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959, p. 37.

⁶⁷ Roth (1959), p. 8.

⁶⁸ Roth (1959), p. 8.

other words, one seamless world of ‘material’; in fact the ‘texture of life’ depends on where you stand. Only later does Zuckerman come to think of Newark as ‘material,’ a nostalgic relationship that serves to predate the actual descriptive process. As Zuckerman becomes fully bourgeois, his life experiences cease to be something he is living and become objectified in their entirety as a form of property, something to be owned, which requires that it also undergo a process of abstraction and symbolisation, something akin to a trademark. Indeed, Henry (Zuckerman’s brother) in *The Counterlife*, literally steals Nathan’s manuscript, the ‘property’ of his life story – as Alvin Pepler, the crazed doppelganger of *Zuckerman Unbound* (the second of the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy) accuses Zuckerman of stealing their shared childhood.

In *Zuckerman Unbound* and subsequent novels, after Zuckerman publishes *Carnovsky*, Zuckerman’s upward flight accompanies some very repetitive ideas about paternity, family and heritage. Roth repeatedly stresses in his novels of this period, as we have seen, the unique historical nature of Zuckerman’s (and Roth’s own) parents, the generation of recent emigrés from Russia and Europe – and that, by extension, what makes him historically unique is having been their child. However, what were initially quite specific, contradictory Jewish lives become generalised as a template for a more authentic Jewishness.⁶⁹ Alexander Bloom suggests that this is inevitably retrospective: ‘to understand fully both how ‘extraordinary’ and how ‘raw’ this world really was required the perspective of both having been raised there and having left.’⁷⁰ Indeed, this could be seen as a kind of reification; what was initially, in Roth’s own work, a particular milieu, in proximity to other milieux, of social, cultural, economic, religious and familial ties, becomes overwritten as an ontological being, ‘like a glass or an apple,’ and thereby a unique touchstone for authenticity that by extension (albeit from a distance) authenticates Roth as historical agent. The aspects of his early life that might be proximate to others’ lives disappears under this attitude of authentication, and the sentimental attitude he has towards the struggling past is revealed as somewhat hypocritical. For of course, Newark hasn’t disappeared, but for Roth it has become a symbol of loss:

A young black man, his head completely shaved, stepped out of one of the houses with a German shepherd and stared down from the stoop at the chauffeur-driven limousine in front of his alleyway, and at the white man in the back seat who was looking his place up and down. A chain fence surrounded the three-story house and the little garden of weeds out front. Had the fellow cared to ask, Zuckerman could

⁶⁹ This is reminiscent of Adolph Reed’s argument about ‘race men,’ in his essay “‘What Are the Drums Saying, Booker?’: The Curious Role of the Black Public Intellectual” (*Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene*. New York: New Press, 2000, pp. 77 – 92); that the notion of an abstract spokesperson or ‘representative’ of the race only emerges when the existence of class divisions *within* the race is mystified or concealed.

⁷⁰ Alexander Bloom (1986), p. 12.

without any trouble have told him the names of the three families who lived in the flats on each floor before World War II. But that wasn't what this black man wished to know. 'Who you supposed to be?' he said.

'No one,' replied Zuckerman, and that was the end of that. You are no longer any man's son, you are no good woman's husband, you are no longer your brother's brother, and you don't come from anywhere anymore either. They skipped the grade school and the playground and the hot-dog joint and headed back to New York, passing on the way out to the Parkway the synagogue where he'd taken Hebrew lessons after school until he was thirteen. It was now an African Methodist Episcopal Church.⁷¹

By the end of *Zuckerman Unbound*, Zuckerman's loss of location is also an entry into the realm of the unmarked: he has become just 'a white man.' The third book in the trilogy, *The Anatomy Lesson*, re-treads some of the same ground: "They passed beneath a railway bridge sprayed in six colours with mongoloid hieroglyphs. "Hateful bastards," said Mr. Freytag when he saw the public property defaced."⁷² The unintelligibility of the language is not incidental to the cryptically racist imagery. This marks a profound movement by Roth from the evasion of the censor (compare with the following, from *Goodbye, Columbus*: 'Man,' the boy said, 'that's the fuckin life.' The euphoria of his diction would have earned him eternal banishment from the Newark Public Library)⁷³ into being in the position of finding others unintelligible, others who are, geographically at least, quite literally where Zuckerman used to be.

It is illustrative to compare Roth to a member of an older generation of writers from the same milieu, Saul Bellow. Bellow and Roth have been identified by Alexander Bloom as second- and third-generation members of the New York Intellectuals. They are two of the most famous writers who have been associated with the group – among whom we can also count Norman Mailer, Delmore Schwartz, Bernard Malamud, Mary McCarthy, and Isaac Rosenfeld, as well as, if we include the general group of writers published in *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*, a larger constellation of 20th century authors such as James Baldwin. Yet the differing generations to which Bellow and Roth belong are of pivotal importance. Namely, the shifting trajectory from margins to centre which influenced the whole New York Intellectual group was largely in relation to the Second World War. As such, Bellow, as a member of the pre-war generation, expresses the experience of the war in far more complicated terms than Roth. His early writings portray alienated characters whose relationship to the mass is in question. Indeed, his novel *Dangling Man* centres around a character

⁷¹ Roth (1985), 406.

⁷² Philip Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1983, p. 257.

⁷³ Roth (1959), p. 32

disillusioned by his Communist past – ‘we had been Comrade Joe and Comrade Jim’⁷⁴ – whose experiences track with the broader trajectory of the New York Intellectuals.

It is widely understood that Bellow began his mature career with *The Adventures of Augie March*, a capacious integration of ghetto life and literary reference. Yet it is instructive to study the works published before he ‘found his voice’ (to use the terms of the MFA), the two ‘depressive’ novels *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, both of which address the immediate war and post-war era through the question of one’s location in relation to mass society. The following monologue from the protagonist and narrator Joseph establishes this:

I could see a long way from this third-floor height. Not far off there were chimneys, their smoke a lighter gray than the gray of the sky; and, straight before me, ranges of poor dwellings, warehouses, billboards, culverts, electric signs blankly burning, parked cars and moving cars, and the occasional bare plan of a tree. These I surveyed, pressing my forehead on the glass. It was my painful obligation to look and to submit to myself the invariable question: Where was there a particle of what, elsewhere, or in the past, had spoken in man’s favour? There could be no doubt that these billboards, streets, tracks, houses, ugly and blind, were related to interior life. And yet, I told myself, there had to be a doubt. There were human lives organised around these ways and houses, and that they, the houses, say, were the analogue, *that what men created they also were, through some transcendent means, I could not bring myself to concede.* [my italics] There must be a difference, a quality that eluded me, somehow, a difference between things and persons and even between acts and persons. Otherwise the people who lived here were actually a reflection of the things they lived among. I had always striven to avoid blaming them. Was that not in effect behind my daily reading of the paper? In their businesses and politics, their taverns, movies, assaults, divorces, murders, I tried continually to find clear signs of their common humanity.⁷⁵

‘That what men created they also were,’ serves both as a condemnation of the degradation of popular culture, the concomitant indignities of a dehumanising class system (Joseph’s brother’s family is wealthy and callous, their neighbours in the boarding-house poor but equally callous), and perhaps, indirectly, the war itself. The choice of mass-produced objects to stand in, however dubiously, for human consciousness, still seems unfamiliar, perhaps a violation (in contrast to the ease with which Roth, particularly in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, cheerfully references popular culture). In this brief moment of Joseph’s contemplation, there are echoes of Bellow’s second novel, *The Victim*, which situates itself more fully in a crowded urban space. The objects of Leventhal’s existence, described impersonally, are those shared by the anonymous masses, duplicable down to the details:

⁷⁴ Bellow (2003), p. 20.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 24-25.

trains, buses, apartments, even lunch in an Automat. There is also a hyper-accuracy in these details: ‘The waiter brought his meal, an omelette in a chipped, blackened enamel dish with tomato sauce hardened on the rim, a salad, and some canned apricots. ...The coffee was sweet and thick; he swallowed even the sediment.’⁷⁶ The ‘sediment’ of the coffee is scientifically accurate, yet generic, thus acting to defamiliarise the description, bringing one’s thinking back to its abstract properties rather than its purposes in an individual life. Bellow’s description formally mimics the register of mass production rather than personalising it through Leventhal, producing a more accurate summation of the appearance – in this case, the appearance of mass-produced life – through his avoidance of cliché. Yet rather than observe impersonally from a distance, as the narrator does, Leventhal actively fears joining ‘humanity’: ‘He had almost fallen in with that part of humanity of which he was frequently mindful... the part that did not get away with it – the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined.’ Leventhal is, in his own way, dangling, which Joseph articulates in the first person:

Because I was involved with them; because, whether I liked it or not, they were my generation, my society, my world. We were figures in the same plot, eternally fixed together. I was aware, also, that their existence, just as it was, made mine possible. And if, as was often said, this part of the century was approaching the nether curve in a cycle, then I, too, would remain on the bottom and there, extinct, merely add my body, my life, to the base of a coming time. This would probably be a condemned age. But... it might be a mistake to think of it in that way.⁷⁷

The ironic ending of *Dangling Man*, in which Joseph is drafted, ending his alienation: ‘I am no longer to be held accountable for myself...I am in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom cancelled. Hurray for regular hours! And for the supervision of the spirit! Long live regimentation!’⁷⁸ may have been tongue-in-cheek, but it honestly depicted the way in which larger social machinery rather than personal commitment bound individuals to the experience of the war, and led the *Partisan* intellectuals from opposition to tacit acceptance of American militarism. The suspension of his purpose and significance in unemployment and ‘dangling’ suggests the tension of turning against the larger currents of society, made physical through the metaphor: ‘I sometimes think of it as the backdrop against which I can be seen swinging. It is still more. Before I can properly estimate the damage it has done me I shall have to be cut down.’⁷⁹ But the distance from violence should be

⁷⁶ Ibid, 54.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 25.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 5.

noted. What Joseph suffers from is not the war, but the imposition of not being able to place himself in relation to the war, to commit to it, such that being involuntarily ‘relieved’ of his civilian life comes, in another sense, as a relief.

If there were a ‘counter-history’ to the New York Intellectuals, it might have been the development of Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School during the same decades. From having been largely the purview of political, economic, and social theory, Marxism emerged as a form of cultural criticism in the 1920s. The methods of critique developed by the Frankfurt School were a reaction against the tragedies of actually-existing socialism. Yet Frankfurt School thinkers never developed the confidence in capitalism or in the moral supremacy of America evidenced by the anti-Communist consensus. There is a marked divergence between European Marxist thinkers’ (particularly Adorno’s) ‘pessimism’ in response to the Holocaust and to the worldwide battle between Communism and capitalism, and American intellectuals’ ‘optimism’ and departure from Marxism. This is theorised almost explicitly in Bellow’s work as a transition from the European past to the American contemporary, as well as Joseph’s transition from alienated Communist to military recruit: ‘Besides, the giants of the last century had their Liverpools and Londons, their Lilles and Hamburgs to contend against, as we have our Chicagos and Detroits. . . . The worlds we sought were never those we saw; the worlds we bargained for were never the worlds we got.’⁸⁰

Thus, rather than speculate on the decline of civilisation and reason, or the reduced possibilities of the aesthetic (‘no poetry after Auschwitz’), Philip Roth developed *The Great American Novel* (1973) and integrated Anne Frank as a love interest into *The Ghost Writer*. As Roth himself explicitly articulates in *The Ghost Writer*, this kind of uneasy centrality of Jewish writing within American life would be impossible to imagine without the Holocaust – but so too would the centrality of American writing globally be impossible to imagine without the pitched cultural battles of the Cold War, in which the ‘democracy’ of American literature was figured as triumphantly Western (through, for example, Roth’s patronage of Eastern European writers like Milan Kundera through his ‘Writers from the Other Europe’ series). ‘That what men created they also were,’ does not ring so badly on Roth’s ears, who is entirely comfortable borrowing from commercial culture, including the commercialisation of the Holocaust. If for Bellow’s early work, Popular Front

⁸⁰ Ibid, 15.

The language deliberately mimics the Communist slogan ‘A World to Win.’ Joseph’s former comrade Jim has created a military-style map in case of the outbreak of armed struggle in the streets. To Joseph, this is a mark of Jim’s foolish fidelity to Communism, but it is additionally a reminder that America’s quiet streets are distant from the brutality of the Second World War.

radicalism, ‘mass’ movements, and a sense of the mass-produced nature of capitalism creates alienation: ‘Our windows, with their glowing shades, set two orange rectangles, trade-marks of warmth and comfort, against the downpour and the dark,’⁸¹ Roth’s post-war vision is far more able to use, and understand, identity as a trademark.

Roth’s works, including those that explicitly engage the Second World War, do not perceive the mass politics which drew Bellow’s characters to declare ‘There is no personal future anymore.’⁸² ‘You could touch with your toes where America began,’ begins a reminiscence from Philip Roth’s 1995 novel *Sabbath’s Theater*.⁸³ Roth’s protagonist Morris (‘Mickey’) Sabbath grew up in a vacation resort not dissimilar from one visited by Roth’s family. Sabbath’s childhood, like Roth’s, was idyllic – until the fateful day of December 12, 1944, when his older brother was killed in the Second World War, the day after the final gassing of concentration camp victims. Pierpont’s biography of Roth discusses this specific passage:

A small boy stands in the water off a rinky-dink New Jersey beach, the continent rising behind him. *Sabbath’s Theatre* is the book in which Roth rediscovered America: the mythic grand-scale country of promises and principles, the America of his childhood indissolubly bound to the moral victory of the Second World War.⁸⁴

While Roth portrays America as a natural entity, a shoreline, it was reconstituted politically and ideologically not only throughout his lifetime, but also throughout his work. Pierpont observes this dynamic of greater inclusion in Americanness through Roth’s writing over the years:

Young Alexander Portnoy envies the little boys named John and Billy... Roughly a quarter of a century later, Morris Sabbath has no doubts that he is American... towards the end of the book, he literally wraps himself in the flag... Since Portnoy’s childhood – since Roth’s childhood – more recent immigrants have replaced the Jews’ sense of foreignness.⁸⁵

Although Jews have assimilated to American life over the 20th century, those who have ‘replaced the Jews’ sense of foreignness,’ as can be seen from Roth’s own writing, are not necessarily ‘more recent immigrants’ but rather, the black inhabitants of the formerly Jewish ghettos, most of whom are not immigrants at all. The way in which non-Europeans have been temporalised as ‘recent arrivals’ speaks to ‘arrival’ as a class dynamic (of which mid-century New York Intellectuals such as Nathan Glazer, Patrick Moynihan, and Norman Podhoretz were explicitly aware). The effort to locate

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 95.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Philip Roth. *Sabbath’s Theater*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1995, p.

⁸⁴ Pierpont (2013), 204.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

America that Roth exhibits – and if there is a boundary, the nature of the boundary – is precisely at stake here. At stake, also, is a question of autobiography and history – how does the individual fit into larger historical movements? Roth's characters, as time passes, move away from the 'historical,' materially and culturally determined schema of Jewishness, towards self-making.

Chapter Two: A ‘Third Thing’:

Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, and the International

When Amiri Baraka received a dishonourable discharge from the Air Force (or as he renames it in his *Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, ‘Error Farce’)⁸⁶ for possible Communist sympathies, among the ostensibly subversive literature found in his possession and used as evidence against him were copies of the *Partisan Review*.⁸⁷ In an irony not lost on Baraka, the *Partisan Review* had originated as a Communist-affiliated left-wing magazine; however, in taking up a position against Stalin in the late thirties, the review developed a notably more conservative stance, such that by the 1950s it had few words in support of suspected dissidents investigated by the US government – indeed, it would receive CIA funding throughout the decade, including at the time of Baraka’s reading.⁸⁸ Thus, the literary landscape from which Baraka emerged was marked by a backlash (led by the *Partisan Review*, among others) against the proletarian writing of the thirties and forties, a period which had ushered in enduring contributions to black literature from writers such as Margaret Walker, Richard Wright, Claude McKay, Frank Marshall Davis, Arna Bontemps, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, and Langston Hughes, as well as W.E.B. Du Bois’s ground-breaking work of materialist history, *Black Reconstruction in America*.

As James Smethurst suggests in his consideration of the period, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African-American Poetry 1930-1946*, in which he assesses precisely these under-examined decades of black literary production between the New Negro Renaissance of the 20s and the ‘high’ Cold War style of the 50s, a presumptive periodisation of black writers in the first half of the twentieth century has taken hold which does not map adequately onto the dates of the works themselves. ‘Both the account of African-American literature that describes the 1930s as essentially an extension of the New Negro Renaissance and that which sees the decade as absolutely disjunct from the 1920s have the effect of making the 1940s a sort of non-period, effectively excluding the 1940s from a discussion of the 1930s.’⁸⁹ This extends to the treatment of individual writers: “Those poets who publish books for the first time in the 1940s and who now are considered “important”

⁸⁶ Amiri Baraka. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997, p. 94.

⁸⁷ Baraka’s use of names and titles in the *Autobiography*, including his own, is inconsistent (or poetic); he also renames the *Partisan Review* the *Sectarian Review*. For the purpose of clarity, I refer to him throughout as Baraka, encompassing the periods during which his work was published under LeRoi Jones.

⁸⁸ Hugh Wilford. *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. See also Bennett (2015).

⁸⁹ James Smethurst. *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.7.

black writers – Margaret Walker, Robert Hayden, Melvin Tolson, Gwendolyn Brooks – are variously attached to earlier or later periods,’ he writes.⁹⁰ Rather, a sense of the development of black literature in the 20th century has taken hold which largely avoids the decades immediately preceding the Cold War; indeed, Smethurst’s book is significant as the only extant full-length study that centres on black poetry produced in this time period.

It is almost unquestionable that the neglect of these two decades’ worth of literature is related to geopolitical events far beyond the developments of aesthetics, since the failure of Soviet Communism to actualise a utopian society, and the development of anti-Communism in America, had direct implications for black writers whose careers were frequently implicated by Communism. The Communists were relatively unique in putting forward an immediate and full emancipatory programme that was radical, clearly and consistently stated, and supported by an international organisation – although it is also important to note that black intellectuals had a theoretical commitment to egalitarian ideals beyond their own practical stake in such principles. During the 1930s and 1940s, in addition to publishing in black journals like *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, black writers also published in journals affiliated with Marxism, such as *New Masses*, the *Daily Worker*, and the then-Left *Partisan Review*; particularly Hughes, as Smethurst notes, ‘Poems by Langston Hughes as well as a large number of Hughes’s translations of poetry and prose were printed in virtually every journal or organ connected with the CPUSA.’⁹¹ However, the growing awareness of Stalinism’s repressive character, domestic anti-radical efforts by the American government, as well as blunders by the American Communist Party (CPUSA)⁹² compelled some – although not all – black Communists to abandon their earlier political positions. The aftermath of this political failure gave rise to the relatively understated world of literature within which the young Amiri Baraka began to discover his calling as a writer. Black writing, in the literary world he entered, was now marked by a retreat from explicit social engagement to the more veiled critiques exemplified by Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Robert Hayden. Thus it was nearly inevitable that Baraka’s writing initially developed through the lens of non-academic ‘New American Poetry’ (inclusive of the disparate Beat,

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ For more on the relationship between Left institutions and black writing in this period, see Smethurst (1999).

⁹² Particularly its change of doctrine regarding blacks in WWII to no longer support immediate integration as a highest priority and instead consolidate efforts against Hitler; a shift which disillusioned Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Polsgrove notes, crucially, that Wright and Ellison initially disapproved of the CPUSA’s shift *on Marxist grounds*; in other words, they perceived the CPUSA’s change in line as itself reformist, having sold out ‘both Negroes and labour.’ Only in the 1950s did Wright and Ellison take up a clear line against left politics more generally. (Carol Polsgrove. *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.)

Black Mountain, and New York schools, with whom Baraka had acquaintance), and not necessarily or immediately through racial affiliation. Baraka's account, in the *Autobiography*, of his initial Village years, depicts a multiracial literary counterculture alienated from prior generations of political struggle, within a broader dominant culture marked by, among other things, the *Partisan Review* (for which his first wife, the writer Hettie Jones – *née* Cohen, would work as a secretary):

So this was a time of transition. From the cooled-out reactionary '50s, the '50s of the cold war and McCarthyism and HUAC, to the late '50s of the surging civil rights movement. And I myself was a transitional figure, coming out of the brown world and its black sources but already yellowed out a bit by the Capstone employment agency on The Hill. And then to add insult to injury, or maybe attempted homicide to assault, I had offered myself to the totalitarian 'whiteness' of the military. Running away from it, I dived into books, only to get involved in a deeper, more 'profound,' more rational version of the same thing.⁹³

Baraka's depiction of the decade as 'reactionary' is well-founded, but it is also, crucially, the era that initially grounds him as a writer, and whose transitions furnish his own.

The primary aim of this chapter is to contest the predominant periodisation of black left-wing politics and literature in the first two-thirds of the 20th century. Much of our tacit understanding of the historical progression of black writing in fact comes from self-justificatory myths of the seventies, which portrayed previous generations as predecessors to the Black Arts project who were in a sense insufficiently enlightened. For an example of this temporal placement, we can look to the 1975 anthology *The Forerunners: Black Poets in America*, edited by Woodie King, Jr., with a foreword by Addison Gayle, Jr., which situates the output of poets including Frank Marshall Davis, Sterling Brown, Owen Dodson, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Langston Hughes, among others, as 'forerunners' of Black Arts. The book is dedicated 'to the memory of Langston Hughes', but as the foreword goes on to specify: 'Langston Hughes remains one of their patron saints;' (by 'their', the volume refers to new poets of the 70s, chiefly Baraka, who is mentioned several times) 'it is not, however, the Hughes of the romantic dream whom they admire, but the Hughes of *The Panther and the Lash*, who realised, finally, that salvation for Blacks is possible only through the efforts of Blacks.'⁹⁴ We can here see an ambivalence about Hughes' relationship to political consciousness

⁹³ Baraka (1997), p. 189-90.

⁹⁴ Gayle, Addison, Jr. 'Foreword.' to *The Forerunners: Black Poets in America*. Washington: Howard University Press, 1975, p. xxiv.

Given the rhetorically Manichean division between Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent approach and Malcolm X's nationalism, it is conceivable that this reference to the 'romantic dream' is also a veiled reference to Hughes' presumed conservatism (falling on the 'Martin' side of this equation). For his part, while Hughes disapproved of what he perceived as a nihilistic impulse in black writing, he was not in principle opposed to violence; indeed several of his poems depict fights to the death for revolutionary struggle, including some in praise of John Brown.

which inevitably places him historically even as it invokes his late work, tying him resolutely as a figure to the first half of the twentieth century in need of evaluation by the more advanced Black Arts aesthetic/politic.

In this vein, the foreword continues: ‘Though there are those in this volume who tend to eschew race, who write a facile poetry of little meaning, who attempt to lose the Black experience in abstraction and surrealism, for the most part *The Forerunners* is marked by those who have turned inward,’⁹⁵ such as the exemplary folk writing of Sterling Brown (the ‘facile poetry of little meaning comment’ is possibly aimed at Robert Hayden). This didactic tone, pointedly directed at establishing a politicised canon, is not atypical of the period, and I wish to dwell on this precisely because it is an excellent example of historical flattening through canon-formation practiced as part of the renovating ideologies of a new movement. In particular, to depart so strikingly from Hughes’ earlier writing in favour of his late work is an act of rereading that borders on misreading. It is crucially important to note the Hughes of *The Panther and the Lash* is the same Hughes ‘of the romantic dream,’ given that *The Panther and the Lash* is an anthology of work spanning back to the 1920s. What Gayle dismisses as the ‘romantic dream’ encompasses the majority of Hughes’ writing, including his most politically engaged work, in which he develops his significant formal flexibility. The selective reading of Hughes not only locates him as a literary godparent, with the so-called ‘romanticism’ of early poems ‘oftentimes evidencing nothing so much as the poet[’s] ignorance of the facts of history,’⁹⁶ it thereby deeply obfuscates his major contributions.

