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Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies

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LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (LLIDS)

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EDITORS' NOTE

Deeksha Suri & Md. Faizan Moquim

Since 1980s, the novelty of "institutional study of narrative for its own sake," remains in opposition "to the examination of individual narratives, narrative features, or correspondences between them" (Kreiswirth 377–78) within Social Sciences and Natural Sciences: Walter R. Fisher in "Narration as a human communication paradigm: the case of public moral argument" (1984) points out the central role of narrative in Politics and of narrative analysis in Political Sciences (Czarniawska 3); Jerome Bruner in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986) develops a narrative mode of knowing and claims that stories are "especially viable instruments for social negotiation" (qtd. in Czarniawska 9); Donald E. Polkinghorne, in *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (1987), likewise extends the insights around narrative into the domain of Psychology by way of his focus on plot; Louis Mink, Frank Ankersmit, and Hayden White radically question the enterprise of historiography and problematize conventions of historical representation by way of narrative discourse. In making a clarion call to engage with narrative in sociological research, Laurel Richardson in "Narrative and sociology" (1990) states that "Narrative rejuvenates the 'sociological imagination' in the service of liberatory civic discourses and transformative social projects" (133); in the discipline of Economics, Deirdre McCloskey (1990) observed that "Economists are tellers of stories and makers of poems, and from recognizing this we can know better what economists do" (qtd. in Czarniawska 108). Within philosophy, Alasdair MacIntyre theorizes on how social life is a narrative in *After Virtue* (1981); Paul Ricœur's three-volume study *Time and Narrative* (1984–1988) ingeniously reinterprets Aristotle's insight into plot and brings out temporality to bear on the complexity of narrative rhythms of life; and Charles Taylor's *Sources of Self* (1989) argues that "we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a 'quest'" (52).

As apparent from the above broad strokes, a singularly decisive interest in the narrative as an object of study is a major signpost of the second half of twentieth-century thought in Humanities, Social Sciences as well as Natural Sciences, which continues to be a force to reckon with in the contemporary intellectual climate of twenty-first century. This remarkable interest marks a departure from previous forms of narrative inquiry, as it is not limited to specific genres—epic poetry, drama, the folktale, the novel or more generally fiction—within the bounds of literary studies. Marie-Laure Ryan observes that "It was the legacy of French structuralism [...] to have emancipated narrative from literature and from fiction, and to have recognised it as a semiotic phenomenon that transcends disciplines and media" (qtd. in Hyvärinen 72–3). The repertoire of narrative—as developed early in Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of Folktales* and followed by the structuralist discourse of 1950s and 60s—travels from discipline to discipline to transcend the boundaries of literary enclave that, in the words of Kreiswirth, is the "narrative's original disciplinary domicile" (378).

The transmission and proliferation of engagements with the "narrative," in almost all major disciplines of inquiry, is the recognition and foregrounding of a story "not just […] as story but with storied forms of knowledge" (Kreiswirth 380). This epistemic

engagement with "storied forms," account for four different turns with different agendas and attitudes: a) the turn in literary theory in the 1960s; b) the turn in historiography following literary narratology; c) the turn in Social Sciences from the 1980s onwards; and d) a more broadly cultural and societal turn to narration. (Hyvärinen 69). The theme of the current Issue, that is, life narratives, may well be understood in the context of the fourth turn.

The literature that we designate by the term life narratives is a protean one, resisting easy demarcations and distinctions. The issue of describing life narratives is succinctly captured in Margarette Jolly's words: "the hope of describing fully a subject of such celebrated ambiguity and disciplinary iconoclasm is certainly vain" (ix). Smith and Watson also express a similar concern in noting life narrative as a "moving target, a set of ever-shifting self-referential practices" (3). On one hand, such remarks sensitize about the complexity of the subject as well as provide a sort of caveat for any reductive take. On the other, however, they seem close to paralipsis, for they end up doing what they seek not to do.

There are a variety of competing terms to refer to writings about life, whether one's own or others, or both, for example, life writing (unhyphenated), life-writing,[1] autobiography (according to Smith and Watson "the most widely used and most generally understood term for life narrative" (3)), auto/biography studies,[2] and life narrative. The driving concern for the choice of terminology has been the question of inclusivity. Marlene Kadar[3] prefers life writing for this reason, so does Margarette Jolly.[4] Though Smith and Watson also follow the logic of inclusivity, they exclude biography from their assessment when they opt for the term, life narrative.[5] In their characterization, life writing is a general term for "writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject," whereas life narrative is taken to be a "somewhat narrower term that includes many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography" (3). We take a departure from Smith and Watson's view as we include biography under the generic term, life narrative. Following the rationale of inclusivity, we encompass many varieties of life stories within the category of life narratives, ranging from travel writing, autobiographical fiction, marginalia, graphic forms, writs, court proceedings, scientific writings, obituary, poetry, letters, illness narratives, visual arts, artifacts, testimony, films, oral history, digitally

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[1]Zachary Leader notes that term is usually traced to Virginia Woolf, who first used it in "A Sketch of the Past" (1939), "in connection with the difficulties and inadequacies of conventional biography, a word which itself literally means 'life-writing'" (1). See, in particular, the choice of term for the title of Leader's edited book, *On Life-Narrative*.

[2]See the journal *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*. Ricia Anne Chansky in the "General Introduction" to *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader* writes that the slashes in the title of the journal suggests that it would not privilege "self-life writing over life writing" (qtd. in Howes 3).

[3]"Life writing, put simply," Kadar writes, "is a less exclusive genre of personal kinds of writing that include *both* biography and autobiography, but also the less 'objective' or more 'personal' genres such as letters and diaries" (4).

[4]"The term "life writing" itself, recorded in the 18th century, and gaining wide academic acceptance since the 1980s, has been chosen for the title [*Encyclopedia of Life Writing*] because of its openness and inclusiveness across genre, and because it encompasses the writing of one's own or another's life" (ix).

[5]Smith and Watson note that they "opt for 'life narrative' as a similarly wide-ranging term for exploring diverse modes around the autobiographical, but one that signals the exclusion of biography from our investigations" (223).

mediated new forms of expression in social media to autobiography, biography, memoir, diary, and so on. Scholars include diverse forms of writing related to life in their respective choice of terminology, however, the accent on 'writing' in such formulations tend to be limited in scope in embracing modalities of expression in media other than writing. We contend that the framework and intellectual currency of 'narrative' is more encompassing and congenial in the fast-changing landscape of twenty-first century.

On the level of narrative structuring, life narrative portrays a hermeneutic of existential world by the narrating self of the experiencing self. The dynamics of these two selves is pivotal to understand the work of interpretation that goes in the making of life narratives. Paul Ricœur says, "A life is no more than a biological phenomenon as long as it has not been interpreted" (27). In other words, it can be said that the biological life acquires the character we call human life with/in the act of interpretation. Life narrative may be understood through a dual frame of archaeology and genealogy where both work in an interlocking way to the formation of subjectivity vis-à-vis discursive formations in society. The retrospective mode of life narratives uses the frame of archaeology to fashion and foreground the self through its trials and tribulations, eventful moments, and their traces on the shape of the author's life. In this sense, it can be seen as an archaeology of the experiencing self by the narrating self. However, the archaeological frame is not to be understood as a mere unearthing of the past experience from the point of present. Neither is it aimed at a discovery of the self or its essence. In fact, archaeology here is taken to be interpretive in nature, attempting to recollect autobiographical memory to imaginatively form an intelligible narrative through selective reconstruction.[6] Autobiographical memory, argues Antonio Damasio, is an "aggregate of dispositional records of who we have been physically and of who we have usually been behaviourally, along with records of who we plan to be in future" (qtd. in Eakin 127).

In the making of life narratives, which is to say making of a self, the dynamics of forgetting and remembering play a crucial role as what is remembered and what is forgotten shape the contours of self-identity. "Autobiographical memories that are consistent with the goals and values of our current working self are prioritized for remembering," write Sutton, Harris, and Barnier, "while memories that conflict with our working self are more likely to be forgotten" (215). The construction of the self by way of life narratives is in fundamental relation with autobiographical memory. In fact, Joseph Ledoux and Richard Brown view "the self as a set of autobiographical memories about who you are and what has happened to you in your life, and how you think, act, and feel in particular situations" (E2020). What is, therefore, involved here is the temporality of the auto/biographical subject—its sense of past, present as well as future. The memories of past experiences form an archive of the self but the narrative interpretation of that archive in view of the present and future goals configure what Ricœur calls narrative identity of the subject of life narrative.

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[6]Though not fully intelligible, fragments too lend themselves to contextual intelligibility and constitute a significant part of life narrative literature, for it draws attention to life stories that remain at margins and figure in fragment. Archaeology of fragments then may result in recovering such voices. See Marlene Kadar's take on fragment in the context of women's writing, Holocaust writings, and genre of samizdat in "Marlene Kadar interview with Sidonie Smith – May 15, 2017," *a/b: Auto/ Biography Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2018, pp. 523–531.

The genealogical frame accompanies the archaeological one. Genealogy in the Foucauldian sense of the term implies "history of the present" (qtd. in Kelly). Life narratives unequivocally employ the genealogical dimension in telling the history (story) of the self to mark and interpret how the subject comes to be constituted in a particular way in relation to historically contingent discursive formations of society. Such a frame is most readily recognizable in life narratives embodying resistance to various oppressive structures of power relations that seek to dominate and supress people. Charles E. Scott says genealogical knowledge can function as "'reversal of a relationship of forces,' appropriate a vocabulary, and turn it 'against those who had once used it'" (qtd. in Scott 167). In being subjective and individualistic, such narratives create, to use Foucault's phrase, 'counter-memory' to dominant versions of narrative. In doing so, it presents an alternate stance on past experiences with an employment of interpretive strategies that function to subvert and transvaluate "current values by the power of a new kind of knowledge that is formed by a genealogical approach to those values" (Scott 165).

Each paper under the themed section of this Issue, titled "Life Narratives: Prismatic World of the Author and Beyond," brings focus on a range of relevant thematics of life narrative. Abhilasha Sawlani teases out configurations of autobiographical memory that constitute nostalgia and project utopic imagination. The uncritical imaginary of the harmonious milieu in Sindhi partition narratives is problematized to argue how, in eliding underlying ruptures, 'fictions of memory' take hold in the face of dissatisfaction with temporal present and result in a desire for a utopia constructed on "the syncretic traces of the past." James Baumlin's contribution to the Issue returns us to fundamentals of life narrative by building on the insights of Jim W. Corder, a late-20th century pioneer in postmodernist life narrative, to indicate a model of creative nonfiction—his term for life narratives—that fosters a careful balance of honesty, intimacy, authenticity, and privacy, and aims for health and community as its highest values. Extending the idea of "ethic of care" as conceptualized by Martha Nussbaum and Nel Noddings to the domain of life narrative, the paper foregrounds a necessary space of empathy in reader-writer relationship. While these two papers incorporate the authors' personal narratives into their research by deploying the methodology of autoethnography, the next one bases its critical discussion on autobiographical texts. Summer Sutton takes issue with the prevailing culture of transparency in life narratives. Building on Judith Butler's framework of spectrality to read gestures of emotional unruliness as spectral testimony in the accounts of domestic abuse in American memoirs, the paper problematizes the assumption of home as a haven. It reads the question of domestic violence vis-à-vis state disciplinary technologies and shows how the latter is implicated in the former. Under the Special Submissions section, Sounak Das seeks to understand the nature of untranslatability as encountered in the praxis of translating a work of art. Towards this aim, the paper draws upon continental thinkers—Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricœur, and Deleuze—to argue that the notion of untranslatability as hinderance is a consequence of interpreting works of art from epistemological vantage point. Instead, it makes a case to interpret thingness by shifting to ontological understanding which allows us to engage with untranslatability as a horizon of becoming.

Enabling individuals to write and rewrite themselves in the act of writing is the characteristic feature of life writing and the intent behind introducing the theme of Life Writing in Volume 5 circles around understanding the negotiations between word and life as a constitutive practice of meaning making. The perspectives presented by authors of the first Issue of Volume 5 are well placed as well as go beyond the theme we proposed for engagement. Since the editorial process is fundamentally collaborative, we would like to thank our Authors, Peer Reviewers as well as Editorial Board Members for their contributions to this Issue.

With the publication of the first Issue of *LLIDS*'s volume 5, we wish all our contributors and readers a happy and safe New Year 2022.

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Sikk[1] for Sindh: A Study of Utopianism in Sindhi Hindu Narratives of Partition

Abhilasha Sawlani | Ashoka University
http://ellids.com/archives/2022/01/5.1-Sawlani.pdf

Abstract | Most narratives about the Partition of the Indian subcontinent frame the lost home/city/cultural milieu as an idealized model of syncretism. The frontier region of Sindh was a particularly fertile locus for the confluence of diverse cultures and religions. The resultant syncretism made it a particularly apt site for the projection of nostalgic and utopian fantasies. Bringing together historical accounts, literary analysis of short stories, along with interviews conducted within my own family, this autoethnographic study seeks to explore the utopian impulse within Sindhi narratives of the Partition of India. It looks into how the past is fabricated as an idealized space, obfuscating its dystopian aspects—the inequitable socio-economic structure and communal tensions that pre-existed Partition. Despite this selective, nostalgic reconstruction, it argues that the oppositional utopian impulse of these 'fictions of memory' lies in their visions of a world where proximity and coexistence were possible. Instead of offering realizable blueprints of a utopian past, these narratives signal the possibility of a society based on alternative, more amicable ways of negotiating religious difference. The underlying utopian impulse manifests in the desire that motivates nostalgic longing, emerging out of a chaotic and dystopian present which selectively reconstructs the past to mobilize its redemptive possibilities for syncretic, potentially utopian, future, social configurations.

Keywords | Partition of India, Sindhi Narratives, Sindhi Hindus, Pre-partition Nostalgia, Utopia, Syncretism, Sindh, Autoethnography, Personal Interviews

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[1]The Sindhi word "*sikk*" connotes both love and longing (usually for a place or person) (Kothari, "Pikchar with Rita" n.p.).

"Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, wherefrom came this Sindhi caste!"[2]—while growing up, I often heard this phrase repeated to me in school. Anxious to belong, to be legible to my peers in accordance with neatly defined categories, I sought to distance myself from the Sindhi identity. "We are like the Punjabis," I insisted, claiming a recognizable identity for my stateless community. And yet, my attempts towards comfortable categorization were constantly thwarted by my lived experience of a confusing Sindhiness—we worshipped Hindu deities alongside Jhulelal, Guru Nanak, and Sufi saints, and we constantly invoked 'Allah' in our speech.[3] It was much later that I became aware of the reasons for this uncategorizable identity, of my family's roots in Sindh. My grandparents' experience of Partition lay wrapped up in silence, an unwillingness to revisit the past juxtaposed with efforts towards assimilation in the mainstream Hindu fold—an attempt, much like mine, to conform to the neat categories of identity.

What was confusing to me then seems utopian now. The Hinduism practised by the Sindhis incorporates elements from diverse religions—this porosity renders the community uncategorizable but I have come to regard that as a virtue rather than a bane. The blurring of borders around one's identity appears to be a much desirable phenomenon in an increasingly bordered world governed by the politics of hate. The utopian element became further pronounced in my family's stories about Sindh that often resembled the idyllic pre-Partition scenes painted in literary narratives.[4]

This paper is an attempt towards understanding the utopianism inherent in nostalgic stories about pre-Partition Sindh—both familial and literary. It draws upon

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[2]"*Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Isaai, ye Sindhi jaat kahan se aayi*!" (Original in Hindi, all translations from Hindi and Sindhi by the author).

[3]Jhulelal is widely recognized as the Sindhi Hindu community God. The deity is a part of the Indus river cult and is also known as Uderolal (Ansari 48). Guru Nanak is the first guru in the Sikh religious lineage (Ramey 1). Sufism is, broadly speaking, a form of Islam which insists upon a spiritual path to devotion without any intermediation by the religious orthodoxy of mullahs (Muslim clergy) (Kothari, *The Burden* 27).

[4]Menka Shivdasani discusses depictions of Hindu-Muslim camaraderie in post-Partition Sindhi literature (n.p). In a similar vein, Motilal Jotwani writes of the "Sindhi angst" expressed in literature of the 1980s where writers bemoaned the partitioning of a people along religious lines. This angst is particularly heightened in the context of the region's Sufistic leanings where the principle of Unity of Being found echoes in the Vedantic notion of *advaita* and the Sufi philosophy of *tasawwuf* (164). The theme of lost friends and harmonious inter-community relations is also sketched in relation to autobiographies of writers like Hari Dilgir and Gobind Malhi (Jotwani 130). In her introduction to one of the few translations of Sindhi short stories in English, Rita Kothari writes, "The first generation writers […] re-enact Sindh as a pure and pristine nation, an ideal haven that they [the Hindu Sindhis of India] may not be able to visit, but which remains enshrined in memory as a pre-lapsarian heaven" (*Memories* v). More than the violence of dislocation, Sindhi writers highlight the violence attendant upon resettlement and forced assimilation in India, particularly given the absence of the cultural comforts of a state. For a discussion about the tendency to idealize the past in Partition fiction at large, see Bhalla 10–29.

theories of cultural memory, and critical reflections on nostalgia and utopian thought to interrogate why survivors of Partition, Sindhis in particular, idealize the past in their narratives and the significance of such idealizing practices. It begins by laying out the socio-cultural framework of the province before tracing the utopian contours of Sindhi Partition narratives. Following this, it problematizes these utopian images by discussing historical sources that foreground fractures in the purportedly syncretic culture. Finally, it locates the utopian potential of these stories in the desire that leads to their construction, a desire for a better world premised on principles of coexistence transcending religious differences.[5] Far from providing documentary evidence of a lost utopia, it argues that these stories offer visions of a world where proximity, if not complete harmony, could be realized.

The frontier province of Sindh, by virtue of being an entryway into the Indian subcontinent for several conquering armies, allowed for a confluence of diverse cultures.[6] By the time it was annexed by the British army led by Sir Charles Napier in 1843, the region had witnessed the influence of Buddhist, Iranian, Persian, Hindu, and Mughal dynasties. Consequently, it had come to be inhabited by a mixed population—a veritable country of immigrants which included Hindu Rajputs, Lohanas—who had emigrated from Punjab—and others who could trace their origins back to Kathiawar, Gujarat, and Rajasthan (Cheesman 34; Kothari, *The Burden* 23).[7] Most significant, however, was the lasting impression left by centuries of Muslim rule in the region, starting with the Arab Caliphate (represented by the famed conqueror, Muhammad Bin Qasim) to the Talpur Mirs who reigned until the British took control in 1843.

Boasting of several important ports on the Indus, the province was an integral link in a network of trade and communication, linking Central Asia, Northern India, Persian Gulf, and the Arabian world. Trading relations further brought cultures in proximity, thereby aiding the formation of porous identities. Persian and Arab traders settled in

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[5]In thus speaking of a utopian desire, this paper follows the line of thinking inaugurated by Ernst Bloch in *The Principle of Hope* where he argued for the existence of a utopian impulse in everyday forms of social expression. Ruth Levitas builds upon that approach to define utopias as not just descriptive blueprints of ideal societies but also as a "desire for a better way of living and of being" (4).

[6]The province of Sindh is located in the southeastern part of Pakistan, geographically and culturally contiguous with the Indian states of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Situated neither fully in the Indian subcontinent nor in Central Asia, this liminal region has been ruled by diverse empires. The region is well-known for being the site of the Indus Valley Civilization and the entry-point for Islam with the arrival of Muhammad Bin Qasim's forces in 711 BC. Prior to that, it witnessed Iranian influence under the rule of the Persian (Achaemenian) Empire (519–486 BC). This was followed by Greek invasion and Alexander the Great's conquest in 326 BC. Between 325 BC and 3rd century AD, the region came under the rule of Chandragupta Maurya, Emperor Ashoka, the Parthians, the Huns, the Scythians, and Kushans. This period was followed by Persian rule under the Sassanians who were ousted by the Rai Dynasty led by Buddhist rulers. The region came under the rule of Hindu Brahmans under Chach Brahman before the advent of Muslim rule under the Arabian Caliphate. From 988 AD to 1783, Sindh came under the rule of the Ghaznavids, Sumrahs, Sammahs, Arghuns, Turkhans, Mughals, and Kalhoras of Iranian lineage. The Sindhi Talpur Mirs who followed were ousted by the British in 1843 (Kothari, *Memories* 20–23; Panjwani xiii–xvi; Ramey 18–22; Thapan 13–14).

[7]In a similar vein, Sarah Ansari discusses the gradual transition of Sindhi society from nomadic pastoral to a settled agrarian economy. With the development of irrigation facilities on the Indus, the region invited new arrivals, consequently becoming "a kind of 'melting pot'" for Baluchi tribesmen as well as nomads from the Thar desert region (11–12).

different parts of Sindh in pursuit of their business interests, their contact with the local population often facilitating religious conversions (Thapan 16).

Two significant qualifications need to be made to the notion of conversion. Firstly, contrary to the dominant Hindutva narrative, the encounter between the two faiths in Sindh did not necessarily take the form of forced conversions or lead to centuries of persecution of Hindus under Muslim rule. Sufi missionaries of various persuasions, particularly the Ismailis, who arrived in Sindh between the tenth and fifteenth century, practiced a veiled form of missionary activity. Often disguising themselves as Hindu jogis or mystics, they established links with the existing religious beliefs of the local population. The resultant syncretic faith lay at the intersection of distinct religious and cultural idioms, with overlapping religious practices and holy figures who attracted veneration from both the communities[8] (Ansari 13–24; Bhatia 167–180; Khan 76–77; Thapan 16).