Black writers of earlier generations – particularly, as I will argue, Hughes – envisioned a significantly more radical world through black plurality, communal voice, and internationalism. Due to the trajectory of Stalinism, the institutional political project to which Hughes committed himself in the 1930s proved an objective failure; however, I believe that the recognition of this failure has been carried over into revision of Hughes’ political beliefs and his poetry. What has arisen instead is a narrative of continued poetic progress for black Americans implicitly concomitant with progressive political radicalisation which effaces the consequences on black writing of the reactionary 50s. Myths of progress in African American politics and writing efface the contradictory nature of the past century for black Americans: our own century, which has seen the first black president, and Beyoncé doing a Black Panthers-inspired dance at the Superbowl, has also ushered in a new era of financial terror for black people which culminated in the complete destruction of an American black middle

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

class in the 2008 financial crisis – such that there is even some muted nostalgia for the era of segregation, in which there was at least an identifiable and consolidated black ‘community.’⁹⁷ In what follows, I will compare Baraka’s and Hughes’s work in order to establish the contemporaneity of their production and call into question the linear teleology of Black Arts, which I hope will more clearly establish the field of possibility within which Baraka was operating. There is an expressive continuity of terms within the writing of Hughes and Baraka – internationalism, politics (Marxism and populism, including humour), musical expression, and black literature as ‘national literature’ – all of which are terms introduced by Hughes which Baraka retains and resignifies, showing both his debt to Hughes’ project and his desire to redefine its key concepts.

In periodising and staking black identity on ‘the new,’ of course, Black Arts was following in the footsteps of the New Negro Renaissance, and of the 1920s more generally— when, as Hughes puts it, ‘the Negro was in vogue.’⁹⁸ Both the New Negro Renaissance and Black Arts articulated the increased autonomy of African-American literature in contrast to the past.⁹⁹ In the case of the figure of the ‘New Negro,’ this ‘newness’ came explicitly from the Great Migration of African-Americans from the South and their concomitant industrialisation and urbanisation. Alain Locke’s anthology, *The New Negro*, the seminal text of the New Negro Renaissance, articulated Hughes and others within a specifically national frame: ‘the New Negro is keenly responsive as an augury of a new democracy in American culture.’¹⁰⁰ Hughes would take up this sense of ‘American-ness’ throughout his work, although never with the desire to assimilate culturally into the white mainstream, and perhaps contrary to the tenor of cosmopolitanism, it may be precisely this sense of having to articulate a highly local *American* ‘Negro’ poetics that enabled Hughes to approach a greater internationalism (through, for example, his engagement with poets like Nicolás Guillén and Federico García Lorca, as well as his travels to Soviet Central Asia).

⁹⁷ This is a genuinely widespread stance (and among more than the cultural-nationalists to whom one might easily attribute it). See Hortense J. Spillers. ‘The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date.’ *boundary 2* vol. 21 no. 3 (Autumn, 1994), pp. 65-116.

⁹⁸ Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.

‘It was a period when every season there was at least one hit play on Broadway acted by a Negro cast. And when books by Negro authors were being published with much greater frequency and much more publicity than ever before or since in history.’

⁹⁹ This new autonomy was largely real, in terms of the increased publishing opportunities available for black writers. However, the implication that African-American writing itself only became innovative during this period is questionable. Scholars such as Dickson D. Bruce have pushed toward a reconsideration of black writing from the ‘nadir’ of American race relations, from 1877-1915, focusing on figures such as Charles Chesnutt. Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

¹⁰⁰ Alain Locke, ed. *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968, p. 4.

Although Baraka, after becoming a Marxist, reached a similar position to Hughes's in the 30s and 40s on the relationship between blackness, nationalism, and internationalism, his initial stance was significantly more ambivalent. In 1965, he proclaimed that 'Nations are races. (In America, white people have become a nation, an identity, a race.) Political integration in America will not work.'¹⁰¹ Moreover, in his writing of the 1960s – beginning with his history *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, whose very title articulates a difference between black culture and a broader white national identity – he identifies black people's position within America as a kind of insurgent presence that developed autonomously from the dominant culture.¹⁰² Throughout *Blues People*, Baraka asserts a direct (albeit falsifiable) continuity between African-American popular music and African, rather than American, cultural forms, by which means he argues for a genealogy of African-American culture as essentially non-American.

The vagueness of Baraka's notion of 'the African' here – arguably reducible to an 'Other' counterposed to America – recalls other contemporaneous visions of nonwhite people, including those by white authors from Norman Mailer to Allen Ginsburg, which are in turn indebted to earlier modernist and neo-primitivist visions of black people: as naturally artistic, libidinal, experiencing the world directly and authentically. This idea somewhat uncontestedly carried over into Baraka's emphasis in *Blues People*, and other writings, on the need to recuperate the natural rebelliousness of black life and folk aesthetics from white oppression. This idea also decidedly turned Baraka against a European intellectual tradition. Paradoxically, concomitant with Baraka's dismissal of black people's belonging to America proper, his emphasis on black self-representation and his frequent assertion that prior generations¹⁰³ of black writers made the mistake of turning towards Europe might be seen as articulating a characteristic post-World War II mindset of assumed American dominance, which dismissed the 'old' Europe as passé. In an indictment from the *Autobiography* that targets Claude McKay, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and others, Baraka argues: 'For many black intellectuals... Europe was the source and site of the really serious intellectual pursuits. But for black people this assumption has very serious implications. (It has, finally, for all Americans.) The intellectual worship

¹⁰¹ Amiri Baraka. 'The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation.' *Home: Social Essays*. New York: Akashic Books, 2009, p. 224.

¹⁰² Amiri Baraka. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: William Morrow, 1963.

¹⁰³ Again, these assertions of different literary 'generations' or affiliations with different movements tended to overwrite the empirical chronology of literary history. Baraka's assignation of certain writers to older 'generations' was, in effect, a move to label some of his contemporaries as outdated. Baldwin, for example was a mere decade older, and while Hayden was some 20 years older than Baraka, he continuously produced topical poetic work, relating to black life and the Vietnam War, throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The primary difference between him and Baraka is not merely time period, but sensibility.

of Europe is in one sense only the remnants of colonialism, still pushed by the rulers through their "English Departments".¹⁰⁴ Most interesting in this rather uneven formation is the fact that, contrary to the impulse governing *Blues People* in the mid-sixties, Baraka does not fully disconnect the terms 'American' and 'black,' – 'for black people... for all Americans' – revealing the degree to which a black person belongs in, or to, America as an unresolved problem persisting throughout his oeuvre. Similarly, for Wright and other emigré black writers, the question of blackness and Americanness was far from resolved. Europe granted them not a sense of cultural affiliation, but confirmation and refuge from alienation and American persecution. Thus, perhaps the most significant term in examining the differences between Hughes and Baraka's relationships to internationalism is not, in fact, 'America' but the voice.

Hughes's most stunning poetic innovation was the creation of a plural Black voice. This derives directly from the 'I' of Walt Whitman. As Hughes' biographer Arnold Rampersad puts it, 'In this way Hughes had aligned himself with the great native river of American verse that derived in a real sense from Walt Whitman and his *Leaves of Grass*, which had emphasised as never before the glory of the American language as an expression of the nation's finest character and ideals.'¹⁰⁵ Hughes himself, in his writings, acknowledged this debt to Whitman, particularly in creating his most famous poem 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers.' Rampersad relates (possibly apocryphally) that when Hughes travelled to Africa on a steamer, leaving many of his books behind, one of the few he did not abandon was a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. Unlike Whitman, however, Hughes had to simultaneously hold in tension the 'national' body and the particularity of black life. Hughes uses a more broken line than Whitman and techniques such as rhyme that sustain the variance of voices in a totality. He also looked to specifically black areas of cultural production, particularly music, and social practices both 'low' and 'high' (indeed, he thematises this in a pair of poems called 'Low to High' and 'High to Low') to articulate simultaneously multiple strata of black life. This is most fully demonstrated in his book-length work *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), in which Hughes forges a voice that is simultaneously plural, collective, and unitary.¹⁰⁶

The suite of 91 poems, which together Hughes considered a single long poem, engages a significant number of popular musical forms from boogie, to blues, to jazz. Many of these formal

¹⁰⁴ Baraka (1997), p. 186-7.

¹⁰⁵ Langston Hughes. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. Vol. 3. Columbia: University of Missouri, 2001, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ Langston Hughes. *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad. Vintage Classics, 1995.

references are sonic, from shouts: ‘Hey, pop!// Re-bop!// Mop!// Y-e-a-h!’¹⁰⁷ to children’s rhymes, which form poems-within-a-poem, to a use of refrain and different ‘versions’ of the same piece (a piece appears first entitled ‘Warning,’ then again in extended form as ‘Warning: Augmented’). The most-repeated line is that of the ‘dream deferred,’ which occurs throughout. There is even what could perhaps be seen as an instrumental solo; in the poem ‘Easy Boogie,’ between evenly rhymed stanzas appears the parenthetical ‘(Riffs smears, breaks.)’ Hughes’s deployment of musical and sonic registers in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* summons a non-singular simultaneity of voices, notes, and sounds; in short, polyphony.

Hughes moves the rhyme from one register, or voice, to the next, as in this example: ‘Copper’s whistle!/Patrol bell!/Arrest.//Precinct Station./Iron cell./Headlines in press://MAN THREATENS LANDLORD//TENANT HELD NO BAIL//JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL.’¹⁰⁸ While there is still a sonic quality to these movements, we also see Hughes engaging with textual practices which do not necessarily have full oral equivalents, such as one poem written in the form of a letter, another with a parenthetical which serves as an explication of why a black audience in Harlem is ‘laughing in all the wrong places’: ‘(Hollywood/ laughs at me,/ black – / so I laugh/ back.)’¹⁰⁹ Another poem, ‘Neon Signs,’ is composed largely of the text found on street signs. There is a dialogic quality of the poems’ address in the collection as a whole, most explicit in a pair of poems like ‘Low to High’ and ‘High to Low,’ in which the two social classes take turns addressing one another. Hughes uses a range of registers, from an ironic height to vernacular invocations which include urban, folk, and markedly African-American utterances. Thus, throughout the work, voice takes on a flexible, self-interrogating, and dialectical form: that is, the titular form of ‘montage,’ influenced by Soviet artists such as the pioneering film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein, in which one image collides with another to produce a third, unseen synthesis.

In Eisenstein’s own montage theory, he referred to this third element – a moment of epiphany produced by the juxtaposition of the first two elements, both negative and synthetic – as the ‘tertium quid,’ or third thing. In a fascinating double signification, W.E.B. Du Bois used the same phrase, ‘tertium quid,’ in his classic *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)¹¹⁰ to identify the status of black people in the American imaginary, as caught between man and animal. We might say that

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 388.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 403.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 395.

¹¹⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.; Cambridge: University Press John Wilson and Son, 1903; Bartleby.com, 1999. Web. Accessed August 2017.

<<http://www.bartleby.com/114>>

Hughes uses Eisenstein's montage form to adapt Du Bois' racial signification of the term throughout *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, presenting us with a new 'tertium quid' in the name of the titular 'deferral,' that of the 'dream' that Hughes refuses to name in any unitary sense. This technique can be observed at work throughout the cycle, in poems which on the surface have significant formal differences, such as 'Wonder':

Early blue evening.
Lights ain't come on yet.
Looky yonder!
*They come on now!*¹¹¹

and 'Passing':

On sunny summer Sunday afternoons in Harlem
when the air is one interminable ball game
and grandma cannot get her gospel hymns
from the Saints of God in Christ
on account of the Dodgers on the radio,
on sunny Sunday afternoons
when the kids look all new
and far too clean to stay that way,
and Harlem has its
washed-and-ironed-and-cleaned best out,
the ones who've crossed the line
to live downtown
miss you,
Harlem of the bitter dream,
since their dream has
come true.¹¹²

While the first of these is broken into contrasting utterances, and the second formed of a long meditative sentence, they both share an unspoken negativity. In 'Wonder,' the event of lights coming on in the 'blue' (never a racially unmarked adjective in black poetry since the advent of blues music) evening is performed through the interplay of two voices that do not quite speak to each other, or perhaps form two uneven pieces of an internal monologue. The effect of the lights 'being seen' by a speaker within the poem, rather than described by the (presumed) narrative voice of the poem, is that the lights are merely presumed, produced by the contrast between the first and second voices, and occurring somewhere within the gap between the two voices. The 'tertium quid' in this case, the light, is an effect of contrasting voices. Meanwhile, in the latter poem, the entire nostalgia-infused description of Harlem reveals itself to be predicated on the perceptions of those Blacks 'passing' for

¹¹¹ Hughes (1951), 394.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 417.

white, who ironically miss ‘the Harlem of the bitter dream,/ since their dream has/ come true.’ This doubles the vision of ‘Harlem’ in the poem, bringing it into contradiction with itself, through the slippage of viewpoint, the tension between the locations of Blackness and passing-for-whiteness, the ‘bitter dream’ and the bitterly fulfilled one. In these ways, the ‘dream deferred’ of the cycle is always approached through a polyphonic production, rather than the straightforward unity of a singular voice – even, notably, in poems like ‘Passing,’ which appear to be quite unified.¹¹³ Hughes writes not portraiture, but *voicing*, and as the voices that he chooses contradict each other, it is within their imagined interstices that his project can be perceived.

In Hughes’ earlier work, the self-assertion of the poems’ lyric subject would not merely name the ‘dream,’ but seize it: this is evident in ‘Goodbye Christ’ (1932): ‘Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—/A real guy named/Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin worker ME’; or, in the play *Scottsboro Limited* (1932): ‘Too long have my hands been idle/Too long have my brains been dumb./Now out of the darkness/The new Red Negro will come:/That’s me!’¹¹⁴ Both of these self-asserting voices, crucially, link their ‘selves’ directly to the empowerment of political engagement

¹¹³ Hughes’s work, particularly of this postwar period, is often approached as a primarily lyric phenomenon. A common departure point for this lyric reading of Hughes is one of *Montage of a Dream Deferred*’s small segments, the poem ‘Harlem’:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

The voice of this poem is often read as Hughes’s pure lyric extension. Perhaps this is due in part to Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, whose title and epigraph are taken from this poem. Crucially, Hansberry’s play is set at the beginning of the Cold War, ‘Sometime between World War II and the present’ (as with Hughes, whose major historical reference point for *Montage* is also the end of World War II). The play, which depicts the financial struggle and humiliation of a South Side Chicago Black family in moving into a new home, has contributed to the emphasis of the theme of ‘deferral’ in Hughes’ later work, an emphasis far more compatible with a lyric or even elegiac voice, but not commensurate with the polyphonic innovation that characterises *Montage* as a cohesive work. An outside focus on the ‘deferral’ rather than the ‘dream’ misrecognises Hughes as an ancestral, lyric, and ultimately defeated voice. Yet in fact, at a moment when other writers embraced the lyric, Hughes, moving out of his ‘proletarian’ period, chose instead the untimely avant-garde practice of montage to organise an enormous range of vocalisations, within which, as we have seen, the ‘dream’ awaits as the crucial *tertium quid*.

¹¹⁴ Rampersad (2001).

with a mass movement. Jonathan Flatley emphasises the nearly agglutinative chain of ‘Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin worker ME,’ as well as Hughes’ tendency to use ‘me’ as a plural (as in his poem ‘Air Raid on Harlem’ when Harlem speaks as a ‘ME’). This ‘me’ rather than an ‘I’ emphasises the receptivity of the speaker in the act of creation through naming. Flatley fundamentally suggests that Hughes is searching for poetic ‘representation’ (*vertreten*) that might prefigure political representation (*darstellen*) – a poetics, in other words, that might function like a political party.¹¹⁵

When Baraka envisions a black populace during his Black Nationalist writings of the 1970s, such as the collection *It’s Nation Time* (1970), he tends to view plurality as a stage *before* politicisation. As the titular poem from *It’s Nation Time* puts it, ‘Time to get/together/time to be one strong fast black energy space/one pulsating positive magnetism.../[...]/niggers come out, brothers are we/with you and your sons your daughters are ours/and we are the same.’¹¹⁶ That is, black people, in their multiplicity, merge for Baraka into a single energy. However, even when Baraka’s ideology coincides with Hughes’s (and as I will discuss later, some of their thematic structures are remarkably similar) Baraka generally maintains a closer relationship with a traditional lyric form of address. Instead of Hughes’s ‘ME,’ which Flatley argues is the seat of his plurality, Baraka tends to use a rhetorical ‘I’ or ‘we.’

Rather than divide Baraka’s work into ideological and teleological categories as strictly as *The LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka Reader* has done, for example (namely ‘The Beat Period,’ ‘The Transitional Period,’ ‘The Black Nationalist Period,’ ‘The Third World Marxist Period’), I think it is instructive to see how Baraka’s work follows a kind of dialectical progression, with each work attempting to solve or re-solve the implicit (and often explicit) questions posed by the preceding writing. This form of dialectical problem solving is especially clear in Baraka’s dramatic works—for example, *The Slave* (1964) has often been read as a continuation of *Dutchman* (1964), with the character of Clay, who cannot awake to racial reality and is ultimately killed in *Dutchman*, returning to life to voluntarily struggle and kill in *The Slave*.¹¹⁷ Baraka’s succession of stages and philosophies, in which each one progressively alters the previous, is significant for his writing, but it is also crucial to note the difference in the tone of these alterations: from the vantage point of his Marxist period, which continued until his death, Baraka continues to praise the spirit in which he developed Black Arts,

¹¹⁵ Flatley, Jonathan. ‘Langston Hughes’s Black Leninism.’ Comintern Aesthetics Conference. University of California, Berkeley. Institute of International Studies, Berkeley, CA. 18 April 2015.

¹¹⁶ *The LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka Reader*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1999, p. 240-242.

¹¹⁷ Kern, Douglas. *Killing in the Name of Struggle: Amiri Baraka’s Revolutionary Theatre*. University of York. 2014. PhD thesis.

even when he denounces it most fully in political terms (as reactionary, chauvinistic, etc.) This is utterly distinct from Baraka's treatment of his 'Beat' period, which he deliberately redacts. What leads this progression throughout is some kind of vanguard sentiment: even if Baraka comes to recognise that Third World people (along with some progressive whites) are his allies in political struggle, this is primarily a way to complicate his cultural-nationalism stance, not a negation of it – in this case, the important implication is that there are some black people (the black bourgeoisie) who are crucially *not* his allies.

One benchmark of the vanguard stance of Baraka's poetics is the highly visual nature of the vernacular he deploys, in contrast to the above-noted sonic register of Hughes's polyphonic approach. Baraka often uses unique spellings which relate to oral speech; however, their effect largely takes place on the *visual* level, rather than as a direct transcription of the sound of spoken dialect.¹¹⁸ To take one commonly found example in Baraka's work, 'sd' and 'said' would be pronounced nearly identically. Thus, Baraka's use of these abbreviations and alternate spellings might be conceived as an anti-academic intervention into standard diction *on the page* rather than as motivated by sonic or musical questions, demonstrating another continuity between his first poetic circle in *New American Poetry 1945-1960* (in which he was the only African-American poet) and his ensuing deliberate engagement with blackness. This contrasts with Hughes' use of performance notation in works such as *Montage* and *Ask Your Mama*.

This 'vanguard' sentiment has a direct relationship with Baraka's lyric self. Hughes vocalises his political opinions somewhat indirectly, within the gaps, contrast, or crowd arrangement of voices. Baraka's tighter lyric mode, on the other hand, requires him to personally inhabit or undergo a transformation in order to speak from the political changes that Hughes can always depict as belonging to 'another' (or multiple 'others'). Despite the more explicitly programmatic nature of Baraka's writing, its consequence is that these programs are pulled through the loop of a 'singular,' a figure (even if this figure is in a sense plural, like 'the black man'). Baraka, in innovating a lyricism of the vanguard, also shows its political limits towards a 'mass,' particularly in his writing of the 60s and 70s when the poetry itself served in conjunction with his political actions. Baraka's emphasis on consciousness, and actually *being* the voice of the conscious black subject, ahead of the masses, and perhaps ahead of the seemingly available material possibilities, bring him to an impasse, figured in his writing and theory as a kind of excess through violence.

¹¹⁸ The latter might be found, for example, in the exaggerated dialectal transcriptions of Paul Laurence Dunbar.

It might be instructive to pose the question to the works of both writers: which term, mass politics or art, becomes foundational, the premise for the other? The perhaps less formally experimental Hughes seems to see the mass as the premise for art, whereas for Baraka, art is a way of getting at the mass. As Clay in *Dutchman* says, 'I'm the great would-be poet. Yes. That's right! Poet. Some kind of bastard literature ... all it needs is a simple knife thrust. Just let me bleed you, you loud whore, and one poem vanished.'¹¹⁹ While the author's stance cannot be entirely identified with Clay's, this preoccupation with poems that become 'something else' is a calling card of Baraka's. Furthermore, the intentional address of his poems 'for' or 'to' certain people, as in 'Poem for Halfwhite College Students' 'Short Speech to My Friends' or, most clearly, 'Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note,' serves as an illustrative lens through which to look at the fantasised (and occasionally actual, as mentioned in the *Autobiography*) violence that accompanies Baraka's political awakening – for violence is a form of address from one specific place and person to another.

Baraka's racial model of cultural transmission works in a single direction, pushed by the 'assimilation' logic of racists of the period. Exemplary of this tendency is Norman Podhoretz's 1963 essay 'My Negro Problem – And Ours,' in which Podhoretz advocates ending the existence of blacks as an identifiable racial or cultural group:

[The Negro's] past is a stigma, his colour is a stigma, and his vision of the future is the hope of erasing the stigma by making colour irrelevant, by making it disappear as a fact of consciousness. I share this hope, but I cannot see how it will ever be realised unless colour does *in fact* disappear: and that means not integration, it means assimilation, it means – let the brutal word come out – miscegenation.¹²⁰

From Baraka's vantage, whites are not in danger from being 'blackened,' only blacks are in danger of having their essence dampened, becoming 'imitation greyboys' (in his 'Poem for Halfwhite College Students') who speak in white tongues. The black subject, without a nation and without a history proper to that nation, is uniquely vulnerable. This is easily recognizable as the fantasy of vulnerability that proves to be the ground for the founding of national projects, although, again, it is important to note that the fantasy is based in a reality of conflict. This entente with whiteness that Baraka fears was not part of Alain Locke's theorisation in the New Negro Renaissance; the concern offered within *The New Negro* is that blacks would become *stereotypes of blackness*, never white.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (1999).

¹²⁰ Norman Podhoretz. 'My Negro Problem—And Ours.' *Commentary* Feb. 1963, pp. 93-101.

¹²¹ Alain Locke. 'Enter the New Negro.' *Survey Graphic* March 1925.

Thus, the problem of art becoming material action in Baraka's work is a racial one. It is *Black* art that must become action: 'poems like/fists'; 'dagger poems'¹²²; 'All the stores will open if you will say the magic words. The magic words are: Up against the wall mother fucker this is a stick up.'¹²³ Furthermore, the 'action' that art must become is most frequently violent, a libidinally charged violence that arrives from the vulnerability of the black artist, the black artist's penetrability, one might say. In contrast to Podhoretz's piece, which managed to abstract 'the Negro' into a figure of sociological inquiry, and therefore preserve a modicum of innocent unconcern for his own genocidal implications, the targets of violence in Baraka's work are rarely abstract; rather, they are intimate. Just as Baraka's titles carry particular address from one to another, his invocations of violence also depict particular injury to subjects close to his black male narrators, often based on his own family (for example, the family in *The Slave* resembles Baraka's own). Structurally this bears significant resemblance to Freud's concept of the joke-work, particularly what are called 'tendentious' or aggressive jokes (and indeed, Baraka's work, no matter how violent its imagery, seems deliberately humorous in structure).

The model of art as a substitute for repressed violence, an uneasy sublimation of it and certainly not a morally superior alternative to it, as Baraka's anti-nonviolence stance in real life¹²⁴ precisely supports Clay's speech in *Dutchman*: 'Bird would've played not a note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw. Not a note! ... If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors.'¹²⁵ Relevant here is not just Clay's assertion of homicide as true self-expression, but the way in which he posits that high culture itself might disappear in the realm of genuine (violent) self-determination.

Hughes' model of art and politics' relationship is significantly different. While he, too, sees forms like blues emerging from an emotional attempt to manage suffering, the model of art on which the 'Dream' of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* is premised suggests that it is precisely enfranchisement that might lead to more, and greater, art – that is, politics exist as a means of enfranchising the voices of the mass. In the most polyvocal poem in the collection, 'Dream Deferred,' a number of African American voices chime in suggesting different things they might want to do (but which, implicitly, they cannot yet). Many of these involve artistic participation and

¹²² *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (1999), pp. 219-220.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 224.

¹²⁴ Reilly, Charlie, ed. *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994, p. 40

¹²⁵ Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman*. In *Dutchman and The Slave*. New York: Morrow and co. 1964, p. 35.

education: learning French, owning a radio, learning the flute. The attainment of the dream would enable them to pursue, and attain, these cultural aims – yet they also critique the dream. In contrast to the subject-addressee model of violence, Hughes’ figure of the ‘dream’ is far more diffuse, ranging from enfranchisement itself to the small material wishes that might be brought forward by that enfranchisement. As we have seen, it is also distinctly plural, not just including the perpetrator and recipient of Baraka’s poetic violence but striving for a genuine mass basis.

I argue, then, that the most crucial political distinction between Baraka and Hughes is not a determination of which poet takes a more radical stance. Rather, what matters is Baraka’s adoption of a vanguard position as opposed to Hughes’ deliberate commitment to a black mass, a popular base: a poetic distinction intimately related to the two writers’ relationship to nationalism and internationalism. Due to the historical context of the 1930s and 1940s, with their CPUSA-backed journals and proletarian literary movements, Hughes was able to make contact with a genuine mass and community base; by contrast, the anti-Communist (and in practice, anti-black) HUAC investigations, along with the strengthening of American imperialism and the rise of a commercially saturated culture of mass media, put Baraka in the more isolated position of a vanguard. This distinction is reflected in how Hughes and Baraka relate to black music. Both wrote musical poems and both, like most 20th century black writers, saw black writing as explicitly informed by music above all else. However, Baraka’s appeal to John Coltrane as the idol of his poetry *against* a poetics of the ‘popular song’ (a position which he invokes for decades, beginning in 1963 in ‘Rhythm and Blues 1 (for Robert Williams in Exile)’¹²⁶; ‘in those crazy dreams I called myself/ *Coltrane*’ (Wise *Why’s Y’s*, 1983),¹²⁷ significantly distinct from Hughes, who, while ambivalent about white owners’ ability to water down and profit from black culture (‘Note on Commercial Theatre’),¹²⁸ still valued popular and folk expression *as such* (rather than as expressions or signifiers of ‘innovation’ or ‘culture’) and chose to write in anonymous, shared forms such as blues lyric that were occasionally, if not always, commercially distributed.

The later, ‘3rd world Marxist’ Baraka finds himself retracing some of Hughes’ footsteps. In *Why’s, Wise, Y’s* (1995), Baraka moves away from the longer lines influenced by Beat writing and projective verse (identifiable to some degree even in his black nationalist period), and reapproaches bop writing, irony, questions, rhyme, repetition, all of which are among Hughes’ more identifiable

¹²⁶ The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader (1999), p. 62.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 484.

¹²⁸ Hughes (1995), pp. 215-216.

techniques. It must be noted, however, that Baraka refrains from taking on Hughes' total immersion in polyphonic montage of multiple voices, and still works within the boundaries of a relatively singular voice – perhaps, however, this is why he reapproaches some of the 'New American Poets' thematically rather than stylistically in the collection, comparing the work to *Maximus* and *Paterson* as well as Melvin Tolson's *Liberia*. Baraka's transition to a Marxist aesthetic in his 'Third World' period strikingly initiates the inclusion of women as dramatic heroes in his plays for the first time.

Additionally, his turn toward Marxism entails a direct revoicing of Hughes' concerns: Baraka's poem 'When We'll Worship Jesus' could be seen as a reformulation of Hughes' 1930s poem 'Goodbye Christ,' but the most striking point of comparison comes between Baraka's play *What was the relationship of the Lone Ranger to the means of production?* and Hughes' *Scottsboro Limited*. Both plays depict the coming to consciousness of oppressed groups: in Baraka's case, a group of General Motors workers, in Hughes' the eight black youth falsely accused of raping two white women in the Scottsboro case – and both dramatise this struggle through a form of seclusion, the workers locked inside the factory, the youth locked in jail, until finally the walls of the theatre are broken down in a general call for 'STRIKE! STRIKE! STRIKE!' ¹²⁹ or 'Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight' ¹³⁰. Yet even in this direct mimicry, Baraka and Hughes maintain distinct voices. Baraka, notably, writes the stage directions (completely inaccessible to any audience) in the form of dialect, punning visually between 'MM' for Masked Man and 'mmmmmm!'. Hughes' play creates rhyme between multiple characters' speech (an incomplete rhyme, 'Where is this?/Well, wherever it is, I'm going to take a – ' shows Hughes' characteristic humour, but unlike Baraka's, it is generated in the form of both interpenetrated dialogue and ellipsis). Fundamentally, instead of the didactic characters Baraka introduces, each of which can be taken directly as metonymic for a larger 'type' (the black male worker, the female worker, the Hispanic worker, the union representative), Hughes chooses to dramatise *all eight* of the Scottsboro boys, resulting in each, in turn, expressing their innocence, individually; arguing amongst themselves (also in rhyme); but finally joining their voices in chorus at the play's conclusion. Despite these differences, however, it is Baraka's later works which come closest to approaching the simplicity and popular address which was Hughes' calling-card.

¹²⁹ Amiri Baraka. *What was the relationship of the Lone Ranger to the means of production? : a play in one act* [electronic resource]. Cambridge: Proquest LLC, 2006. Prepared by the Yenan Theater workshop [New York]: Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union, 1978.

¹³⁰ Langston Hughes. *Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad. Vol. 5. Columbia: University of Missouri, 2001, p. 129.

What Baraka and Black Arts experienced as literary autonomy was a kind of historically novel freedom of the artist – to fantasise, for example, about assassinating President Richard Nixon in ‘When We’ll Worship Jesus,’ which was more than enough to end the career of any writer of Hughes’s generation – but in a grim paradox, this freedom was based on the progressive marginalisation of art and artists within American society. Baraka’s freedom to contemplate racialised mass murder in verse is enabled by a broader cultural designation, almost a dismissal, of his expressions as ‘merely cultural,’ accompanying the gradual removal of the artist from the public sphere.¹³¹ This process would continue into the 21st century, and I will address its logical conclusion in discussing the Vietnamese American writer Linh Dinh: for if Hughes faced the fundamental question of the artist’s political role, and Baraka the artist’s cultural role, Dinh’s situation – which he situates with respect to Baraka’s – is to face a society so inundated with media that it that no longer needs art at all.

¹³¹ That, despite his numerous calls for world revolution, borderline-genocidal terror, etc., the poem most frequently invoked in the present as Baraka’s most offensive is ‘Somebody Blew Up America’, where he subscribes to a conspiratorial anti-Israeli view, suggests precisely that he is viewed as troubling along the lines of a cultural producer who ought to demonstrate liberal speech. The era in which the government explicitly campaigned against a poet, as Johnson did with Hughes for publishing ‘Goodbye, Christ,’ was over – in part because the masses who might take up a Left program had been summarily defeated.

Chapter Three: The Third World in America

I want to begin with the 1998 book by Michael Bell and Sze Tsung Leong, *Slow Space*.¹³² Their title refers to the book's attempt to address the multiple temporalities inherent in the architecture of contemporary cities – from 'the near instantaneity of financial transactions' to 'the anomie of the residual no-man's land' and 'the even slower movement of matter.'¹³³ This is a compelling project, but I mean to begin with the book by reading it in a more literal sense, opening its first and last pages for the reader. In doing so, I also want to call attention to the difference between the book as a text and as a physical entity. I do so because there is a crucial distinction, in the ensuing discussion of America, between 'the nation' as sovereign region and the physical space that makes it up.

Slow Space begins with the latter, the geographical area of the United States, which, Noam Chomsky suggests, is 'developing characteristics of the third world.'¹³⁴ Because global financial systems and international commerce are increasingly untied from physical infrastructure and industry, capital can vacate the spaces it once had to invest in: the corporation is, for legal purposes, 'located' within the U.S., but this no longer indicates any obligation to produce or operate materially inside national borders.¹³⁵ American-headquartered pharmaceutical company Pfizer, for example, 'operates in 180 countries,'¹³⁶ far more than most Americans could name. The authors of *Slow Space* note as a result 'the juxtaposition of islands of concentrated wealth and distended, empty zones of urban blight and anomie, an incommensurate arrangement now typical in American cities.'¹³⁷ In addition, while the authors restrict themselves to analysis of American urban space, this development can also be observed within rural America, as well as in other nations.

The growing spatial and cultural division between classes leads to Chomsky's comparison of large swaths of America with the Third World. The majority of the country's neglect, from crumbling infrastructure to aid disasters such as Hurricane Katrina (and the more recent, as of this writing, hurricane destruction in Houston), does not merely index segregation, but a paradoxical

¹³² Michael Bell and Sze Tsung Leong. *Slow Space*. New York: Monacelli Press, 1998.

¹³³ Ibid. p. 23.

¹³⁴ Ibid. p. 24.

¹³⁵ The authors' analysis mostly addresses the architectural remainders of this flight, but I want to make a brief note here that there are multiple ways to think about vanishing capital. In asking what precisely has happened, the first possibility is that traditional manufacturing has simply *gone elsewhere*, such as work compounds in Shenzhen, China – however, the second possibility is that large-scale production has simply restructured towards what David Graeber calls 'technologies of simulation' which can involve a more dispersed network of development and administration.

¹³⁶ 'Pfizer Global Manufacturing Announces Plans to Reconfigure its Global Plant Network.' *Pfizer.com*. Pfizer Inc., May 18 2010. Web. 2015. <<http://press.pfizer.com/press-release/pfizer-global-manufacturing-announces-plans-reconfigure-its-global-plant-network>>

¹³⁷ Bell and Leong (1998), p. 23.

consolidation of the sovereign at the expense of the actual, resulting in extreme fragmentation and gesturing to the nature of the 21st-century state and the flexibility of the international system to accommodate these failures. Perhaps, in addition to outright comparison, there is also a question of migration between worlds: one rather postmodern consequence of U.S. imperialism in the latter half of the 20th century is the displacement of significant populations of Third World people into the U.S. itself. I use the term 'Third World' as Chomsky uses it, to suggest mainly the formerly colonised countries that sought independence in the 20th century. Within this framework, it is important to note that 'Third World' is distinct from other attempts to describe the same regions such as 'Global South,' 'developing nations' and 'periphery' in that it contains within it the germ of explicit political conflict between the capitalist first world and Communist second. To be third, in this formation, also means to be defined primarily in terms of terrain and only incipiently in terms of ideology.

I open this up not to continue the direct line of comparison from Third World to impoverished America – to me, such a comparison relies too heavily on internally divergent terms that would have to be significantly reconstructed – but to open up a set of ideas around which the *Postcards* series of Vietnamese American artist Linh Dinh pivots. The series's full title, *Postcards from the End of America*,¹³⁸ suggests both spatial and temporal limits: geographic 'ends of the earth' and doomsday prediction of the end of days. Dinh's ability to see (or envision, depending on one's preference) this national collapse comes from his 'thirdness,' his willingness to work on and in America from elsewhere than American aesthetic vocabulary. Dinh's work does not address an American ideal, a cultural 'dream,' even by way of arguing that it has failed. Rather, his work testifies to the gap between the abstract and the material, the growing distance between disembodied systems of propaganda, advertisement, and finance, and *people*, who are bound by their physical bodies and their particular environments within the United States. Contrary to myths of American greatness, Dinh focuses on human frailty and humiliation. Ultimately, Dinh's writing depends on physical intimacy as a form of limitation: capital may accumulate, but each person has only one body. Thus his depictions are not invested in an idea of authentic proletarian living,¹³⁹ for Dinh, the work is a matter of putting forward *that* people live, and the vulnerabilities of this life.

¹³⁸ Linh Dinh, *Postcards from the End of America*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2017.

Linh Dinh, 'Postcards from the End of [the] America[n Empire].' <linhdinhphotos.blogspot.com>

¹³⁹ Aesthetically, the 'folk' and 'artisan' have been recuperated by the bourgeois as repudiations of the dehumanising process of mass production, whereas uncritical acceptance of commercial aesthetics is identified with lower classes. As Ernst Bloch observed, 'The countryman in the 19th century exchanged his painted wardrobe for a factory-made display cabinet, his old, brightly-painted glass for a coloured print and thought himself at the height of fashion. But it is unlikely that anyone will be misled into confusing these poisoned fruits of capitalism with genuine expressions of the people'

Linh Dinh was born in Saigon and came to the U.S. at age 11. He dreamt of becoming a painter but turned his intention, instead, to poetry. *Postcards from the End of America* is his first major return to visual art. The online *Postcards* series contains, at the point at which I write this, over 9,900 photographs of over 100 different American cities and towns, as well as international locations such as Budapest. It may be important to dwell on the size of this project, its Whitmanian scope. Dinh began taking these photographs in 2007, and uploads them to his blog on a near-daily basis. In addition, the extrapolations he publishes alongside the photographs often find their way into his other writing; his poetry collection *A Mere Rica*¹⁴⁰ can be seen as an extension of the *Postcards* project. Given the photographs' intersection with his writing (as well as the ways in which they are themselves a kind of found writing, which I will discuss later), I will treat Dinh's more recent documentary writing as part of this series, although its boundaries are not clearly delimited from the main body of his work.

The *Postcards* series can be read both as a series of photographic texts supported by interstitial writing (which is mainly how I will read it), and as a form of generative documentation, a practice that is interrelated with writing. One of the most helpful side effects of this documentation is that we can learn about nearly any day in Dinh's life for the past decade. We follow him from bar to payday loan store, from the road median to a parking lot with a lone anti-abortion protester. Because of the sheer size of the project and its extensions back into the world itself, finding, delimiting, and archiving the *Postcards* would necessitate its own study. Fundamentally, the critic of Linh Dinh's work must come up with different questions to ask rather than only the interpretive ones, because 'the text' in this case is a part of the question. Dinh is a fine interpreter of his own work and quite open about his process; however, such responses to his own work are often included in the project itself and therefore the boundary between criticism and artistic production itself is uncertain.

This chapter will follow several different conceptual threads, each of which refers to, and in some way depends on, the others. For an analysis of Dinh's practice inevitably leads back to its conditions of production, its formal properties on the interpretive beliefs and relationships they imply – out of this, finally, the political consequences of Dinh's work can be read, but the work must be read itself as a political consequence of an already-existing system. The terms are

(*Aesthetics and Politics*. Verso 2007, p. 26. *Contra* Bloch's assertion, a number of cultural studies today analyse mass consumption as a form of 'genuine expression.'

¹⁴⁰ Dinh, Linh. *A Mere Rica*. Chax Press, 2017.

interdependent and coextensive, and thus, like a photograph, must be taken as a whole, even if perceived sequentially. Furthermore, Dinh's documentary photography relies on existing reality for the material of its images, and thus by necessity involves itself in larger conversations about architecture, capitalism, and 21st-century America: in other words, what must have materially occurred to furnish the scene of the photograph. Most critics of Dinh have tended to focus on his stylistic qualities, such as obscenity, irony and humour, or the direct content of this particular work, devastated neighbourhoods and public space. But taken separately, these aspects tend to imply that the work is other than it is: either light commentary, or serious social agitation. The truth is that it is both, and neither, according to the terms of previous analysis, for each of these roles, the comic observer and the social agitator, finds its fullest expression through the other. Dinh's political approach to public space is to take its inhabitants not as social symbols but as subjects, yet his process undermines this through anecdotal extension: extreme textualisation and qualification of subject matter rather than reification of being. Thus, Dinh attempts to counter the abstraction of capital (its flight from physical, public space) through an anecdotal practice which reproduces the words and images of these evacuated publics.

By way of physical introduction, we must first close the book on Bell and Leong. In the final pages of the book *Slow Space*, Aaron Bettsky announces a call to arms against the architectural enterprise of planned public spaces, which, he says, inevitably deteriorate into the logic of the prison and armed compounds, and instead inaugurates an architecture which might mean 'telling stories, having sex, or cutting holes in the fabric of the acceptable.'¹⁴¹ Bettsky's essay 'Nothing But Flowers: Against Public Space,' describes the vacant, failed zones that the book as a whole treats, but suggests that they should not be eradicated, and, indeed, that their eradication is impossible and will merely create a harsher divide between securitised, 'planned' spaces and their exterior regions. Instead, Bettsky suggests, these abandoned spaces should be celebrated; new cartographies are needed to encompass them. *Slow Space* contains photographs of its own that function alongside the text. In the case of Bettsky's essay, Leong's photographs of Houston, emphasising horizontalism and the planes of walls, fences, the strip, the road, aerial lines and telephone poles, give it a haunting symmetry. These photos clearly show the 'almost nothing' (*beinahe nichts*) of contemporary public space, a flattening which, Bettsky observes, resembles intentional modernist principles, but is instead derived inadvertently.¹⁴² Clearly, these are some of the 'Third World' regions of America which *Slow Space*

¹⁴¹ Bettsky, in Bell and Leong, p. 467.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 463.

treats in great detail, but Bettsky's essay addresses the architectural conundrums of such spaces, which, rather than being 'organic' or 'undeveloped' voids, are the results of intentional, contradictory processes of deterritorialising capital.

Because Bettsky's argument addresses architecture, which involves among other things an imagination of people's lives and the phenomenological attention to lived space, he addresses at several points the experience of the strip. Primarily, he notes, the strip is *uninhabited*: 'Confined to a car, one is always physically removed from the experience of the strip, *one experiences it solely as a spectacle*' (my italics)¹⁴³. This paradox, to Bettsky, is actually definitional of the strip; the strip is 'the void that appears out of neglect or lack of focus.'¹⁴⁴ This characterisation coincides with a primary characteristic of Leong's achingly empty, beautiful, yet banal photographs – there are no people. Thus, Bettsky's suggestion of a lived architecture or 'celebratory' cartography structurally undermines itself in its characterisation of the potentiality of abandoned space. It is important to assert that this space is only abandoned *from the perspective of the car* – there are inhabitants of these spaces.

Linh Dinh examines many of the spaces Bettsky so thoroughly characterises, but he can be distinguished by his commitment to moving through the space in the manner of its inhabitants. His own set of photographs taken in Houston emphasise a sign on the side of a building which reads 'Please, this is not a restroom,' a woman begging in a wheelchair, a man waiting for a bus, and several war veterans. In fact, Dinh described the very beginning of the *Postcards* project as an effort to make himself live in the spaces that local people, but especially the homeless, have to inhabit. While spending several years in Italy and the UK at the turn of the 21st century, he began to walk significant distances in order to understand these new environments. Dinh then tried to continue a walking practice when he came to Southern California, and found himself having to walk across eight-lane highways.¹⁴⁵ Instead of abandoning the walking practice, he acknowledged that locals would be confronted with the same dilemmas, so he continued, and began to photograph and interact with the people he encountered. Dinh's photographs elapse in the same 'slow space'—but the considerable difference is that Dinh's photographs are inhabited, in two senses – inhabited by others, and by Dinh as he strives to depict them. This opens up a horizon in his work for *Postcards* to be understood not merely as a set of images, but also as a process of engagement, a practice. While

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 461.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 462.

¹⁴⁵ Conversation April 20, 2015.

Dinh's space is absolutely the space Bettsky describes, it is not, as Bettsky suggests, unknowable. In fact, it is known, and inhabited. The only question is of the cultural enfranchisement of the people who know and inhabit this space: their fate, their political identity, and their experience.

Would not Bettsky's tabulation of this unplanned 'public' space –

made by front lawns, driveways, turning radiuses, security perimeters, lines of sight (for both signs and advertisements), landing patterns, noise abatement programs... the unfenced front yard and the zone lit by the television...the space of the parking lot that bleeds into the space of the highway. It is the space of the corner mini-mall or gas station. It is the uncertain depth of the screen...¹⁴⁶

– notable for its effort to name each unconnected manifestation of this general principle of disorganisation, speak to Marx's description, in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, of the lumpenproletariat, a class characterised by disorganisation? Marx describes the 'vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux*, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars'¹⁴⁷ in the same populous yet jumbled fashion that characterises Bettsky's list. Furthermore, Marx's 'whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*'¹⁴⁸ bears significance to Bettsky's description of disintegrating, unplanned *space*.

Dinh's work directly references bohemia as an inspiration. His essay 'Common Dreaming' notes, 'In my teens, I was inspired by Franz Kline's "A bohemian is one who can survive where an animal would die," and by Alfred Jarry having to write on his belly because his one room apartment has been divided, vertically and horizontally, into four quarters by an enterprising slum lord.'¹⁴⁹ In interviews with the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, however, Dinh refers to his poetics as 'working class.'¹⁵⁰ Given the decline of the industrial proletariat and the expansion of service-industry jobs and temporary work, a topic not discussed in such terms by Marx, there may be some blurring between the lumpenproletariat (generally conceived of, and certainly within the *Brumaire*, as fodder for reactionary agitation) and members of the 'reserve army of labour.' Additionally, actually-existing

¹⁴⁶ Bell and Leong, p. 462.

¹⁴⁷ Marx (1937).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Linh Dinh. 'Common Dreaming.' *OpEdNews.com*. OpEdNews, October 26 2011. Web. Accessed May 2015. <<http://www.opednews.com/articles/Common-Dreaming-by-Linh-Dinh-111026-306.html>>

¹⁵⁰ Cao, Trang. 'Examining the Bawdy: An Interview with Linh Dinh on His First Novel, *Love Like Hate*.' *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 6.3 (Fall 2011): 140-50. See also Linh Dinh. 'An Interview with Linh Dinh on His First Novel, *Love Like Hate*.' *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 6.3 (Fall 2011): 151-79.

communism, especially in Vietnam and China, has always problematised an emphasis on industrial workers, since Asian communists (much like the Soviets) have relied on a large peasant population. Regardless, I think it is explicit within Dinh's work that his portrayals serve not to illustrate 'inequity,' but rather the existence and manifestation of class in America, and particularly the underclass, broadly construed, which he sees as a shared worldwide condition, in populist terms: 'Most people in the world live like this.'¹⁵¹

Although Dinh's work is anti-capitalist, to squeeze a programmatic Marxist interpretation from it would be insufficiently sensitive to the role that communism has played in Vietnam. Actually-existing Communist nationalism in Vietnam has censored many of the writers whose work Dinh considers significant.¹⁵² Thus, Dinh's political vision seeks another avenue for its commitments. Primarily, in Dinh's work, political critique embodies ideology critique. Dinh's literary work is devoted to demystifying life, and demonstrating reality as the terrain where propaganda is proven to be idiocy even by idiots. Many of Dinh's most enjoyable characters are bumbling zealots of some stripe, who undermine ideology by being too stupid to internalise it properly. This also where Dinh splits with the often Marxist American avant-garde. Dinh's work is formally relevant and accessible to the underclass he portrays, as well as reusing their own language as material in the tradition of Vietnamese writers such as HỒ BIỂU CHÁNH and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. Thus I do not consider Dinh Marxist, post-Marxist, etc., although he is, in a sense, 'post-Communist'; nevertheless I believe the *Postcards* project to be so materially grounded in class as to be strongly compatible with a framework of Marxist analysis.

The political significance of Dinh's *Postcards*, while beginning with the commitment to a broad class of people who exist worldwide, has specific implications as anti-nationalist American art, because it is explicitly a national work, and a work that considers American nationalism as part of international capitalism. James Guimond's landmark *American Photography and the American Dream* addresses American predecessors to Dinh's project (large-scale domestic documentary photography, such as Robert Frank's *The Americans*), but these other series are framed, however critically, around national identity and a 'dream' of wealth and enfranchisement. Guimond suggests, 'Documentary photography often represents... a minority, or opposition, viewpoint. It is, however, the viewpoint of a "loyal opposition".'¹⁵³ Indeed, Guimond suggests in a chapter on dissident American

¹⁵¹ Conversation April 20, 2015.

¹⁵² *Night, Again: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam*. Ed. Linh Dinh. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006, p. xvi.