Secondly, the idea of conversion implies a wholesale movement from one religious identity to another, seldom taking account of the fact that "identities do not convert like currencies, translated fully" (Kothari, "Translation" 15). In addition, the idea of conversion also presupposes the existence of discrete and bordered religions as if they occupy separate grids on a bordered map. The lived practise of religion, particularly in zones of contact like Sindh, is defined by proximity and dialogue with other peoples, cultures, and faiths, giving rise to a hybrid, unbordered mode of life. The faith experiences of the two communities were not radically segregated and the boundaries between the two not as clearly defined as they are now. It would be erroneous, in this context, to employ contemporary, bordered definitions of religions to understand cultures formed under conditions of contact and consequently heterogenous (Ramey 1–10). The inhabitants of Sindh resided in "a third space, a zone of liminality where identities are simultaneously Hindu and Muslim, or perhaps neither in exclusive terms" (Kothari, "Being" 129).[9]

In other words, the differences between the two communities were not suppressed or erased (through forced conversions) but negotiated in a way that coexistence through the centuries became possible. It is this mode of relating with difference that Dipesh Chakrabarty terms "proximity" as opposed to "identity":

[8]For instance, the importance of the river Indus in the social and economic life of the province gave birth to the river cult of Zinda Pir (the Eternal Saint), worshipped as Jhulelal among the Sindhi Hindus and simultaneously associated with the Quranic patron-saint of mariners, Khwaja Khizr (see Bhatia 167–180). The figure of Jhulelal also carries iconographic associations with Guru Nanak, testifying to the influence of Sikhism among the Sindhis (see Ramey 105–124).
[9]There has been some scholarly debate about the appropriate terminology for the nature of religious confluence which existed in Sindh. Scholars like Anita Raina Thapan, Claude Markovits, and Sarah Ansari have preferred the term "syncretic" to indicate the blending of elements from Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism. On the other hand, it has been argued that such an idea of blending or amalgamation presupposes the existence of pure, originary forms of religions which then combine to form syncretic admixtures (T. Stewart 262). Such approaches are premised on the understanding that hybridity is the norm rather than the exception. I have chosen to retain the idea of syncretism, in its enlarged sense as the process of encounter between "zones of difference" (C. Stewart 53), which may be hybrid and heterogenous to begin with. People, religions, or languages do not encounter each other as pure entities, but only as entities that appear different at a given moment in time (52).

By *identity*, I mean a mode of relating to difference in which difference is either congealed or concealed. That is to say, either it is frozen, fixed, or it is erased by some claim of being identical or the same. By *proximity*, I mean the opposite mode, one of relating to difference in which (historical and contingent) difference is neither reified nor erased but negotiated. (140; emphasis in original)

The negotiation of difference in Sindh allowed the emergence of a society that was heterogeneous, a culture and religion not exclusively claimed by any group. It is this mode of coexistence that Asim Roy has termed "living together, even though separately" (20).

This contradicts the assertion put forward by several Sindhis today that the centuries of Muslim rule in Sindh necessarily entailed relentless persecution of Hindus through forced conversions and restrictions on practising their religion openly.[10] Religion, after all, did not carry the same political valence then as it does today and other markers of identity—ethnic, linguistic, regional were of greater importance (Boivin et al. 3). In addition, the narrative of persecution fails to explain how Hindu Amils had come to occupy important positions in the region's administration under various regimes or how the Bhaibands dominated the economic sphere (Kothari, *The Burden* 24–26; Markovits 43).[11] Indeed, the socio-economic framework of Sindh rested on a peculiar balance of power—while religious authority was commanded by the Muslim *waderos* and *pirs*, economic power remained vested in Hindu control.[12] Free from orthodox fears of pollution, the Hindus of Sindh could travel by sea and mix with other races to further their business interests. Free also of the Islamic prohibition on *riba* (charging interest), the traders of Sindh emerged as a powerful class of moneylenders and financiers (Kothari, *The Burden* 29–32). The higher literacy rates among Hindus also allowed the Amils to gain ascendancy in the Mughal court or the British administration. The Sindhi Hindus maintained a symbiotic relationship with the political leadership of the *pirs* and the *waderos*, thereby resulting in "a relationship in which conflict and hostility mingled easily with amity and a syncretic attitude to religion" (Markovits 45).

In contrast to these syncretic, unbordered identities, the two-nation theory that motivated the partition of the Indian subcontinent posited the notion of two distinct cultures with diametrically different interests. The borders of the new nation-states were consequently drawn along exclusively religious lines; the utopian promise of freedom that underlay the anti-colonial movement thus eventually culminated in the creation of what Anupama Mohan calls 'homotopias': "those visions of unified collectivity where

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[10]Jyoti Panjwani, for instance, in her translator's introduction to Popati Hiranandani's autobiography, refers to the period following Muhammad bin Qasim's conquest as one defined by unqualified hostility and persecution (iii). Interestingly, the origins of this narrative have been traced back to the British rhetoric for conquering Sindh—colonial travellers underscored the ostensibly deplorable conditions of Hindus under Muslim rule to hide their imperialist ambitions under a paternalistic cloak (Markovits 43).

[11]Bhaibands are an occupational group under the Lohana caste, primarily comprised of traders including *sahukars* (merchants) and *hatawara* (shopkeepers). Amils are also a part of the Lohana caste—the term initially referred to revenue officers but has broadly come to be associated with those involved in government service. Sindhworkies are another category of well-to-do Bhaiband traders; they emerged during the period of British rule and were involved in international trade in local art and craft objects (Thapan 14).

[12]The term *wadero* (literally meaning elder) refers to established landowners and village chief while *pirs* are Muslim holy men (Kothari, *The Burden* 30).

an aggressively homogenizing impulse operates and where unity is a form of collective gathering of one or two coordinates (race/language/religion) and the deliberate repudiation and exclusion of others" (9). In the context of Sindh, the movement from identities that were porous and non-sectarian towards more rigidly defined religious ones—the homotopian impulse, in other wordsmay be traced back to the activities of reform movements like the Arya Samaj that sought to 'purify' (through *shuddhi* ceremonies) what was perceived as a 'corrupt' brand of Hinduism in Sindh.[13]

In the post-colonial context, the two-nation theory eventually proved to be a self-fulfilling prophecy as communal difference became gradually ossified within the collective memory. Sindhi Hindus who were displaced to India in the wake of Partition refashioned their formerly syncretic selves to be accepted within the exclusionary confines of the homotopian nation-state; thus, cultural influences—sartorial, religious, and linguistic—from Islam and Sikhism, accreted over centuries of harmonious proximity, were deliberately erased or suppressed (Bhavnani 265; Kothari, *The Burden* 178–184).[14]

In contrast to this pragmatic assimilation and acceptance of the new, rather dystopian status-quo, literary narratives about the Partition were marked by an overwhelming sentiment of '*viraha*'[15] or nostalgic yearning for a utopian, pre-lapsarian Sindh. During conversations with my family, my great-grandmother's stories kept coming up—throughout her life in India, she kept longing to return to Sindh. Eventually, when she managed to return, she spent three months in her old city, visiting erstwhile

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[13]Reform movements among the Indian literati emerged in the nineteenth century, fuelled by western liberal education and nascent nationalist sentiments (Kothari, *The Burden* 51). The Arya Samaj was one such reformist organization established in 1875 by Swami Dayanand Saraswati. It aimed at reinstating the authority of the Vedas and removing all post-Vedic accretions in Hinduism. Under its founder, the Arya Samaj attacked idolatry, stood for widow remarriage, female education, and inter-caste marriages. Gradually, however, reformism turned into revivalism and cultural chauvinism; the focus shifted towards *shuddhi* (or purification) ceremonies, meant to bring converted Hindus and Dalits back into the Hindu fold. By the 1990s, the Arya Samaj became involved in cow-protection movement, motivated less by spiritualism and more by anti-Muslim passion (Bandyopadhyay 154–155). Visions of an unsullied, authentic Hindu culture, free of Islamic influence, that dominate contemporary Hindutva imagination are governed by a similar homotopian impulse.

In Sindh, the Amils in particular, given their proximity and identification with the Muslim rulers, were prone to religious conversion. In addition to this, the syncretic and porous Hinduism of the region also invited the revivalist attentions of the Arya Samaj. The Samajis also propagated the use of Devanagri instead of the Perso-Arabic script and supported the study of Hindi and Sanskrit instead of Persian (Kothari, *The Burden* 56). The activities of the Arya Samaj are known to have caused the Larkana riots of March 1928 when some members of the movement attempted to forcefully reconvert a woman who had been married for several years and had many children (62). One of the consequences of the revivalist impulses of the nineteenth century was the consolidation of religious identities—Markovits notes that the Lohanas of Shikarpur and Hyderabad who had identified as Sikh in the 1881 census confirmed their Hindu identity in the 1891 census (48).

[14]Steven Ramey notes the continued centrality of certain Sikh (and Sufi practices) among the Sindhi Hindus in India. They continue to visit *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples) and accord importance to the Sikh holy book, Guru Granth Sahib, particularly on special occasions (159). However, following the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, the association with Sikh devotional practices has either been played down, or framed within the ambit of Hinduism (55). Other traces of syncretism also remain—the popular Sindhi song "Dumadum mast Qalandar" carries references to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, a Sufi saint also known among the Hindus as Raja Bhartrhari (Boivin 37).

[15]*Viraha* refers to the sentiment of love-in-separation as discussed by Sangari (2011).

friends and neighbours, being warmly received by them and often endowed with material gifts: "Some gifted her gold, some chickens, some dates and others clothing"[16] (Interview with Shanti Devi Sawlani). She would call her daughters and tell them about her experience: "It's good here, everyone meets me, recognizes me, everyone gives me love."[17] Longing and affection cohere in that Sindhi word "*sikk*," testifying to the continuity of cross-religious affective bonds.

My grand-aunt followed in her mother's footsteps and visited Sindh with my grand-uncle some years ago, visiting their childhood homes now occupied by strangers who welcomed them with great warmth. Her memories of return were filtered through a nostalgic lens evident in her description of the large size of the lost home suggesting that the past was a site of plenitude and prosperity. Reflecting upon the gracious hospitality extended to her, she said, "You get great respect and honour there, in Pakistan."[18] Surprisingly, she extended her affectionate approval to include the nation-state ("Pakistan") rather than the region alone, suggesting the implicitly felt need to oppose the essentializing and divisive rhetoric that categorically denounces the "enemy" nation. Her positive appraisal of Pakistani hospitality was particularly significant given the presence of my father and uncles during the conversation. Being staunch supporters of the BJP and its anti-Muslim rhetoric, they expected her to confirm the stereotypes about the degenerate and inhospitable Pakistanis that Indian media relentlessly propagates, and they complacently believe. Clearly, her utopian account, far from being nostalgic sentimentalism, was responding to current political discourses.

Back in Sindh, the current residents acknowledged their affective claims upon the home, insisting that they hadn't made any changes to the property that belonged to its former owners: "This is their property, we have not made any changes."[19] (Interview with Shanti Devi Sawlani) To a sceptical ear, the sentiment might appear to be an exaggeration, a performance; however, one could read in this encounter the emergence of a utopian ethics of hospitality that allows a stranger to make equal claims upon a home, blurring the native/alien distinction emerging out of a homotopian ensemble. In the words of Priya Kumar, "if hospitality has to do with the ethical claims that the stranger has on us, then, there must be room for the stranger to lay claim to the very home from which s/he has been excluded or rendered indeterminate" (103). Kumar seems to be arguing for an ethics based on proximity where the difference between the native and the stranger, the guest and the host is not erased, yet co-existence in the same home remains possible. This ethical relation of proximity necessitates the opening of the home to the other, without erasing the other's difference. It demands that we relinquish claims of exclusive ownership—a demand that runs counter to the logic of the two-nation theory.

Laying claim to her memories of the lost home, my grand-aunt insisted that nothing had changed in the landscape. My grand-uncle, now paralysed, gestured his disagreement through a dismissive groan and hand wave. Things must have changed surely, no matter how much the returnee wishes for sameness, for an unbroken continuity.

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[16]"*Kathon son milyus, kadon murgiyun milyas, kadon khakhan milyas, kadon waga milyas*" (All original quotes from personal interviews are in Sindhi, unless otherwise specified, and have been translated by the author).

[17]"*Sutho aahe, sab milin ta, sunyadin ta, sikk din ta*."

[18]"*Hutte ijjat maan dadho aa, Pakistan me*."

[19]"*He huninji jaye aa, asaan kuch kon karayo aa*."

This interplay between sameness and difference is staged in Gordhan Bharti's "Familiar Strangers" (91–106), a fictional narrative of return.[20] The story recounts a Hindu *deewan*'s[21] temporary visit to his lost village generating a constant tension between the remembered past and the encountered present. The space of the village is viewed as a palimpsest by the returnee who perceives each locale in juxtaposition with the remembered image. "The world is beyond recognition," the *deewan* muses, simultaneously feeling a sense of belonging and alienation, homeliness and estrangement, familiarity and unfamiliarity. This sense of unsettlement is consequent upon the destabilization of social relations that had earlier allowed somewhat stable relations of proximity between the two communities.

Pakistan, envisioned as the sacred utopian abode for the Muslims of the subcontinent, is described in dystopian terms as the *deewan* witnesses the misery of emaciated villagers struggling in a destabilized economy. The displacement of the Hindus, the predominant merchant class in Sindh, rendered people like the tonga-drivers and the labourers unemployed. The descriptions of empty huts, dried down rivers, decrepit mosques, and blood-smeared carcasses of fish being pecked at by crows in the village fish market further testify to the failure of the utopian promise. In contrast, the *deewan*'s nostalgic memories—of village children playing in the river, feasting on stolen mangoes and *pharwas* from the garden, participating in village *prabhat pheris*[22]—are described in sepia-tinted, idyllic terms.

Most significantly, however, the *deewan* perceives the immensity of change in inter-religious relationships—the figure of the genial porter is replaced with the hostile *muhajir*[23] officer who harasses him; when visiting his home that he had left under the Shah sahib'-s charge, hopeful of return, he perceives the invitation lacking in force, the hospitality diminished. His childhood memory of staging a mock inter-religious wedding contrasts starkly with the sharpened communal prejudice of the present. The memory of lost plenitude and harmony hold out the possibility of something better, of a world where "that innocent wedding did not bring any harm to the Hindu religion nor did it endanger the Islamic faith" (100). The difference between the two communities, in other words, had not yet 'congealed,' and proximity—the negotiation of difference to ensure coexistence—was still a possibility.

The experience of being warmly welcomed at the village marketplace while listening to the fakir sing Shah Abdul Latif's couplets rekindles the *deewan*'s sense of hope—"some remnants do exist, everything has not been destroyed" (102). As he announces his decision to return, the Shah's response offers another glimpse of a utopian

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[20]All references to short stories are taken from Kothari, Rita, editor. *Unbordered Memories*. Penguin, 2009.
[21]The word *deewan* is used to refer to an administrative official usually responsible for revenue matters (Kapoor, n.p.).
[22]*Pharwas* are purple berry-shaped fruits. *Prabhat pheris* are early morning processions in which a group of people move around while singing religious songs and playing instruments (Kapoor, n.p.).
[23]The Urdu word Muhajir refers to those who perform *hijrat* (migration) due to religious persecution. Originally used to describe the Muslims who, along with Prophet Mohammad, migrated from Mecca to Medina, it came to signify the Muslims who sought refuge in the newly-established state of Pakistan. The religious connotation of the word initially worked to imbue a sense of religious duty amongst the host population to welcome the refugees. However, "muhajir" increasingly turned into a derogatory referent for refugees tainted with an Indian past before being reclaimed as a politicized ethnic identity (Kumar and Kothari 781–82).

ethics of hospitality: "This is your village. Your home, your belongings, everything is intact" (105). At the threshold of the village, as the puppy he had left behind refuses to accompany him across the border, the *deewan* experiences renewed despair about the impossibility of return: "He felt that the street underneath his feet was unfamiliar, the field unknown, the village facing him was also not his own" (106). The story seems to suggest that the lost home is the *u-topos* or the no-place of the refugee's imagination, irrevocably lost and sustainable only in the fabrications of memory.

The *deewan's* nostalgia for a utopian Sindh is constantly undercut by the experience of hostility and unfamiliarity. Nostalgia, after all, is the yearning for "a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (Boym "Introduction"). Return (*nostos*) to the lost homeland, the locus of nostalgic longing (*algia*), is impossible; indeed, the remembered utopian past is itself a fabrication, shaped by the needs of the present, a product of the refugee's desire for rootedness and stability in alien, inhospitable conditions of displacement. Nostalgia is, much like utopian thought, "a romance with one's own fantasy" (Boym "Introduction").

Indeed, these idyllic descriptions of the lost homeland appear fantastical, for they often elide socio-cultural tensions that interrupted the syncretic fabric of pre-Partition society. While the revivalist activities of Arya Samaj and the divisive politics of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)[24] in the province were consolidating hardened religious identities, the communal tensions were further fuelled by British policies that ended up reinforcing the economic disparities in the region. The new education policy, focussed on urban centers like Karachi, inevitably favoured upper caste Hindus who constituted the bulk of the urban population. As indigenous schools like the madrasas that catered to the rural Muslims suffered from lack of funds, the literacy rates among the community went down. Their poor representation in government positions further fuelled resentment along communal lines (Kothari, *The Burden* 37–42).[25]

In the increasingly communalized pre-Partition world, tensions were further exacerbated by the decades of pent-up resentment against the exploitative Hindu *vaanyas*.[26] These usurious moneylenders, predominantly Hindu, kept the largely illiterate

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[24]The RSS is an extremist, right-wing, Hindu nationalist organization formed in 1925. Known for its anti-Muslim ideology, the RSS imparted paramilitary training to Hindu youth to arm them against perceived fears of "Muslim aggression." Banned three times since its inception, the RSS is known for its exclusionary and divisive ideology and has been involved in several incidents of communal rioting in India (Bandhyopadhyay 452).

[25]The communalization of the province was further aided by the increased role of the RSS in the province which trained young Sindhi recruits in self-defense and played upon Hindu fears of minoritization in a Muslim majority province (Kothari, *The Burden* 66–90). Such fears were also responsible for the Hindus leaders' withdrawal of support for the demand for Sindh's separation from the Bombay Presidency. While they had earlier supported the movement for a separate Sindhi province, the Larkana riots (see footnote 12) and the backlash against Hindus convinced the leaders that they would be oppressed in a Muslim majority province. Three years after the secession of Sindh from the Bombay Presidency, riots broke out in Sukkur over a group of buildings that the Muslims claimed had been a mosque. The Hindus feared that, if the Muslims were granted possession of the buildings, it would restrict their access to a sacred site not far away (Albinia "River Saints"; Bhavnani "Prologue"). Known as the Masjid Manzilgah episode, this incident marked another milestone in the souring of Hindu-Muslim relations in Sindh.

[26]The term *vaanya* referred to moneylenders in Sindh. Usually Hindu, they were known to charge exorbitant rates of interest. This adversely affected the *haaris* who were land-tillers, usually Muslims or Dalits (Cheesman 447; Kothari, *The Burden* 42–46).

waderos caught in a vicious cycle of debt by charging immensely high rates of interest. As the British introduced a mandatory tax on land, the *waderos* increasingly resorted to the moneylenders. Merely concerned with maintaining their prestige and social status, they left the management of their estates and the financial matters of cultivation and revenue assessment to the *vaanyas* to whom they were indebted. The *vaanyas,* on the other hand, counted upon the prestige of the *waderos* to command the obedience of the *haaris*,[27] mostly Muslim or Dalit (Cheesman 447; Kothari, *The Burden* 42–46). While the *waderos* and the *vaanyas* benefitted from their symbiotic relationship, it was the *haaris* who suffered exploitation. In the Muslim League's narrative of the exploitation of rural peasantry, the Hindu *vaanya* was villainized and the *wadero* absolved (Kothari, *The Burden* 45). Be that as it may, it is clear that while Hindu-Muslim relations in pre-Partition Sindh were marked by relations of proximity (with the political clout of one balancing the economic prowess of the other allowing for coexistence), the poor and socially destitute remained outside the ambit of this proximity.

In the context of this exploitative *wadero-vaanya-haari* relationship, the utopian space depicted in nostalgic Sindhi Partition narratives appears to be a fictional construction. This fictionality becomes further apparent in the anti-Muslim sentiment pervading the Sindhi Hindu consciousness today. Interrupting my grandmother's idyllic portrayal of inter-religious bonds in Sindh, my father and uncles rehearsed some well-worn stereotypes about the purportedly unhygienic nature of Muslims, their rumoured tradition of spitting into food. "The damned Muslims never change,"[28] they commented, their Islamophobia puncturing my grandmother's utopian memory of inter-religious harmony in Sindh.[29] That utopian image is further undercut in historical narratives recording the prevalence of the practice of untouchability in Hindu-Muslim relations in pre-Partition Sindh. In *The Burden of Refuge,* Rita Kothari writes of the Hindu practice of not accepting cooked food from Muslims. At railway stations and other public places too, she notes, vendors could be heard hawking Hindu and Muslim water (28).[30]

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[27]The Hindi word *haari* signifies a land-tiller (Kapoor n.p).

[28]"*Mussalman toh sale Mussalman hi rahenge*" (Original in Hindi).

[29]The conflict in their social visions might be attributed to generational difference. Indeed, scholars have noted the absence of anti-Muslim sentiment in the migrant generation as opposed to their more fundamentalist descendants. However, any generalizations would be untenable given the complex differences in experiences of pre-Partition cohabitation and subsequent dislocation. For instance, Sindhi Hindus affiliated to the RSS in Sindh have veered towards Hindu fundamentalism in the post-Partition context and transmitted their Islamophobic ideology to the succeeding generations (Kothari, *The Burden* 189; Bhavnani 264). At the same time, others have managed to retain and transmit their Sufi worldview. In addition, some writers of the second-generation, particularly those with leftist leanings, have begun questioning the Islamophobia of the migrant generation by excavating stories of syncretism, thereby undercutting the dominant narrative of a timeless Hindu-Muslim animosity (see Panjabi 22). For an incisive discussion on the complexity of generational responses to Partition and communal conflict, see Greenberg 261–62.