¹⁵³ Guimond, James. *American Photography and the American Dream*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1991, p. 9.

photographers of the 1960s that they seem to share more European, rather than American, influences, which can perhaps be connected to their harsher and more alienated views. In either case, even with critical photographers, the terms of discussion remain contained within the term of the nation itself – are Americans ‘the beautiful people,’ or are they ugly and freakish, as photographer Diane Arbus’s work suggests? This, like much American literature on the Vietnam War, simply inverts a stereotypic praise to display its obscene opposite, and remains resolutely fixed on the nation and its ideals, without relativising them. The use of advertisement in the history of American documentary photography, as observed by Guimond, is a useful comparison. An image such as an advertisement, unlike a human body, becomes a form of higher-level reflection on an American ‘ideal,’ usually directly negated by the poverty or despair of the people nearby. However, this tends to use the people as a form of ‘proof’ against the ad, marshalling their image in abstracted form, while reifying advertising language as discursively characteristic of ‘America’ or ‘American ideals.’ Dinh’s use of advertisements, as I will indicate later, involves them in a greater degree of dialogue with their surroundings, displacing and ironising them, textualising them through his own readings, and putting them on even footing with hand-lettered signs and human bodies, thus retaining a more mutual, and mutually charged, relationship between perception and discourse.

That Linh Dinh is a much more liminal figure, in terms of America, than any of the European-influenced photographers Guimond names speaks both to his primary vocation as a poet (which thus makes the tension between English and Vietnamese inherent to his work) and the relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam. Dinh is intensely critical of America – some of his political commentary is still available from his time as a correspondent for Iran’s ‘Press TV.’ (Dinh adds that he was only censored once on air, when he decided to talk about the U.S. selling weapons to Iran and Iraq).¹⁵⁴ Yet Dinh’s criticisms of America on the show drew their force from his American citizenship; an American citizen presumably knew the truth of his descriptions. Thus, Dinh’s work, in *Postcards*, introduces complications of identity through the symbolism of different social strata. Dinh uses particular people’s daily struggles to indicate cultural collapse, ruthlessly criticising capitalism through them: joblessness, for example, can be shown through images of hiring centres, but also through pictures of the unemployed. If *Postcards* is intended to document the economic, political, and social collapse of the United States,¹⁵⁵ it does this through a display of

¹⁵⁴ Conversation April 20, 2015.

¹⁵⁵ Dinh repeats this phrase frequently (it can be seen as the statement of intent of the series) but often switches the order of the terms.

Americans. While Dinh's intent is not to shame poor Americans specifically, he is not interested in idealising them or protecting national dignity by pretending they do not exist.

However, rather than working entirely through the self-evident body of the person photographed, which might demonstrate concrete individuals as embodiments of social ills, Dinh describes them through his own form of commentary, often using interviews and captions to interject his opinion. Dinh's caption for a photograph of a man sleeping in the doorway next to his shoes and hat, which is notably pragmatic rather than morally high-handed, is: "Though well on our way to becoming a poor and desperate country, we're not quite there yet. In Vietnam, for example, you would not see such a sight as above. In Vietnam, such a pair of sneakers, and NIKE, no less, would be gone in a minute, and somebody would take that dirty cap too!".¹⁵⁶ This playful commentary manages to shame America through association with the Third World, ironically, through suggesting that Americans haven't gotten 'there yet' – they still have access to the most important resource of all, American branding. However, his normalising of the subject of homelessness, through implicit reference to worldwide poverty, takes this man casually rather than as a symbol of neglect.

The relationship between American identity and consumerism plays a frequent role in Dinh's work. In Dinh's short story, 'Chopped Steak Mountain' (an ironic reference to the 'Hamburger Hill' battle in the Vietnam War), the narrator, a ghost of an American soldier, comments: "The mud walls are decorated with pages torn from a Sears catalog. Just looking at this lawn mower can bring tears to my eyes."¹⁵⁷ However, one significant difference between Dinh's work and most American documentary photography is the absence of 'American Dream' rhetoric. Guimond describes this dream of America as 'not merely a new world, but a different kind of world, a unique place where the limitations, boundaries, and inequities that formerly confined the human race either do not exist or are about to disappear,' and goes on to observe that this often implied literal physical transformation of immigrants when they arrived in America.¹⁵⁸ Dinh's entire opus contains almost no references to 'American Dream' as a concept beyond the subjective. He does conceive of it, however, through a photographic frame: "The collapse will not be televised. Ignored and alone, each of us will experience it singly. As blemish and accusation, you will be photoshopped from the

¹⁵⁶ Dinh (2017).

¹⁵⁷ Linh Dinh. *Fake House: Stories*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000, p. 201.

¹⁵⁸ Guimond, p.12.

American Dream group portrait.¹⁵⁹ This does not engage the ‘American Dream’ as a conceptual ideal, but rather, nationalistic propaganda, referencing both the totalitarian custom of removing the ‘disappeared’ from photographs and the contemporary consumer-capitalist use of deceptive photography. It is also important to emphasise Dinh’s ironic anti-utopianism, as his first sentence inverts Gil-Scott Heron’s call to arms. Dinh is not a nihilist,¹⁶⁰ but his photos are intended unequivocally to depict a negative development.

The most recent of the American documentary photographers mentioned in Guimond’s book is Michael Williamson, who, through his treatment of similar subject matter to Dinh, provides a helpful contrast. Williamson took the photographs for *Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass*, intended as a revisitation of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*’s Dust Bowl sharecroppers. Williamson is now a photographer for the *Washington Post*, recently nominated for a Pulitzer for a series on food stamp recipients. He also explicitly states, in interviews with the *Post* about this project, ‘I’m interested in how people pursue that American dream.’¹⁶¹ However, the question of what the American Dream might be or to whom it is available does not fit in to this particular series, which is notably avoidant of political rhetoric. Texas state representative Terry Canales, portrayed in the series, is quoted saying, ‘The more you learn in this job, the more complicated it gets to take a position.’¹⁶² Thus, the series emphasises just one simple fact: it is difficult for many Americans to get enough to eat.

One notable aspect of Williamson’s portrayal is its attempt to countermand a rhetorical strategy in which non-white people have taken on ‘representativeness’ of hunger:

I think it’s been good...to make the case that the typical recipient of food stamps is not who you think it is. ... As our series pointed out, the typical food stamp recipient is a Caucasian American. So it’s not a person of color. It’s not a lazy person who

¹⁵⁹ Dinh, Linh. ‘Welcome to the Collapse.’ *Postcards from the End of America*. Blogspot, December 29 2010. Web. Accessed June 2015. <<http://linhdinhphotos.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/welcome-to-collapse.html>>

¹⁶⁰ Dinh is interested in conspiracies and frequently photographs US POW flags, a wholesale lie fabricated by the US government to prolong the war (see H. Bruce Franklin, ‘Missing in Action in the Twenty-First Century.’ *Four Decades On: Vietnam, the United States, and the Legacies of the Second Indochina War*. Ed. Scott Laderman and Edwin A. Martini. Durham: Duke UP, 2013). However, he is clearly invested in futurity as well. His interview with a former foreclosure expert included both a question about the future of children and the following: ‘What can we possibly do to mitigate our problems, whether collectively and/or on a personal [sic] level? If you’re really struggling, please share some of your coping mechanisms and survival tactics. What adjustments, minor or traumatic, have you had to make?’

¹⁶¹ May-ying Lam and Michael Williamson. ‘The paradox of poverty, through the lens of Michael Williamson.’ *Washington Post*. Washington Post, August 7 2014. Web. Accessed March 2015. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/storyline/wp/2014/08/07/the-paradox-of-poverty-through-the-lens-of-michael-williamson/>>

¹⁶² Eli Saslow and Michael S. Williamson. ‘Too much of too little: A diet fueled by food stamps is making South Texans obese but leaving them hungry.’ *Washington Post*. Washington Post, November 9 2013. Web. Accessed June 2015. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2013/11/09/too-much-of-too-little/>>

won't work. It's not a scammer. It's a 6-year-old Caucasian boy who lives in Tennessee.¹⁶³

Although Williamson appeals to statistical populations in an effort to banish Reagan-era 'welfare queen' propaganda which drew upon voters' fears of a black underclass, the merely factual response also implicitly appeases racism. The majority of people, this quote suggests, might associate the poor or people of colour with 'lazy people who won't work' or 'scammers,' and might not support social welfare if provided with evidence that supported those claims. Thus, the factual defence of welfare it offers is not a principled defence. Furthermore, the examples used for Williamson's series are humanistic depictions of extreme suffering. The families depicted often have young children and their reliance on food stamps to (barely) survive is relatively noncontroversial. Thus, the food stamp series portrays a depoliticised set of experiences within an ongoing political conflict over American social services and welfare. One might perceive it as the minimal case for welfare: if no other services can be funded, surely food stamps for the starving ought to be? Unfortunately, this ambiguity leaves the series open to precisely the opposite political interpretation (perhaps if recipients were hungrier they might be motivated to work harder and earn more money, perhaps what is really starving them is the tax system, or perhaps they have chosen a 'culture of poverty').

Thus, while the images are not connected to political arguments, they are connected to political rhetoric surrounding welfare and social services, even if they are also literally 'true' or statistically representational. The photograph that heads this series, of a white toddler eating a piece of bread, displays not merely a 'type,' but also an 'ideal' recipient of food stamps. (A photographic portrayal of the 'typical' is also seen in Orientalist postcards, which I will discuss later.) Williamson's photo series responds to the negative characterisation of welfare recipients by transferring the defence of welfare to a category of Americans who are themselves 'deserving.' Plainly, his documentation serves as evidence, in which the people shown will be evaluated by the public for each taxpayer dollar of food consumed and must prove the worth of their lives – in this case, through virtue and passive suffering.

The images, although harrowing, and although directly linked to government policy, are not meant to support political programs¹⁶⁴ – rather, they are intended as images of reality (albeit a

¹⁶³ Lam and Williamson (2014).

¹⁶⁴ If there is a political aim to the series, it is perhaps along the lines of Noam Chomsky's insistence that the pure facts themselves dictate truth in a manner that needs no ideological assistance. However, even the Pulitzer nominating letter for the series suggests that lives are influenced 'for better and sometimes for worse' by food stamps, hardly a seal of endorsement. Most clearly, none of the food stamp recipients interviewed is asked to give an account of their own view of food stamps or government aid – merely a passive description of how it has intervened in their lives. The real

possibly surprising, counterintuitive reality). However, as representation, the photo is ‘real’ to an order one level above that of day-to-day reality. This form of realism is achieved both through detailed, textured images that result from high-definition camerawork, and through the use of captions and statistics – inasmuch as these images depict not just these people but food stamp recipients more generally, they do so by condensing information into the ‘realism’ of the image. In a horrifying accompanying image to one of the *Washington Post* articles, which discussed obesity among food stamp recipients, it is possible to peer inside the medical model of an obese child to view abnormalities from his brain to his growth plates. However, the model uses drawings of organs superimposed atop a photograph of an actual Mexican American child.¹⁶⁵ This image, linked to the journalistic story which discussed a Mexican family on food stamps who struggled with health conditions linked to poor nutrition, serves as a reminder of the technique of this documentary series, a form of representative realism. I do not mean ‘representative’ merely on the aesthetic level; rather, the photo becomes representative of something that is not directly visible: statistical information.

Williamson produces images that could be said to act as *icons* or *portraits*. In Foucault’s *Birth of the Clinic*, the concept of portraiture comes up several times vis-à-vis particular diseased people, the patients: “The form in which truth is originally shown is the surface in which relief is both manifested and abolished – the portrait.”¹⁶⁶ Foucault continues to define this process of portraiture as one in which ‘the ideal configuration of the disease becomes a concrete, free form, totalised at last in a motionless, simultaneous picture, lacking both density and secrecy’¹⁶⁷ until ultimately, at the end of this process ‘the patient is the rediscovered portrait of the disease; he is the disease itself, with shadow and relief, modulations, nuances, depth.’¹⁶⁸ Williamson’s images similarly condense sociological and narrative information until the photograph (rather than even the person depicted) becomes a portrait of the food stamp program. For these photographs to establish not just documentary realism (‘this really exists’) but representative realism (‘this is a picture of *what really exists*’; i.e., social conditions at large), we need both information and image—first, the documentary narrative which convinces us of *reality* (the race or age of the average food stamp recipient, for

decision-making, it is implied, will be achieved without agitation by those who are already in power, and it is dangerous to alienate people by demonstrating obvious *political* sympathy for welfare recipients rather than personal sympathy or pity. That the series deliberately includes one impoverished man who attempts to *refuse* government aid because of the shame and stigma also speaks to this ambivalent attitude.

¹⁶⁵ ‘How obesity harms a child’s body.’ *Health & Science*. Washington Post. Web. Accessed June 2015.

<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/health/childhoodobesity/obesityeffects.html>>

¹⁶⁶ Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 8.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 16.

example) and then, after this adjustment, the photo, which we can then *perceive* as a straightforward representation of this reality. Of course, what is incidentally reinforced at the end of this process is not merely our knowledge of food stamp funding – but rather, the authority of the photographer and the documentary journalist (allied with the social statistician and the doctor) to declare a depictional order. In this sense it could not be more different from Dinh’s images, which as artistic practice draw attention to their own specificity.

Dinh’s disregard for American nationalist obligations of ‘representative realism’ informs his involvement within the photographic frame. Because he does not photograph only objects or people in isolation, but rather within the flow of time and in their environments, Dinh participates in interactions when he feels it is necessary. This immersion is quite different from Barthes’ idea of photographs as temporal isolates (versus the progression of cinema)¹⁶⁹ – in its relation to time, Dinh’s work may be seen as cinematic or montage-based as well as photographic, particularly because its isolation of moments focuses on spatial moments rather than temporal ones. Thus, Dinh’s work bears traces of his disclosed presence. First, physically – in two of the earliest photographs, Dinh holds a meat skewer across the camera’s field of vision; Dinh’s reflection or pieces of his body sometimes arrive in the image – then, implicitly, when the subjects of his photography interact with him. In one sequence, ‘Homeless man examining Susan B Anthony’ and ‘Hand,’ Dinh arranges two photos of a homeless man. In the first image, the homeless man attempts to identify a Susan B. Anthony dollar, a one-dollar coin that is out of circulation now but still legal tender. The second photograph, ‘Hand,’ shows the same man, with an angry expression, attempting to block Dinh from taking a photo of his face with his hand. The seeming story behind this is that Linh Dinh gave this man a Susan B. Anthony dollar, which he did not recognise as valid currency. Dinh comments ‘I think he would have preferred I gave him a quarter.’ Dinh often gives money to people he photographs if they ask for it, although he says he also tries not to disturb a good shot by attracting notice.¹⁷⁰ His presence, either way, can be detected in the photographic scene.

One particularly complex effect within Dinh’s project is the spatial depth created by his sequences. Rather than working with a stationary camera, Dinh’s work shows a progression in the photos, through which his movement can be assumed, roving through the landscape trying to get a better shot of the same thing. This is yet another distinct deviation from an aesthetic of

¹⁶⁹ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010, p. 78.

¹⁷⁰ Andrew Cox and Linh Dinh. ‘Linh Dinh’s state of the union.’ *Jacket2*. Jacket2 Magazine, September 28 2011. Web. Accessed June 2015. <<http://jacket2.org/interviews/linh-dinhs-state-union>>

documentary portraiture. In their *Encyclopedia of Asian America*, Zhao and Park write, ‘With aspirations akin to the WPA photographer Dorothea Lange, Dinh turns his gaze toward the underemployed, the dispossessed, and other marginal presences found in numerous tent cities of the homeless and other gritty cityscapes...peddlers, protesters, public preachers, and prostitutes, casinos, and abandoned factories.’¹⁷¹ Dinh’s work, however, in its everyday mode, does not create the dramatic spectacle this implies. Indeed, Lange’s renowned photograph ‘Migrant Mother’ was retouched to avoid the intrusion of the photographer’s thumb wrapped around a tent pole on the right-hand side of the frame.¹⁷² The texture of Dinh’s work repudiates this kind of editing. His photographic sequences, especially, seem to erode the possibility of their own iconicity. Rather than replace reality with a well-composed image, Dinh stalks his images through a series and prints multiple angles. These photographs very strongly imply Dinh’s presence, to humorous effect, since the viewer can feel the camera creeping around, attempting to retrieve the shot. In one set of photos, which depict a man sleeping on the ground wearing one shoe, he is first seen from afar—the subsequent picture is the same man, in close up, but viewed from behind a grate depicted in the first picture. Through these, the viewer simultaneously ‘zooms in’ on the man, but also realises that Linh Dinh must have snuck up behind this fence in order to achieve the second, closer image.

Dinh’s use of the postcard as an iconic token hearkens back to the tradition of a postcard as a token of travel, as well as the colonial use of the photographic tradition; John MacKenzie notes that ‘photographs had a significant role in capturing and preserving images of people supposedly doomed to extinction’¹⁷³ and specifically mentions postcards as a popular form of this photography, popular in both senses; ‘common’ and ‘demotic’. Dinh’s tour of America continues this tradition and ironises it. Here, those ‘doomed to extinction’ are his fellow citizens. This is a political project, but its politics is largely descriptive and interpretive rather than programmatic: while Dinh occasionally photographs explicitly political images such as pamphlets and demonstrations, his photography is taken spontaneously, and therefore much of the ironic political commentary (many homeless people wearing American flag apparel, for example) belongs to the sphere of experience itself.

¹⁷¹ Xiaojian Zhao and Edward J.W. Park. *Asian Americans: An Encyclopedia of Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political History*. Greenwood, 2013.

¹⁷² ‘Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, and the Documentary Tradition.’ *MoCP Education*. Museum of Contemporary Photography. Web. Accessed June 2015. <http://www.mocp.org/pdf/education/MoCP_Ed-Dorothea_Lange_Migrant%20Mother_and_the_Documentary_Tradition.pdf>

¹⁷³ John M. MacKenzie, ‘Review Article: Photography and Colonialism.’ *African Research & Documentation*, 2007, p. 93.

I do not want to dwell on the question of defining documentary photography for long, because ultimately the question is reducible to intention. The photograph, in a rudimentary way, is always reliant on a ‘trace’ of reality, light, regardless of how much the scene has been staged for the camera’s benefit, and can then be said to be ‘documentary’ in a number of incongruent cases.¹⁷⁴ Currie suggests that in this ‘weak’ sense, even *Casablanca* is a documentary. Currie attempts to solve this problem by stating that the images of a documentary ‘represent only photographically: they represent only what they are of.’¹⁷⁵ Of course, this merely shifts the burden of ‘documentary’ to any surrounding information, particularly narration. In this sense Dinh’s work can be described as documentary *in intention*, in that he views it as responsive, as a form of attention in which he tries to notice people rather than put words in their mouths. Yet Dinh also states that art is inherently ‘deforming people to suit your purposes,’¹⁷⁶ which undermines the possibility of objectivity implied by documentation. I will discuss Dinh’s use of framing later, but, significantly, he does not obsessively remove signs of his own presence – including multiple photographs of the same scene that testify to his attempt to get a ‘good shot.’

The question of realism or documentary in Dinh’s work bears perhaps the most relation to the early Soviet school of *factography* or *faktografiia*. In distinction from the passive *documentary*, factography focuses on the active implications of the ‘fact’ as *made thing*, as *fait*—and especially as process. Indeed, some of the descriptions of Soviet factography seem to eerily anticipate Dinh’s work, from the immense scale (‘Aleksandr Rodchenko proposed that individuals’ lives be captured in an open-ended photographic archive that would be composed of an infinite number of momentary snapshots’) to the blurred generic boundaries, often combining journalism, photo-essay, criticism, memoir, as well as its ‘modal and act-oriented practice.’¹⁷⁷ Devin Fore brutally historicises factography, suggesting that it is ‘as old as yesterday’s newspaper’ and ‘expired with the passage of...reality.’¹⁷⁸ However, that Dinh’s work carries over many themes of the *faktoviki* (factographers) into an utterly different context and for a prolonged period contradicts Fore’s claims regarding factography’s longevity. Fundamentally, what Dinh’s work shares with the *faktoviki* is an anti-monumentalism, an aggregative, rather than hierarchical, sense of art in which details play pivotal roles *as details* rather than as symbolic substitutes (or, as I will discuss in the next chapter, as symbols

¹⁷⁴ Gregory Currie. ‘Visible Traces: Documentary and the Contents of Photographs.’ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Summer, 1999), pp. 285-97.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Cox (2011).

¹⁷⁷ Devin Fore. ‘Introduction to Soviet Factography.’ *October* 118 (2006): 3-11, p. 5.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

of detail itself). That this is an aesthetic practice in itself is unavoidable (although it is unclear whether it should be considered ‘realist,’ as its realist credentials rely on its *derivation* from reality rather than any sense of its ‘representation’ of reality), but it certainly deviates from a history of American documentary practice.

Firstly, we ought to look at Dinh’s invocation of postcards, a mass-produced visual genre distinguished by its ability to provide a space for individual writing. The Orientalist *cartes postales* ‘were disseminated back to the Métropole as examples of the ‘types’ of people encountered by the French. Yet, even while the postcards purported to represent the reality of colonial life in Indochina, most of them had in fact been meticulously posed by the photographer.’¹⁷⁹ In addition to the genre of human ‘types’ Chiu discusses, Orientalist postcards included a great volume of landscape imagery, which, in contrast, utterly withdrew from mentioning the people within the photograph. In this example, the *cyclo* driver has been posed by the photographer, yet the caption makes no mention of him. Rather than contrasting with the attention paid to Oriental ‘types,’ these landscape photographs must be seen as continuous with that attention. This man, or someone substitutable for him, had possibly been catalogued elsewhere, and therefore is not worthy of comment as an individual within this frame. He composes a picturesque part of the landscape. There is also a strong differentiation between the closeness of frame in ‘type’ photographs and the lofty horizon of the landscape photography. This accommodated two different postcard orientations, the horizontal and the vertical – the horizontal, by far the more common of the two, mainly restricted to landscape, but also used for reclining portraits (of Oriental lassitude), or group images, while the vertical was used primarily for portraiture (although occasionally for towers and other vertical landscape features).

The tradition of postcard photography in Vietnam did not end in the colonial period, however. During the Vietnam War, NVA photographer Mai Nam took a famous picture of a North Vietnamese patrol shooting down a fighter plane, which was widely printed on postcards. After the war, several revolutionary photographers also published their work as postcard collections.¹⁸⁰ Yet Dinh, when asked about photographic inspiration for ‘Postcards,’ suggested a more indirect lineage for his practice, referencing the archive of American photojournalism that focused on Vietnamese victims. ‘You know, they would photograph our tears,’ Dinh says,¹⁸¹ adding that the intent of

¹⁷⁹ Lily V. Chiu. ‘The Return of the Native: Cultural Nostalgia and Coercive Mimeticism in the Return Narratives of Kim Lefèvre and Anna Mõi.’ *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (2008): 93-124.

¹⁸⁰ Christina Schwenkel. ‘Exhibiting War, Reconciling Pasts: Photographic Representation and Transnational Commemoration in Contemporary Vietnam.’ *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 1, 2008, pp. 36-77.

¹⁸¹ Conversation April 20, 2015.

'Postcards' was to turn this photojournalistic gaze on to the American people – with the twist that he, now an American, is also taking photographs of his own neighbourhood. Within that context, he is aware of a prurient scrutiny. The topic of photos comes up multiple times in Dinh's book of short stories *Fake House*, but there is a specific reference to photojournalism in his story 'Dead on Arrival':

Each day I stare at them in the newspaper, lined up in neat rows, some with their clothes blown off, their arms and legs bent at odd angles. I look at their exposed crotches, at their bare feet. (I cannot help myself: If I see a picture of a near-naked person, I look at the crotch first, then the face, if I look at the face.)¹⁸²

This emphasises the aspect of national humiliation through the portrayal of the bodies of Vietnamese people as well as through pictures of pain and tears. However, Dinh's work turns this gaze onto Americans, and yet it is utterly unclear whether this is meant to be a violent or sympathetic act. Working class, poor, the 'subjects' of the photographs are patently suffering under capitalism and in some way embody national shame. But they are also the site of ordinary life which functions as a critique. Dinh makes no effort to 'clean them up' or distinguish between these two readings. 'Short of suicide,' Dinh writes in his poem '*How to Have an Interesting Life*,' 'always situate yourself/ In the wrong place, at the worst time.'¹⁸³ This is simultaneously a 'negative' assessment and a 'positive' injunction.