[30]Despite scholarly suggestions that Sindhi society was free of the caste system and the practise of untouchability (Anand 9–10; Markovits 48; Thapan 13), recent work indicates the exaggerated nature of these claims. For an incisive ethnographic study of Dalit communities in Sindh, see Rita Kothari's *Memories and Movements.* Yoginder Sikand's travelogue about his journey to Pakistan also includes encounters with communities such as the Gurgulas in Sindh who have been treated as untouchables by caste Hindus and Muslims alike ("Southwards, to Sindh").

The friction between communities can also be noticed on an economic level. When describing their erstwhile prosperity in Sindh, the youngest of my grand-uncles told me how his father (my great-grandfather) was a farmer as well as a *halwai*[31] in Sindh—"We were quite well off in Sindh […] we were farmers […] we didn't live in the city […] but we were prosperous […] farming used to happen in its place, we were also confectioners"[32] (Interview with Omprakash Sawlani). Having read about the socio-economic framework of the region, I was surprised to hear that the two professions—the Bhaiband trader and the *haari*—could coexist. Perceiving my incredulity, he qualified his statement, saying that they were landholders. In light of the foregoing discussion about the *wadero-vaanya* nexus, his utopian description of pre-Partition life must be regarded with scepticism. In addition, the passive construction of the phrase "*farming used to happen*" serves to erase the presence of the *haari*, the land-tiller, a position occupied predominantly by the Muslim population. A similar impulse towards erasure fuelled the disenchantment among the *haaris* in the period immediately preceding Partition.[33] In his autobiography, Gobind Malhi records his conversation with a *haari*, "Landlord, change the sharecropping system. Not 50–50 anymore; we will take two-thirds, one-third for you. Now your security lies in our hands" (qtd. in Bhavnani "Alienated at Home").

The nostalgic and utopian perspective of Partition narratives seems to be complicit in a similar erasure of the economically underprivileged; the depiction of the *zamindaar-haari*[34] relationship often focusses on the benevolence of the Hindu landowner and the subservience of the Muslim tiller, failing to capture the disenchantment invariably engendered in a relationship of feudal exploitation. Narayan Bharti's "The Document" (112–16) presents a Sindhi Hindu, Manghanmal, in a refugee camp in India, rifling through property documents to claim compensation for his lands and constructed property left behind in Sindh. "One, two, three houses – the documents unfolded," testifying to his economic status as a wealthy landowner in pre-Partition Sindh (112). In stark contrast appears the situation of Rasool Baksh, a Muslim *haari* working in Manghanmal's fields, driven to a situation of economic deprivation—he is indebted to Manghanmal, his wife's jewellery is mortgaged with another *vaanya*, and in this penury, he approaches the zamindar for money to procure some seeds. The exchange that follows merits quoting at some length:

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[31]Loosely translated, the word *halwai* refers to a confectioner, more particularly, the owner of a sweets-shop (Kapoor n.p.).

[32]"*Sindh me bohot badhiya the* […] *kisan the* […] *sheher me nahi rehte the* […] *par sampann the* […] *kheti hoti rehti thi apni jagah, saath me halwai the*" (Original in Hindi).

[33]The Zamindari system, introduced under the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent, was a system of agrarian relations with complex internal differentiation. The zamindars or landlords were a part of the nobility or ruling class under the Mughals. They were responsible for revenue collection for lands that were given to them as *jagirs* (feudal land grants). Under the British, they were made proprietors and a fixed land revenue was imposed on the lands they controlled. Different systems were introduced, determining the nature of land ownership and the method for revenue assessment and collection. These included the Permanent Settlement introduced in Bengal and the Ryotwari Settlement followed in Madras and Bombay. During the first century of British rule, there were uprisings led by peasants and cultivators who suffered under the burden of excessive land revenue. For a detailed discussion of the Zamindari system under different regimes, see Bandyopadhyay 7–10; 159–62.

[34]The Hindi word *zamindaar* refers to a landlord (Kapoor n.p).

Sternly, Manghanmal reminded him, 'Miyan, you already owe me almost two hundred rupees, which you have yet not returned. You want more? I don't run a charity house here. It is futile asking me, I suggest you go to somebody else.'

[…]

Rasool Baksh, who was sitting on the threshold, took off his head-cloth, placed it at Manghanmal's feet and said, 'Bhautaar, please oblige me this time. I will do whatever you ask me to do.' (114)

The asymmetrical power relations are evident in Manghanmal's crude response and Rasool Baksh's status as an outsider allowed only at the threshold and his gesture of humility and subservience. Repeating the rhetoric of religious harmony, Manghanmal says, "Yaar, you have tilled for us and made our ancestral land fertile. You have a right to come to us, where else would you go? After all, we also share bonds of love and affection" (115). The assertion of love, however, appears merely rhetorical especially when one considers Manghanmal's nearly insidious act of having Rasool Baksh write over his house to him in exchange for a paltry sum of money.

In a moment of benevolence, reminded of Rasool Baksh's unflinching loyalty even amidst the crisis of Partition, Manghanmal decides against submitting his claim for the house lest Rasool Baksh be rendered homeless. Despite the story's overt message of religious harmony, one perceives the fissures in the purported syncretic framework. While the site of the home in "Familiar Strangers" presented the possibility of a relationship of proximity between the host and the guest, of coexistence between the native and the stranger, here the threshold of ownership and belonging is more clearly defined. The Hindu *vaanya* retains proprietary claims over the home while the life of the Muslim *haari* remains contingent on his idiosyncratic benevolence and largesse.

The idea of a utopian, egalitarian society gets further undercut when one considers the class divisions operating even within the Sindhi Hindu community. The experience of migration and resettlement was highly mediated by one's class status, depending upon the available financial as well as cultural capital. Among the Sindhworki and Bhaiband groups, existence of prior trade contacts in India and abroad comparatively eased the process of rehabilitation. The Amils who occupied administrative positions in Sindh, managed to utilize their literacy and political connections to their advantage upon relocation. The years of rehabilitation saw the emergence of new hierarchies—those languishing in refugee camps being looked down upon by those who had managed to move beyond it (Kothari, *The Burden* 189).[35] Even the experience of assimilation upon migration was not uniform; Amils and upper-class Bhaibands who moved to urban locales did not experience the same stigmatization as the ones who resided in camps (184–186).

In Bharti's narrative, Manghanmal's social status is evident in his ability to navigate state bureaucracy and file property claims. The availability of property

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[35]A telling illustration of these new hierarchies can be found in Meira Chand's *House of the Sun* (1989). In the novel, the inhabitants of Sadhbela Housing society are all Sindhi refugees; however, the ones who prosper reside in spacious, front-facing apartments while the impoverished occupy cramped, dimly lit and decrepit spaces at the back of the building.

documents hints towards a migration journey characterized by a relative ease. For those who could not plan their departure, unlike the wealthy and the prescient, such documents were hard to come by and it would have been more difficult to negotiate a state circular so impersonally worded as the one Manghanmal receives: "You are expected to remain present on such and such date at 11 a.m. in Camp 2 office. Please be there on time and bring with you all documents and evidential proofs with copies. In case of your absence, a unilateral decision shall be taken" (112).

Furthermore, those with well-established connections in metropolitan cities in India managed to rebuild their class status; those lower in the social hierarchy languished in refugee camps, dependent upon the government's largesse. Unaware of this varying potential for resettlement, the youngest of my grand-uncles, born in India, recounts complaining to his father about his poor choice of location for resettlement: "Why didn't you settle down in a metropolitan city? If you had to find work, you should have done so in Bombay itself"[36] (Interview with Omprakash Sawlani). My grandfather, who was nine years old at the time of Partition, paints a more realistic picture. He recounts boarding a steamer from Karachi port after having spent three days on the footpath (Interview with Hargundas Sawlani). His initial few years in India were spent moving from one refugee camp to another—from Bombay to Dund to Katni—until their search for livelihood brought them to what later became the Sindhi quarter in Raebareli. Having switched several businesses over the years, the family's efforts have been geared towards escaping the cramped environs of the erstwhile camp, a marker of their refugee status. The presence and persistence of these class differences, often evident in the friction between different groups—*Amil* (administrator) or *Bhaiband* (trader), *Shehri* (urban) or *Gothana* (village)—further complicates the utopian image of harmony constructed in nostalgic Partition narratives.

In light of these competing interpretations of the idealizing impulse in Partition narratives, it might be more fruitful to consider such narratives as "fictions of memory" (Neumann 334). They are fictional to the extent that they selectively represent the past, eliding its unsavoury aspects. According to Neumann,

> [T]he term 'fictions of memory' refers to the stories that individuals or cultures tell about their past to answer the question "who am I?" or collectively, "who are we?" These stories can also be called 'fictions of memory' because, more often than not, they turn out to be an imaginative (re)construction of the past in response to current needs. (334)

In other words, far from revealing any ontological truths about the past, fictions of memory reveal how people construct and represent their identity; this construction is premised on desires rooted in the present, often emerging out of dissatisfaction with current realities. The utopian impulse lies not simply in any perfect world located in the past, but in the desire for a better, alternative world. Having experienced the life of a refugee and the economic privations that entailed, my grand-aunt romanticized the plenitude of life before Partition. Surrounded by her Islamophobic sons and nephews, she presented an idealized vision of Pakistani hospitality. The *deewan* in "Familiar

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[36]"*Kisi metropolitan city me hi kyun nahi settle ho gaye? Jab kaam hi dhundna tha to Bombay me dhundte*" (Original in Hindi).

Strangers" evaluates the dystopian present—the crumbling economy, the hostility of the *muhajir*—in light of the remembered plenitude and syncretism.

The constant interplay between memory and reality foregrounds the incongruence between the past and the present, further fuelling the dissatisfaction with a dystopian present. The act of imagining a utopian past might be premised on an erasure of its dystopian elements; however its political valence lies in the desire that motivates the utopian imagination, the desire for an unbordered self in an increasingly bordered world. To yearn for an idealized land, people, and cultural ethos located within the "enemy" nation is to critique the institution of borders. Nostalgia and utopian desire thus become intertwined in an "oppositional cultural practice" (Moylan 11), offering resistance to the hegemonic narrative that frames Hindus and Muslims, Indians and Pakistanis as eternally locked in a relationship of animosity. According to Tom Moylan, the task of such oppositional utopian texts is to negate the present, to hold forth the possibility of a society based on alternative, non-hierarchical values of equality (26). Instead of realizable blueprints of a perfect world, what these Partition narratives offer are amicable, alternative ways of living with religious difference.

In *The Principle of Hope,* Ernst Bloch associates this oppositional practice with the principle of *anagnorisis* or recognition—"the power of the past resides in its complicated relationship of similarity/dissimilarity to the present. The tension thus created helps mould the new. The experience is therefore creatively shocking" (Bloch qtd. in Geoghegan 58). In "Familiar Strangers," for instance, the transformative, utopian potential of *anagnorisis* is evident in the *deewan*'s realization of the absurdity of borders, his critique of the exclusionary logic of nation-states dividing a shared culture. "This is really strange, we have the same music as them, the same poetry which Bachayo fakir sings here, Kalu *bhagat* sings over there. Shah, Sachal, Sami belong to them, and also to us.[37] How did they escape Partition?" (104).

More significantly, the memory of former co-existence, metaphorically represented in the easy proximity between the village temple and mosque now separated by a barrier, arrests his movement towards communal hatred. "On seeing a mosque razed to ground during the riots in Ajmer, he had not felt an iota of remorse. But now, something snapped inside him when he saw his village mosque damaged" (96). The memory of the erstwhile harmonious proximity between the village temple and the mosque reflects another aspect of the past that becomes utopian particularly in light of the hardened communal sentiments that dominated the postcolonial moment. The past holds forth the possibility of co-existence that is perceived as impossible with the increasing ghettoization of the Muslim community and the periodically erupting incidents of communal violence.[38] While they might not provide perfect, realizable

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[37]Shah Abdul Latif is the iconic seventeenth century Sindhi Sufi poet-saint, known for his poetic compendium, *Risalo.* Sachal Sarmat was also a Sufi poet from eighteenth century Sindh. Sami was a Sindhi poet from the eighteenth century, known for fusing Vedic and Sufi wisdom in his poetry. The three figures are often cited as an illustration of Sindh's syncretic ethos (see Motilal Jotwani's *Sufis of Sindh).*
Fakirs are itinerant religious ascetics who survive on alms. *Bhagats* are folk singers from Sindh (Kothari, *Unbordered* n.p.).
[38]See *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalization*, edited by Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot, Hurst & Company, 2012. The essays in this edited volume focus on spatial segregation in ostensibly cosmopolitan, urban locales of India. Nazima Parveen's *Contested Homelands: Politics of Space*

blueprints for a utopian future, the utopian impulse of these narratives lies in their nostalgic visions of a world where proximity, if not complete harmony, was possible.[39]

The baton of storytelling has been passed on. Increasingly, second and third generation writers revisit their ancestral homes across the border, either physically or through their inherited memories.[40] They tend to be more critical, their vision not as veiled in sentimentalism. They notice the differences, the hostility, the caste hierarchies—the dystopian side of the utopias that their parents and grandparents had constructed. Their reaffirmation of Sindhi syncretism is more conscious of its limitations. Their utopian dreams are more egalitarian, though still fictional. Yet they continue to value the utopian impulse of visions of coexistence evoked by memories and narratives about the past.

"From here on, you keep writing the story,"[41] the youngest of my grand-uncles said to me. So when I hear Islamophobic or casteist sentiments uttered by my parents or cousins, I will repeat to them the stories of my great-grandmother and my grand-aunt's return to Sindh—a story of *sikk,* of friendships and affection sustained across borders, of lives lived in amicable proximity. It will still be a "fiction of memory," but nonetheless capable of speaking back to official history and a regime dedicated to creating a bordered and segregated world. After all, nostalgic utopianism has its merits; it allows us to reaffirm the possibility of residing in proximity, of living together with difference.

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and Identity, Bloomsbury, 2021 offers a more historically grounded account of the communalization of spaces in Delhi. Priya Kumar's essay "Beyond Tolerance and Hospitality" also offers an incisive analysis of the discursive production of Muslims as outsiders and aliens within the space of the nation.

[39]Indeed, apart from a few scattered incidents, Sindh remained largely free of communal violence; what motivated the displacement of the Hindu community was the psychological fear of being persecuted as minorities in an Islamic nation. Scholars like Subhadra Anand, Vazira Zamindar, and Rita Kothari attribute this psychological violence and the growing atmosphere of panic to the arrival of scores of Muslim refugees (or *muhajirs*) from riot-torn areas in India. These refugees carried harrowing tales of violence, which when circulated through newspapers or word of mouth, sparked fear of retributive violence (Zamindar 54). Additionally, the seeds of distrust were sown in regional politics dominated by the Muslim League which introduced policies skewed to favour the Muslim population (Anand 22–60; Kothari, *The Burden* 101–103). Most of these accounts locate the source of the fear in "outsiders" who arrived in the province rather than the Sindhi Muslims, who continued to observe amicable relations with the Hindu population. Any internal conflict, as Kothari notes, was owing to resentments fuelled by long-standing socio-economic disparities between the two communities.

[40]See Kavita Panjabi's *Old Maps and New*; Saaz Aggarwal's *Sindh: Stories from a Vanished Homeland*; Yoginder Sikand's *Beyond the Border.*

[41]"*Ab iske baad ki story tum likhti jao*" (Original in Hindi).

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Life-Writing in an Age of Postmodernism: A Corderian Rhetoric of Creative Nonfiction

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http://ellids.com/archives/2022/01/5.1-Baumlin.pdf

Abstract | In the lifeworld that we experience from within and share with others, there are some things that we don't know, some things that we can't know, some things that we don't need to know, and some things that we don't want to know (or, perhaps, to admit). Parsing these differences marks the delicate artistry of creative nonfiction (CNF). Whereas fiction (as figured in the contemporary novel) has less need to censor its depictions of character, creative nonfiction must balance honesty (toward one's subject) with authenticity (toward oneself), intimacy (toward one's reader), and privacy (toward details of one's lifeworld). Embracing an "ethic of care" (Nussbaum; Noddings) aids the CNF author in balancing these competing claims: It is not "the Truth," but health and community, that contemporary CNF seeks in its narrative artistry. For a model of successful CNF, this paper turns to Jim W. Corder, a late-20th century pioneer in postmodernist life-writing. Fusing Corderian rhetoric with an ethic of care, this essay ends with a series of aphorisms supportive of Corderian practice. Along the way, it makes use of Corder's own scholarly habit of autoethnography—that is, of incorporating personal narrative within cultural/textual analysis.

Keywords | Creative Nonfiction (CNF), Consciousness, Lifeworld, Intimacy, Ethic of Care, Jim W. Corder, Corderian Rhetoric, Postmodernism, Narrative, Autoethnography

Storytelling before CNF

> [W]e make the fictions that are our lives.
> > —Jim W. Corder, "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love" (17)

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant.
> > —Emily Dickinson

> "Things were simpler back then."
> > —My uncle

Is there anyone whose uncle (or aunt, or grandparent) *didn't* say something like that last epigraph, above? Let's say that the world longed for, the "back then" of my uncle's nostalgic dreaming, follows World War II: 1955, let's call the year. For me, that would mean crawling back into the womb, for that's the year I was born. By my sixth or seventh year, television had taught me that the Nazis had been defeated; the discourse of American democracy had carried the day. I had heard of communism, which was telling a different story about the world than our own. But surely it, like fascism, would burn up in the crucible of Truth: That's what my parents, teachers, movies, television, and popular culture generally were teaching me, and no "real American" would hold otherwise. People's opinions might differ over details, but Truth itself was the final arbiter and Truth had its authorities—political, religious, social, intellectual—to police and protect it.

Back then, my uncle owned a restaurant in central New Jersey. He had been a cook in the army, so his military skills were put to use. He would have told you that the Truth of his world was American, Catholic, self-employed, married, middle class. And he loved telling stories about his life growing up near the railroad tracks in his hometown of Perth Amboy, across from the NYC borough of Staten Island in Raritan Bay. Most Sundays of my early school years—from 1960, say, through 1969, when my mother's father died—our families would gather at my grandmother's house for supper. We children would gather around his chair and my uncle would tell us the heroic adventure stories of his youth; then we'd eat, and then we'd settle in the living room to watch Walt Disney's "Wonderful World of Color" on a black-and-white TV. (Every year of my childhood, they showed *The Wizard of Oz* on TV, and every year I watched it on a black-and-white set. Only as an adult would I experience that same surprise and delight that people felt back in 1939, when Dorothy's black-and-white Kansas transformed into the dazzling colors of Oz—for *The Wizard* was one of the first films in color.)

Some of my uncle's stories were fantastical, almost Oz-like. Heroes and villains were easily identifiable. Some of his stories were polaroid-snapshots of life itself. My uncle knew the world he lived in as well as he knew himself. And words never failed him in the telling. He loved his wife—genuinely, I can say. If you had talked to him in his

later years, he would have told you that he loved and cared for his son, too, though his son might occasionally have thought otherwise. My uncle was being patriotic back in 1968, when he grabbed me off the city street and dragged me into a barber shop for a haircut. ("America: Love It or Leave It" was a popular bumper-sticker sentiment back then, to which my uncle vociferously agreed.) In Vietnam at that time, the Tet Offensive—the war's largest conventional military campaign—was in full swing.[1] I did manage to escape from the barber, preserving my hippie-wannabe hair. When his restaurant burned down sometime in the early 1960s, my uncle opened a tavern; when that suffered fire damage sometime in the 1970s, he opened a deli. He was the American Dream incarnate: civic-minded, a church goer, self-employed, a family man.

In his old age, my uncle turned to writing. Every second week or so he would compose a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, which published some of his nuggets of political, economic, and social conservatism. It wasn't until the last year of his life— 1997, if I'm remembering correctly—that my uncle told me of the owner of the bowling alley adjacent to his restaurant. "You got fire insurance?" the guy asked him. "No," my uncle said. "Get some." And he did. And the bowling alley went up in flames a few months later, taking the restaurant with it. I don't know why he told me that; it confused me, frankly. His stories, always heroic, had never been confessional. It was an uncharacteristic gesture of intimacy that made me feel complicit, somehow, in his lifeworld. It changed my view of him.

And then, some summers ago—though years after his passing—my mother reminded me of two other fires, one in the shed behind the tavern, one in the apartment above. That's all I know to say. Truth is messy: It bangs against other claims to our loyalties, like family, friendship, love, security, self-image. Whether there's more to the story, I cannot know. As I've said, my uncle passed away years ago and, more recently, so has my mother, his sister. He was funny, kind to me, and my mother loved him: Such is my memory of my uncle.

As a one-time editor of a small academic press, I have received more than a few manuscripts written by other people's uncles. Typically, they present history and biography as simple, nonproblematic, monochromatic. They idealize their lives, their worlds, their forebears. And they write from a standpoint of moral certitude. They are, in sum, masters of their texts. They write—the Truth. Or, more accurately, they write that part of the Truth that consorts with their idealized self-image and worldview. As a rule, I've returned their manuscripts with a brief, polite rejection letter. I do not tell them that their version of the world may have been publishable in 1955 or 1968, but not now.