There is a strong argument for Dinh's photography as an extension of his poetry or as 'visual poetry,' for reasons which I will enumerate. Firstly, his photography uses montage and sequence rather than emphasising unique moments in time, as well as captions and essays which comment on the scene. Dinh never leaves his photographs untitled; they are always geographically located (one feature which he shares with Orientalist postcards), but this emphasises their role as embedded in an existing geography rather than as mere images. Secondly, the images themselves bear many visual hallmarks of flattened pages – rather than focusing on an emphatic, centred figure or a deep visual instant, they often have a shallow depth of field and force the viewer to take a close-up view or decipher them like written text. The profusion of advertising into everyday life inundates the sides of buildings, bus stops, and vehicles with slogans and text, and Dinh uses this thoroughly as a compositional element. Finally, and most importantly, Dinh, as a writer, tends to gravitate towards photographs of words and text alone. Some of his photography shows nothing other than words, and this can be considered 'found poetry' as much as photography. In a show of solidarity, he tends

¹⁸² Dinh (2000), p. 187.

¹⁸³ Dinh (2017).

to take close-ups of any manifesto or show of words he finds. Even further, this text often finds its way into his writing at some point. Dinh's poem 'Homelessness Starter Kit, \$29.99' includes: 'WE ARE THE 99%, PREGNANT AND HUNGRY, I HAD A STROKE, I AM A WAR VETERAN, OCCUPY EVERYTHING DEMAND NOTHING.'¹⁸⁴ Each of these facets is complex enough to warrant a closer reading in turn.

In the fourth photograph in the series, 'Virgin Mary in Pizzeria – Frankford,' an industrial-size box of potato chips behind the votive candles reads 'Make Herr's Yours.' Slogans within the photographic frame work as effective captions as well as uncomfortably undermining the intent of the advertisements. For example, an image taken in Chinatown juxtaposes several passers-by with an ad for a 'Human Bodies' exhibit which used unidentified corpses of Chinese laborers as medical exhibits for museum-goers to learn about anatomy. The ad reads 'There's so much inside,' over an image of human musculature, stripped of skin. When placed next to the people in the crowd, the ad takes on an aggressive tone, or perhaps a contemplative one, simultaneously. Others verge into poetic commentary, from their titles (a man's hand lining up condoms is titled 'Mike's initiative 2'), to their use of captured text. In New Orleans, painted in hand-lettered script on the side of a white building with barred doors and covered windows, 'No Hanging on Premises' contains both the vernacular 'hanging,' to mean loitering or hanging around, and a suggestion of hanging as lynching in the American South.

Another of Dinh's strategies with regard to advertisement is to juxtapose the ad and its surroundings. Staging acne removal advertisements next to passers-by, for example, has the unsettling effect of dislocating the implied world of the ad, stripping it through closeness with its presumed referent. Dinh is not necessarily mocking people, merely using their presence to estrange the advertising's naturalness. Another photo centres a bank advertisement with Regis Philbin and Kelly Ripa posing beneath the slogan 'MORE BANK. MORE FOR YOU,' while a homeless man sleeps on the ground in the corner of the image, barely visible. These visual quotations of lines Dinh finds instructive, interesting, or textually composite are included in a number of his poems, and the strategy of stealing grammatical elements from slogans one he uses frequently in written work. In his poem 'Brand New Products,' for example, he suggests buying 'A super realistic photo of what's outside/Your window, pasted to your window.'¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Linh Dinh. 'Brand New Products.' *Borderless Bodies*. Factory School, 2005.

That he uses juxtaposition and montage rather than attempting to entirely reshape the images suggests Dinh's assumption of irony, and occasionally, powerlessness. In the aforementioned bank photograph, for example, the glowing green sign takes up the central portion of the image, with the homeless man placed in a corner. The bank advertisement is visually dominant, even as it disingenuously implies a world of boundless wealth for the viewer. The photograph literally depicts the 'you' referred to by the advertisement, the actual passers-by of the ad (far from the television personalities who populate it), thus undermining the bank's reality-claim while simultaneously seeming to surrender to its authority. Michel de Certeau writes 'In the spaces brutally lit by an alien reason, proper names carve out pockets of hidden and familiar meanings... These names create a nowhere in places.'¹⁸⁶ De Certeau here refers to street names and regional classifications, but advertising copy has punctured Linh Dinh's 21st-century cities in a way that cannot help but spatialise them; turning them into sites of spectatorship and ubiquitous commercialism, alongside more local forms of public script, also documented by Dinh, such as stickering, graffiti, and handmade signage. Thus the spatial signifying practices mentioned in de Certeau's work take on an even more thorough *carving out* of the city.

As de Certeau observes and Dinh documents, public space is composed of migratory crossings, some which are textual and can be literally read, while others are networked indexically according to informational patterns and accretions of human knowledge. This information is disembodied and deprives persons of agency in a number of ways, most often through institutional and economic violence, which becomes evident in the various images of itinerancy Dinh provides to us. Yet the ethic of Dinh's work does not evoke pity for those observed. Susan M. Schultz suggests that Linh Dinh's work presents a 'poetics of disgust,' although she also attempts to connect it to a form of empathy. Schultz is here referencing Sianne Ngai's 'poetics of disgust' when it comes to the work of Bruce Anderson, where Ngai specifies that Anderson's work attempts to become *disgusting*, in order to undermine a capitalist commodification of art. However, I am uncertain as to whether Dinh's work necessitates disgust, or whether critics' reactions of disgust are actually theirs to claim. Dinh himself does not exhibit disgust when talking about his work or its subjects (although sometimes he expresses it towards the U.S. government or the media). Instead, as he remarks in an

¹⁸⁶ Michel de Certeau. *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p. 104.

interview with Eric Nguyen, 'I incorporate a filth or uncleanness to make the picture more healthy—not to defile anything.'¹⁸⁷ Dinh continues,

We live in a consumer culture that, in order to sell, glamorises everything, even extreme pain or squalor. Filth is photoshopped from the picture, or transformed and perverted into something irresistible, sexy and, ultimately, purchasable. The degradation that's in my work, however, is not dressed up. By dragging degradation back into the picture, I'm making it more complete, and thus more healthy, and more sane. Sane comes from the Latin 'sanus,' by the way, meaning healthy or sane. In contemporary Italian, 'sano' simply means 'healthy.' Anyway, by dragging dirt, death and squalor from behind the curtain, or under the table, into view, I'm merely showing what everyone of us is already aware of daily.

Thus, conclusions drawn from affect theory about Dinh's portrayals seem to implicitly universalise beliefs about what is or is not disgusting in ways that Dinh's work actually countermands. Dinh's poem 'Conversion Table' is one example among many in Dinh's work that demonstrates conflicting cultural values: 'They like to kiss outside and piss inside./We like to kiss inside and piss outside.'¹⁸⁸ Perhaps the estranging element of this disgusting empathy that Schultz identifies is in fact a commentary of displacement of norms themselves. This certainly comes into play through the aggrandising norms of advertisements Dinh often uses.

Dinh's use of the abject as a trope can be celebratory and populist as well as critical of the proper in almost any sense. Furthermore, Dinh does not frame his abjection as radical even if it is politically oppositional, but rather as *radically ordinary*. In bringing up the daily 'intertwining unrecognised poems'¹⁸⁹ of the city, the notion of recognition is more crucial than that of repulsion, and it takes on a textual emphasis. Dinh's poem, 'A Hardworking Peasant from the Idyllic Countryside,' which I will quote in full, may help focus these various concerns:

I was illiterate until yesterday. All these squiggly lines — tattooed on every available surface, all around me, all my life — suddenly started to make sense yesterday. Until yesterday I did not know that the invectives and commands constantly swarming around me were actually made of words. I thought they were mosquitoes, or dust, or flecks of paint, each one leaving a prickling sensation on my thin, almost transparent skin. Yesterday someone said something in my vicinity and I finally decided to write it down, a phonetic transcription, to the best of my abilities: FUAKE YOW MOFTHEARFUAKIER.

I wrote that down with a blue pen on a yellow piece of paper. I finally wrote, I

¹⁸⁷ Eric Nguyen. 'Interview with Linh Dinh: Art is Always Political.' *diaCRITICS*, 21 March 2013. Web. Accessed June 2015.

<<http://diacritics.org/?p=16596>>

¹⁸⁸ Linh Dinh. 'Conversion Table.' *All Around What Empties Out*. Tinfish Press, 2003.

¹⁸⁹ de Certeau (1988), p. 93.

thought, now I'm a writer. If I had merely transcribed the above as a blue thought onto my yellow memory, I would still be seen as a hardworking peasant from the idyllic countryside.

Here Dinh does not seem to politicise the categories of literacy-illiteracy, as much as skewer their social perception. The physical act of writing, he suggests in a turn of surreal literalism, is what makes a writer. But he also represents the social body as 'swarming' with text, 'made of words,' as if words were a substance that could be felt with a 'prickling sensation' on his skin. In Dinh's work, therefore, we see questions of publicity, being seen, location, not necessarily *addressed* as much as decentred, through a series of intimate encounters with words. That Dinh's aesthetic encompasses a social world which is also textual helps disentangle the oppositions between text and body (or, as Trang Cao suggests, 'bawdy'), even making fun of them.¹⁹⁰

As Mueller writes, 'Dinh means to alienate us from a home that is constructed by propaganda,' and this often means creating photographs that are 'decentred,' unlike the directed visual fields of advertisements, in the hope of being socially decentring. Dinh takes a particularly and deliberately limited frame for many photographs, and they do not take the same relationship to planning or staging. In some the subject is aware of the camera, in others, not. Indeed, the subject matter is not always well squared within the photo itself; the pictures lack 'focal points.' When it comes to Dinh's many portrayals of homeless people sleeping in public places (perhaps the series' most frequent theme), this lack of centre means the viewer can skim over the picture without always noticing the sleeping body in one corner of the frame. (In a meta-sense this gives the person sleeping some shelter from exposure in the photograph itself).

There are particular visual elements that allow one *not* to direct one's attention, when looking at Dinh's pictures, allowing the eyes to roam over the landscape in the same way its subjects do. One is the hyper-saturation of his image. It is as if we are constantly inside a slightly too-bright day. The other elements are his off-centre framing and close-ups – the immediacy of the photograph makes it harder to orient. Dinh also often composes his photographs with a kind of hyper-intrusion into the visual field, something deliberately and intensely foregrounded. This is partially related to his use of text, and partially because of his physical closeness to his subjects. It is reminiscent of a close-up view of text itself, through creating a 'flattening' of what is still easily understood as three-dimensional city space, composed of intersecting flat planes of urban architecture. Dinh's work goes against much of the postcard tradition of photography (and much of classic photography besides),

¹⁹⁰ Cao 2011.

which juxtaposes a major object in the centre of a receptive background, creating a visual crowd effect. The effect of this technique is that a significant amount of effort goes into understanding Dinh's images through a dimension of time and deduction, and is done through more of what I would call a 'reading' process than a mere viewing process.

By reading I do not mean a sociological reading. In fact, although a number of the people depicted seem to be suffering or struggling, Dinh's photographs contextualise him and his subjects so thoroughly that the question of their humanity seems off the mark. Sometimes what's going on is comprehensible through an existing social narrative, other times less so, as we rely on his other photographs, on captioning, on stories, or our own imaginations, but either way we participate in broadening the space, and in recognising and viewing the people in it, not as 'subjects' demanding 'recognition' but rather as people we are familiar with recognising and observing in a physical way, *people in our space and sharing our space*. One of Dinh's most common tropes is that of a person sleeping outside, particularly in Philadelphia. These are some of Dinh's most virtuosic and intriguing photographs, but what perhaps enables their virtuosity is their intimacy. Philadelphia is Dinh's American hometown, and the pose of the sleeper is one of the most gentle and trusting positions—especially sleepers like these, exposed to passers-by, Dinh among them.

De Certeau concludes his discussion of city space and its poetics by saying, 'to practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, *to be other and to move toward the other*.'¹⁹¹ This process, as Dinh's harshest work describes, can also be bleak. But his work *itself* finally performs a migratory function, by de-centring the dominant and implied of both 'the social' and the 'nation' – as well as the methods of art ostensibly most appropriate to respond to these issues. Occasionally, especially when caught in transit, any person becomes, or appears, homeless. Dinh himself writes about sleeping on benches while caught in a blizzard, unable to return to his home. Immigration is a form of homelessness implicit in his writing, deriving from deterritorialising effects of global capitalism and imperialism. Yet he avoids conclusions (deriving from his Vietnamese origin and immigrant/refugee status) that would lead to an assumption of unique outsidership. This is 'America' and 'the end of America'; Dinh is a tourist – and also in his own backyard. The work tightropes between these potentialities, and there, in its mobility, finds its critical vigour.

¹⁹¹ De Certeau (1988), 103.

Dinh's *Blood and Soap* contains a one-sentence story: 'He ignored public fascinations with movie stars, athletes, statesmen, revolutionaries, mass-murderers and poets by writing well-researched, footnoted and illustrated biographies of bus drivers, cashiers, beauticians, filing clerks, plumbers and roofers,' which, Dinh adds 'describes [his] orientation in writing and photography.'¹⁹² That Dinh compares his work, including his photographic work, to a textual, rather than a visual genre (and the clarification of 'illustrated' biographies makes this clear) distinguishes his work significantly from efforts within documentary photography to condense reality into an icon. Rather than elevating the photograph as the ultimate conclusion or embodiment of the text, Dinh suggests that it itself contains multiple layers of textuality, 'footnotes' and 'illustrations.' Furthermore, it is 'well-researched.' What, then, is a well-researched photograph?

We can perhaps see some of this through Dinh's use of captions:

Great grandson of Kay Labricciosa, original owner of the Red Eagle Tavern, which opened in 1950. This is the last neighborhood bar in Cherry Hill, population 69,965. The rest are bars in chain restaurants like T.G.I. Friday's, Houlihan's and Bobby's Burger Palace, etc. Kay died 1 1/2 year ago at age 96.

Another image, of stuffed animals on a curb, is more lyrically titled 'Death spot' and contains the remark, within discreet brackets: '[Someone died here.]' In each of these instances, what deepens the photograph is its anecdotal nature, the interplay between the story or history and the details, almost seemingly arbitrary, of its physical existence. Dinh thinks of this in terms of localism and emphasis on the 'local' nature of truth. However, as has been suggested, 21st-century localism is far more contingent, migratory, and unstable, even if when taken as a whole it shares recognizable features or origins. When Dinh took me on a tour of his neighbourhood in Philadelphia (April 20, 2015), he pointed out many changes that had been wrought in the 'local' within only the past five years. Thus, 'localism' is far less about the particular content of the local in any generalizable sense, and far more about the position the 'local' occupies within the relationships instantiated by international finance. In 21st century America, the poor are either moved by outside forces, or do not have the ability to move. This creates an interesting divide *in the texture of space itself*— the proletarian class is simply more dependent on, and more enmeshed in, the particularities of physical space. I believe this is where Dinh derives his emphasis on intimacy and particularity. The ruling class, on the other hand, has access to an 'abstracted' space, and can move across homogenised discursive realms (for example, English as a language of exchange), as well as traveling internationally as the 'global middle

¹⁹² Personal correspondence, February 17, 2015.

class.’ However, this abstraction contains serious implications about the nature of citizenship and embodied relationships to others in public space. Ultimately, it suggests that access to abstraction (national ideals, artistic representation) is more important than material reality.

In the Pulitzer nomination letter for Williamson’s food stamp series, Martin Baron for the *Post* writes, ‘Where some would have seen unappealing fast food and rotting vegetables, [Williamson] saw beauty and Americana... He manages to evoke a universal humanity by giving his subjects something that the world often does not: dignity, respect, and a fair viewing.’¹⁹³ It is interesting to note how quickly the letter moves from the national (‘Americana’) to the frame of ‘universal humanity,’ without ever mentioning the world, especially countries with differing forms of social welfare. Furthermore, as part of a rhetoric of the American dream, Baron does not suggest that the missing object, the ‘something the world often does not give’ to the people shown is *food*. Rather, it is *dignity*, and a nationalist dignity, despite the invocation of ‘the world’. Investment in an American dream can easily suggest that artistic representation is more important than material enfranchisement. Furthermore, if American culture and ‘Americana’ depend on valorising the American underclass’s beauty, how could the eradication of that class ever conceivably be a goal?

For Dinh, artistic representation is neither mimetically related to political representation, nor a means to it, nor a substitute for it. Despite his use of political material, even political viewpoints, as subjects in his work, Dinh’s use of art is politically autonomous and negative. He frequently invokes Baudelaire and Rimbaud, the *maudits*, as literary influences. It is possible to perceive this directly in Dinh’s writing. One inspirational figure in *A Mere Rica* is Fast Eddie, an HIV-positive college dropout who ‘paid these/ St John Newman kids to piss, shit or throw up/ Into his mouth.’ Dinh concludes ‘To be an artist, you must not blunt your/ Troubling vision... You must have as much integrity/ As Uncle Eddie of Philadelphia.’¹⁹⁴ Contrary to Freudian analysis, in which art might be seen as excreta, Dinh’s image suggests art as something which travels *into* the body instead, unnaturally, and repeatedly so: it is the dedication to this process of reversal, he suggests, that constitutes art. Rather than merely sublimating desire into a more socially acceptable form, art is a form of obscene desire in its own right. It is also dependent on each person’s ‘troubling vision,’ and likely to be quite antisocial, even physically harmful (Dinh refers to it as ‘queer’). Dinh does not view

¹⁹³ Baron, Martin. ‘Nomination letter for 2014 Pulitzer Prize: Michael Williamson.’ *The Pulitzer Prizes*. Pulitzer Board, 2014. Web. Accessed June 2015. <<http://www.pulitzer.org/files/2014/feature-photography/williamson/williamsonletter.pdf>>

¹⁹⁴ Dinh (2017).

‘dignity’ as an aim of his art, nor does he even associate it with the human. His ensuing image of dignity arrives as the conclusion to another poem:

...She’s selling old pots,
Five single rolls of toilet paper and an ashtray.
On a chain link fence, she has hung up her dead
Husband’s polyester jackets. A portable heater,
Well-rusted, is also for sale. You engage her.
Examining closely the ashtray, you cannot help
But envy its coherent life, its focus, its dignity.

The ashtray is dignified precisely because it is inhuman, possessing a single purpose in utter contrast to the debris of other people’s lives that surround it. Dignity here, even if it is enviable, is not generally possible. Nor is it something that can be bestowed through a favourable artistic rendering. Dignity arrives through having a proper role, which is constantly undermined by the complexity of individual life.

In the *Washington Post* series, the dignity that is restored to the people Williamson portrays is implicitly an American, national dignity. ‘The world’ that watches is not the globe, but the American social world. Within the perspective of the nation, dignity is viewed as one of the highest goods of all, above material safety. Along the lines of dignity, it is possible to differentiate an Americanist strand from Dinh’s strand of thinking. This immediately brings to mind one of Dinh’s translations, of the poet Nguyễn Quốc Chánh: ‘To be human is to be humiliated, to be Vietnamese is to be extra humiliated.’¹⁹⁵ This ironic rejoinder reminds us that American media, and hence depictional order and authority, has even decided to rewrite the Vietnam War. What this also means is that images of Americans in ‘undignified’ situations or situations of ‘humiliation’ can be likened to violence by the American media rather than, perhaps, comedy, or the general human condition. To be American is to be dignified, not humiliated. To be Vietnamese is to be ‘extra humiliated.’ Fredric Jameson writes of Third World artists, ‘None of these cultures can be conceived as anthropologically independent or autonomous, rather, they are all in various distinct ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism – a cultural struggle that is itself a reflexion of the economic situation.’¹⁹⁶ Thus, while it is possible for Americans to implicitly ignore the ‘others’ within and outside America, it would not even be possible for Dinh to emphasise Vietnamese ‘dignity’ without

¹⁹⁵ Linh Dinh. *The Deluge: New Vietnamese Poetry*. Tucson: Chax Press, 2013.

¹⁹⁶ Fredric Jameson. ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.’ *A Jameson Reader*. Ed. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 315-339.

implicitly making reference to American dignity. Rather than recuperate national dignity, Dinh sees his work as anti-propaganda, in which negativity, obscenity and physicality are all integral.

Dinh does not glorify ‘the people’ as a composite, but he sees scores of individual people within America who are members of a larger social class deeply affected by American capitalism, military expansion, propaganda and media. Part of Dinh’s concept of propaganda includes not merely state censorship, but market censorship – he wonders frequently how art can survive when placed beside cheerful images of consumer capitalism. *Postcards* attempts to depict America as a failed state through the bodies of everyday people, yet it does not use disgust as a weapon, but rather a form of rehabilitation. Dinh’s work tries to counter hierarchical forms of ‘representativeness’ through the production of autonomous concrete material that is non-synecdochic, but materially and spatially shared. As a poet, Dinh accomplishes this by extending the photo into the realm of textuality. This is compelling on an aesthetic level, but there are additional material implications to Dinh’s practice. Significantly, Dinh is not interested in expressing or representing America, or providing America with a narrative. He is interested in reporting what he sees around him, extending it and interpreting it. Jameson continues, in a comparison to Hegel’s Master,

It strikes me that we Americans...are in something of that very same position. The view from the top is epistemologically crippling, and reduces its subjects to the illusions of a host of fragmented subjectivities...all of this is denied to third-world culture, which must be situational and materialist despite itself.¹⁹⁷

Dinh offers an interesting case study of a ‘Third World’ artist inspired by ‘Third World people,’ with one major distinction: this Third World is in the heart of America. This internal difference is what allows Dinh to present a totally savage, yet familiar, view of the country itself.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

Chapter Four: A Poetics and Politics of Indexicality

This work began simply as an acknowledgement of the institutional history – and contemporary praxis – of American creative writing. Yet given that creative writing programs were shaped by the logic of the Cold War, it made sense to extend the study towards both the intellectual history of the Cold War (as well as the decades preceding it) and some of the most salient aesthetic and political questions of the period. Within American writing of the past century, there have been a range of responses to the question of belonging to the nation – from assimilation to secession. This has developed alongside the aegis of triangulating among the popular or ‘mass’, the folk, and the avant-garde, each of which registers took on varying politicised valences. From Bellow’s ‘I am an American, Chicago-born’ to Hughes’ ‘real guy named/Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin worker ME,’ it seems that while the specific *figuration* of national literature varies, the articulation of personal identity has in all cases been crucial to formulating it.

While the personal voice also served as a scaffold for the justification of American Cold War interests, it intersected formally with the question of the communal and the individual’s representativeness – for despite the contravening claims of marginalisation and individuality, the descriptive power of a detail depends on its ability to *relate*, and relate to, broader experience. Of this paradox, Eric Bennet writes,

the personal and the particular elements in poetry and fiction – the private and the individual – were considered to be the source of its redemptive power. Yet this rejection of totalising, simplistic modes of belief led to an embarrassment for critical longevity. How could writers use local materials to make texts that appealed to everybody, everywhere, forever?¹⁹⁸

This is not a passive matter of ‘relating what has happened,’ but often of having to formulate a voice with sufficient flexibility with which to articulate radically new, shared experiences. The political obligation to use language to represent national concerns has at times synthesised, at other times opposed, the demands of modernism and realism, which, as many critics have noted, took on varied political significations dependent on geographical and class locations. Thus we move from the question of nationalism to the formal difficulty of representation itself – how, and whether, identity can be represented.

¹⁹⁸ Bennett 2015, pp. 50-51.

In the stylistic system of the writing workshop, Bennett names ‘the symbol’¹⁹⁹ or detail. Barthes refers to the aesthetic inclusion of seemingly extraneous details as ‘futile’ or ‘useless’ details, in the sense that they do not advance the narrative.²⁰⁰ However, I will refer to ‘definitive’ details, considering that, as Barthes also notes, despite their narrative redundancy these details often perform an additional representative function. The workshop’s focus on style, and on the aspects of modernist style that could be, in a sense, mass-produced, has emphasised small details as one of the most formally significant devices of texts, whether poetic or prosaic.²⁰¹ Yet while the production process and aesthetic evaluation of these details has been explicit, they have yet to be historicised. The simultaneous specificity of a mark, or trademark, and the abstraction of that specificity, has to be understood in dialogue with a theoretical debate within postcolonial studies in which local ‘particularities’ are presumed (falsely) to be resistances to, rather than extensions of, capitalist production. Gavin Walker’s useful corrective, reminding us that capital ‘always mobili[s]es the “particular”, not in opposition to the “universal”,²⁰² but as part of the same movement,’ might equally apply to the detail’s representational authority. Our task, as Walker suggests, is ‘to analyse not “particularities” as if these exist in a substantial sense, *but rather to analyse the historical production of “particularities”*’[my italics].

The contemporary problematic of detail can be found in a recent personal essay in the online literary journal *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, called ‘On the Kinds of Love We Fall Into.’²⁰³ The question of representation can already be seen to be incipient in the title’s effort to reference some sociality outside of itself – its use of ‘kinds’ to reference genera of experience, which ‘we’ are implicitly involved with. This presents, in a relatively clear way, the precise problem I have been grappling with, which is how to account for the profusion of generic processes of ‘individuality’ within American writing. What is exhaustive, even exhausting, is the catalogue of seemingly generalizable detail: ‘Soon, we were Facebook friends in the way two people can be without really knowing one another’; ‘an archly hip sort of southern girl who loves to cook for us despite

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 51-52. See Bennett’s discussion of the symbol’s recuperation of ‘what was lost through the aversion to totalising gestures.’

²⁰⁰ Roland Barthes. ‘The Reality Effect.’ In *The Rustle of Language*, trans. R. Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, pp. 141-149.

²⁰¹ James Wood. ‘How Flaubert Changed Literature Forever.’ *The New Republic*. December 12, 2014. Web. Accessed August 2017.

<<http://newrepublic.com/article/120543/james-wood-flaubert-and-chekhovs-influence-style-and-literature>>

²⁰² Gavin Walker. ‘Postcoloniality and the National Question in Marxist Historiography.’ *Interventions*. Vol 3.1, 2011.

²⁰³ Emmett Rensin. ‘On the Kinds of Love We Fall Into: Polyamory in Theory and Practice.’ *Los Angeles Review of Books*. February 14, 2014. Web. Accessed September 2016.

<<http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/polyamory-kinds-love-fall/#!>>

possessing the scepticism toward me of a lover's roommate.' This is a highly representative account of how one is induced to articulate identity today, but the effort put on the universal in these descriptions shows simply that indexicality itself is under question in this stage of capitalism, particularly in countries with the primary economic function of consumption: in other words, how to summarise a person, now that we have taken on the job of proliferating our own individuality, an individuality, which, as Adorno says, destroys the individual.²⁰⁴ What happens during proliferation of the phrases 'the sort of' and 'the kind of,'²⁰⁵ in which what is described implicitly belongs to an order. The details are produced, no doubt, but the order itself is missing.

We can see a more successful example of the generic, yet definitive, detail in *Goodbye, Columbus*: 'For an instant Brenda reminded me of the pug-nosed little bastards from Montclair who come down to the library during vacations and while I stamp out their books, they stand around tugging their elephantine scarves until they hang to their ankles, hinting all the while at 'Boston' and 'New Haven.'²⁰⁶ What enables this detail to successfully mediate between the specific and the universal is its reference to class, and the idiosyncratic, yet generic way in which the upper classes conceal themselves. The detail's descriptiveness, then, is dependent upon larger structures of repetition in social life, and most of all the repetitions of mass production and class membership. It also here comes from a sense of alienation rather than identification. The definitive detail as a 'personalising' characteristic extends farther back than Zola, Flaubert, or Proust, but realism and modernism generally harnessed the detail to the composition of specificity, subordinating it to larger social machinations but without suggesting that class membership was reliant on replicability – indeed, the details often concentrated on the *production* of class membership, as with *Germinal's* coal-blackened faces, Emma Bovary's home decorating or the details of Odette's dress. Further, with Joyce, we see the emergence of the commodity as a detail ('What is home without Plumtree's Potted Meat? Incomplete.') and thus the detail's height of generic efficacy begins in earnest with mid-century writers. The key development is a historical one: the rise of mass culture, and thereby the increased production of commodities and group memberships which were both recognizable and distinct. The structure of these details connects otherwise disparate texts, from the 'flattened nose' which begins *The Sun Also Rises*, to Gwendolyn Brooks' 'kitchenette building,' and the American

²⁰⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 2005. p.150.

²⁰⁵ Rensin 2014. Including the title itself, these phrases, and their attempt to map archetypes, recur compulsively throughout: 'the sort of girl who is energetic in her sadness, sharp-tongued and chain smoking; like she was only waiting to become one of those old, bitter ladies who seem so much like quarrelsome hens.'

²⁰⁶ Roth 1959, p.8.

scenery of *Lolita*. As with the dream-work, the detail can condense a vast narrative – in these cases, usually one of race, class, and location.

As of the present, the detail's ability to serve as indexical reference is in decline. Saul Bellow could write, in the 1940s, 'her lips are painted in the shape that has become the universal device of sensuality for all women, from the barely mature to the very old.'²⁰⁷ By the 1980s, in Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg*, lipstick is seen to change colour from season to season; by now lipstick is known by its specific name and trademark – it is itself produced as an explicitly aesthetic object, not merely a means of beautification, bearing what could even be thought of as a 'title.' This suggests that if one is to create the 'enstrangement' or *ostranenie* that Viktor Shklovsky attributed to art, one does not merely have to defamiliarise one's own habitual perception of the object, but also defamiliarise the object from its socially objectified, embedded perception, its readymade signification.

The consumer proliferation of subcultural identities and styles one must cope with is accompanied by a sense of evacuation, given that these labels are not 'types' isomorphic with human figures but instead loose psychic or aesthetic attachments shaped more like commodities than people. The comparison of the 1955 film *Marty*, with a lonely, ugly main character who eventually finds love with a similarly socially awkward girlfriend in the crowd at a dancehall, and the 1999 *She's All That*, in which the outcast is transformed *into* a popular, desirable girlfriend through the process of a makeover, demonstrates the progression: 'types' are no longer partly-unconscious or part of larger social formations but deliberately bought, bought into, and utterly fungible. The concomitant rise of the autobiography or memoir as the preeminent tense in which to conduct discussion, has perhaps been a means of breaking down the inevitably digressive contextualisation necessary to introduce all the qualifiers that now accompany the thoroughly individualised person. The writing programme's attitude towards authorial control has emphasised, over the 'telling' of grand narratives, 'showing' through descriptive detail. The anecdote, perhaps not coincidentally with the growth of Big Data (including targeted advertisements which alter depending on one's social position, group membership, or past behaviour), tagging/keywords, and other 'vertical' methods of mining information, demonstrates itself as a credential, a mark of selfhood par excellence. Autobiographical display is a virtuosic performance *of detail itself*, the (ostensibly) grubbled²⁰⁸ texture of the marginal as excluded from the 'smooth' universal.

²⁰⁷ Bellow 1944, p. 11.

²⁰⁸ 'Face/up on the grubbled sea/of this infected unfamiliar/and infinite room': Franz Wright, 'To a Blossoming Nut Case.' *The Beforelife*. New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2010.

There are a few points to introduce further. One primary point is that this ‘individualisation’ primarily comes through becoming part of smaller and smaller constituencies, as even evidenced by the essay which I opened with, which concerns itself with the divide between polyamory and monogamy. This ‘identity’ is different from the development of subjectivity. Of course, there is a vein of innovative contemporary writing that has attempted, in various ways, to avoid articulating a subject. Yet the minimal location of subjectivity in writing is simply as a linguistic feature, the pronoun ‘I.’ (Further thinking might connect this to the question of ‘pronouns’ as a linchpin of gender identification – pronouns which are always third-person.) But the other point is that the self, autobiography, one’s ‘personal brand,’ has become necessary for interpreting some of these consumer behaviours, since they are essentially aesthetic in nature. There is no way to understand these forms of detail as the ‘innocent’ observations ‘of another’; they are intentional forms of communication and self-narrativisation, even aesthetic creation or commodification, and should be understood as such. The principles of modernist composition have so penetrated our daily lives that creating a separate artistic practice can at times seem entirely redundant.

‘Realism’ of course was originally a reaction in favour of objectively documenting social forces, and its form, description, uniquely and deliberately alienating. It was also a development of narrative writing that could represent psychological processes and subjectivity. This connection between subjectivity and the ‘objective’ social fabric is the animating tension of realism. Thus, it is interesting to return to McGurl’s observation that the products of the contemporary writing programme are all really concerned with modernism and not realism. To ‘realistically’ describe the self would seem to undermine the ‘realism’ which was originally designed to describe *another* and often an alienated other; what we have, in our use of detail, is an effort to dramatise the *writer* as the subaltern *character* of older social realism; that this, no matter how ‘autobiographical,’ requires a significant amount of fiction is clear.

Fundamentally, a kind of realism which presumes the visible world is the one that exists is wrong. This is perhaps what Ron Silliman was getting at when he observed, in *The New Sentence*, the bar codes, legal structures, and computer languages which mediate our ‘experience.’ Further, we are not passively ‘plugged in’ to our own experience. We are now expected, through our duty of consumption, to produce coherent selves. The predominant sense nowadays is not that representation depicts a pre-existing reality, or that the range of the representable has to be ‘widened’ or made more capacious in order to accommodate gritty reality, as in the 19th century, but that you have to produce yourself *as a certain kind of representation* in order to be acknowledged as part

of 'reality' at all. That these coherent selves resemble in structure if not in content all the other coherent selves on the market (and are interchangeable with all the others as well) might explain why contemporary fiction struggles to differentiate itself from other linguistic products. The forms of privacy and publicity which originally structured the emergence of the novel have utterly changed in form. Experience is a job. The product is a self. Beckett: 'I can't go on. I'll go on.'

The anxiety about not being marked by a bigger power, and about the constant need to inscribe oneself, perhaps connects to the emphasis in the contemporary questions around social death, citizenship, and ontology. What one is being told to think is oneself is actually the production of a commodity of oneself. A number of recent demands for compensation for this invisible or uncompensated labour of composing sociality seems to recognise this problem – people increasingly demand to be paid for participation in social life, for their time, for their 'love' – but the address to a Big Other who might adequately perform said compensation seems as if it is not forthcoming.

The semi-autobiographical manuscript that follows is thus not organised around the composition of a self but around finding means of notating subjective processes and events through description. As a set of experiments, the form my writing has taken, thus, has had less to do with stylistic differentiation and more to do with duration. The context in which I began to produce poetry was spoken word performance and competition, which most commonly carries a time limit ranging from 3 minutes to 3 minutes 30 seconds. Written down, this is approximately 2-3 pages. This length is ideally didactic, enough to create a formal structure within which one can exhaust a single topic. It also tends to produce a nascent sense of narrative or sequence, but often through a relatively self-enclosed poetic form rather than through prose devices. Often the process of developing these poems was one of attempting to find or reveal a device which would then be taken forward to scaffold the entire piece. Although the poetry would frequently contain the word 'I,' it was brief enough that the question of whether it was autobiography or fiction was never fully developed. The reason I have turned to producing longer works is because I seek to develop that question.

One of the limitations of the 'psychologistic' approach is the continuation of a private, bourgeois realm of 'character' and experience, with an essentially local purview. In contemporary life, the home has an even smaller cast than it did in the 19th century novel, due to the absence of, for example, domestic servants. The current television adaptation of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is emblematic of this problem: despite its semblance as a political narrative, we only sympathise with the central character through her family, her sexuality, her privacy (all of which are depicted as

voluntary in contrast to the repressive doctrine of the religious order), rather than through broader networks of social relations or constraints. This stands in extreme contrast with the vast casts of characters in works of Soviet Futurism, not all of whom would even cross paths, let alone occupy the same social milieu. My prior works, written for performance, also relied upon the presence of my body to verify the 'I' of the writing. An 'I,' of course, can always be situated further by the inclusion of notation which reveals it to be a quotation or an observation of a third person. In order to move from the personal to a larger scale, I have moved from bodily mnemonics into a direct need for the page's capacity as a storage device. In the process I have had to undo the tendency to produce formal enclosures. The American writing programme has centred its pedagogy upon the production of novels and short stories as prestige forms, pedagogy which carries over to a degree into the workshopping of poetry in the same programmes. Yet, as I have already tried to illustrate, the problem, perhaps the impossibility, of description in prose poses a significant challenge which cannot simply be ignored. Formal choices, inasmuch as they produce a consistent style, are less significant to me, perhaps due to their overemphasis in the writing programme, than those of totality, sequence, and limit. I have tried to avoid the continuity of 'le beau style' and have introduced a numbered sequence. The sequence, inasmuch as it implies a totality, connects movements of the text. Proletarian literature may, in the near future, experience a comeback. If so, it will not come as a recurrence of 19th century realism, nor from the cultivation of any particular style, but through description capable of enstranging a world already composed largely through the principles of modernism. This is not yet that.

It occurred to me –

part one: who is affected

I.

'Love and Marxism,' she requested as for book recommendations which I could not fulfil in the Brooklyn-esque Hampstead shop, lots of upsettingly edifying material for children, toys, I was wearing a pair of someone else's pants which was another reason this wasn't working for me, perhaps it's romantic to argue about whether we should turn Libya into a fuckin' parking lot, for other people, 'intervention' was the trendy academic phrase a few years ago, not the kind we do for alcoholics, some poets are, but you may as well not do it, we were at the ponds which we had to cross through, a half hour of raised white paths along hot rowdy weeds, noisy and hot, sickeningly blank form of 'civilisation'; is it the same in Trinidad, I've only been to two places, on the way back behind a woman with a Nigerian accent: 'If my husband hears about this he will divorce me,' everyone reproducing sensibly in their mid-thirties and wearing clean maybe overly clean clothes, flowers massive tropical dead in their perfection, bleach, London plane trees designed to not-reproduce, the plot of *Children of Men*, to derive the appearance of life without its inconvenient tendency to struggle across everything, a weed being a flower you don't have to take care of, she was holding the transparent British Library bag, which as I explained was like going through airport security, what had begun as charming was arid and murderous, but in fact was never charming, the sight of the Shard from the hill, I was talking about autobiographical writing and what a dead end it was, I offered bitter and disinterested responses, but I didn't hate pleasure, not the way Miles wanted to with his drawn face and the look of a young German philosopher which was so obscene in analytic England that I could hardly speculate on his conditions, arriving and announcing that the paintings were shit, humiliating us all including the group of Chinese tourists in front of whom I felt implicated in the largesse of colonial pity, we'd come in and fucked still in the pool heat of the room, I an awful swimmer and only wanting to submerge for a brief moment and for the excitement of getting ready, her horrible text message in which it was stated I was 'making her the adult' (as for me) his briefs sodden and heavy below the shadow, I couldn't really look at it, I reached down, I felt it was inappropriate, to look directly at... I wanted to do something illegible together in the evening regardless of these betrayals but graduate study is more contemptible than the Shard, a timer shaped like an apple which you set to give yourself breaks, cloth mother, and it was the height of summer but the injunction to enjoy made this impossible, to desire, impossible, she kept talking about love, which was something I wished I'd never heard of (suddenly realised I was singing along to the background music in the Costa, free falling, since I was 8 years old, indoctrination, could we make propaganda this good), bodies together I was aware of her breasts under the top which was fragrant and synthetic, the water leapt and I hated it, it was uninteresting to me, we had our own lake which had actually not occurred to me, the lifeguard who was equally detailed and jovial watched and gave comments on each of us, delimiting the range beyond which we could not swim, when I next went into the lake the surface was covered in miniscule dead flies, I don't want to turn myself into someone who can be enjoyed, love as the extended form of enforced leisure, I could imagine it well, enjoying not enjoying their own lives, she took a photo in which I knew I looked, her newly slender limbs, vacant, I was nearly ill, ate enough for both of us wanting to be in, damning I'd be of this, but still entirely displaced (I fled) imagining hydrants exploding, power lines falling, to seize the state is to do more, instead of the people falling in the way of the train, an unfortunate inconvenience and one it's difficult to talk about, I was lightheaded and could not tolerate 'love' – enclosure – the enclosure of the pond, the enclosure of sex, for Christ's sake, why be a person?

II.

You do that bitch and I'm gonna fuck you up, I'm gonna throw it over the fence and I'm gonna fuck you up [Richard, age 8]

I don't like the way you're talking to me yeah? You know what you're a fucking arrogant little nasty little fucking child, I wait on you hand and foot, someone's gonna kick you in the fucking ass one day, Get your fucking ass into the trailer right now or I'm gonna throw the fucking sleeping bag over the fence, get your fucking ass up or I'm gonna beat the shit out of you, I don't like your fucking attitude, it's really impolite, well guess what you won't be watching any more movies than that for a long long time. I am going to stop it unless you pick up the sleeping bag. Because you are behaving like an asshole and assholes don't get rewarded in life dude. The Doritos are going in the bin

III.

We ran a workshop where I asked the participants to think about possible futures and several of them said they liked the idea of everyone dying, returning the earth to a state of – after Ali said ‘mass extinction’ was for poor black people – if you think about it, the revolution starts with you – I’d put poison in water bottles at the bodega with a diabetic syringe, no one would care, Noah Cohen said in the car, if I wanted to be an effective terrorist – life hack: if you’re on the can and you run out of toilet paper, kill yourself – I didn’t – sometimes imagining killing yourself is easier than imagining other things, that is my official stance, it’s easy to imagine what everyone would do without you because you are in a sense without-you, you are a pressurised unit that strikes other pressurised units, all of which move where they’re able to, I was reminded

shielding his eyes, staring into them, one of the pupils larger than the other, the smallness of the pupils gazing into the light

the window had blown open and there were water droplets across the papers he had left on the desk

Sometimes I see and sometimes I am formed into something by forces beyond my control, and if you are those forces, how can I

Lying down in front of a very tall building, to make it look taller

Sometimes

It’s not impossible but –

It isn’t

What I

But I don’t know what I’m saying here, perhaps I should go.

IV.

The way we

No

It occurred to me

Maybe we could talk about

I'm open to

Perhaps I

I could

I don't appreciate your speaking in that way in front of me. It feels as if it's intended to make it difficult to respond. I am going to set a boundary and withdraw from this conversation.

The boundary is a white circle drawn across the grass in the playing field; you said 'level the playing field,' I've eaten things that have grown in it, three-headed dandelion, I suppose their genetic faults are mine, waiting in the evening looking at a candle diminishing, not metaphorical, but it might as well be, both ends, imagine two people each holding one end of a rope walking closer to each other until it hangs on the ground, that is how it feels, or, it is better to, I, just, hurts

Sometimes sentences break down

The clothesline in the backyard wasn't tight enough and kept everything flapping back and forth, it looked like a piece of electrical wiring, hard to make into a knot, things swung circularly and fell off, pants, a woman and her children had just been evicted and Matt stepped over their rubbish in the street, toys, soiled neon leggings, shopping bags, disgusting, life is absolutely disgusting, our shared life, I asked what you thought about a suspended sentence, a life sentence, but I didn't envision us getting older, but it's not good to do that, it's important to remember you have an age, details about your life, in case you're questioned or have to tell anyone, I have a photograph of a photograph of myself as a child, I've refused to distribute it, I don't want to distribute everything of myself across everywhere, I don't have enough self, it wouldn't go anywhere, I'm consoling myself by remembering you wore my socks when the police patted you down and because of their thickness thought you were wearing two pairs, otherwise nothing of me went there, but perhaps the food, perhaps if I put nutrients into the soil, it could come up in the form of lettuce or something, at which point, I could conceal the message inside a sandwich I gave to you, the message being, I wanted to know, I wanted to be with, you,

But sometimes people just hurt themselves

David, 21, posted a message in the forum, bolded, responses: I love you, please keep fighting David, you have a friend, there are people, they exist somewhere, and someone else said the best way to kill yourself was to throw a piece of plugged-in electrical equipment into a pool and jump in ensuring that the current was high enough.

V.

Instead of being anyone, I have a backache from trying to split the wood, where the axe came down wrongly and struck to the side, or something of that nature, and perhaps from how tightly clenched I was from worrying if someone could see me trying, instead of being effortless, and hurry to give me advice which was unfollowable, I think I should stop hitting the wood with the axe for a while until my back recovers a bit, I think I might as well wait and drink a cup of tea, but I do have this tendency to let tea cool until it is undrinkable, which I'd like to break, but it takes me a long time to break things, as we've previously seen, even sometimes when I throw things with presumably all my force they don't shatter, I suppose there's a hidden reticence even in those furious actions, a holding-back, for that matter I don't want to accidentally fall on a board covered in nails and be pinioned unable to get up like Lajos was the other week, one nail in his hand the other in his arse, the small puncture-hole in his track pants looking genuinely miserable and the wound something I didn't get a chance to look at, now that we aren't close, which I slightly regret, because I've never seen a nail-hole in anyone's arse before, which I now appear to be spelling in the English way, like a pretentious fuck, like an American who lives in the UK and becomes some hybridised and disappointing entity, without the ability to speak frankly or subtly, without a genuine form of expression, with an accent that pleases no one and that simply grows tighter and tighter every passing day, like trousers in winter, which leave fine red marks from where they've pressed the skin tightly, which is something I told you as we walked back down the road from the café yesterday, and you smiled when I said the vest was too small, which I'm not sure was an interesting remark really, so the smile felt like an unearned bonus, which is an essential figure, when I told him we might name someone 'Mireille' meaning 'miracle' and add 'of electrification' he said that atheists didn't believe in miracles, and perhaps that's right, but maybe there's an atheist form of miracle such as emergence of the unknown or what in the 70's was called 'kismet' which I learned God knows where but possibly from *A Dictionary of American Idioms*, a book my mother bought for my father when they began to date, which I am relatively certain he didn't use, but which I used frequently and brought my mind into contact with archaic terms for police vehicles, almost always paperback, and almost always smelling of exchange, and feeling as though they were produced for an audience standing invisibly around as I walked back through the dull suburban waste to watch TV, as I explained to you the other day, you had to turn the sound on and off and back away slowly, you explained the colour slowly bled from your set as well until it was grey and blotchy, this felt crucial, I could envision you in the back of the car as we drove, I'm not sure it's really accurate, you've probably never been to the U.S., but you asked me if a 2-litre bottle could be a substitute '40' and it seemed as if a mental extension beyond what was known became and we both wondered what was growing in the fields outside the detention centre, possibly kale, and what was written about tuberculosis on the sign pasted to the woman's window in green marker, I joked I was tubercular the next day while coughing and felt bad, because it's a sign of the alienation of signs from things, I want to learn about how things are built, and why, and what they work on, why the dirt was white on the window and turned it white but when added to water and washed away turned black, I want to know what transformed it, what it did, and earth and air together might be something useless, like smoke, or the opposite, like the lungs of trees which eat the carbon from air, which thicken themselves on that invisible piece of a common molecule, and stretch slowly like an embrace, like pinpricks, reminiscent of other forests, ones seen before behind the house.

VI.

After a while we had to stop because my legs were hurting. Lajos gave me crap for it as usual and made it seem as if I'd been lying to him when I told him how far I could run. My knee and hip were tight and my leggings had gotten looser and I felt brittle and kept caressing the side of my hip. The fumes from the highway were harsh and it was already dark and the wet road was shining. I saw a few white sparks into the air off-kilter and to my mind unimpressively from a back garden but I made a remark about it nevertheless and said it must be for Guy Fawkes day. This idiot country I hate it said Lajos or something along those lines which is basically a summary of what he says nearly all the time. Some dogs started barking and freaking out from the fireworks. In Hungary we only set them off on New Year's. It's terrible, on the New Year's Day all you see are posters looking for the lost dogs and lost cats, I don't think they can survive all this noise, they run into the street. Every year starts this way with this sad shit. We kept walking, I didn't really know what to say to him. I asked if we could stop at the Asda and get a drink of water. He said You're a cute sweet girl, maybe they will give it to you for free. They gave it to me in a coffee cup so I pretended it was coffee. We walked past a place offering to neuter dogs and cats for a relatively low price. I said When I treat you well it isn't because I want something from you. He didn't understand the word treat. It's just how I act if I like someone. I had to translate a lot of the expressions. It doesn't matter what you feel, when you look at me that way, I get a physical response, this shit makes me depressed. You sit near me, you give me a feeling, leave me alone with this shit. He was telling me how he broke up with one of his exes because she blamed him for not being physically affectionate enough and then sat in her kitchen breaking her shit and drinking all her alcohol when we passed onto the massive roundabout. This is where Chris died. Really, he said. No one told me this. Yeah. I asked the cops if they knew exactly where Chris had died but they hadn't been on duty. I remembered Mitch and Om and I walking back and forth and asking the cab drivers who were standoffish pissing onto the highway if they knew of where a man had died around here. We figured it was near a bit of fencing behind which some brown horses were standing and staring at the rushing hell of traffic from their limited field. We made a cairn under an underpass and I said some Buddhist shit and we left him a can of non-alcoholic beer so that maybe he'd be sober in the next life. The fence was dented and there were remnants of police-fencing and the tyre-tracks of the ambulance were there where it had pulled up on the roadside. I suddenly recalled a traffic accident we had driven past on the way to Wales – the cops had brought out this kind of black screen, like an enormous 'censored' bar on legs, which completely shielded the accident. When I was a child I remember my mom saying Don't look. Don't look Aimee and Randall. Lajos said something about how in India they didn't have traffic laws and a lot of these cab drivers were from India so they drove like maniacs. We were standing so close that the air shook you. Yeah, I said, we guessed he died somewhere near here. Phil said he came by that night and traffic was blocked off. Hmm, said Lajos, then I think I met him maybe 15 minutes before his death. We jogged onto the sidewalk, I had a superstition that speaking of it meant we'd get hit. We came to the smaller roundabout past the Novotel. This is where I met him the night he got kicked out of the site, said Lajos. He said he was going to come back and kill all of us. He said he liked me because I was an asshole so he was telling me his plan. And I said, But Chris, what makes you think I will let you do it? He went that way. If what you say is true I think he died maybe 15-30 minutes later. It may have taken him time to die, I said. At that point we met Matt who was headed the other way carrying a bottle of cider.