"The Power of the Regime" vs. "The Power of Freedom"

Each of us forms conceptions of the world, its institutions, its public, private, wide, or local histories, and each of us is the narrative that shows our living in

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[1]From January 31 through March 28, 1968, the North Vietnamese People's Army conducted an all-out campaign across the length of South Vietnam, attacking a hundred towns and cities and some military bases. Though the Tet Offensive failed militarily for the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies, the bloody news coverage served to turn American popular sentiment against the war, leading to a negotiated withdrawal of American forces. With that withdrawal, the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon, fell on April 10, 1975 (see James H. Willibanks, *The Tet Offensive*).

and through the conceptions that are always being formed as the tales of our lives take their shape. In this history-making, as E. L. Doctorow says, "there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction." There is only our making, sometimes by design, sometimes not. None of us lives without a history; each of us is a narrative.
—Jim W. Corder, "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love" (16)

"Each of us," Corder tells us, "is a narrative." Within this recognition, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction dissolve. For any attempt at constructing a coherent history, biography, or world-picture is grounded in narrative: Such is the reigning linguistic/epistemological premise of postmodernism, which Jean-François Lyotard taught us back in 1979.[2]

In the essay, "False Documents" (1977)—which Corder cites in the epigraph above—E. L. Doctorow distinguishes between "two kinds of power in language." There's "the power of the regime," which lays claim to the fact-world, to objective history, and to a stable social reality; and there's "the power of freedom," which reimagines the human social-material lifeworld (152). The "regime language," Doctorow notes, "derives its strength from what we are supposed to be," whereas the power unleashed in a language of freedom "consists in what we threaten to become" (152). This freedom-to-become belongs to fiction, which serves to challenge the ideologies lurking in "regime language." As Doctorow writes, "What we proclaim as the discovered factual world can be challenged as the questionable world we ourselves have painted—the cultural museum of our values, dogmas, assumptions, that prescribes for us not only what we may like and dislike, believe and disbelieve, but also what we may be permitted to see *and not to see*" (152; emphasis added). I would argue that this same freedom-to-become extends to contemporary CNF, which poses similar challenges to the "cultural museum" and its embedded ideologies.

Described within an existentialist vocabulary, contemporary CNF harnesses the narrative structures and stylistic techniques of fiction while remaining tied to the lifeworld (or *Lebenswelt*, as Edmund Husserl puts it). Put simplistically, the lifeworld *is*: It's what exists materially in time and space, providing us with our sense of "the real." The lifeworld exists prior to language, though its human meaning unfolds within a continuous process of interpretation, valuation, and response. Imagining what "is possible," fiction creates a "parallel reality" to the lifeworld, whereas CNF interprets, values, and responds to the lifeworld-as-given. The artistry of CNF aims to make "the real world" *more real* to us by sharpening our tools of perception, discrimination, interpretation, valuation, and response. Still, the very term, "real world," immerses us in

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[2]See Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. This epoch-driving shift in epistemology made its way into sociological theories of selfhood: "The existential question of self-identity," writes Anthony Giddens, "is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual 'supplies' about herself" (54). Giddens continues, "A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain a regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self" (54).

the linguistic/epistemological crisis of postmodernism.[3] *Mundus est fabula*—"the world is a tale"—was a motto of the French philosopher of subjectivity, René Descartes. Our ways of knowing are tied to our ways of telling.

The Partial Truth of Language

> When you learn strong lessons early, however wrong, no evidence seems to count against them.
> —Jim W. Corder, "Lessons Learned, Lessons Lost" (23)

> We make truth, if at all, out of what is incomplete or partial.
> —Jim W. Corder, "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love" (31)

By its nature, storytelling is imperfect, a partial revealing. A lifeworld's complete rendering would take a piling-on of words upon words. But we don't speak or write polyphonically; rather, our speech unfolds linearly as a fugue, one word at a time. Necessarily, then, "language enforces a closure" (Corder, "Argument" 18): "We must say one thing or the other; we choose, and make our narrative" (18). This limitation in language compels us to make selections among details, revealing some while concealing others; in effect, we scatter shards of experience throughout our texts, leaving traces of self. But while we lurk in our stories, aspects of our lifeworld remain hidden, in whole or in part.

Within CNF, we can commit to telling "the truth"—which is as much to say, all the truth we have at hand or can recover, test, and preserve. But we have still to learn ways of "slanting" the tale of it, balancing artistry—the literary "creativity" embedded in "creative nonfiction"—against honesty, intimacy, and authenticity. "Things were simpler back then," I've quoted my uncle as saying. I doubt very much that things were ever simpler in any "back then," whether my uncle's or my grandparent's or my own; it's *the ways of telling* that make them seem so. Laying aside his one confession, my uncle's stories were politically and ideologically unconscious, dismissive of contradiction, and insensitive to the ethical difficulties lurking underneath.

Postmodernism awakens us to the competing voices contained within the cultural museum. The dominant discourse uses regime language as a means to power, wielding authority over attitudes and social relations. The "what is" of material-social reality reduces to what the regime says it is. "America: Love It or Leave It." "Go to church." "Get a job." "Get a haircut." In its varied voices, the museum speaks through our uncles.

My mentor in CNF, Jim W. Corder (1929–1998), belonged to my uncle's generation. In our scholarly collaborations, I was the junior professor.[4] He introduced me as his son on a couple of occasions when we were together in public—a fiction that I found flattering. Corder's military service came in 1950–1951 in occupied Germany, and

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[3] As Richard Rorty describes the so-called "linguistic turn" of poststructuralism, "we need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there […]. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations […]. The world does not speak. Only we do" (*Contingency* 4–5). For Rorty's seminal discussion, see his *Linguistic Turn*.

[4] He taught at Texas Christian University for many years, rising to dean and vice chancellor; I taught there with him for a few years before moving to Missouri.

he carried around in his head many of the same introjected voices that my uncle heard, though he came to recognize their danger. His essay, "Lessons Learned, Lessons Lost" (1992), is devoted to the topic:

> How do you remember guilt, disgrace, honorable victory, honorable defeat, and success if the way you first learned them was maybe altogether wrong and certainly altogether mismatched to a world that any soul ever lived in? When persuasive people and daily evidence both testify otherwise, how do you continue to believe […] that love is always accompanied by chivalric behavior, that the WASP family of 1934 is the appropriate goal of nostalgic dreaming, that true believers will at last be saved? (23)[5]

Such is the grand project of Corderian CNF: The unmasking of ideologies, as told within stories of the lies one was taught (in childhood primarily) and of the need to correct those lies and recover from them. In unmasking ideologies, Corderian CNF seeks authenticity while remaining humane, caring, and accommodating.[6] But there's a further unmasking explored in this version of contemporary CNF, one pertaining to the author's own self-identity.

In ways rarely confronted by novelists, CNF puts the writing self not simply on display, but on trial: "From time to time, I tell a dingy little story […]. When I do so, I like to think that I am trying to be honest, trying to show a little why I see what I see and how I see what I see. But of course I can't. I can't tell what I'm unwilling to say, what must not be said" (*On Living* 31). I'm quoting from *On Living and Dying in West Texas: A Postmodern Scrapbook* (1998)—Corder's last effort at life-writing, published

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[5]Corder was a formative five years old in 1934, the year chosen for his own "nostalgic dreaming." He, like my parents and their siblings, was weaned in the Great Depression and came of age in the Second World War. For further discussion of Corderian life-writing, see my essay, "Toward a Corderian Theory of Rhetoric." See also my co-authored "Hunting Jim W. Corder" and the co-edited volume, *Selected Essays of Jim W. Corder: Pursuing the Personal in Scholarship, Teaching, and Writing*.

[6]Note that Corderian CNF is one among many viable ways of life-writing in an age of postmodernism. What I'm describing as its antithesis—call it the museum-style of life-writing—assumes that Truth ("*the* Truth," with a capital T) is singular, stable, and knowable; that language is adequate to thought; that self-knowledge is a given; and that life is exemplary. Despite its naïveté, the museum-style continues to be produced in abundance. I should add that authenticity—a Corderian-existentialist aim of life-writing—avoids similar charges of naïveté by treating self-identity, not as a pregiven, hidden essence to be uncovered, but as an activity bound to a set of commitments expressive of an ethic of care. Responsiveness, responsibility, and answerability are the simultaneously social, ethical, and linguistic grounds of this model. In his book, *On Being Authentic*, Charles Guignon elaborates:

> [O]ur identity-conferring identifications are drawn from, and are answerable to, the shared historical commitments and ideals that make up our communal lifeworld. What imparts authoritative force to our decisions and commitments is not the wholeheartedness of the commitment, important as that may be, but rather the authority of the cultural traditions and social practices that form the shared background of intelligibility for our beliefs, commitments, feelings and decisions. Seen from this point of view, becoming an authentic individual is not a matter of recoiling from society in order to find and express the inner self. What it involves is the ability to be a reflective individual who discerns what is genuinely worth pursuing within the social context in which he or she is situated. (155)

Guignon adds, "what determines personal identity on this view, then, is not the static self-sameness of a pregiven thing through time, but the continuous, ongoing, open-ended activity of living out a story over the course of time […]. Seen from this standpoint, we are not just tellers of a story, nor are we something told. We are a telling" (155). In *Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor makes similar observations.

posthumously. It's a gloomy read at times, reflecting the author's terminal illness (as he wrote, he was dying of cancer) and an ego-deflation borne of depression. But such a passage, ironically, represents the author "trying to be honest" in confessing his refusal to confess all. Here, the partial truth of language comes to a head: It's not merely the cultural museum, but our own mechanisms of defense—of repressions, projections, and mis-remembering—that "slant" our storytelling.

"Freud was my father" (*On Living* 143), writes Corder: That's the opening sentence of "The Scrapbook that Holds the Truth at the End of the World," which is the last chapter of the last piece of CNF Corder managed to complete. In making this wry claim, Corder invites readers to interpret his storytelling through a psychoanalytic lens (which is how Corder himself studied the self and its texts). In Sigmund Freud's tripartite map of the psyche, the ego, though captain of consciousness, "is not even master in its own house" (Freud 353), since much of the id-driven psyche remains generally walled up behind defense mechanisms and repression. Being itself a "mere" complex or bundle of psychic energy arising out of (and differentiating itself from) the primal unconscious, the Freudian ego describes a mental/imaginative/linguistic construct whose defining feature is that it has repressed its imaginary/fictive origins. Yet our sense of selfhood comes to rest in its fictions, half-remembered, half-fantasized. Beneath the ego lie other complexes built out of the traumas of past experience; these pressure the ego-consciousness, expressing themselves as symptoms. Woe to the ego that cannot protect itself from the introjected voices, memories, fantasies, fears, and desires embedded within such complexes. Not only can we not know ourselves fully (given the inaccessibility of the unconscious *qua* unconscious), but we are divided against ourselves. The traumas and taboo aspects remain buried, albeit in shallow graves that raise a holy stink at the most inopportune moments, offering their insults to ego-consciousness. (Is it any wonder that naïve CNF remains deeply, albeit unconsciously, censored and repressed?)

Among the frail ego's fictions is an image of its own moral perfection, which Freud termed the ego-ideal: "In the move from primary narcissism to identification with significant others, the ego ideal is set up to 'keep watch' over the individual's behaviour and is used by the individual both as a model of perfection and as a self-censoring agency" (Laplanche and Pontalis 201). Out of this construct, the super-ego is born. As a self-observing component within the Freudian structure of the psyche, the super-ego/ego-ideal mediates between the subject's uncensored desires and its sanitized self-image.[7] But how shall we apply all this to Corderian life-writing?

In our lives and relationships we wear masks, often pretending—to ourselves, as to others—to be "more" or "better" than we are. We see this in the idealizing tendencies of naïve CNF, whose projections of heroic self-image smack of ego-inflation. Such writing aspires—or pretends, much like my patriotic, conscientious, God-fearing uncle—to "goodness," imagining itself worthy of approval. Its subjects are easily moralized, rendering self and others within stereotypes of hero or villain, wise man or fool, lover or adulterer, saint or thief, cop or con-artist. Though we wear masks in public, we must learn

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[7]In this paragraph and several scattered below, I make revisions to an essay previously published, "On Moral Criticism," pp. xiv–xv.

to peer behind these: So we are taught by Corderian practice. Though we do not tell all, we do not lie; not to others, not to ourselves.

Midway through the last chapter of his last book, Corder shifts from psychoanalysis to poststructuralism, turning the deconstructionist "death of the author" into a self-disabusing confession:

> I understand that the personal must be in question, given, as they say, the play of the signifier, the indeterminacy of signification, the inaccessibility of Presence. I understand that *personal* derives from *person*, that *person* derives from *persona*, that *persona* means *mask*. I understand that there is no person, if by the word we mean a complete, unitary self confronting a solid, fixed reality, perceiving it directly and accurately, then providing a transcript of a living voice. I understand that personal writing is contaminated by mistaken claims of autonomous authorship. I understand that no writer writes alone, therefore never just personally; even if he or she is alone in the room, a crowd is there, advising, encouraging, hissing, cursing. (*On Living* 151–52)

"No writer writes alone": Though the "crowd" consists of voices introjected within the divided self, it's to his reader that Corder appeals for a witness. "Yes," he adds, "let there be stories, histories, pictures that make truth by giving truth a place to be" (*On Living* 155). And the reader, we might note, is to meet him in that "place." With this insight, we shift from a largely Freudian psychology of life-writing to an existentialist psychology of reader-response.

Art, Empathy, and an "Ethic of Care"

> Argument is emergence toward the other. That requires a readiness to testify to an identity that is always emerging, a willingness to dramatize one's narrative in progress before the other; it calls for an untiring stretch toward the other, a reach toward enfolding the other. It is a risky revelation of the self […].
> —Jim W. Corder, "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love" (26)

In lived experience, intimacy demands face-to-face proximity, caring, and sharing. But there are limits to "the depth of psychic entry" achievable in life (Booth 87). Intimacy with another (from the Latin *intimus*, "inmost, innermost, most secret, most profound") is something that we can approach, though never achieve in fullness. We can "be with," but never *within*, the interior space of another's mind. The lovers' bedroom, the priest's confessional booth, and the psychoanalyst's couch are places of closeness and sharing. Beyond these, however, there's one place "where the sharing of another's *innermost* lifeworld—one that literalizes the *intimus* in intimacy—is […] imaginable. And that 'place' is fiction" (Baumlin, "On Moral" xv).[8] Having made this claim for the modern

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[8]As David Lodge notes, it is within literature (modernist fiction especially) that "the essentially narrative character" (24) of consciousness is most fully realized and explored. In *Wings of the Dove* (1902), Henry James "had perfected a fictional method which allowed him to combine the eloquence of a literary, authorial [third-person] narrative voice with the intimacy and immediacy of the first-person phenomenon of consciousness" (Lodge 47). James Joyce went further in developing first-person "stream of consciousness," his *Ulysses* (1922) "com[ing] as close to representing the phenomenon of consciousness as perhaps any writer has ever done in the history of literature" (Lodge 67). For applications to

novel, I wish now to extend it to contemporary CNF, which offers a second site of intimacy, authenticity, and sharable lifeworld.

Much has been written about the confluence of artistry and ethics in fiction. "The novelist's task," writes Martha Nussbaum, "is a moral task" at every level (163), given that "certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist" (5). As a genre, CNF has only recently joined in this critical discussion. Still, the CNF author is as much a "narrative artist" as the novelist and, on that basis, we can appropriate the "care ethic" of literature for CNF. As Nussbaum writes, "People care for the books they read, and they are changed by what they care for—both during the time of reading and in countless later ways more difficult to discern" (231). Much the same process recurs, I would argue, in CNF.

Engaging imaginatively in the author's lifeworld, readers develop the empathy foundational to an ethic of care, as Nel Noddings describes it: "Apprehending the other's reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring" (16). Indeed, "receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" (Noddings 2) are qualities fostered in fiction and CNF alike; in each case, these rest in an imaginative merging (of selves in fiction, of lifeworlds in CNF) that "narrative artistry" fashions between authors and readers. Marshall Gregory describes the "vicarious imagination" (211) as it works in fiction:

> The vicarious imagination gives us the power to *identify*, to experience others' feelings and ideas and experience—their entire mode of being—as if they were our own. Without reference to the vicarious imagination, we cannot explain how fictional representations get out of the text and *into* our heads […]. Significantly, this temporary and imaginative merging of selves produces clarity rather than confusion. In literary experience we are given the gift of identification without the pathology of delusion. (211; emphasis in original)

What Gregory ascribes to fiction—the "temporary and imaginative merging of selves" in acts of reading—can be redescribed in CNF as a temporary and imaginative merging of lifeworlds.

Emerging, dramatizing, stretching, reaching: in the Corderian epigraph above, such actions as these describe the speaking/writing self as it opens its lifeworld to the other. Such an ethos aims at "enfolding the other" (Corder, "Argument" 26), at "apprehending the other's reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible" (Noddings 16). Clearly, what Corder terms "rhetoric as love" covers much the same territory as Nodding's care ethic.[9] Now, having brought writer and reader, self and other together in CNF, we circle back to a point raised earlier, when discussing the Freudian unconscious

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postmodernist texts, see Grzegorz Mariarczyck and Joanna Klara Teske's *Explorations of Consciousness in Contemporary Fiction*.

[9]In the passage that follows, compare Nodding's active verbs to Corder's:

> When I care, when I receive the other, […] there is more than feeling; there is also a motivational shift. My motive energy flows toward the other […]. I do not relinquish myself; I cannot excuse myself for what I do. But I allow my motive energy to be shared; I put it at service to the other. It is clear that my vulnerability is potentially increased when I care, for I can be hurt through the other as well as through myself. But my strength and my hope are also increased, for if I am weakened, this other, which is part of me, may remain strong and consistent. (Noddings 33)

and its mechanisms of defense. Given the partial truth of language, the author cannot, will not, must not tell all. How, then, might the CNF text's silences qualify the model of reading outlined above?

Leaving Gaps

> I suspect it was most likely a deadly situation if he was the only survivor, *which I can't know*, but it would explain why he never talked about it or the war in general.
>   —A son writing of his father

My uncle was not the only one with stories to tell. I remember sitting in a diner while family-vacationing in Florida, listening to my father talk to my fraternal twin. The year, I believe, was 1974. "I could write a book," I remember him saying. (He never did, though I wish he had.) I remember overhearing snippets of his story about Artie Shaw, to my ear the smoothest-toned clarinetist of the Big Band Era. They both served in the navy in World War II, my father as an airplane mechanic stationed in Hawaii, Shaw as a musician playing gigs throughout the Pacific theater with "the Band of the U.S. Navy Liberation Forces." (I confirmed that fact and got the band's name from a web search.) My twin brother was laughing, though I don't remember why: It was more than forty years ago, when I was in college. I do remember my father saying that Shaw was constantly drunk while they were together, an anecdote that I have not felt a need to confirm. What surprises me about this diner-conversation was that it took place at all, this being the only time that he spoke of war within my hearing.

It was from my older brother, who heard it from my father's sister, our aunt, that I learned a more poignant war story. I heard it many years later—decades, in fact, after my father's death. In preparing to write this paragraph, I emailed my brother, asking for details. Here's what he returned:

> All I remember was Aunt Boots saying that he was in a plane that went down. One story was he was a passenger going somewhere, the other he was doing a shakedown flight. Don't know who else or how many others were also in the plane. The plane went down and apparently dad managed to get in the raft. No idea if he was alone or not. Four days after, he was rescued. I also heard it that he had a tin of hot dogs in his pocket. I suspect it was most likely a deadly situation if he was the only survivor, which I can't know, but it would explain why he never talked about it or the war in general.

So, there were two versions of our aunt's story, the "shakedown" version sounding slightly more heroic. But military heroism isn't the point: Survival is. When my brother first told it to me, the tin of hot dogs proved an important detail. On impulse, my father put the can in his pocket. As luck would have it, he lived off its contents while floating on a life raft in the Pacific, waiting for rescue.

Other salient details—Who else lived? Who died?—are missing. When my brother writes of what he "can't know," he is joining me in a Corderian project. I want to ask my aunt, but she, too, has passed. I do not blame my father for keeping the memories of war from his sons while making a sister his secret-sharer. This, I have come to believe, marks our generational difference: In experiencing global depression and war, *his*

generation's silence became collective and, in that respect, unexceptional. (I'll be curious to see how a global viral pandemic shapes generations today.)

My brother adds, "If I draw one thing from it all, it explains to me why he was a very brave person who was not afraid of much, especially when it came to boats. You survive something like that, it steers the rest of your life." I paused over these sentences, which offer a CNF summation of a father's lifeworld—and of an oldest son's admiration of that lifeworld. I don't believe that my brother is idealizing here or being sentimental, and his email has raised up in me a serious existential question: Can I understand my father without acknowledging the formative experience of a plane wreck at sea? It has been my assumption, postmodernist and Freud-inspired, that I do not "know" my father, and that my relationship with him (and, hence, with myself) remains unsettled, an internal work-in-progress.

But my view of him has changed, and now I'm tasked with filling in the gaps, searching for whatever external records survive pertaining to his wartime service. Still, I lament what is lost. Returning from war, my father entrusted his medals, citations, and other service documents and memorabilia to his sister; these are gone now, along with his sister, our aunt. *And I did not know these ever existed*, until my older brother told me about them. I wish I had known; I would have asked for them.

There are gaps—absences, blind spots, *lacunae*—in the narratives of contemporary CNF. But there's a qualitative difference between these and the self-censorings of a prior age's storytelling. For the postmodernist author, traces of what's absent are built into the text. In the following passage, Corder makes this explicit:

> I have written as much to hide as to reveal, have written so that I might show the writing to others and not be required to show myself. There's more to me than meets the eye, and less […]. A piece of writing can be revelatory […]. It can also be a substitute for the unspeakable, a closure, not a revelation. (*Yonder* 54)

Again we note the effort at honesty: What separates Corderian CNF from naïve life-writing is that the author, himself undeceived, acknowledges without naming the secret shame or trauma lurking within his text. The author's invitation to readerly intimacy begins with an act of self-humility, of accepting that the reader-writer relationship must rest in a partial truth. For "each one of us," as I've written elsewhere, "will carry secrets to the grave: shyness, embarrassment, fear of judgment compel us to do so" ("On Moral" xiv).

If, as postmodernism tells us, we cannot speak or write the world and self in their fullness; if, as Freud observes, portions of the psyche remain inaccessible, repressed and unconscious; if, as history teaches, the records and archives are easily lost; and if, as experience persuades us, an individual's untold or misremembered stories perish with one's passing: If these things hold, then we must be content to work with whatever shards of truthfulness come into our hands. This is part of the noble failure of CNF in an age of postmodernism: Our mappings of personal narrative include *terra incognita*, where a portion of the page is left visibly blank.

I wish that my father had written his book. But, joined by my older brother, I'm the bearer of what's left of his story that can be recovered, interpreted, tested, and told.

Composing the Corderian Scrapbook

> Moral character is always in formation, never fixed. Every choice we make in life is both a reflection of the self we are and a creation of the self we are becoming.
> —Marshall Gregory, "Ethical Criticism: What It Is and Why It Matters" (209)

> But stories—histories, that is, and scrapbooks—can hold the blessed, ordinary particulars of creation. No truth waits otherwise.
> —Jim W. Corder, *On Living and Dying in West Texas: A Postmodern Scrapbook* (19)

In an age of postmodernism, CNF can read like a scrapbook *bricolage*, a gathering-up of stories of people, places, and events half-remembered, half-imagined, each of necessity reconstructed. Though scattered throughout our mental-imaginative-archival scrapbooks, such fragments can be stitched together, made into a kind of whole by the narrative artistry of CNF. Needless to say, I take this metaphor from the title of Corder's posthumous work, *On Living and Dying in West Texas: A Postmodern Scrapbook* (though I should confess that, as its editor, I imposed the title: in his own shaky handwriting, Corder named it, simply, "Scrapbook"). It's in the book's final paragraphs—the last story of the last chapter of Corder's last book—that the title is explained. I quote these paragraphs in full, since they exemplify his way with CNF:

> Grandma—my father's mother—saved scraps. Then she made quilts. When I was a boy, I sometimes watched her, though I didn't always understand what I was seeing. Grandma wasn't a very good cook. She wasn't cuddly. She was mean-tempered: the world didn't always suit her well. She was illiterate. Her eyes were a little crossed, and her vision was poor, except up close. When she was fifty-eight, my Grandpa died. She had nothing. She lived for another twenty years, first with one of her children, then with another, in a rotation I never understood. She was lost. But she collected rags, scraps from other people's sewing projects, pieces of worn-out shirts and whatever. Then, after a while, she made quilts. I remember watching her, but until just now I had not taken pains to notice the significance of one step in her method.

> As she collected scraps, she sorted them by some standard I was never able to understand and tied them in little bundles. When more scraps accumulated, she would untie her bundles and go through the sorting process, adding the new scraps. In time, when enough scraps had accumulated, she made a quilt. I never saw her lay out all the scraps to consider them at once. She had no printed pattern or design. The design, I guess, was in her head. She began with a single scrap. She cut it to suit her purpose, then took another scrap and cut it. Within a day or so, then, she would sew the shapes together to make the first square of the quilt. Until just now, I had not paid sufficient time to the cutting. None of her scraps survived entire, though she wasted little. When she cut her scraps to make her shapes, she left something out. I'm glad I noticed or remembered that.

I guess we never keep our scraps entire. Her quilts were beautiful. After a while, each of her grandchildren came to own one. We enjoyed them. Mine was lovely, made to a design that no one else had ever seen before she made her quilt.

I think, too, that each of us has seen what no one else has ever seen. Each of us is the last of some tribe, the teller of the last story, the keeper of the last scrapbook, the last sewer of the last quilt. (*On Living* 158–59)

What can we take from Corderian practice, here in "Scrapbook" and in earlier samples of his life-writing?

Corderian CNF teaches us to revise, refine, and expand the stories that we tell. We're taught to unmask ideologies, rooting out the deceptions that we've been taught and have taken as the Truth about self and world. By challenging the cultural museum with its regime language, we can begin the process of *approaching* truth (or truthfulness), knowing that any truth-claim remains tentative and subject to testing and revision.[10] We're to root out the inauthentic from our personal narratives and collective histories. And what we take as knowledge will be placed under scrutiny: Our task is to write, not just of what we "know," but of what we don't know or need to learn.

In this last respect, Corderian CNF is corrective. Proceeding from an admission that we've mislearned, misremembered, and gotten things wrong, we turn to writing as a means to fashion a tentative knowledge, a self-in-process. We revisit old haunts and memories and histories in order to see or re-see them more clearly, authentically. This revisiting of haunts to fill in gaps and root out deceptions and half-truths turns CNF life-writing into research—a practice of autoethnography. As students of our personal/local/family/community/cultural histories, we spend time in attics and archives, surfing websites and recording interviews. The boundaries between personal and scholarly writing necessarily dissolve. We tell whatever truths we've uncovered and tested, but learn to tell them slant, allowing for some privacy even as we seek intimacy, leaving trails for the reader to follow. In balancing honesty, intimacy, and privacy, we practice an art of implication: In Corderian CNF, there's work for the reader to do in "filling the gaps."

There's risk-taking in Corderian CNF, since narrative puts authors and their subjects on display. Concomitantly, we seek to accommodate our readers, building a commodious, welcoming text. For Corderian CNF aims at an intersubjectivity between self and other, using language "to open a space" for writer and reader to cohabit.[11] Within this space, lifeworld experience can be shared in an attitude of mutual, sympathetic understanding. Claiming health and community for CNF, I would describe its driving

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[10]In the chapter, "What Is Lost (III)," Corder writes, "Much, of course, remains in the personal archives that each of us carries around, filed, fingered, refiled, kept, whether verifiable or created, remembered or misremembered. Much, however, is gone and oftener than not irretrievable. Much is lost that I know is lost. Much is lost that I never knew. Much is lost that I went off and left. Much is lost that I chose not to see" (*On Living* 67).

[11]In "dramatiz[ing] one's narrative in progress before the other," the writer "is asking for an acknowledgment of his or her identity, is asking for a witness from the other" (Corder, "Argument" 26). Put more colloquially, one aims "to out oneself" in that space of language where self and other stand facing each other, equally vulnerable.

force as an ethic of care.[12] As the English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, writes in his autobiographical 1805 *Prelude*, "what we have loved, / Others will love, and we may teach them how" (13.445–46). This, I should add, is a love that avoids "mere" sentimentality. It is committed to the sensuous particulars of lived experience. It affirms the body's role in life-writing, acknowledging that life is experienced within a gendered body that is situated in time and place. These coordinates are given; and while markers of gender, race, class, and culture can be turned into ideology, they can also be acknowledged as orientations of our lifeworld. The CNF style of writing is, indeed, "close to the body," since the bodily sensorium is a ground of our authenticity, as much as memory and imagination.[13]

As Corder practiced it, CNF acknowledges the ethical co-presence of the other, "as we keep trying to enter their world or bring them into ours" ("Varieties" 2).[14] It refuses to preach or to assert values contrary to health and community. It refuses to muckrake, point fingers, or settle scores. Rejecting black-and-white depictions, it transcends conventional morality. Moral/spiritual dilemmas are rarely solved by CNF; rather, they are acknowledged as such. And each story must await its own right timing. Some will never be published. And that's okay, since healing begins and, often, ends

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[12]I take health and community as the preeminent values of CNF life-writing and treat them as twin terms, mutually supportive and enabling. For the purposes of this present essay, I ground health in the practice of caring—of caring, that is, for ourselves as individuals and for all who share in our lifeworld. Health sustains freedom, which sows seeds of moral, spiritual, psychological, social, sexual, aesthetic, and intellectual growth. If these describe the aims of self-making, then community seeks to ensure these same aspirations for our fellows. *Self* and *other*, *individual* and *collective* conjoin in these twin terms. Identifying two necessary components of "the good life," these belong to the revival of classical-Aristotelian eudaimonism within contemporary ethics. (See Somogy Varga's *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*.) They pertain as well to the Platonic *epimeleisthai sautou* or "care of the self," as explored in Michel Foucault's "Technologies of the Self." (See also Foucault's "Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom.")

[13]In a previous discussion of Corderian ethos, I elaborate on Arthur Vogel's incarnationist theory of rhetoric:

> [A]rguably, all discourse is oriented toward (or proceeds from) the body; in this sense, [Corderian] ethos can be equated with the material, bodily presence "standing before" the texts that it speaks or writes. Articulating such a view, Vogel suggests that words are indeed "extensions of the body," a sort of "meaning in matter, a location of presence"—literally an embodied presence. For meaning is in words, Vogel argues, "as we are in our bodies, and it is only because we are our bodies that we can 'be' our words—or, as it is usually put, mean what we say. We can stand behind our words because our presence overflows them and is more that they can contain, but we choose to stand behind them with our infinite presence because we are also in them" (92). ("Toward a Corderian Theory" 51)

[14]Indeed the task, as Corder writes in "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love," is for writer and reader "*to see* each other, *to know* each other, *to be present* to each other, *to embrace* each other" (23; emphasis in original). Corder published this essay (arguably his most influential) in 1985, before his own version of life-writing found a name in CNF. Though its focus rests in rhetorical argument, I'm appropriating the essay's ethical-existentialist model for CNF: for both are grounded in narrative, and both share the same intimate, caring, and accommodating ethos.

with the act of writing.[15] In selecting the details of one's CNF artistry, health and community abide.[16]

As I've noted, the artistry of CNF aims to make "the real world" more real by sharpening our tools of perception, discrimination, interpretation, valuation, and response. I would add that CNF aims to create wonder in the author and reader alike: wonder in the beauty of life, in the nobility of suffering, in the complexity of experience, in the competing claims of justice and mercy, in the joys of friendship, in intimacy, in the mysteries of the body, in the depths of the psyche. We have a duty to explore the wounds that we sustain by virtue of having lived. And we owe a duty to our forebears in honoring them without idealizing or deprecating. It's with "a cold eye," freed from sentimentality, that we seek to recover their silences and correct their errors. The Irish modernist poet, William Butler Yeats, expresses this in the epitaph ending his poem, "Under Ben Bulben" (92–94):

> Cast a cold eye,
> On life, on death.
> Horseman, pass by!

Such an eye, as Yeats describes, removes blinders of prejudice, fear, anxiety, debts, and grudges. It is a clarity of sight enhanced by an attitude of caring and an inclination to forgive.

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[15]Of course writing yearns for an audience, *which authors themselves supply* in such private, confessional genres as journals and diaries. Still, the Corderian author must weigh what and when to publish. The final chapter of *On Living and Dying in West Texas* consists of a string of journal entries, the last of which—titled "Journal clipping, September 24, 1997" (153)—recounts his grandmother's quilting. In this "clipping," Corder writes:

> I have almost invariably, after bland enough beginnings, started writing down hopes, fantasies, occasional near-truths that then I can't tolerate seeing again or bear to have someone else, by chance, read. I'm doing it again, and if I continue, I'll sooner or later have to destroy this journal, too. I comfort myself with great company for a moment, remembering that Dr. Johnson, late in his life, destroyed some of his own papers. (153)

By building this chapter out of diary scraps, Corder is playing with genre and narrative structure.

Unfortunately, he did not follow his own (or Johnson's) suggestion, having left many hundreds of pages of private entries for family members to find and read. I shall not tell what they found. I don't know why he left them. I can't say it changed my view of him, but the discovery of his private, unpublished papers led me to destroy my own juvenile efforts at journaling. Truth is messy.

[16]In the years since Corder's passing, publication in CNF has exploded, as has scholarly interest. Burgeoning new subfields have grown within psychology, ethics, and English studies (among other disciplines), each grounded in the practice and study of therapeutic nonfiction narrative. For work within memory and trauma studies, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). For a seminal and strongly influential work in medical narrative, see Arthur W. Frank's *Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, Ethics* (1994).

The individual experiences of survivors of cancer or of the Nazi Holocaust cannot be corralled into one rhetorical-narrative-therapeutic-ethical model. Some subjects preclude any possibility of forgiveness, accommodation, or reconciliation. Proponents of social justice cry out for a witness against poverty, prejudice, and political oppression; righteous indignation belongs to many such narratives. Not all nonfiction narrative falls within the artistry of CNF; not all CNF is Corderian in its ethos and urge toward intimacy. Where Corder serves, I recommend his CNF model. Yet I'm convinced that, were he alive, he'd be exploring this fuller range of writing-as-therapy.

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Keeping It in the Family: Domestic Violence and Spectral Testimony in Contemporary American Memoirs

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http://ellids.com/archives/2022/01/5.1-Sutton.pdf

Abstract | This essay considers how the cultural valuation of transparency within life writing prohibits the state to recognize and address the harm against marginalized subjects. To do so, this essay turns to two recent memoirs of childhood stricken by domestic violence: Rachel Sontag's *House Rules* (2008) and Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* (2018). *House Rules* documents Sontag's childhood growing up with an emotionally abusive father in an upper middle-class white, Jewish household, while *Heavy* documents Laymon's childhood experiences of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse in a single-parent, Black Southern household. The essay focuses, in particular, on how much of the violence Sontag and Laymon depict traces back to the nuclear family's role as a state disciplinary technology that enforces white supremacist and patriarchal kinship structures. It shows disruption of the private-public binary by excavating how Sontag and Laymon's accounts of violence in the home entangle the dysfunction at the heart of the U.S. nuclear family with the dysfunction at the heart of the U.S. nation-state. Ultimately, it proposes a life writing hermeneutic of spectrality that focuses on the structural realities that exceed the boundaries of the individual memoir.

Keywords | Life Writing, Domestic Violence, Trauma, Discipline, Legibility

The Western tradition of life writing traces back to religious confessionals, most famously Augustine's *Confessions*, which recounts the saint's sinful youth and his conversion to Christianity (Archambault 23). The religious and confession-based origins of Western life writing are still quite visible within the ostensibly secular contemporary publishing market. Life writing scholar Leigh Gilmore has coined the term "American neoconfessional" to describe contemporary U.S. audiences' obsession with narratives that follow a trauma-to-redemption arc, in which a life writer confesses to traumatic experiences, for which they are usually to blame, and then ends with joyful recollections of how they overcame their earlier, misguided years (American Neoconfessional 658). An insistence on transparency implicitly accompanies the American desire for confession: a belief that the life writer has not strategically hidden any aspect of their experience, that they have truly written to their imagined reader with the image of a priest in mind. Augustinian scholar Paul Archambault notes that a philosophy of truth as objective and transparent was also evident in the structure of Augustine's *Confessions*; the last four books of the Confessions are markedly more objective and impersonal than the first eight, which Archambault reads as evidence of how "Augustine's conversion to Christianity also symbolized his second and final conversion to philosophy" (Archambault 28). Not only was Augustine redeemed from sin, but he was also redeemed from partiality and bias.

The degree to which contemporary U.S. audiences share Augustine's moralized outlook on truth can be seen in the widespread outrage sparked by the revelation that James Frey, in his 2003 memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, falsified his account of his descent into drug addiction. *A Million Little Pieces* had been an Oprah Book Club pick, and Oprah's fans were angry with both Frey and Oprah for what they saw as an abuse of their trust and empathy as readers. Life writing scholar Timothy Aubry argues that both the initial success of Frey's memoir and the controversy that followed illustrate how the American conception of truth is less about what actually happened than about narratives that conform to a middle-class view of 'authenticity,' which values the gritty aesthetics of trauma and violence as long as they are ultimately tied to individual responsibility and redemption (155).

Gilmore has in turn written extensively on the ways in which public expectations of transparency place life writers of collective trauma into a double bind (*Tainted Witness* 150). Gilmore contends that life writings that recount personal and collective experiences of harm carry within them, whether implicitly or explicitly, a call for justice. That call for justice, however, can, and often is, negated by accusations of falsification on the part of the author—accusations most often evoked to discredit writers who speak for positionalities marginalized by their class, race, gender, sexuality, and/or disability status (99). Gilmore points to global reactions to the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú, a K'iche'

Guatemalan rights activist, who published a book-length testimony to the human rights abuses committed by the Guatemalan army against Indigenous peoples throughout the Guatemalan War in 1983 (59). The white American anthropologist David Stoll subsequently published a book-length fact-check of Menchú's testimony, Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans, in 1999, which claimed that Menchú had significantly falsified her story and incited widespread, global outrage against the activist. Stoll's claims largely revolved around minor details, such as Menchú's level of education and whether she was present for her brother's murder, that do not affect the testimony's central claim as to the ubiquity of the state violence committed against Indigenous peoples of Guatemala (63). Stoll's pedantic attack and the global eagerness to discredit Menchú speaks to the structure of silencing that consolidates state power, both on the level of state-funded institutions, like the army, and the privileged citizens, like Stoll, who wield their structural power against more vulnerable subjects.

In her study of the American neoconfessional, Gilmore focuses primarily on best-selling contemporary memoirs by white women, such as *Wild* (2012) by Cheryl Strayed and *Eat Pray Love* (2010) by Elizabeth Gilbert, that illustrate a neat arc of trauma to redemption (Tainted *Witness* 111). The more recent bestsellers *Educated* (2018) by Tara Westover and *Maid* (2019) by Stephanie Land, the latter of which was recently adapted into a critically acclaimed television series,[1] can also be seen as representative of this trend, though Westover and Land do a better job of highlighting the structural reality of class stratification in America and its determining effect on life quality than Strayed and Gilbert. Although white women generally dominated the American memoir market in the 1990s and early 2000s, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement over the past few years has drawn dominant consumer interest to memoirs by writers of color, particularly Black memoirists. The explosive reception of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World And Me* (2015), which focuses on the debilitating reality of anti-Black police violence, captures the growing attention of white, middle-class American consumers on memoirs which address the politics of race.[2] Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* (2013), Margo Jefferson's *Negroland* (2015), and Ashley Ford's *Somebody's Daughter* (2021), all critically-acclaimed best-sellers, can also be read as evidence of the market's evolving focus on race in light of the growing national attention to anti-Black violence, although Ward, Jefferson, and Ford all come from different backgrounds and provide different perspectives on Blackness and Black American womanhood and should not be read through a conflationary lens.

The contemporary American memoir market's ostensible shift to narratives that represent social injustices in order to argue for action towards structural equity illustrates the importance of reading practices that can pay such accounts due diligence. Black American authors, for instance, have argued that recent white consumer interest in

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[1] Land's individual account of working her way out of poverty as a white, single mother, for example, arguably spectralizes the structural reality that the majority of the American domestic labor force, which encompasses services from house cleaning to nannying, is made up of underpaid and undocumented (and thus politically vulnerable) immigrant labor. Laborers under constant threat of being reported by their clients and deported by the state have much less agency than white citizens like Land over improving their work circumstances (see Chang).

[2] *Between the World and Me* was an instant New York Times bestseller and won the 2015 National Book Award.

narratives of Black pain and debilitation, such as Coates' *Between the World and Me*, risk transforming complex works by Black authors into mere trauma porn, meaning the treatment of Black cultural productions as entertainment for white people rather than social criticism (McKinney). This paper will in turn consider the degree to which the American public's historic fixation on narrative transparency within memoirs further risks suppressing the demands of structurally vulnerable subjects for state accountability. Questions framing this interrogation include: How does the insistence on transparent testimony in the courtroom replicate forms of disciplinary violence aimed at rendering unruly and inconvenient bodies docile? How can life writers of trauma retain both the unruliness of their testimonies and the clarity (if non-transparency) of their call for justice and accountability? Can trauma be rendered legible without being rendered docile?

To flesh out these questions, this essay turns to two recent memoirs that portray experiences of and attempted recoveries from domestic violence: Rachel Sontag's *House Rules* (2008) and Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* (2018). *House Rules* documents Sontag's childhood growing up with an emotionally abusive father and her difficulties navigating a comparatively freer life as an adult, while *Heavy* documents Laymon's childhood experiences and later reckoning with sexual, physical, and emotional abuse through a more explicit focus on the entanglement between domestic violence and the insidious state violence of patriarchy and racism. The two life narratives thus speak to quite different social contexts. Sontag comes from an upper-middle class, Jewish home, and many of her father's violent idiosyncrasies are in some ways the contortions of privilege, while Laymon is raised by an impoverished single mother in Mississippi, whose roots in Southern racial violence compound the stresses of their home life.

Nevertheless, there are important resonances between the two. Sontag's father is an ambitious and well-educated doctor, whose emotional abuse centers around his insistence that his wife and two daughters conform to his rigorous standards of respectable decorum. Much of the violence that results traces back to the ways in which the family operates as state disciplinary technology which sanctions patriarchal violence. Similarly, though not interchangeably, the tensions between Laymon and his mother that structure *Heavy* center around her unwavering commitment to educating Laymon in white institutional standards of respectability through a rigorous, and often violent, parenting style that neglects his need for emotional care. Both like and unlike Sontag's father, Laymon's mother's preoccupation with the apparent respectability of her home speaks to the material urgency of conforming private forms of domesticity to the patriarchal and white supremacist standards of the state.[3]

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[3]See Saidiya Hartman's 1997 book, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and Hortense Spillers' 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," for fuller accounts of how the development of the nuclear family structure was central to the disinheritance of Black subjects from the state. Spillers focuses on how Black, female slaves were "ungendered" through their sexual exploitation as reproducers; moreover, their children were not seen as children so much as laboring objects and often violently taken away from them, leaving Black mothers always already outside the nuclear family structure. Hartman's analysis in turn focuses on the white American cultural fixation on 'appropriate' domesticity post-Emancipation. She argues that the attributes of proper domesticity that obsessed white Americans, such as hygiene and cleaning practices, operated to criminalize newly-freed Black subjects already seen as dirty and improper by the white populace. Domesticity thus became another tool of the Jim Crow South. Together, Spillers and Hartman's analyses highlight the material stakes of family appearances for contemporary Black American families, who face a centuries-long history of disinheritance from state

Precisely because of the state-sanctioned nature of domestic respectability behaviors, both memoirs trouble popular notions of what constitutes state violence and domestic abuse, as well as the often overlooked entanglement between the two. Is forcing your daughter to document how she spends her allotted hours at the library psychological abuse, or a strict parenting style that she will thank you for later? What about giving your son a homework assignment to complete at a friend's house, which contains the set of encyclopedias you can't afford, and then beating him when he fails to follow through? My approach to the question of discipline as violence will focus on how Sontag and Laymon draw connections between how their parents justify their violent disciplinary regimes to themselves and the ways in which they are rewarded, rather than admonished, by the public sphere for their privileging of discipline over care as a guiding family value. Reading Sontag and Laymon together is also useful for the different ways in which they trouble dominant notions of state violence and domestic abuse. Sontag's account positions psychological and emotional abuse as violent in effect as physical abuse, which, because it leaves visible traces, is often taken more seriously by witnessing audiences; however, she does not make explicit the connections between her father's tyranny and the patriarchal structure of the U.S. nation-state. Laymon's account in contrast often features graphic instances of physical violence, which could risk being read by a white American audience as confirmation of Black familial dysfunction; however, his explicit references to the Black American community and the material, educational, and social inequities that accompany being Black in contemporary America necessitates reading his personal experience of domestic abuse alongside the structural disinheritance of Black Americans from the sociomaterial resources that facilitate individual flourishing.