VII.

Later I'd read *David Foster Wallace*, a Thomas-Mann style bildungsroman about the eponymous David Wallace, a Yale student who commits spectacular self-harm then throws himself from the Golden Gate Bridge. The point, as I sat in the seminar, with a German lecturer who was articulating some fine points of Heidegger, a student responded that we might do a Heideggerian reading of Adorno, the cardboard stars fell from the ceiling of my mind, I crashed to the floor internally, sweat began to pour from my forehead, the pointlessness was evident, my speech was being ripped from my gullet in thin ever-extensive ribbons, I escaped at the hour, I staggered, began to gasp, there were Powerpoints of massacred Vietnamese children meant to make a point about Power, which was alright (in the English sense) until one of them was smiling then the horror was mine, we were holding hands in our hearts and I was throwing up in the hall trashcan directly next to the white porcelain drinking fountain with the distinct sense that everyone was looking on although my back was cramping and I looked awful, folded in on myself, and when I cleaned myself off and raised up there wasn't anyone, they had all gone out front for a cigarette. The world yields up much to philosophy, although it is often in the form of appearances of the arbitrary. In evening, then, the houses on Cherokee Street with their slanting roofs and the way they catch the whole pitch of light from shaft to shadow is not nothing to philosophy, nor is the way we move through them, tilting, rotating, like a film camera, as if we are on our way to somewhere else. Now on the other hand if you were to ask me what precisely they yield up to philosophy, I would not say anything. But the fact that this sight itself encapsulates a number of basic problems of perception, of Spirit, of the Ideal, and furthermore, extending towards the social sciences, towards atomic structures, towards biology, and towards simpler questions like why the houses have never looked like that before, why do they only begin to look like that when I am with you for the first time, and although you are off teaching refugees how to speak English, a job which you say you are very bad at, and which I never see you do, but which I imagine you do with aplomb the way you put your beautiful clothes on, the belt with its clear marking of the correct hole (with one on each side for leverage) and the trousers which don't fit and shoes which are a bit nice for the occasion, I walk down the street and suddenly the sunset is suspending some kind of time, suddenly there is a greater amount of space inside me, psychically, which enacts the shadow, which enacts the low-riders & the one empty shop on the corner not quite out of business with a limp flag waving from side to side over the door, and the windows open fully without screens above in what I could imagine as our vacant apartment, but this has become inaccurate, because it isn't, some kids look apprehensively down the street at their own footsteps, one then two young men on bicycles with perfectly detailed musculature work their way up the street pumping at each step with the bike from side to side swaying and they don't remind me of anything, I see them, I lay a hand on the landscape to my side, it is so clear I can feel it, the most boring branch of philosophy is ethics, you said, but I think it is obviously metaphysics, and to be without any pretence of naming things or that things shine any brighter in the presence of their names, as the young men flee from their names up the street which is the flat purple colour of shadow in the summer but is not itself in shadow. He was like them, a young man fleeing from death. Everything kept moving except for, somewhere, him, he had been chased down. I kept trying to hold my timespan next to his. This wasn't the point, and in a sense, it didn't feel as if he was dead, just on the run somehow, in flight, like the diminishing sight of those two young men on their bikes. The point is, that somehow the earth kept turning past, I didn't heal from anything.

VIII.

It was raining and awful – raining and awful from inside the workplaces, from inside the flats, and from outside where we were standing under it. I had a sudden thought that it must have been raining everywhere on the earth, everywhere I had once stood, both the narrow path outside the canal where the boat had been anchored, along the glass terraces of the monstrous experimental building across the way, the ‘neon entrail’ of the post-Olympics construction twisting from below, and rain hammering on the boat’s roof, wherever it was anchored, wherever it had been moved to.

The boat had a few difficulties, someone had painted a mural of the sun smiling on the ceiling, it was cartoonish and grotesque, but more than that, a face has to be perceived right-side-up or right-side-down, and it was somewhat disturbing to feel, lying or sitting on the floor, that one was half the time facing the wrong way, the sun was feeling something backwards about one, but also to stare constantly into that crudely painted smile was to pass into the emoji of the real. The windows fogged with damp and the walls were wet and cold to the touch, and the glass of one of the windows was broken. The lock on the door was half-broken, and in order to feel it securely bound one often had to reform the inner tooth of the lock with one’s hands. There was also a locked box on the deck with a bit of graffiti on it saying *Please don’t store food inside*, a rat had been depicted on the box saying, *Don’t listen to him! We love peanut butter!*; it was disquieting to realise that what one had initially experienced as the voice of an impersonal inner auditor had been heard by the rats as a ‘him.’ It opened up the possibility that all of the text we read could conceivably take form as someone else’s speech, and how horrifying that would probably be.

I had begun to really struggle with art and with words in general. It began by waking up staring at the upside-down face of the sun. But it continued in that it became less and less possible to find surfaces that had not been inscribed.

I went to take a piss in the woods one day and found the sides of a stand of birch trees had been spray-painted in pink, one letter per tree, F U C K C O P S, and while it was an exciting visual illusion, I’d seen the basic premise used before in a music video, and therefore some art director who read a ton of magazines and went to ‘galleries’ had found the device, there was no way to escape the derivative presence of culture, this at moments felt worse than finding bar codes on everything, because someone had voluntarily tried to execute this imagery, someone had subjectively identified with this act, which now tormented me as I knelt beneath the bridge watching my urine darken the pavement. The pavement had probably been inscribed, everything is inscribed, but unlike my fantasies of Heaven as a small child, the fact of having been written on is no entry to a book of life, it doesn’t mean one will be noted or remembered, and just because something has been noted does not mean it has been taken up into any form of presence.

On the other hand –

When I was sitting with you we were on the bus and the sun was extremely bright and although it was already late and we were both physically fucked and our relationship had been over for a long time, and although later in the evening I would develop a headache, possibly from low blood sugar, which meant I couldn’t enjoy anything, for that brief period of time we climbed to the top of a council flat and looked down, not merely for the sake of the gesture, but in an actually submissive realisation of seeing, itself, in other words, the immanence of the things that appeared to us – in this

case, some upper middle-class people barbecuing on top of a nearby building, and the fantasy of going over to join, and the fantasy of being a couple, despite what we were actually wearing and who we actually were, sustained a form of flight, rare enough, into things rather than away from them, which meant we stood outside of the building for the next few hours and managed to get through 2 layers of security, although we didn't breach the final door, just hid inside the separate room where they stored their trash, all from Waitrose.

Later we would learn who lived there but for now it was just another building with people wearing pastel clothes they'd probably purchased recently, who probably worked for something.

*

It's important to remember that this is an illusion.

*

Autism, bicycles, collective, deviance, environmentalism, feelings (simulated), grievances (nurtured), hygiene, incest, jam-jars, ketamine, libraries, marxism, nature, organising, poverty, queerness, repetition, social work, television, umbrage, vegetarian dinner, wifi, excrement, you.

*

We were walking alongside the riverbank when I realised the fatal formulation, the form of this relationship is not determined by us, it is determined by the social, relationships are not in our terms, they are a predominant form of expressing the social totality, and strangely, compulsively, at the same time, I love you, we were beside each other, things were passing over us so quickly they seemed like – no – we were passing over things so quickly they seemed arranged in a line by an assiduous set director, an unending procession along the riverbank of alternative styles of clothing and people gazing across at nothing, sitting along the end of concrete, most of them must live, must work, for what, for what.

IX.

My next book is on refugees so I must immerse myself in everything to do with refugees. It's non-national-specific – it's allegorical –

There's this documentary – Australian documentary –

How long is it?

I've watched 20 minutes

It's not like five hours or something, because I don't have time

X.

Which part is the material, and who is the thinker? Which piece is an inert moment to be passed over, to demonstrate to another, which piece is to be held in place, which piece is a miniature flag.

Except we saw some flags – some real ones, at the exhibition, made by hand – imagine things like currency and flags being made by hand, they must have been at some point – it was grey. It had been red. On it in the centre were two simple points of insignia, a sickle that looked like a C and a hammer that looked like a T. It was so far from being a logo. The hand of the maker was present. I imagined a room full of schoolchildren drawing the same insignia, all subtly different. A room full of people making the same sound. An auditorium. A city. A continent. A planet.

We have to consider that the sun was used as a sign of the aristocracy, and of natural right. We have to consider that things were perceived, signs were seen, to justify what was done. We are not seers. Or we must not be seers. Or all we will see is what is. Immanence means, seeing what is there unsees what is there. We have to consider that the planet is a colony now.

That is one of the reasons his affinity with agriculture struck me as deeply meaningful. When you have spent the day cutting plants back, your blades, your shears, secateurs, grafting knife, and breaking concrete on a building site with a heavy sledge, the few stitches, the insignia, the little black C & T on the flag leaps into eyes denuded of its age, present as an image of what we have done in our days, and what we might be able to use.

part two: car crash

XI.

We were at the sports bar as a family when my dad told me he had an idea for a book that would be better than Harry Potter. My life story, he said. Ha ha ha ha. You're full of shit, Dad, I thought. While my mom was in the bathroom, he told me about shooting drugs straight into his neck. When Mom came back, she looked concerned, apart from the way that her face always looks concerned. Dad said, Don't tell Mom that. She worry. As my mom came over, he said, I am the crazy guy. If not, I never marry your Mom.

XII.

We had done all the big sights in Saigon, and frankly we were looking for some non-war related activities to fill our final days. There had been enough guilt and tears so far for one vacation.

I haven't done anything wrong.
toy cheu-uh lam zee sai?

It was a misunderstanding.
chee...ee? lah... hugh luhm... toy

Don't touch me!
DUHung DUHooung vaw Toy

Where are you taking me?
ohng dahng yuh'n? toy dee duhw

Westerners who can't read, who have no real way of representing the difference between I and Only, who generally call it Saigon, have decided to transliterate the Vietnamese in a Northern accent. Toy bee lack, they might say. The small lacquered toy bee falls to the ground in the collection of dead languages. I am lost. Or zoo, an impossibility in which a Northern accent pronounces a Southern word for umbrella. Strange as it might sound, conversational Vietnamese takes place almost entirely in the second and third persons. Trung would skip class, go to the zoo. The botanical gardens and zoo had been established in the 19th century: the new cage for the tigers, built with a crosshatch of steel bars, pelicans in a long set of airy chambers constructed from wire, monkeys playing on a wooden bridge, small elephants the size of rowboats washing themselves. In addition all manner of flowers and trees, none I can recognise, the banyan (or 'false caoutchouc' as the French called it), buildings with terraces, green painted pagodas, men selling food outside the arched dome of the front gate. Phrases to add to the guidebook: botanical garden, entrance, exit, gamekeeper, I am not lost, please touch me, we have an understanding, I have done so much wrong in my life, please take me somewhere, guilt, tears, blindness, sin (pron. xin, polite particle of speech), war (as fog), war (as sorrow, famous novel), war (as experienced by animals in a zoo [in which era, specify?]) {as remembered as small elephants in Saigon, the size of rowboats, not always as a time of war, lasting for much of their lifetimes, including meals of hay fed to them by gamekeepers (see above) and moments of stillness} & (convert to third person): I was born.

XIII.

He was on his way back from the embassy when he hit something. In the dark of the little back road past the military base Samuels had thought he saw the lights of a car. The road was banked up high on each side; someone long ago, perhaps the French, had planted a row of trees spaced out perfectly along the edge, which whiffled faintly when the Cadillac passed them. He had the radio going but was barely listening to it, and he only realised he had hit something when the woman stopped singing. The engine made a whining metallic noise and stopped suddenly. Samuels slammed back slightly into the drivers' seat, and his head bobbed on its axis. He waited a moment, then tried to throw it back in drive. It didn't move. And the lights were everywhere now. And perhaps someone was screaming. Lucky he was driving an American car, Samuels thought as he got out to see what the trouble was. The other car, a little Peugeot, had crumpled end-to-end. His left headlight had been destroyed and the wheel-well jammed, but other than that, there was the possibility the beast would repair if all the wreckage were cleared away. There was, somehow, a second Peugeot behind the first, its headlamps shining, and a few Vietnamese now got out and spoke to each other, then very quickly started to pull the bodies out of the car. There was blood everywhere, which seemed an obvious thing to expect, but it took Samuels a while to notice it – it was so dark and slick he had thought momentarily of a coated leather interior. The Vietnamese were shit drivers. These must be relatively important ones if they had cars. Samuels was a little drunk still and brushed himself off, staring at the ground. It probably wouldn't be long before Rex from the embassy came along the road behind him. He made a half-conscious gesture of frustration. One of the Vietnamese, an old woman, started at this point to moan loudly. Samuels, who would never know Vietnamese til the day he died, felt that this, too, was incomprehensible, and ducked into the back seat of the Cadillac. He must have fallen asleep there, because the next thing he knew he wasn't drunk anymore and it was dawn and Rex was peering into the car with an uncharacteristically businesslike expression saying – Now what have we here? Rex was one of those for whom humor or indeed any expression of personality came poorly so it was hard to tell what it all meant. The crumpled Peugeot was still there, fused in a wreckage to the beast, its snout half taken off. Rex's motorbike was parked jauntily in the grass. There was a quietude about it though in the day. The crash was taking up half the road, thought Samuels, it was possible with care to edge around. Tow's on the way, Rex said. He sat on the trunk kicking at the tyres and sucking at a strip of a nearly spent cigarette. You're in for it, he said. –Where's the dinks? –Called an ambulance and fucked off. –Can't drive for shit, dinks, Samuels said, then, momentarily seised by solicitude, Maybe it'll still run. –It's fucked. –Try it, said Samuels. Let's try it. Rex climbed into the driver's seat and began to fiddle with the dashboard. –Everything's fucked, he said. He whistled a half-scrap of tune and turned on the radio. *Need you baby, so bad...* A woman singing. It was the same song.

XIV.

In 1965 or 66 I start welding school. Two or three months later Grandpa pass away – car accident.

I was 14.

That year Uncle C. was drafted. (C. was born the Year of the Horse, so he 21-22.)

This was a higher level of training. C. was sent to camp an hour away, and for the first couple months he wasn't allowed to leave. But my dad had a connection to some higher-ups who trained those guys, and he got them to let C. out over the weekend. The deal was, on Friday, they could go out and bring C. home with them to Saigon. On Sunday night, they would bring him back to camp.

That Sunday night, S., and her parents, C., and Grandpa and Grandma, and a friend, went out to a restaurant. Afterwards, the military guy would drive C. back to camp. Grandpa decided to accompany them in his car to be polite. So, there were two cars.

The friend went home. He lucky.

It was almost midnight when they dropped C. at camp. On the way back, S. went over to sit with the chauffeur guy so he wouldn't be driving back all alone. So, left in the car are Grandpa, Grandma, and S.'s parents. This was a Peugeot 403, a French car.

The Army guy drove a Cadillac.

This was some guy working for the US embassy or the US Army. And I think he was drunk. They were halfway back and he went on the wrong side of the road and smashed into them. He got into the hospital for this, too, but he was awake – meaning it wasn't really that bad.

XV.

The snow kept falling and through the window I watched the strange world become familiarly taken away. I thought of the frozen river in Michigan of my childhood, and how often I imagined walking across it *and how often I walked to the edge of the actual river to join you*. At some point the vision included ice skates; that is how naïve I was. And all the living things asleep beneath it, just as we were pressed into inaction here. The door banged open in the wind and Lajos cursed and righted it. The fire in the stove began to make a noise like the blade of a helicopter and he made the same noise with his mouth. I told him I was doing a Ph.D. in literature. –Ah. I went to university for a while, this is what I wanted to study. We have a category of world literature, you can get a degree in it. But due to poorness...the term if I translate it directly, ‘poverty spiral’... –Yes, in English it’s the same. –Literature is my life, said Lajos. I explained to him about my dad. –Ah then, I have a chance that my daughter will become an English writer. I will try but maybe my English is... –Better than my dad’s. –How it comes? Another time he would say –We can’t get too far from what our parents were. I could not explain it fully, but I thought of my father’s career as a welder, initiated from a set of completely arbitrary accidents, accidents that nonetheless carried his particular stamp, albeit in reverse, as it is the sequence of these accidents that, perceived in the light of memory, makes us what we are.

I don’t know how to explain welding, since it, and so many other of his life experiences, seemed to have no impact whatsoever on my father, or at least never brought themselves nearer our zone of privacy in our life in America. I very rarely saw my father fix anything, physically, with his own hands. He was very clean and could bang on things and make them work, but middle-class suburban life in America relied on appliances rather than simple tools, and handymen with knowledges of plumbing, of electricity, of programming stoves and oil changes. Something like a furnace, I assumed, didn’t need to exist in Vietnam. But this is again the kind of assumption from which I build nothing.

Life is like sitting in a room that’s invisible, with no floor, and nothing in it. And you realise soon enough that you should have been learning to build tables, conducting interviews with truckers and bakers, lawyers and magicians at children’s parties, and that precisely the skill which makes you want to know (or at least you hope), which is that you aren’t didactic, you take the world as it is, in its natural amoral and slightly unwashed state, means that your morality, as it were, does not girdle the world, doesn’t hold its middle in place, or connect things, or connect you to your father, as sweetly peasant-ish the sense of ‘storytelling’ and ‘third world countries’ might be, and in fact you are simply a very vacant individual waiting for things to happen to you, which, in a sense, is what your father was, but in a third world country during a war, and with several thrilling additives, which, you imagine, probably made life easier to ignore.

The number of blanks I have to fill in my father’s life sometimes seem insurmountable. For example, how many blowjobs has my father received in his life? Less than 10? Over 100? How would I know—how could I ask? When I began to menstruate I would walk about staring at every woman and older girl, thinking in all probability you are bleeding right now, one of you is secretly bleeding right now, this has been going on around me this entire time, I never noticed. This holds true for entire species of reptiles, birds and insects, which happily slithered and perched out of the direct gaze of humans, perhaps in the shadow of a lawn-mower, and which perhaps have never been

seen, or if seen, never recognised, and yet lived out their entire life cycles within the same breath as our sorry, polo-wearing species. With that in mind, I have to say that the trade school my father attended is a mystery to me. Did they wear uniforms? Did they sit in rows? How many were there, and how were they arranged? I know in the morning they had to line up and be inspected, the principal would pace down the line, he was a short man, and if you were dirty he would slap you, and the older boys, the ones who hung out with gangsters and soldiers, weren't scared in the least of his slaps, being a whole head taller than the principal, they would jump in the air and mockingly wave their fists, showing how high he'd have to leap to even reach their heads to slap their faces.

The technical school was Grandpa's idea, he thought it was going to teach Trung to be an engineer. It soon became apparent that it was a dinky technical college, for training woodworking, welding, electrical, plumbing, the manual aspect of the trade, but because of the way school worked in the South not much could be changed. If you took a year out of school you'd be immediately drafted into the military. Trung and his half-brother had been sent into the technical school. When he realised the situation, the half-brother determined to enter back into normal classes, and went to night school after each day of labor, making chairs, clipping wire, working with fire, crimping the heated metal. For the first month or so Trung went along with his half-brother, but then he quit going.

When Lajos was young his father made a mistake and upended a horse cart, killing two horses. Lajos was raised on a horse farm. He had to carry buckets of water to the horses, and he hated those damn horses, because they would drink litre after litre of water, which he had to lug from the tap, and he was still skinny and small, he would not attain his adult height until midway through his twenties, and certainly looking at him as a boy you would never have predicted his growth to a man of over 100 kilograms, although, someone with an annoying sense of humour might add, it's much the same with a horse. Talk to them, his father said, they like it when you talk to them. So Lajos would take the water to the horses in the big pail, swinging it back and forth and hearing it slap against the sides, until he was sweating and tasting his own sweat, and when they would come and drink the water he would pet them and say Fuck you you bastard, you fucking retarded horse, faggot fucking bitch-horse, and the horses would knicker sweetly at him, and stare with their dark eyes bigger than chestnuts, and they loved it, he knew they loved it when he spoke to them, and of course horses don't speak Hungarian, they don't speak a word of it other than Stop and Go.

The night of the terrible car accident S., C., Grandpa, Grandma, S.'s parents, a friend of theirs, and the colonel went out to a restaurant. I imagine even the polite Please eat, from the youngest, which would have been S., or perhaps the friend, I invite you to eat. The colonel had arranged to let C. out of training for the weekend, for Grandpa to accompany him back to base camp. C. and S.'s friend went home. So as they travelled back in two cars, the parents of the couple in the front, and the colonel in the back with C. and S., and it is unclear from this diagram where those in the back car were seated, but I imagine that C. sat in the passenger's seat, with S. by herself in the back, and there was no hand-holding – but it might have been the opposite, they were already married, they might have chosen to sit next to each other in the back, and these kinds of details are rather important, the ordering of the cars, the seating, even the politeness is important, as it determined, in this instance, who lived and who died. And in this instance, Grandpa, from deciding to call in a favour from a friend for his oldest son, and from having finished dinner at this precise time and needing to return

said son to the camp, and from being polite and wanting to accompany the caravan as it returned him, from politeness and from being the one whose car it was, from driving, and from driving a small French car as Vietnamese did, and in front, was the one hit immediately as the driver swerved into his lane, and killed instantly – or, perhaps, from drinking, it was the American who was bound to kill someone, and Grandpa just happened to be sitting there. Thus, as you can see, the head-on collision killed Grandpa, wounded Grandma, and S.'s parents in the backseat were OK, and C. had to return to base camp although his father had just been killed, and in a war although not *in* any war in a sense, and although he was the soldier he would survive without having to fight anyone, and it wouldn't have been the Americans he was fighting; he too, would die in a car crash 45 years later, except that time he crashed into something, he died, or passed out, behind the wheel and the car kept moving.

XVI.

That year I 14 year old. Grandpa pass away right there. They didn't have seatbelts. The mirror broke, the glass got into his face. S. and this guy from the Vietnamese army right behind. They call the ambulance. The key thing was Grandma. S.'s dad in passenger's seat was OK. Grandma hurt, she out – unconscious. So they drove her to the big public hospital by the market downtown Saigon. They put her on canes and pick her up, same way they carry cement. Meanwhile at home everyone sleeping, we go to school in the morning. One aunt that took care of things and a cousin came home and were talking. We kids overheard.

The next day they brought my dad home. I can see the whole of his body. His skin become pale. His arm was broken and there was glass in in his face. At four-five-six in the morning someone drove me to the hospital.

She was on the floor in a stretcher in the room with an IV. There was blood and food all over her. They didn't clean her. Her face was swollen. A man in a white coat came in and said 'I don't think she can survive' and left. Later they told us he didn't work there. That guy was a dentist.

Before they came to the public hospital they had tried a private French hospital, with French doctors, but there was no room. Some relatives discuss what to do. It was Q. – this cousin, Grandma let him borrow a lot of money and people gossip about him ah this guy. He know a lady who work for the French hospital administration.

We thought – what we do except bring her home anyway to die? Otherwise, if she die in the hospital, they take the body. That's the Vietnamese way, you take the person home to die.

So we decide to do the gambling. Try the last one. He says let me talk to that lady, maybe she can find somebody to help her out and discharge them to a different room. We had to put Grandma's body in a big truck we use to carry the sacks of lime, and went to the French hospital to do paperwork at the gate. There were trees inside, it was beautiful. While we stop I jump into the truck.

–Do you know me?

She nodded a little. I feel something – I knew she wasn't completely dead.

So we check her into the room, and she survive. A couple of days later, she woke up. They put some chains on her legs with weights attached to stretch them out. She was sitting up with the weights on her legs, awake and talking.

The family said don't let her know Grandpa's dead. They posted someone to stand outside the room and tell everyone who came in don't talk about that. Two or three days later we had the funeral. But they lied to her 'how he doing' 'he OK'

She said 'I know. So I won't ask anymore.'

That the Le family. Everything private. I know what going on you guy.

When she left the hospital she said 'I know what you want to tell me.'

S. had no idea what to do. C. in army. My brother maybe 17 no idea what to do. The daughter of my mom brother stay with mom since she was 20-something, run business. My dad dealt with big business but she did day-to-day stuff, groceries, handing out three buck, two buck. I couldn't even get my money. Five bucks I had to steal.

Most of the people after that who helped is my dad's best friends. This guy who work as a chauffeur, his wife come to the hospital to take care of Grandma for a couple years. That is the respect way. I come see her once a week after I see her and ask mom can I have some money? Borrow? Get out of here Trung.

Grandma goes home at least two years later. They have surgery on her so many times. Thank you, she say. God has saved you I don't know, the doctors say.

But anyway Grandpa dies just after I enrolled in the technical school and I get stuck there.

XVII.

Daniil showed me how to take an empty water bottle, roll a joint, and press the joint's lit cherry into the plastic until it melted, passing through clearly, and filled the bottle with smoke. Then you simply uncap, breathe out, and take a drink – exactly like taking a drink. My lungs weren't as good as Daniil's and I always forgot to let go of the small hole the joint had made to let the air pass. Daniil always seemed depressed in some vague way, hungry, since the place had been fenced in he was spending more and more time in the dark, in the office, but he liked to smoke the 'Russian bong' and talk about literature – he liked Henry Miller and the lyrics of Depeche Mode. Ya tebya lublyu, I said, testing the sound. Ya lublyu tebya. We agreed the best time for literature was the late 19th century, and perhaps also the 70's. Several large rats began to frisk through the compost. We bowed to them. We were sitting on the kitchen counter so we had a great view as they dug through the barrels of shit studded with brilliant vermilion melon rinds. Outside a small child began to scream. What's the emergency number in this country, Daniil asked.

–999.

–Hello, 999? We've got 666 here, let us out for fuck's sake.

–Uh hah, I said, which is what I said when I didn't know what to say. Then, –They're wasting a lot of water.

–Who?

–The mom. She washes everything they own over and over. In the clean water, not the runoff.

Daniil sighed. –I'm too peaceful to kill. In the end it will ruin me.

–I feel sorry for this boy.

–He's very manipulative. He was trying to throw pieces of glass in my face earlier. Daniil threaded a second joint into the water bottle and we watched as the smoke made it white inside, a bottle of milk. –Careful with your empathy, I mean it. If you get too close you'll get glass in your face and then everyone will say, oh he's such a naughty boy, we're so sorry he poked out your eye – but you're encouraging him with your one remaining eye.

–Shut up, bitch! screamed the 8 year-old to his mother outside.

Daniil and I closed our eyes and tried to get as high as possible – meanwhile, in the compost barrel, the rats suddenly began to sing to each other.

XVIII.

1978. The last time I do cocaine on top of the mountain. Pulau Bidong is so small it only takes about an hour to walk across. But the ground climbs upward, hazily, and becomes forest and cliffs. There are three beaches. The rest of the coastline is sharp rock. The first beach, the only one people ever see, has a long jetty sticking out over the beachhead and a dispensary. That's where everyone lives. They go down for their UN rations in the morning and stand on the sand watching to see if anyone they know has made it out. As the slope of the island rises into trees it becomes too far to carry water and gas, and the tents become sparser. On the west side of the island, back there, is the second beach, the black market. Noodle, cigarette, meat, flour, whatever you don't have. You swim out there. The boats come by. At night maybe a hundred people lie on the beach in the dark. Somebody say 'Hey, police coming!' and they disappear. What about the third beach? The third beach, only Trung knows about. The family lives in a plastic tent draped over wooden beams. There's nothing in the tent except a can of gas, a can of water, a mat to sleep on, and, right outside, a circle of rocks for a firepit. When they first came to the camp, a friend of S. offered to let them stay with him. He lived right by the communal toilet. The wind blew so good but you could smell that shit. You could hear it too. C. paid his 200 dollars for them to get their own place. Before they leave Grandma gives each of them \$200. She slips it into the seam inside C's bag and sews it in place. No one can know you're leaving, Grandma says, Don't tell Auntie. Auntie take care of me when I was young. Man, that rough. Did you hug her or say goodbye? I hug her but... I never see her again. All Grandma says is, Trung, in one week we go. Really ma? Oh shit— Go out, get as high as I can get, and go.

XVIII.

If we are brought into language—
Language is not ours.
What was your first word? ... Mine was Da Da.
I was Baby.
Does that hurt?
Yes.
Everything is someone else's, including me.

What do I have in common with him? We were in the car.
I don't know what you try to do here.

I told him about Art Spiegelman and he said, Holocaust, that mean the big one. I don't know what is important about my life. The heat in the van has not worked in years and the brakes are very bad and he was driving me somewhere and I kept worrying we would skid on the ice.

While I sit on the floor writing it down, Dad starts googling 'How to get a good title of your story.'

He does not snore as loud as he used to, although sometimes he cries out in his sleep Fuck you! English, the English he thinks in. A language toting its own shame, and pride. Like Oscar Wilde covering his bad teeth. A single cigarette stuck vertically to the inside of the car door.

He needed help rescuing the turtle. You pick them up. I grabbed it and threw it in the manmade pond. Alive and slipping into the other side quickly.

St. Maximilian Kolbe is the patron saint of drug addicts. Volunteered to die in Auschwitz in another's place. Ruth's arm, and the small grey numbers on it. Make them small, she said. I want to cover them with a bracelet when I get out of here.

Kolbe called Patron Saint of our Difficult Century. He is the only saint with a radio license. The turtle's body sleeps with all its limbs withdrawn into its armoured house. St. Max raising his arm to take carbolic acid. Patron saint of needle exchanges, of unmentionable bruising, of metal heated slowly over a lick of fire. The turtle is buried and wakes up alone. There is no species where the parents care for the young.

Neither of our dads had dads. Wars. I don't know if that means anything.

Us. His atonement. The goodness he does not even want to know the name of some days but make sure all the relatives can pronounce.

They did not name me smart, or loud, or even lucky, or brave, the thing everyone tells me I am when I am publicly in pain.

They named me 'loved.'

It was cold, which in Chicago means you have to dig out your car. Place an ironic lawn chair in the dug-out space.

I do think loving you is like digging a space for you out of the white nothing.

I do think loving you is like watching the empty square form of it holding and dying later.

One night my grandfather fell and broke his jaw coming into the house, drunk.

He was crying, my mom said, and for Grandpa Bill to cry meant it really hurt. But he drove himself to the hospital. (Drunk, my brother says, raising an eyebrow.)

They wired his jaw shut. I could hear him out there crying. Grandma wouldn't let him in the house. She was scared. I don't want to see beer, my mother says. It makes me so sick.

Proverb: The man who does not know how his father died will die the same way.

My grandpa died buttering a slice of toast. Not having seen it, that's how I imagine it.

My parents met in an elevator. Strangers. A friendly question. When I came to England it was frightening that people didn't talk on elevators. Or that that word wasn't the same. How could I have been born?

A tiny lantern on pulley strings. Tremendous. Love has a size and shape and depth. Love is like walking into a building and the outside and inside reversing.

Boxes of light. I want to give you a shoebox filled with it. Poke holes in the lid so the light can breathe.

All I could see was a man trying to explain something. A very angry man trying not to hurt us. We were helpless too and me wishing I could make him feel another way, kissing his fitful brain

When I met him he had just been struck by a high heel. There was rope dangling from the roof. We set to cutting it down, but he said – no, I can't predict what they will do, or want

Each note itself with its own name, asleep, as I was once asleep inside my mother's body while she named me – my dad in a cell – his dad in a grave – my ba ngoai raising children in Livonia not hers until her eighties – my mom sitting in the hospital room last summer for a week without leaving, wiping her lips, touching her feet, patting the coffin as if to comfort it at the funeral, and calling it Ma, which in Vietnamese means mother, ghost, horse, grave, depending on the tone.

XX.

(The boat crashes. Dad takes a shit.)

'I have an idea. You should start with the Malaysian police just beating dad. Just beating him and beating him.' –mom

'Or you could talk about all that good stuff in the water.' –dad

I remember stories of shitting off the side
All the fish would swim and
eeeh I elaborated And they caught the fish and—
but who knows what Dad made up for fun or what I did.

I thought the boat was metal. It was wood.
We don't know who build that.
The boat had a Chinese name no one remembers.
My dad also had a fake Chinese name no one
remembers.
Mom: 'All boats have a name.'
Dad: That nothing to do with my story.

Boat Not too small like canoe or...
Reason when they build the boat their whole family go.
And 100 people in the family. More inside. That consider like
basement of the boat.

The shoreline is full. They will be turned away.
Sent to the camp. Police stand like a fence,
with shield and Dad forgets this word,
synonyms: baton, nightstick, cosh.

The pilot drives the boat on. The waves pin it to shore.
Let's go. Cannot go
anymore. I carry Nga
I jump down.
Mom: 'Was she crying?'
I don't remember.

But Dad remembers the boat had tipped to the left,
so he jumped over the side where the water was still chest-high.
The police lay them on the sand
and beat them.
Take about a half hour.

Mom: 'What did you bring?'

By that time you have nothing.
'What were you wearing?'
COME ON MAN I DON'T
REMEMBER, WHY YOU ASK ME
THOSE QUESTION I DON'T
REMEMBER (Dad stirs his noodles
emphatically and leaves the room.)

some kind
of rice not enough water

Man get out the international ocean
open champagne

Sit up there
All the wind blow so good

Because Dad thinks
in location like me, he remembers—
On a hunch, I ask, Why were you on top?

I say I go up there take a shit
I stay up there

I pretend I relative – So many relative of relative

I look up at the moon, Man

Really quiet in those ocean

Taking a shit. Dad's bid for joyride.
Stayed up there
3 days.

XXI.

They ride far south where a Chinese family has paid off the local government to build a boat. What does the country look like? Rice field..., waving his arms. It's around Christmastime, the day is cloudy and blue. The car takes them to the southern tip of Vietnam. This way the escape journey will be short as possible. But where we go? I have no idea. Reason I do not run the boat. The Chinese people got a permit to build a boat for fishing. You never deal directly with them. No one can know who they are. Every their relative run around everywhere. Why you try to find out what for? Connections... middle men you are do business with. The middlemen take the family down to the basement of one of the village buildings. Hundreds of people sleeping on the floor, crammed together, breathing in the dark. By the stairs Trung sees two guys he recognises from the café. Ay, he says. Let's go. The three of them leave the other sleeping passengers, go out walk around. Last chance before they board the boat to look around, before they have to leave it behind. You could have ruined it for everybody. By the time you talk about that, everybody know we there. Cars come to the house, they go buy food for us... the government know. Everybody know. On the Chinese boat they take everyone's luggage. There wasn't enough room. The owners had overestimated the boat's capacity, and want as much money as they could get anyway. So the boat is overcrowded. 476 people. The Chinese guys load C.'s bag on top with the other bags. Trung had slipped in a carton of Pall Malls and two cans of spam. C. love that. Trung thought, At least I can survive. Everyone is scared of the toilet. It's a wooden board with a butt-shaped hole in the middle which extends out over the water. As the boat moves over the waves it bucks you up and down and when you take a shit you can see the fish swimming up to eat it. On the second day at midday, Thai pirates circle them. Three or four pirates in a small craft. They let the boat go, there is nothing to steal and all the women are below deck. Trung manages to get to the top of the boat. He has a little more freedom of movement up there. We lie down. Look up at horizon, the moon. Trung is lying next to another guy on top of the pile of bags and sees him moving. He's feeling through the bags looking for food. The Chinese guys who run the boat if they see us do that they kill us. He reach down. What's this? Cigarettes? A can of meat! That's my brother's bag! So Trung gets the bag – after that, man, nothing, because when they smash the boat into shore, all the other stuff floats away. Spam and cigarettes. These are the two beautiful things. Trung pulls the moon through a straw when he smokes. The taste speaks in no language. An image pulled apart by water. Shit eaten by the toothless mouths of fish. When the pirates let the boat go, Trung thinks, having nothing to steal is like. He touches the lining in C.'s bag where the bills are sewn. Grandma is smart. When Grandma leaves Vietnam a decade later, she will board a plane with a raw diamond hidden inside her hollow tooth. The diamond will be shaped like the inside of her tooth. It will taste like the moon tastes, without a filter. Trung beats the ghosts out of his clothes. His tongue is as black as a river at night over which many trees cover the sky. He will lose all his teeth, too, one day, like diamonds in a clear sea. One day at the black market Trung recognises somebody from the old days. Ay. You wanna smoke cocaine? That guy could get whatever he wanted, whatever food – UN give us fucking bean shit – I mean we appreciate but...How did you buy coke in the refugee camp? Give two hundred dollars, Trung says, gesturing towards himself with two claw fingers. Oh don't tell me you spent it on drugs! Trung starts laughing really hard. Grandma trusted you! By that time Trung is getting high for the last time in his life on top of a mountain. But I know I get out of the camp, he says. My brother in the US. After that, cold turkey. I prepare for that. Smoke a lot of cigarettes. His doctor tells him he has the lungs of an 87 year-old man. But he's clean.

XXII.

Musing on history amid his soiled duvets, I told Lajos he was the biggest man I'd ever fucked (110 kilos, as he did not tire of noting), the second oldest, the only one to have never been to America... Ah, he said. You like the statistic.

Later as he lay on his back and moved the big duvet over us he said I think you are the only who don't speak Hungarian. The only from Vietnam. And – he breathed slowly – the first time I make love to another writer.

The wind and rain began to hiss outside. Fucking fronts, said Lajos. I can't sleep with the air pressure, I can feel every front. I don't sleep during fronts ever since I was a baby child.

I wriggled out from under the duvet and opened the door to let the heat from the fire in. If you want it to be warm maybe first check if the window is open, said Lajos. With my big body I suck up all the oxygen in this small room and it's necessary to keep the window open or I would suffocate. I closed the window. If you want to be warm in the future you should check if it's open anyway, he said. Good point, I said. He began to laugh uncontrollably. Good point! Like in a meeting!

I felt it then more strongly, that the alliance between us could not have been anticipated, that it had no apparent reasoning behind it – no narrative, no romance, perhaps a bare pragmatism – but fundamentally that I didn't know how long we'd be held in this place behind the gate, and that that eventuality conditioned everything. He was like a bramble that had caught itself on my sleeve, piercing through to the skin. A sweetness, a suddenness, a pain, and a bond that was physical, speechless, inevitable. Lajos peeled the condom off himself and tossed it in a paper sack by the windowsill. Our future kids, he said, wiping his semen from his hand. I laughed. A Hungarian American Vietnamese, he will have a big problem introducing himself, a total identity crisis. And in Britain. He rolled the R in Britain.

The window was fogged but beyond it I could sense the storm, and somewhere beyond, the guard towers. Perhaps the patrol were changing shifts, unpacking tuna and sweetcorn sandwiches from their weird triangular cardboard with its cellophane panel. I wondered how many of them there were, if they were armed, if they watched us all the time, or, as was typical, if they all took lunch and weekend holidays at the same time. I didn't intend to escape. But it would be good to know if such a thing were possible.

Reluctantly, I put my clothes back on. They were cold and slightly damp, and I shuddered briefly at the drop in temperature. I had no desire to go back to the couch in the artists' cube, which smelled distinctly of old fish now from Lajos's dinner a few nights before and under which I could hear what I just knew were rats, between the poorly spaced floorboards, chewing through plastic to the heart of what they sought, and could always detect. But despite his ability to break boards with his fists and pull out screws and nails with his fingers, or really, because of it, his enormous (muscle-full, as he said it) body, Lajos was very easily injured. He would lose circulation from the weight of his own limbs while sleeping, struggle to breathe enough air in the small bunkroom, bash his head against the ceiling and wall, begin to cramp, and, in addition, the psychotic screams of the poor child having intensified, and lasting for hours on end (emanating directly from where his headboard would have been if the bed were more than just a wooden bunk with a mattress), would follow him into the

depths, stir something in him, pressurise it – when he woke in the morning he was slow and pained enough that it looked as if he were chained down. Perhaps tonight would be a silent one, I thought, the child couldn't throw tantrums in a storm like this, he couldn't stand to be outside in it. Ok, I said. Goodnight. Goodnight, Lajos said quietly. Have a good dream. I crept slowly out of the door and left Lajos in the dark, facedown on the bunk, in his effort at oblivion.

XXIII.

I think English is a stupid language, Lajos would frequently say (this not endearing him to the denizens of the camp, who not only spoke English, but also reflected English vocabulary in all of their behaviours, their bodily rhythms, how they held a cup or drank from it). I found that after a week of workshops with undergraduates I tended to share this hatred, wanting to cut through it like a forest and burn out all the dead wood which they left standing in their useless poems and stories, which, they would inevitably note, were *about form* or *about language*, to which I could not help imagining a table-maker suggesting that his work was *about wood* and *a commentary on flat surfaces*; frequently, in my own strivings, I had found, English had a reverberant quality, something like a warehouse, where each word took on magic propensities, opening onto manifold definitions, like a person throwing open a door in spring, but not the form of a *language*, which, after all, is meant to give, from one person to another, some particular qualia, something of a singular experience. So I bent down and began to make a diagram. First I drew the long jagged coastline of Malaysia, and the small indication of Pulau Bidong off the side, and then I added in Vietnam, I added the boat, and I added some X's for the landing, and on Pulau Bidong itself I placed the long jetty, and the three beaches, the beach for landing, the second beach, for the black market, the centre raised up in a mountain, and the third beach, the far one, the one that only Trung knew about.

I can't tell you how much I hate addicts, Lajos said.

I modelled them off the ones my Dad showed me. The first thing I drew was Pulau Bidong. This tiny island, about three times the size of the field Lajos and I had run the previous day, ended up keeping the population of a small town, forty thousands. With forty people at the camp now there were rats, there were toilets, there was a system in place. I tried and failed to multiply each person by a thousand in my mind. Eventually, a church would be there, pious Thanksgiving to God signs, even a Grandpa Bidong spirit who (reputedly) shepherded the boats into place, disciplinary systems, acronyms (VBP), but when Trung got there it was none of those things, it was what it had been, that is, an island, with a mountain at the center, forests, three beaches, and enough quietude to quit cocaine forever, but not before using it one last time.

My Dad had never been a keen student of English. In the refugee camp, because he was handsome they pushed him forwards as 'the one who speaks English' – forgetting of course how few fucks he gave, that he was in fact a drug addict who found learning a language a waste of time, and would rather ram his ideas in however they would fit, not caring if there was a spillover, something like pouring too much liquid into a very small mug. There was thus in his speech a residue of Vietnamese—more than a residue, almost an impediment of Vietnamese—his words were their own language, the language of his thoughts, and his thoughts (like Vietnamese, in some sense, I would learn later, or perhaps only *his* Vietnamese) had no past tense, no future tense (or rather, had one continuous, perfectly flexible tense, which depending on its context could mean any of them), no verb conjugations, referred to any group of more than 1 person as 'you guy' and any singular person as 'that guy' (pron. *dat guy*). The next day Lajos did not get up. Daniil laughed. In Hungary he's a genius and here he sounds like a retard, it really gets him down.

XXIV.

‘A wood store is also a type of epic poem.’ -Lajos

Lali ka. So dear to have a nickname, not everyone is so lucky, Lali. Food was still not a problem, we still had food, from the barrels and barrels and cans and what grew in the barren waste and from our shit and even, I wondered, from the bodies of the ones who died, the rats the dogs killed, but also perhaps us, the carbon monoxide scare had chastened us, but Lajos was the only one who thought we might run out of wood. The idiots had been burning the green wood, he muttered more loudly than many spoke, we would run out of seasoned wood the next year. Trung in the refugee camp had had a similar problem; they used gas for some fires but needed wood to build any structures and the trees were more and more clear-cut on the small island, boats were torn apart for wood but still more people came. So he climbed to the top of the mountain at the centre of Pulau Bidong with some guys who were strong, and there with an axe they chopped some trees to use. Lajos came up to me and told me I could help if I was heavy enough, heavier than Brad, I could sit on top of the log in the sawhorse and hold it in place with my legs as he sawed it to pieces. He worked the thin and rather delicate saw blade back and forth by my knees, complaining that he was weaker than the day before. The sun flashed in the gap of the saw's centre. The way Lajos sawed the log was thus: he sawed at two diagonals, then chopped into those diagonals with one axe wedged at an angle, which he then hit with a second axe handle, heavy enough to dislodge a great wedge of wood, and he did this 4 times, until the thick log was connected only by a rind to its other half, sharpened to a point, like an enormous pencil. Trung and his friends chopped the trees down the same way, except concentrated on building a single point of weakness of the far edge, so that when pushed the tree would fall with its own momentum and break off from its stump, as depicted in many a Bugs Bunny cartoon. But the felled trees were heavy... how did you carry them back to the camp? I asked. From the top of the mountain?

I will give you some time to consider this question.

I was too light to keep the log in place, the sawhorse was poorly made, and it rocked back and forth, and Lajos turned his attention to stacking the great piles of wood that had been chopped. A rat pranced by atop the fence. Look at it, said Lajos. Like a squirrel.

I watched it run. It's slow, I said. Lajos began to place the logs of the same size beside each other. They are absolutely not afraid of us. And why should they be. We are stupid.

Trung and his friends could not carry the sawed-down trees. They rolled them down the mountain, away from the camp. They pushed them off a sheer cliff face on the far side of the island. The trees, shorn of branches, floated and spun in the brilliant waves. In the ocean, the men swam with the trees, one by one, pulling them up on the shore by the beach where boats would come in.

Lajos did not speak to me for several days. He worked until midnight each evening completing the wood store, packing away the pieces that were to be seasoned, establishing patterns of size, hammering in a spiderweb of boards behind so that nothing could slip out and tension was maintained, all the while complaining to himself, removing, piece by piece, the shoddy work of the

prior idiot, deciding how it had happened, an unwilling detective of sorts, or a coroner, or perhaps in his mind, I figured, the one who would save us from that, the one who would keep us warm.

XXV.

The one thing they still make fun of me...

I bring a suit with me... shit. I don't know what the fuck I thinking about. When the boat was run aground they cut it up trying to find money.

Take the bus – No we go boat – go to land... Reason we live island. Then we rode a bus to the airport. One lady ask me to translate I say shit man I don't know English. Why me – I look nice – handsome – so I ask those guys in Vietnamese Ay anybody speak English – so this guy saves my ass. What I do otherwise. Hand signal?

Everybody say –Ay, I buy the book, I study English. Study in the refugee camp. –Couldn't they have lessons in the camp? – Man I don't go.

Only thing on my mind, drugs. And that's it. If drugs don't scare me nothing scare me. Day communists took over everyone run around and cry. I think I ok. I don't do anything wrong I just go look for drugs.

Reason, your characteristics – you can deal with the risks more than anything, you say hey, big deal. My brothers sisters they home boy home girl. My problem is I want the thrill. I am flexible. Whatever you guys do I can do. I make thing happen. If you can do dirty work I can do dirty work too.

I look at Dad and say he was born in the year of the cat. Because he is flexible maybe it helped him cope. He looks down and quietly says –That maybe true.

I met everyone at the camp. The guy I give my key to on my last day of work showed up at refugee camp 6 months later. That small boat. 25 people. The motor broke down. You know what he do? He put a sail on it. Technician.

After I get here I still make a risk, baby.

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