This paper's reading analytic thus also disrupts the private-public dichotomy that haunts memoirs of domestic violence by emphasizing how Sontag and Laymon's accounts of patriarchal and white supremacist disciplinary violence in the home render inseparable the traumas that haunt individual and familial bodies from the ongoing traumas haunting the national body, such as the culture of doubt that continues to characterize the reception of women's testimony and the mass criminalization and debilitation of Black Americans.[4] Seen this way, memoirs of domestic violence do not

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structures of protection (such as the law) due to their structural positioning as genderless, kinless, and uncivilized. The historical delegitimization of Black American mothers as mothers is particularly important to keep in mind when considering Laymon's mother's obsessive fixation on giving her son a proper upbringing. Similarly, Hartman's framing of hygiene as a scapegoat for white American fears of Otherness illuminates Sontag's father's fixation on his daughters' hygiene habits, which will be discussed in detail later.

The pressure Laymon's mother feels to perform proper domesticity should also be read alongside the release of the infamous Moynihan Report in 1965, nine years before Laymon was born. The Moynihan Report, titled The Negro Family: The Case For National Action, was written by a white sociologist, Daniel Moynihan, who at the time served as the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor. His report blamed widespread Black poverty in the U.S. on the prevalence of single-mother families, further stigmatizing Black mothers and insinuating that appropriate family values would be enough to earn Black Americans economic and political equality (see Moynihan).

[4]On the national level, the culture of doubt that accompanies women's testimonies, particularly when they include demands for justice and state accountability, can be seen in the discrediting of Christine Blasey Ford's testimony against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. Ford testified that Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her in high school and evidenced her claim with a detailed personal account and corroborating material evidence (Hill). Kavanaugh was shortly thereafter appointed to the court. The continued subjection of Black Americans to debilitation by the state and disinheritance from state

so much bravely break the boundary between the personal and private as they reveal that boundary to always already serve as a mystifying cultural imaginary that invisibilizes state-sanctioned violence against vulnerable subjects. Ultimately, this paper will position Sontag and Laymon's written accounts of harm as spectral testimonies for the ways in which they document domestic abuse and state violence to be that which the state always already refuses to see.

The proposed framework of spectral testimony builds on Judith Butler's understanding of the spectral in *Frames of War*, which analyzes how media representations of war are often complicit with the state violence they claim to address. In considering the media's claim to offer a transparent look into the global realities of war, Butler argues that, "When versions of reality are excluded or jettisoned to a domain of unreality, then specters are produced that haunt the ratified version of reality" (xiii). Butler focuses particularly on affective "specters," such as the grief and rage of a violated subject that necessarily escape the camera frame. The close reading developed in the following sections builds on Butler's framework of spectrality by locating spectral testimony within gestures towards the state structures of violence embedded within the individual writer's personal experience of violation. The presence of spectral testimony is often subtle and requires the close attention that testimonies of violence deserve but are not often given. Reading for spectrality is a way of acknowledging that a given testimony cannot and should not render a subject transparent to the reader, where expectation often worsens the conditions of vulnerability a testifier already faces in making public their most debilitating life experience. An analytic of spectrality instead allows that the look into personal experience given within a testimony will necessarily be incomplete. It in turn becomes the reader's responsibility to understand the main demands of the testimony as they relate to contemporary conditions of injustice and to take the knowledge gained from personal experience and generously offered by the testifier to fight for and build a better world. Sontag and Laymon do so by highlighting the domestic as a site of violence in desperate need of national address.

Sontag opens *House Rules* with a scene from her adult life: at a friend's dinner party, she sits across from a man who asks her what she is working on. "A book about family dynamics," (vii) she replies. The man demands, "So who's the monster? [...] Your dad or your mom?" When Sontag tries to explain, "It's more about the way we worked," he persists, "So, who's the monster [...] Which one? Give it up." She finally relents that her father "plays the leading monster," (viii) and the man proceeds to drill her on *what* exactly her father did to earn the title, namely "Did he ever hit you guys." To Sontag's reply, "Never," she receives the following reaction:

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protection can be seen in the ongoing execution of Black citizens by the American police force, which became visible on a global level following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the summer wave of public protests that followed (Joseph). The two sites of violence—the doubting of female voice and the abjection of Black life—are by no means commensurable. It also must be stressed that Black women suffer at the intersection of the two, and that white women benefit structurally from a nation-state built on white supremacy and the exploitation of Black labor. In this paper, Sontag and Laymon are read together not to conflate gendered and racialized violence but for the way both writers testify to the harms perpetuated by the widespread assumption that the family home is a safe space that exists apart from the structural violence of the state.

> That took care of that. The uncertainty drained from his face. He smiled, relieved that we wouldn't have to go *there*. He opened his mouth to speak, decided against it. I could tell, by the careful way he rested his eyes on the large piece of art hanging from the wall, that he thought he could help me see that it wasn't all that bad. (viii)

Discrediting male violence against women by figuring it as not as bad *as it could be* is not new. In her 2018 anthology addressing sexual violence, *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture,* feminist critic Roxane Gay pointedly employs the term, "not that bad," (vii) in order to critique the long-held cultural acceptance of male aggression and the dismissal of women's testimony. Sontag's prefacing of her memoir with a man's determination to make her rethink testifying domestic abuse as abuse situates her memoir alongside the many invisibilized histories of sexual and domestic violence silenced through patriarchal cultural norms.

Her interrogator's assumption that her father does not qualify as an abuser because he does not employ physical force would benefit from an encounter with French historian Michel Foucault. Foucault's 1975 work *Discipline and Punish* famously theorizes the ways in which modern state punishment regimes rely more on the technologies of psychological discipline and behavioral training than on overt demonstrations of physical force to implant and consolidate structures of domination. For Foucault, what distinguishes disciplinary power from other strategies of domination is the minuteness with which disciplinarians regulate individual forms of behavior in line with desired ends; he thus figures discipline as "a political anatomy of detail" (139). Foucault's emphasis on the psychological dimension of state control arguably under-theorizes the degree to which contemporary nation-states remain reliant on physical torture, particularly in colonial and militarized contexts. Nonetheless, for the purposes of life writing studies approach, the paper will rely on Foucault's articulation of state praxis that may not be obviously physical in their manifestation of force but that are nonetheless, and at times all the more, violent through the effects of discipline and silencing.

Sontag's father, Dr. Stephen Sontag governs his household through a strict and, at times, seemingly arbitrary set of behavioral rules that he believes optimize their efficiency and social competitiveness. Sontag describes how, "I was only allowed to go [to the library] when I had a specific project that required research. Always, Dad requested an outline of how I would use my 'unmonitored' time at the library. It was this unmonitored time that would ruin me, Dad was convinced" (8). Dr. Sontag also requires Rachel and her younger sister, Jenny to record all of their homework on a dry-erase board in the family kitchen for his cross-verification. He limits their socialization time to six to eight hours on Saturday, if homework is completed, plus one sleepover per month. They are not allowed to wear makeup. Their clothing must not be "torn or sloppy" and their fingernails must not "extend more than 0.5 cm from the cuticle corner" (119). Everyone in the family must "wake up in the morning to National Public Radio in order to keep well informed" (119).

On the surface, Dr. Sontag's rules seem neither cruel nor abusive insofar as prioritizing homework over friends, dressing neatly, and listening to NPR; they do not, in and of themselves, constitute cruel and unusual punishment. And yet it is precisely the ways in which the rigidity of Dr. Sontag's rules aligns with idealized understandings of

family and citizenship that his fascistic approach to partnership and parenting goes unquestioned and even extolled by the larger community. Family friends see the Sontags as a happy, if tightly-run, ship while Dr. Sontag's more questionable disciplinary actions, such as numbing his wife's resistance to his control by prescribing her antipsychotic medication, take place, always, behind closed doors.

Feminist theorists have pushed against the naturalization of the private, nuclear family structure precisely for the ease with which it simultaneously sanctions and invisibilizes patriarchal violence. Judith Herman directly attributes the rise of activism against domestic violence to the 1970s feminist movement. She notes that, previously, "women did not have a name for the tyranny of private life. It was difficult to recognize that a well-established democracy in the public sphere could coexist with conditions of primitive autocracy or advanced dictatorship at home" (28). Black feminist theorist bell hooks similarly positions the nuclear family as "the one institutionalized sphere of power that can easily be autocratic and fascistic" in American culture (20). However, rather than seeing the hierarchical nature of the family in contradiction with a "well-established" democratic public sphere, she relates the nuclear family's hierarchical structure to its articulation within a nation founded on and governed by the entanglement of patriarchal, white supremacist, and capitalist structures of domination. For hooks, the sentimental notions of unconditional love and privacy that overdetermine the cultural currency of the nuclear family work to obscure its political function as the building block of violent political hierarchies centered around the material power of the father.

Feminist theorizations of the family, like those offered by hooks, Hartman, and Spillers, argue for a different interpretation of Dr. Sontag's disciplinary regime. The cultural values Dr. Sontag upholds—education, hard work, and social awareness—represent offspring of the American Dream mythos that both masks and consolidates the racialized and gendered inequalities at the heart of the U.S nation-state. Under a Black feminist counter-reading, the myth that white women and people of color can, too, have it all, only works if they conform to certain respectability standards that operate to render their bodies docile rather than equal. For the state, the benefit of respectability as a disciplinary tool is thus twofold: firstly, subjects monitor and adjust their own behavior and, secondly, they adjust their behavior towards docility: respectable subjects aren't loud or demanding—they go with the flow. They read the right newspapers and support feel-good social movements without going too far in their polite requests for political justice. The irony for the respectable subject is that going with the flow often means accepting the suppression of their needs and desires as a daily reality. Feminist and queer theorist Lauren Berlant describes the phenomenon of subjects within an oppressive nation-state believing that if they fake happiness under the current state of things long enough, they will eventually be rewarded with some sort of recognition of their efforts, as "cruel optimism" (Berlant). In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed similarly argues that happiness is often a state-enforced emotion meant to silence the complaints of queer and migrant subjects (Ahmed); if migrants express sadness at leaving their old home behind, for example, they are positioned within dominant U.S. discourse as ungrateful, deflecting conversations about global imbalances of resources that force migration from the Global South to the Global North. Under cultures of cruel optimism and compulsory happiness, only those whose values align with the prerogatives of the state experience actual contentment. Sontag's early portrait of her father as a politically

progressive 'feminist' exemplifies the way privileged subjects exploit the performance of respectability on the part of more vulnerable subjects:

> Dad called himself a feminist, gave his secretary paid maternity leave before it was mandatory, bragged about doing it. He believed Anita Hill, supported a woman's right to choose, later insisted on sending me to a women's college. He worshipped Cokie Roberts, Nina Totenberg, Terry Gross—the many female voices that we heard on NPR. He kept black-and-white photographs of these women in binders, taking them out on occasion to show us the people behind the voices. It was the voices that he liked. That he believed and trusted and felt a certain safety in. *These were women without bodies*, black-and-white faces. These were women Dad would never have to know, the sexless women that he loved. (6; emphasis added)

Read one way, Dr. Sontag's politics are laudatory. He believes in paid maternity leave and access to abortion, two main causes of the mainstream feminist movement. Read otherwise, his binder of female radio personalities recalls Foucault's panopticon: a visual technology that delimits where and how its surveilled subjects should position themselves. The women come out of the album only when Dr. Sontag chooses and only to support his narrative of their cultural respectability. As Sontag describes, by bringing their subjectivity to life through black-and-white photography, the threat of their potentially unruly, female bodies is flattened and contained. Significantly, the women in the binder: Cokie Roberts, Nina Totenberg, and Terry Gross, are all involved in progressive U.S. media and journalism, meaning that their careers and livelihoods depended on a disciplined balance between social critique and public respectability.

Dr. Sontag's punishment regime similarly resembles techniques of state control and discipline. Often throughout Sontag's childhood, he had his wife awaken in the middle of the night in order to have a family conversation about her disobedience. Sontag recounts an exemplary moment in which her father has recently been served divorce papers. In response, Dr. Sontag has his wife wake Sontag up at three in the morning so that he can blame the divorce papers on her 'strategic' attempts to turn her mother against him. He calls Sontag "conniving," telling her that, "you're not going to be able to brainwash your mother anymore" (150) and that she reminds him of Saddam Hussein. Sontag explains how at that point in the night,

> I had a decision to make: to get involved or not. Often, I did get involved, not to seriously fight allegations such as my likeness to Saddam Hussein, but to get out of my head and hear the physical noise of my own voice. But it was riskier to get involved. It meant committing to hours of sitting around the living room, punching at pieces of a conversation that had nothing to do with communication or, as I was beginning to realize, sanity or love. (151)

Though Sontag frequently does fight back against her father, just as often she gives in and tells him what he wants to hear in order to escape the dehumanizing experience of unrelenting interrogation. Only when she agrees to repeat his accusations back to him verbatim does her father allow her to return to bed.

Here the parallels emerge between Dr. Sontag's patterns of abuse and common techniques of state discipline. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Marxist

theorist Jonathan Crary describes how sensory and emotional deprivation have become central to contemporary U.S. torture and interrogation techniques, with sleep deprivation acting as a favored means within military black sites. Crary relates the popularity of sleep deprivation to the way in which "the denial of sleep" serves as "the violent dispossession of self by external force, the calculated shattering of an individual," enforcing "abject states of compliance," which "[fabricate] a world that radically excludes the possibility of care, protection, or solace" (7–8). By radically and randomly disrupting an individual's circadian rhythms, state officials can quickly fracture that individual's most basic sense of agency over her own body and mind. As both Crary's research into state interrogation and Sontag's experiences with her father show, sleep deprivation serves as a particularly effective method with which to get a prisoner to admit to false accusations. Deprived of any form of "care, protection, or solace" (8) that takes her emotional and bodily needs seriously, a prisoner begins to relate to her voice during the interrogation process as merely an unsubstantial "physical noise," (8) while the voice of her captor determines the truths and reality she must accept in order to access the primal relief of unconsciousness. Crary's analysis also highlights the importance of reading for spectrality—the signs of life that subsist beneath the surface of the text—as the words and actions of a captive are often deeply informed by the threat of displeasing their captor, and can still be long after they have escaped captivity.

Sontag's experience of gaslighting and dehumanization through the deprivation of both emotional and physical forms of care and protection thus reintroduces the question of whether the line her later interrogator draws between physical and 'not so bad' forms of abuse represents a false dichotomy that enacts a similar form of silencing. In her work on the discrediting of women's testimonies, Gilmore describes how conflicts over the judicial weight of a given testimony "may occur whenever personal accounts are introduced into the public sphere, but particularly when those accounts concern the relation between individual injury and collective politics and make a claim for the representativeness of one person's experience of, or perspective on, violence" (78). For Gilmore, the paradoxical nature of individual testimonies that stand in for collective histories of violence stems from how they attempt to make legible multifaceted and fragmentary histories of repeated trauma through a single testimony judged primarily for its coherency. Traumatized individuals speaking from a marginalized subject position bear the additional burden of always already lacking the authority of truth under the public eye. Her interrogator's fixation on whether Sontag's father physically abuses her ostensibly points to one tangible way a testimony of violence can be ruled insufficient in the courtroom: by lacking visual evidence, such as bruises; however, and more importantly, such a tactic of discrediting embodies the false assumption that the viability of Sontag's testimony depends more on the material reality of corroborating evidence than the receptivity of a misogynistic public sphere to seeing patriarchal discipline as a form of violence.

What becomes obvious throughout *House Rules* is that Dr. Sontag gets away with his behavior not because he does not go so far as to beat his wife and daughters but because his paternal disciplinary regime and his claim to complete power in the house are essentially state-sanctioned. In one telling scene, Sontag describes how she and Jenny discover that her father has accidentally left a mysterious safe he keeps in his bedroom unlocked, on a night in which both of their parents are out of the house. To their horror,

but not necessarily surprise, they find that the safe contains a collection of mini-tapes on which their father has recorded their family conversations. Sontag, Jenny, and a friend of Jenny's listen to an exchange between Sontag and her father, in which he makes her repeat (his) reasons for why she recently disobeyed him:

> '*Because you hate yourself.*'
> '*Because I hate myself.*'
> '*Because you have no self-respect.*'
> '*Because I have no self-respect.*' (135)

As they listen to more and more tapes, which provide repetitions of the same theme, Sontag describes,

> Listening to the tapes had the tiring effect of watching a movie over again. It was a lackadaisical attention I paid, as my mind began to fish around for things we could do with the tapes. We had proof. 'Can we take him to court?' Jenny said. 'And sue him.' 'For?' 'Mental cruelty.' 'It's pretty impossible to sue on the grounds of mental cruelty.' Jenny and I had become avid after-school watchers of *Divorce Court,* and knew enough about mental cruelty to know it was never enough. (138)

Despite her claims to near-boredom in the "lackadaisical attention she paid," (138) she later briefly admits that, after watching the tapes, "I felt paralyzed in the way one does after witnessing a stranger having a heart attack" (138). Sontag's phrasing indicates her alienation from her traumatized self, as, in the tapes, it is not a stranger being tortured but herself. Read alongside the content of the tapes, of course, the "lackadaisical" (138) temperament is a strategic performance: people have thought Sontag was being dramatic or underplayed the seriousness of her father's abuse for most of her life. Throughout *House Rules*, physical evidence of Dr. Sontag's domestic abuse continually makes its way into the public sphere. He sends counselors at Sontag's school similar recordings of strange family conversations and letters of apology he makes Sontag write that center around her innate badness, evidencing his continual whittling down of her self-esteem and his paranoiac need to be obeyed. Sontag's problem is not that her father's abuse is emotional or intangible in form, resistant to legibility and recognition. There are not sufficient institutional structures of protection and care in place to admonish and intervene in situations of patriarchal violence. One can infer from Sontag's statement that she and her sister learn from watching *Divorce Court* "mental cruelty [is] never enough," that it is not primarily female defendants whom the state refuses to hold accountable to spousal testimonies of mental cruelty.

In *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*, Gilmore outlines the patriarchal cultural attitudes, legal structures, and strategies of discrediting that always already make women's testimony disproportionately vulnerable to victim-blaming and dismissal in and outside of the courtroom. She notes that the ideological conditions of neoliberalism have worsened the paternalistic atmosphere that emerges around women's testimony. Her argument centers on how, "neoliberalism presents an aspirational but false agency to an individual cleansed of history" (11). The neoliberal narrative that all individuals have equal agency, which ignores histories of political disenfranchisement and material debilitation, obscures the reality of gendered power

relations that do not magically disappear when a man and woman enter the courtroom. Moreover, emphasizing individual agency makes it easy to understate the ubiquity of rape culture and its enactment through individual actions and cultural discourse and normalized gender performances. Thus, in the same stroke, the entanglement of neoliberalism and patriarchy renders women's testimonies of male violence more suspicious in the public eye *and* positions women as having the greater power to provoke harm. *Yes, she can,* becomes just another way of saying, *No, he didn't.*

Attributing the reasons why Dr. Sontag's abusive behavior is allowed to go unchecked to anxieties regarding its intangibility and prospective illegibility in a courtroom can similarly risk diverting attention from the quite tangible material conditions that both prevent Sontag's mother from going through with the divorce papers and that stop the young Sontag herself from pursuing legal emancipation. Setting aside the more obvious fact that a wealthy and publicly-respected doctor will necessarily have the upper hand over his dependents in any court of law in the United States, staying under his roof also assures Sontag and her mother of continued access to the material and social capital that he has accrued throughout decades of fascistic social climbing and exploitation of their uncompensated domestic labors. At one point in her late adolescence, Sontag makes a successful plea to a social worker to temporarily remove her from her household. The social worker takes her to a local girls home called The Harbor, where Sontag witnesses both the lack of resources on the part of social work institutions, low socioeconomic status, and limited opportunities for upward mobility that predominantly characterize minors who inhabit the foster system. Over their phone conversations while Sontag stays at The Harbor, her mother convinces her to come home by emphasizing this discrepancy of life quality between state structures of care and their upper-class, if emotionally bereft, home:

> Mom was always reminding me how soon I'd get away, and how expensive my getaway would be if I had to do it without Dad paying my college tuition. To drive the point home, Mom said Dad owed me. That I should at least stick around to get the thing I deserved. 'After all this baloney,' she would say, and hearing her put it that way made sense. I had access to things the girls at The Harbor didn't. I'd been promised a better return for my investment. (100–101)

In this framework, Sontag's 'investment' is the years she has tolerated and labored under her father's disciplinary regime; the college education her father will pay for to maintain the family's image of respectability represents the return on her investment that convinces her to choose material security and emotional harm over a fragile structure of state care and material deprivation. Moreover, it is mentioned that the other girls at Harbor House are predominantly girls of color, which Sontag doesn't reflect on but does let slip through the brief mention that her roommate is "the only other white girl" (94). The spectralized presence of the other girls who lack Sontag's racial and class privileges illuminates both Sontag's blindspots as a narrator and the larger lack of national attention and sympathy paid to domestic violence victims of color.[5]

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[5]Black women who injure or kill their abusive partner in self-defense are, for example, far more likely to be tried and incarcerated than their white counterparts (Mentu).

If *House Rules* is a testimony to anything, it is a testimony to the ways in which the state sanctions patriarchal disciplinary violence and renders women and childrens' accounts of domestic harm inadequate to disrupting the material conditions that invisibilize and facilitate the continued violation of their minds and bodies. This paper's reading of Sontag's memoir does not locate its potential subversiveness in the legible evidence of domestic violence—the tape recordings and the letters of apology that are offered to and ultimately ignored by the public— but in the spectral testimony to undisciplined rage that emerges as shadow figures in Sontag's account of her family life. Several brief scenes scattered throughout *House Rules* depict moments in which Sontag's mother's animal fury breaks through her standard demeanor of compliance. One, situated early in the memoir, is particularly striking for the language Sontag uses to depict it. The incident occurs during one of Dr. Sontag's standard punishment rituals, performed after the family misses their flight at the airport:

> Mom got up from the table and, oblivious to the fact that we were in public, put her hands on her head and let out a shrill that sounded very much like a farm animal being slaughtered. Then she placed her hands on her hips, gave her head a shake, and yelled, 'I'm so sick of this Steve,' in a voice that did not belong to her, a voice that sounded like it had run away from the body it belonged to years ago. (7)

Both Sontag's description of her mother's voice sounding "like a farm animal being slaughtered," and as if "it had run away from the body it belonged to years ago," speak to the self-fracturing effects of living under a regime of sustained, disciplinary violence. The incoherency of her mother's rage—the ways in which it appears to have fragmented itself from her legible subjectivity—adds a new dimension to understanding the misplaced ethics of narrative transparency. Insisting on clarity within testimonies of violence misses the point. The central problem haunting the Sontag family is not how Mrs. Sontag winds up screaming like an animal in the middle of an airport, rather than explaining her situation to either a judge or a therapist in more rational terms. The real problem is how the cause of her rage can sit calmly before her, knowing that the first thought of most people walking by, witnesses to the scene, will not be *you tell him girl,* but *crazy bitch*.

Like Sontag's *House Rules*, Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* documents its author's attempts to break free from the emotional remnants of a violent parental disciplinary regime and owes its existence *as* a document to its author's early indoctrination into the respectability values of education and literacy. However, not only does the gendered power dynamic between Laymon and his mother represent a reversal of that between Sontag and her father, but also the external pressure Southern anti-Black racism contributes to and complicates the intensity of and tensions within their mother-son relationship. Laymon's mother, long separated from his father, raises Laymon by herself and, as, variously, a continuing student, research fellow, and adjunct professor, often struggles to keep food on the table. Moreover, in stark contrast to Dr. Sontag's public profile, as a socially ambitious Black woman her academic success makes her susceptible to the scrutiny of the white public sphere and isolates her from the local Black community.[6] She in turn

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[6]In her essay, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual," Hortense Spillers examines how Black American intellectuals and writers, particularly those working within the academy, have historically aligned with the

focuses her remaining energy on training Laymon to emulate a similar mode of constant discipline and learning that develops into an abusive form of codependency between the two lifelong students.

And yet, unlike *House Rules*, *Heavy* does not serve as a disavowal of Laymon's connection to his mother but as an ambivalent love letter written directly to her that neither repudiates nor fully embraces what she has taught him about language and survival. "I am writing a different book to you," Laymon proclaims in *Heavy*'s opening pages, "because books, for better and worse, are how we got here, and I am afraid of speaking this to your face" (9). The question of whether writing helps protect Laymon and his mother from patriarchal and racist material conditions or merely disciplines their bodies into perpetuating those conditions within domestic spaces haunts his account of love and violence that follows.

The form of *Heavy* thus directly disrupts the private/public dichotomy through which the home is often read. Written in second person address to his mother that is designed to open up an honest conversation between them about her abusive behavior, Laymon's words throughout retain a sense of intimacy—a sense that his account, while partly legible to an outside reader, is not for them. However, Laymon's tracing of his and his mother's dysfunctional coping mechanisms, which range from dishonesty in intimate relationships to gambling and over-eating, to the material disenfranchisement of the Black community and the culture of toxic masculinity that pervades intimate relationships, or "how we are taught to love *in America*," (10; emphasis added) betrays how, equally, it is important to him that a national audience is listening. Laymon's simultaneous protection of his memoir as a conversation between him and his mother and his articulations of the ways in which outside forces—state institutions and white people in particular—are complicit in their experiences of and susceptibility to violence in turn enact a productive ambiguity surrounding the imagined boundary between the private home and the public sphere.

The vulnerable nature of both Laymon and his mother's relation to the public sphere is also what makes his narrative of domestic abuse distinct from Sontag's. Unlike Dr. Sontag, for Laymon's mother, the white respectability values that shape her parental disciplinary regime are not confirmation of her structural power but one of the few avenues she has through which to acquire some power, or at least feel as if she has some power, over her social and material circumstances. In one passage, Laymon describes how his mother had her picture hung on a local grocery store shame wall for repeatedly bouncing checks when paying for groceries. He reflects on,

> what it felt like to have a face like yours, one of the most beautiful recognizable faces in our world, plastered on the wall at the biggest grocery store in North Jackson because you claimed you had money in the bank you didn't really have. You were the only local black political scientist on TV during election season talking about politics. The way you overpronounced your words, defended poor black communities in the face of white resentment, and insisted on correcting

values of white, middle-class Americans and worsened conditions of poverty and disenfranchisement for the majority of the Black American community. She argues that contemporary Black intellectuals must work towards incorporating community knowledges and perspectives into their work if they want to contribute to racial equity in America.

everyone whose subjects and verbs didn't agree made black folk in Jackson think we had plenty of lunch money, gas money, rent money, and light bill money.

We didn't. (31)

The performance of respectability and intelligence thus becomes a way to craft the appearance of structural power, when the reality is that Laymon and his mother are always hovering on the edge of material destitution. Given the extent to which anti-Black racism is ingrained in U.S. culture, the public sphere positions Laymon and his mother's bodies as unruly regardless of whether their nails extend more than half a centimeter beyond their cuticles.[7] For Laymon's mother, adeptness in white standards of writing and verbal communication acts a way for the mind to disavow what the body signifies. For example, when Laymon goes over to his friend, Beulah Beauford's house, his mother tells him to use the nice set of encyclopedias Beulah's parents own to write an essay or short story. Laymon fails to do the assignment, as he is traumatized by having witnessed Beulah get sexually assaulted by a group of boys. When he gets home, Laymon's mother demands why he doesn't have any writing to show her, and he does not feel comfortable telling her about the witnessed sexual assault because "sexuality and bodies and feeling good and pain and tender touch and booties were something we never ever talked about" (42). Laymon's mother responds to his non-answer by saying Laymon "not doing the essay was another tired example of refusing to strive for excellence, education, and accountability when excellence, education, and accountability were requirements for keeping the insides of black boys in Mississippi healthy and safe from white folk" (27). In parsing apart the different relationship to testimony people of color occupy within racist spheres of judgement, Gilmore describes how, "the testimonial limitations imposed on people of color are traceable in the violence that greets their embodied presence prior to any opportunity to present a verbal account that would be heard" (158). As a result, Laymon's mother views making their verbal accounts legible and respectable to a white audience as their only chance at survival and social mobility. For Laymon, however, his growing awareness of the inevitability of the racial violence that disciplines what he and his mother can say in public without threatening their already tenuous safety makes his mother's commitment to white standards of literacy both in and outside of their home a questionable, if not self-destructive, investment. In his essay, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" James Baldwin positions language as "a political instrument, means, and proof of power" (5) and argues that the white stigmatization of Black English speaks not to an objective analysis of which forms of language are superior tools of communication but to the devaluation of Black life. He contends that, "the brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: it is his experience" (6). Like

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[7]In her book, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, Black studies scholar Sabrina Strings traces the modern Western correlation of fatness with moral weakness to Enlightenment era imperial narratives of the savagery of the colonized Other. Possessing a disciplined (i.e. thin) body thus developed as a specifically white standard that claimed to be about bodily health but in fact served to support national narratives of the racial inferiority of people of color. Strings traces the continued effects of this history in the contemporary U.S. health system's degrading and patronizing treatment of poor black women, the population most often blamed for the obesity crisis.

Baldwin, Laymon understands the debate over whether Black English is as acceptable of a language as the King's English to be a scapegoat for the white determination to maintain structural power.

A passage in *Heavy* that addresses racially-targeted police violence illustrates both the stakes of Laymon's mother's commitment to literacy in whiteness and Laymon's own perspective on the futility of literacy as a survival strategy. In the scene, Laymon's mother is pulled over while driving home under the false accusation that she changed lanes without signalling. While she is interrogated, she restrains Laymon from coming to her defense and arguing with the officer, refuses to get out of the car when asked—aware of the risk that she will be shot—and is eventually, and reluctantly, allowed to go when the officer identifies her as a student at the University of Maryland. When she and Laymon arrive home, both of them physically and emotionally traumatized, she tells him "to write about what [he] learned from the experience with the police" (83). Giving her son an analytical writing assignment after and on a difficult experience serves as a coping mechanism that helps her tolerate her basic lack of control over her and her son's safety in the outside world. Laymon, however, experiences his mother's writing assignment as a disciplinary violence that attempts to both subdue his unruly feelings towards the racist police officer and, more generally, Black men's susceptibility to state execution, while also forcing his critical analysis of the experience to conform to the same institutional framework of respectability that marks his and his mother's bodies as expendable in the first place. Laymon describes his reasons for hesitancy thus: "I wasn't sure what to write because I wasn't sure how to live life in a way that didn't give them a chance to shoot us out of the sky. It seemed like just driving, or walking into a house, or doing your job, or cutting a grapefruit was all it took to get shot out of the sky" (83). At a deeper level than his mother, Laymon understands that literacy and other structures of respectability cannot save them from the threat of racial violence because their bodies are always already that which threaten the respectability of the white public sphere. He describes how, "We all had cops rough us up, chase us, pull guns on us, call us out of our names. We all watched cops shame our mamas, aunties, and grandmamas. We all floated down I-55 creating lyrical force fields from the police and everything the police protected and served, rapping, 'A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown," (95) demonstrating the depth of his and all his friends' lived experience being carefully surveilled within the public sphere just by merit of their presence as Black people.[8]

A more immediate concern for Laymon is how his mother's perpetual disempowerment, combined with the ferocity with which she nevertheless devotes herself to self-discipline and social uplift, results in suppressed feelings of rage that she takes out on his body. Laymon describes how,

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[8]Black studies and surveillance studies scholar Simone Browne traces the contemporary proliferation of surveillance technologies, from the iPhone's facial recognition technology to the obsessive security culture of post-9/11 airports, to the use of wanted ads and skin branding to track escaped slaves during U.S. plantation slavery. Browne analyzes how the structure of racialization developed during the plantation era is still on display in the implicit racialization of contemporary technologies, such as facial recognition software's well-documented difficulties recognizing Black faces. She concludes that cultures of surveillance remain oriented towards keeping white bodies safe from Black bodies (*Dark Matters*).

> I knew you didn't want white folk to judge you if I came to school with visible welts, so you beat me on my back, my ass, my thick thighs instead of my arms, my neck, my hands, and my face [...] I knew that if my white classmates were getting beaten at home, they were not getting beaten at home because of what any black person on Earth thought of them. (69)

Laymon's mother justifies her physical abuse by claiming that Laymon's unruliness forces her to resort to more extreme disciplinary measures in order to protect his chances at surviving in a white supremacist world. In writing *Heavy*, however, Laymon strives to both understand and push against his mother's thinking by tracing the ways in which her decision to turn to physical abuse represents a missed opportunity—a funneling of both her unruly rage and her capacity for care into the forms of patriarchal violence that have disciplined her body.

In a generous alignment of scenes, Laymon positions his grief and anger over witnessing physical violence against his mother alongside his description of how physical punishment begins to structure her parental disciplinary regime. In the first, he describes being picked up from a friend's house only to find his mother's left eye was filled with a clout of blood. "The brown flesh around the eye was darker and puffed up twice its normal size. It looked like someone put a tiny plum under your eyelid" (44–45). Laymon surmises that his mother's boyfriend, Malachi Hunter, one of the richest men in their community, has beaten her. For the rest of the night, his mother, her mask of control briefly broken down, relies on him for emotional and physical care. Laymon describes how they end up falling asleep together:

> When you finally put your arm around my neck, *I felt all of your weight*. "Hold me tight, Kie," you said from our bed. "You're my best friend. I'm sorry," you said as you fell asleep with the covers over the swollen, slick parts of your face. "I'm sorry for all of this." "You my best friend, too," I told you. "My best friend ever." Lying next to you in that bed, I remembered the first time you told me I was your best friend. I knew you kissed my cheeks because you loved me. I knew you asked me to hold you tighter because you loved me. You were so gentle. For more than a year, this was how we spent some of our mornings in my room and yours. Then you met Malachi Hunter. A few weeks later, you started to beat me for talking back and for way-less-than-excellent grades. (45–46; emphasis added)

In a memoir that documents a sustained pattern of severe physical abuse, it is significant that Laymon only describes feeling *all* of his mother's weight during a light embrace. His choice of phrasing expresses one of the larger arguments of *Heavy*: that the weight of being disciplined into patterns of interpersonal violence "far more than how much, or how little we weigh" (10) is what immobilizes Laymon and his mother.

What he feels is not his mother's arm around his neck but the way her being has been fundamentally altered by Hunter's act of violence, weighted down by the awareness that she is not free but bound to patriarchal codes of female obedience within her immediate community. In her discussion of the near impossibility of recovering a self from the aftermath of traumatic violence, Herman describes how, "even after release from captivity, the victim cannot assume her former identity. Whatever new identity she develops in freedom must include the memory of her enslaved self. Her image of her

body must include a body that can be controlled and violated. Her image of herself in relation to others must include a person who can lose and be lost to others" (93). Laymon's mother cannot help but be a person shaped by an intimate knowledge of the possibility of violence and the price of disobedience. But what Laymon finds questionable is how she takes her continued experiences of violation as evidence not of the futility of her cultivated survival strategies but of the fact that she must more closely model them according to the prerogatives of white supremacy and patriarchy. Under this logic, Malachi Hunter's treatment of her as deserving of beating serves as a lesson not of his inhumanity and the inhumanity of the system that shapes him, but of the violent form of relation one must learn to adapt to and mimic in order to survive.

The entanglement between his mother's traumatic entry into a disciplinary logic of domination and her investment in Laymon's education and literacy is in turn something contradictory in *Heavy* as testimony. If his deftness with words is the result of extensive disciplinary violence, then is it so different from the bruised eye of his mother he uses those words to describe? And if the expendability of Black bodies is the precondition of the institutional sphere in which *Heavy*, as an American memoir, circulates, can either it or the evidence of abuse it contains be rendered legible as testimony to an injustice?

As with *House Rules*, *Heavy* is authored by and through a voice aware of the ways in which its very manifestation through writing it is, foundationally, matching the pitch of its abuser. Throughout his childhood, Laymon questioned his mother's investment in literacy, knowing from watching his mother continue to suffer from poverty and structural disenfranchisement, despite her successful career as a political scientist in the academy, that education would not save them. Sontag similarly despised her father's obsession with success in school and public respectability. However, both authors pursued public careers in writing, necessarily requiring them to speak to the national audience their parents had raised them to please. Both authors rely on this structuring irony to show how the respectability behaviors valued by their abuser, through their disciplining of bodies and subjectivities judged unruly by the white patriarchal public sphere, are concomitant with structures of state violence, meaning they represent vanguards of power held elsewhere rather than pathways to individual empowerment. To the extent that either memoir works against the structures of respectability that underlay Sontag and Laymon's traumatic educations, they do so through the voices that remain implied but silent, from the invisibilized girls of color in the foster system Sontag briefly inhabits to the many contemporary Black American families also suffering under the pressure to perform according to white domesticity, who pursue other avenues of survival besides literacy and whose stories consequently never make it to the public sphere: the specters that exist outside the frame of the story.

However, the act of writing is not as hopeless in *Heavy* as it is in *House Rules*, which Sontag frames with the public's continued hesitancy to believe her story. Laymon, more than but also *because of* his mother, understands that while the education in which she has invested her hopes for their survival will not save her, its energy can be redirected to something beyond state violence and legibility. In the final chapter of *Heavy*, he writes:

> I will remind you that I did not write this book to you simply because you are a
> black woman, or deeply southern, or because you taught me how to read and

write. I wrote this book to you because, even though we harmed each other as American parents and children tend to do, you did everything you could to make sure the nation and our state did not harm their most vulnerable children [...] You taught us to give our lives and work to the liberation of black children in this country. I am working on that, and I finally understand there can be no liberation when our most intimate relationships are built on— and really inflicted by— deception, abuse, misdirection, antiblackness, patriarchy, and bald-faced lies. Not teaching me this would have been the gravest kind of abuse. (238–239)

Though Laymon's mother taught him this lesson of liberation by inflicting multiple violences on his body, here Laymon considers how he nevertheless learned to recognize those acts *as* violence because her lifelong fixation on the survival of the Black community taught him to scout for other, better ways to help the community survive. If *Heavy* as a written testimony is a documentation of disciplinary violence, its form of address as a love letter is where it bends towards something else—towards the logic of interpersonal and intercommunity care; the scene of Laymon's mother wrapping her arm around him introduces love into its larger atmosphere of violence. As in the brief but heavy intimacy between Laymon and his mother in that moment, *Heavy*'s testimonial potential accrues through its offering of a space in which to share the weight of experiencing one's body as expendable. By using the memoir form to name respectability as a trojan horse of state-sanctioned forms of disciplinary violence, such as anti-Blackness and patriarchy, Laymon leans into the subversive potential of language as made heaviest not through the direct force of legibility but through the communication of what has been silenced between those who have been silenced: by giving weight to the specters in the room.

On the surface, both Sontag and Laymon offer standard trauma narratives in their memoirs. *House Rules* and *Heavy* document childhood experiences of emotional and physical domestic abuse and then move into a description of the ways in which those childhood traumas continue to haunt their adulthoods. While neither writer ends their account by fully embracing the possibility of recovery, they do both end on a tepidly hopeful note; Sontag gives us a scene of herself literally turning away from her childhood home, while Laymon offers an incantation of the survival strategies that may better serve the Black community than his mother's investment in uplift narratives. However, reading the apparent legibility of their accounts of trauma and recovery against both texts' evocations of how disciplinary violence against vulnerable dependents is illegible *as* violence within a paternalistic state calls into question the degree to which either writer locates justice in the act of writing to the American public, or what Laymon describes as, "that old black work of pandering and lying to folk who pay us to pander and lie to them every day" (1). Instead, this paper advocates reading for what subsists between the lines within Sontag and Laymon's written accounts of violence in the home, both in terms of the emotional pain of violence for which language is necessarily inadequate and in terms of the larger community of victims of domestic abuse and state violence who, unlike Sontag and Laymon, lack access to the publishing sphere. Reading for such spectral testimonies in turn works against the fact that the demand for transparency that accompanies life writings, particularly those framed as testimonies of violence, itself perpetuates the violence of state discipline. How can a daughter speak about the pain of psychological abuse when audiences are unlikely to believe in forms of abuse that lack

physical evidence? How can a Black American writer speak honestly about abuse in their home without confirming white American narratives of Black familial dysfunction? The problem with compulsory transparency is that it allows the dominant players in a given reading public the power to set the terms of what they will believe and who they will find responsible for it.

While shifting attention to spectrality does not mean giving up on language, writing, and storytelling as potentially radical forms of knowing, it does entail a praxis of reading centered around what Saidiya Hartman describes as "the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law" (12). Spectral testimony decenters transparency and respectability as guideposts for who deserves justice and recenter accountability to material histories of state violence fully legible only to those who lived them. Laymon and Sontag's memoirs make clear that the subversive potential of spectrality can only go so far in a pseudo-democratic nation-state context in which disciplinary violence against vulnerable bodies conditions hegemonic material structures. However, their memoirs also show how writing with a side-eye towards the national insistence on respectability can at least trouble the American desire for a feel-good narrative of trauma and redemption. What pushes against the limits of the page within each memoir is also what gives its writer a way out.

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Thingness of the Work of Art: Reflections on the Ontology of Untranslatability

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Abstract | The paper begins by disclosing untranslatability not as a given fact, but as a consequence resulting from a certain epistemological attitude towards the work of art. A subjectivist outlook towards art and translation encounters the work in its thingness that eventually resists its reification. Taking cue from the insights of phenomenological thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, and Ricœur, this paper seeks to elaborate on the etymology and ontology of the thing while distinguishing it from the notions of aesthetic object and selfhood that have percolated through time since Kant. Thereafter, the approach to the thing as the hermeneutic event of projection is shown as the crucial break from subjectivity, one that leads to a fresh understanding of the literary experience in terms of becoming. This shift absolves untranslatability from the negative connotations of hindrance, and the irreducible otherness of the thing becomes instead the sole enabling condition of the infinitude of our engagement with it. Communication and conversation as modes of being liberate the thing from the delusional specter of untranslatability, shifting translation from being an act of transfer of identity towards a movement generating difference.

Keywords | Untranslatability, Thingness, Other, Event, Ontology

The prefix 'trans' in translation stipulates, in the usually accepted sense, a crossing over, a change, a passage through, as it also does in a similar fashion in other usages such as transformation, transmutation, transfusion, and so on. The occurrence of such processes is predicated by two assumptions. Firstly, there must exist two zones or realms, well demarcated from one another. For example, during blood transfusion, there has to be two distinct bodies, or that the Christian metaphor of transubstantiation has as its point of departure the distinction made between the realms of mankind and of God. Secondly, an entity, also distinguishable as a discrete and detachable part of a whole, must undergo a transfer from one of the systems to the other. Thus, blood in transfusion and the idea of substance interchangeable as blood-wine and flesh-bread in transubstantiation, conceived as independently existing entities, make this transfer possible.

In the case of translation of a literary work, seen as a transference from the source to the target language, our identification of these two systems as structural planes determining the crossing over entails an inevitable and necessary act of regression. The act of translation, as one that 'works over' or 'edits' a text within the parameters and constraints of its meaning, faces the obligation of treating the literary work as a product of culture. This in turn implies that its origin lies in the language, customs, and traditions of the said culture, and this implication renders the work the status of an entity derived from a more general realm, to which the translator turns to in order to de-code and subsequently re-code the text in the target language. Literature, however, understood as the creation of a unique language, is certainly a leap from the lexicon of linguistics towards new possibilities of significations.[1] The study of languages alone cannot fulfil an engagement with literary works, for literariness precisely consists of defamiliarizing our everyday notion of language that conventionally represents a stable, since it is anesthetized, reality to us. The identification of source and target languages or even cultures as the two pre-given systems for translation is therefore taking a step back in relegating literature to be an extension of something other than itself. The literary work is considered then to be a particular manifestation within the general system to which it is assumed to belong. This particularity comes to be equated with how a work is configured within the 'assumedly larger' frameworks of language and culture. Thus, on one hand, the work is conferred a self, an identity of its own, to the extent that it is perceived to be an 'individual' specimen with specific intrinsic attributes. However, on the other hand, this self-identity of the work is understood as the representation of a typical relation it evinces with respect to the generality of the system.

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[1]Seen purely from a lexical point of view, a literary work is merely a combination of words that are already to be found in the dictionary and in social use. However, literature is involved in the creation of new significations, thereby extending the horizon of conventional use of language. It is in this potential to disclose hitherto unprecedented meanings that the primal or original quality of literature subsists.

No matter what strategy is employed in translating a work, the very endeavor of making it pass from one system to another eventually culminates in replicating its particularity with relation to a new general framework of the target language and/or culture. The act, although involving change on the level of appearances, is essentially a conservative one, for it attempts to re-instate the original particular-general relationship in a new foreign environment. If the text was considered first and foremost to be a particular manifestation of a language system and/or culture, the translated text attempts to re-enact this relationship with respect to the target language and/or culture. The question to consider here is: how do we come to believe that this relationship can be repeated identically elsewhere? The clue lies in having first accorded the work with a self. We have assumed that the uniqueness of the work corresponds to an essence of ethos that resides 'inside' it, and it is in the assumption of such an intrinsic quality that makes the possibility of the identical repetition of the latter plausible. The faith that the self can afford to remain identical irrespective of its 'outer, linguistic surface' is tantamount to investing the work with an immanent trans-linguistic identity.

Despite our attempts to straightjacket a work in a given perimeter and depth, it comes to reveal its otherness as soon as we try to process it like a malleable product. Instead of behaving as a mute and co-opting equipment, it generates irreducible differences at the site of translation. Untranslatability is this alterity of the text that it comes to manifest, that challenges the efforts of inscribing it within any general framework, be it language or culture. Its resistance to be subsumed within a conserved self-identity is an indication of our misjudgment in having accorded it selfhood in the first place. The attribution of self and identity to an entity and regarding it in relation to a system aid in the manipulation and transformation of the same. These are techniques which concern epistemology, because the fundamental question around which these practices circulate has to do with the 'what' of the literary work. On the other hand, the nature of the work not as a product but as a happening or event of signification is related to its ontological aspect; the 'how' that makes it. Thus, we can sense at this point that the nature of the problem of untranslatability is not an epistemological one involving transfer of knowledge. Rather, it is this very assumption of the literary work having a transferable epistemic status or state that encumbers our realization of the problem as essentially ontological in nature. This can be elucidated by reverting translation to a more basic realm, that of reading. Does not the act of reading also inherently involve a process of translation? Since we distinguish at the onset of reading a marked distinction between ourselves as the subject and the literary work as our object of perception, our engagement with it more often than not involves a transfer similar to the one discussed so far. Either we try to penetrate the otherness of the work by presumably sublating our selfhood in it, or we may try to assimilate it within our own life experiences and worldview. In both attitudes, the alterity of the work is disregarded in favor of sating our ego, of either consuming or conquering the other. The work is no longer accorded an autonomy of its own; it is rendered as an object which is sought either to be assimilated to the self of the person 'consuming' it, or to be forayed, penetrated, and eventually 'possessed.' In both cases, the work is invested with a status of an entity that is approached in favor of pre-supposed interests. Such commodification of art plays out the same epistemological outlook in conceiving it as knowledge, for it essentially conceives the artwork as a product of language and/or culture. Art comes to be regarded as a product of the culture industry that is firstly identical to itself in keeping with notions of selfhood, and which

can moreover be repeated identically. Associating the work of art with a self has the implication that its uniqueness comprises in being a receptacle of fixed characteristics, whereas the assumption that this self is maintained or is to be maintained intact in reading and translation is based on the belief that this self is repeatable. Both these outlooks are the culminations of a long tradition of Enlightenment which, as Adorno rightly points out, tends to erase out differences in favor of "the reproduction of sameness" (106). And once identified as knowledge, the work yields to relations of power where our faith in subjectivity is but whetted. And yet, do we not meet resistance in relegating the work to just another assimilable or conquerable element within the range of our unchanging worldview? Does it not challenge us when we try translating its singular variegations within the folds of our subjectivity? The negative connotation associated with the phenomenon of untranslatability is contingent with the positivistic attribution of identity and knowledge to the work. We see, therefore, that untranslatability, instead of being a given fact, is an inevitable outcome of a perspective associated with regarding a work through epistemic lens. Instead of behaving as an obedient, manipulable object, the work resolutely maintains its thingness, which in fact is the key to understanding its untranslatability.

Hannah Arendt begins her book *The Human Condition* with the simple yet profound musing that human existence is a conditioned one (9). If indeed so, what is human existence conditioned by? *Bedingt*, the word for 'conditioned' in the German language, contains within itself a clue to the question, for *Ding* refers to a thing. Also echoed previously by proponents of analytic philosophy such as Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus*, our thingly existence among things is the governing condition which co-figures all that takes place, be it in the physical sense or non-material abstract sense, for thoughts and emotions too are as much thingly as anything tangible, as our discussion on thingness would attempt to elucidate. "The horizon of ours, of humans as finite beings, is thingly. Thus man, as a being thrown into a finite horizon, always and everywhere is thingly and is sensibly conditioned. Man cannot escape things" (Sliogeris 9).

As human beings, we are always in confrontation with things. The great tragedy and tension of human existence as the counter-position of man and thing is hinted by Rilke: "That is what fate means: to be opposite/ to be opposite and nothing else, forever" (Rilke 42).[2] With the development of the supremacy of human race over nature and other animals, we have become prone to the habit of often categorizing things as belonging to either nature or of our own making. Such a binary implies the relegation of all the differences and plurality of the world based exclusively on their relation with the human subject and human use. In attempting such a categorization, we fall back upon the same anthropomorphic worldview that places the human subject at the center of the world and explicates all phenomena with relation to this organic center. Such a constructivist worldview had begun with Kant's falling back on the Copernican Revolution, implying every experience to be a product determined by perspective, and gradually gave rise to an epistemology where every occurrence had to pass through the filter of human perception, conceding in the process any claim to autonomy or a beyond-human alterity. The exacerbation of the centrality of human subjectivity in post-Kantian philosophy bears

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[2]This points to the impossibility of transcendence since our existence in the world is inevitably co-figured and conditioned by things.

witness to this phenomenon, where alterity came to be subsumed and selfhood became the cornerstone of all knowledge and truth.

The understanding of the world as the representation of human will and ideas as in Schopenhauer, or claiming the world exists primarily for the sake of the human subject in the philosophy of Fichte, attest to the tendency of Enlightenment and Humanism to 'reduce' plurality of the world to a unifying dimension that serves human interests. This dominant anthropocentric outlook is embodied in the significance with which the notion of truth has been envisaged in relation to the human subject. Hans Blumenberg traces in his essay, "The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel," the evolution of the notion of truth in the shift it has undergone from being an epiphanous "instantaneous evidence" towards that which is constructed and hence associated with a "progressive certainty that can never reach a total, final consistency, as it always looks forward to a future that might contain elements which should shatter previous consistency" (*History, Metaphors, Fables* 488). This shift attests to the growing importance with which the human subject becomes indispensable as the center of every event, which in turn gradually contributes to a weakening of supra-human ideals which were prevalent in earlier epochs. In contrast to the Platonic Idea that formed and individuated man, ideas now point to the cognitive and intellectual faculty of human beings to manage and manipulate resources better for their own benefit. The world is what it appears to me and hence a subjective phenomenon, or that which appears to many like me where experiences come to be understood in an intersubjective field. This not only reifies the thingness of the thing to the limits of human subjectivity, but at the same time delimits the condition of being in the world within the scaffolds of a self that remains identical to itself throughout. The notion of the self is rooted in the belief of a continuum that pervades and maintains the being of a subject as a stable and continuous accretion of experiences through the vicissitudes of time, and is accompanied by a certitude that this subject has at its disposal his perception in representing phenomena to himself. In *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Blumenberg further notes that "while the 'invisible force of truth' may still play a role in the vocabulary of the Enlightenment, there is rather a *topos* of modesty serving to conceal the self-consciousness of a spirit that illuminates with its own light" (16). The self thus regards itself as the sole arbitrator of things.

However, the thing's thingness lies in the fact that it cannot be rendered as a subjective representation fulfilled by an object.[3] The thing does not give itself over as an object of knowledge that can be exhaustibly defined. Thus, the human being, as a thing among things, too loses its foothold over superficially institutionalized and somewhat calcified Humanism. Modernism, in effecting the shift from Kantian *disinterest*—where the human seat of perception maintained itself distinct in its perception of form or aesthesis—to Heideggerian *Interesse*—where the human being loses its immanent subjectivity resulting in an "exteriority of the inward" (Levinas 134)—plays out the transition from an epistemology-driven worldview towards an ontological enquiry, a journey that was necessary to affirm and appreciate the thing for what it is by and in

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[3]The distinction between objects and things is based on the presence of the human subject. That which the subject represents to itself and can exhaustively describe is an object. An object, in this sense, is always represented, hence created, by subjectivity. Things, on the other hand, are sovereign and exist over and beyond the subject. They are not created by us, although they engender us with their presence when we confront them, like a landscape does, or a work of art.

itself.[4] Heidegger charts out the changing significations of the thing in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." The thing understood by the Greeks as *hupokeimon*, referred to an organization of characteristics around a core (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 20). The thing was essentially a happening; a gathering whose event itself created a core. According to this understanding, the thing does not possess any immanence or center, for its core is basically nothing by itself, rather only imaginable with respect to the becoming that comes to form it. However, the reception of this notion in Latin as *subjectum* marks, in Heidegger's view, the very rootlessness of Western thought. The thing as subject was now regarded as a bearer of properties. This understanding assumes an epistemological priority of the thing and thus relegates the becoming of a thing to a definition at once conceptual and exhaustive.

This proclivity for viewing the thing as a subject containing definite features in a sense prefigures a culture of subject-object duality that would be heralded by Descartes's formulation of reason as the ground for human existence. Since the subject in Descartes is conceived purely as a thinking substance cogitating everything that it is not, the very substantiality of the subject is taken for granted and not questioned. Likewise, in Hume's empiricism the subject is merely a receptacle of sensual impressions, where the very nature of the receptacle is passed over in favor of what it comes to accumulate. Heidegger's attempt to understand the thingness of the work of art along Rational and Empiricist dimensions reveals their inadequacy in addressing the problem at hand. The literary work does not agree to an exhaustive definition whereby a set of countable properties are applied to it. We can understand this from the fact that scores of books have been written on classics, and yet interpreting them hasn't come to an end. The rational outlook fails for there is no concept to be discovered in art. Likewise, our experience of art cannot be encapsulated by sensual experience alone, for it involves affect and understanding, a translation of material forms to responses as varied as ranging from empathy to disgust. While the Rational method places the work too far, the Empiricist outlook brings it too close.

Can the thingness of the work then be understood as formed matter, a shaping of a pre-given material according to a pre-given plan? After exploring the thingness of the work from Rationalist and Empiricist framework, Heidegger turns to this third category (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 26). Had it been so, the 'manufacturing' of the literary work would have to conform to a pre-existing design, meant to fulfill a specific purpose. Hammers or tumblers belong to the category of formed matter, whose making involves the choice and form of material as determined by their function. Assuming artwork to be fashioned similarly, would be to understand it as an equipment. The functionality of an equipment consists in it being minimally perceived during an operation. Ideally, one should not be perceptible of the presence of the hammer during using the same to put a nail on a block of wood; the equipment must act as an extension of our natural faculties without forcing us to cognize its unique presence. The presence of the equipment thus necessarily dissolves itself in the act where it finds its use, in contrast to a literary work

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[4]The Kantian notion of Beauty associated with disinterested pleasure maintains the non-involvement of the subject in the aesthetic phenomenon, so as to preserve the thing of beauty from being subsumed into human purpose. Heidegger, on the contrary, associated interest as an indispensable element in the event of perception of art. Here, interest does not refer to pragmatic use but involvement independent of motive, that is, participation.

where words are not means to an end, but stand out in inviting the reader towards perception.[5] Moreover, to subscribe to this notion of art being pre-determined by a function would be somewhat self-contradictory for the definition of art since Romanticism has precisely consisted, in what Gadamer calls "aesthetic differentiation," of distinguishing art from reality (71). Such a segregation of art as something sovereign by itself begins in Kant, who in his *Critique of Judgement* accorded Beauty in art as purely formal, without serving any human purpose [*formale Zweckmäßigkeit*] (53). This was not without a sense of anxiety, for in divesting content or any ethical element from the artwork, Kantian subjectivity found itself face-to-face with something that could not be framed exclusively in human terms. On account of this anxiety, the otherness of the artwork as thing is overlooked by Kant in his favoring of the Sublime over the Beautiful, for the former by inspiring awe and terror elevates [*aufheben*] the perceiving subject to a morally good state, thereby effecting a return to the folds of Humanism and subjectivity (Ellison 12). The thing cannot be approached by the rational, sensual, and pragmatic attitudes because each of these dispositions is a manifestation of a belief and certitude of the human self as the sole arbitrator of experience. The untranslatability of the literary work is not a given fact, but acquires valency only in relation to a self that confuses being with knowledge. The thing in its thingness does not give itself over to be translated into subjective knowledge whereby the self (as that which is identified with the work, and the one belonging to the reader) can seek to maintain its undisputed centrality.

It was necessary for phenomenology to depart from analytic logic, psychologism, and positivism to shift from subjectivist modes of thought aligned on the lines of 'humanism and human progress' to go back to understanding thingness beyond the myopic and reifying gaze of the human self. "The thing must be allowed to remain in its self-containment. It must be accepted in its own constancy" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 26). The phenomenological turn in the history of European thought was fundamentally a shift of sovereignty from the rational human subject to the things themselves. Husserl's famous invocation of "we must go back to the 'things themselves'" was indeed 'regressive' as phenomenology was accused to be (168).[6] By challenging the undisputed certitude of the self's ability to represent the world to itself, one encounters for the first time the thing in its intransigent thingness. "The unpretentious thing evades thought most stubbornly" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 31). The literary work in its thingness cannot be approached by reason, since seen in this light, it continues to behave as an inert receptacle of properties that could be represented or transferred. The departure from associating art with epistemology likewise absolves the possibility of making it belong to a general system, and challenges our fixation with art's identity in correlating with other knowledge systems like sociology, psychology, and so on.[7] "If the work of art itself

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[5]Unlike an equipment, which is the perfect example of matter formed according to a design to fulfil an end, perception in the event of reading is without a telos. What words seek to do in a literary work is to make us aware of their presence without any ulterior motive. It is from this vantage point that Deleuze describes the event (or perception in art) as sense itself ("Logic of Sense" 22).

[6]While Rationalism and Positivism were based on the Enlightenment principle of human progress, phenomenology's departure from humanism and its empathy for things beyond anthropocentrism was in contrast to the then contemporary trend in European thought. It is in this respect that its journey 'back' to the things themselves was castigated as regressive.

[7]This has to do with the domination of the analytical and universal method of natural sciences in humanities since the Enlightenment. The development of disciplines such as psychology and sociology as components of a universal human science overlooks the hermeneutic and contextual feature of human expression and

could speak, it would have said, 'I am, and this much is enough for me, maybe someone needs me, maybe indeed I arouse catharsis, but all this does not depend on me and I do not give a damn, I am a thing. I simply am'" (Sliogeris 2–3).

We have encountered the uncompromising thingness of the literary work by beginning to conceive it as an object of representation for the human self. Thingness entails untranslatability in that it cannot function as an entity to be transferred from its otherness to the workings of our selfhood without it being lost to an object-identity. And stepping aside from the zeal of representation which is wont to our subjectivity, we find the thing in its irreducible otherness. As Blanchot says, "The work is without any proof, just as it is without any use. It can't be verified. Truth can appropriate it, renown draws attention to it, the existence it thus acquires doesn't concern it. This demonstrability renders it neither certain nor real- does not make it manifest" (21). Does that mean a literary work is indifferent to our approach? Does untranslatability as the lack of amenability to subjectivity make art absolutely arbitrary to our existence?

In his essay "The Thing," Heidegger elucidates the etymology of 'thing.' It stems from the Roman *res*, which means whatever that concerns somebody, an affair, a law case (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 173). The phrase *in media res*, literally meaning 'in the middle of things,' is often attributed in academia to an exposition in theatre (or in epics like *Iliad*). Case or *causa* is that which comes to pass, that happens. In Romance languages, the *causa* shifts to *la cosa*, trickling further in French as *la chose*. While the present-day usage of *chose* refers to everyday objects, the usage previously, as in with *res*, involved a sense of being engaged with the thing and not the bare-naked object alone. When we say, he knows his things, we mean he knows that which concerns him (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 173). Unlike the formal purposiveness in Kant, the artwork as thing is not something indifferent and purely formal representation but has care or concern in sense of being involved with it.

Untranslatability as arrived from subjectivist attitude reveals its other face when selfhood is allowed to take the backseat. The thing, by dint of its otherness, provides an occasion for involvement. No longer deemed as an aesthetic object, the artwork as thing opens up the space and possibility of movement. And is not translation, understood in the sense of an event occurring across a plane rather than as a crossing over between two planes, essentially movement?

A return to the understanding of thing as a happening nullifies the notion of it being a *subjectum* or given. In his essay, "Heidegger and the Question of Subject," Paul Ricœur says, Dasein is not given [*gegeben*], but given over to, as a projection [*aufgegeben*]. Phenomenology is hermeneutic (227). How 'is' then the literary work in the world? Its existence cannot be assumed in the conventional structure of a self as receptacle of properties, but could be envisaged in terms of possibilities that engagement with it entails. The thingness of the work does not therefore cut off access to it, but instead provides the possibility for its event as a projection. The thing has to become itself, and this self-becoming evidently belongs to the workly nature, as in how the work [*Werk*] comes to work/effect [*wirken*]. "The thingly feature in the work should not be denied;

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behavior in favor of creating a generalized paradigm like that of physics or mathematics. Art, in being the affirmation of differences, is ontologically set against such systematizations.

but it belongs admittedly in the work-being of the work, it must be conceived by way of the work's workly nature. If this is so, then the road towards determination of thingly reality of the work leads not from thing to work but from work to thing" (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 38). The thingly nature of the artwork can never be given over directly to the subjectivity of human perception, and our access to it must take the form of an event. It is here, Heidegger opines, that the work works. The working of the work absolves it from being a completed, ontic self that could otherwise be simply presented or reflected, and hints at the indispensability of an event without which the work is inconceivable. In other words, the opening-up of the work points at its phenomenal character.

A return to pre-logocentric mode of understanding reality makes the work, according to Heidegger, a gathering of elements, where the elemental nature of the constituents themselves comes to be realized for the first time in taking this primal leap[8] [*Ursprung*]. The gathering does not end up collating the elements to a point of identity, but like trees in a forest, clears up a space amidst themselves [*Lichtung*] (*Essence of Truth* 43). Clearing allows us to see the thing in its thingness, it is that which reveals the thing by providing the light to see it in [*Licht*]. Heidegger's play on *Ereignis,* the word for event, has a connotation to the verb *eräugnen*, and hence seeing, since *Augen* means eyes. Also, *Ereignis* refers to becoming oneself, achieving ownness [*eigen*]. But unlike subjectivist thought which associates identity with correspondence, Heidegger's notion of truth as an event of unconcealment [*Entbergsamkeit*] makes it necessary that the perceiver give himself over to becoming along with the thing, for phenomenology being hermeneutic, as the above quoted passage of Ricœur points out, requires a projection from the part of the perceiver as the compossibility of the event[9] (53). The perceiver becomes a perceiver only in the event of perception, and does not precede the event as a possessor of perceptive faculties. The event engenders us. We are then the "offspring of the event," as Deleuze puts it (*Proust and Signs* 97).

The thing given over to as projection in a work entreats us to participate in the event of its becoming. Human freedom does not consist in imagining ourselves to be free from bonds with things, for then our bordered subjectivity would only have to deal with objects. Rather, true freedom, as Heidegger points out in *Essence of Truth*, consists in the projective binding [*Entwurf*] of being with the otherness of the thing (45). Instead of trying to reify he thing as an object, or to regret its otherness as unknowable, the task at hand is to give oneself over to the possibility of becoming anew in relation to this other.

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[8]"Art lets truth originate. Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of what is, in the work. To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of the source of its nature in a founding leap—this is what the word origin (German *Ursprung*, literally, primal leap) means" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 75). The work appears as if it happens for the first time. The appearance of the work and the world it thus discloses in the event is 'original,' which means both unique as well as unprecedented. The coming-into-being of the work is in this sense figuratively described by Heidegger as a primordial jump [*Ur-sprung*].

[9]Heidegger says, "Primordial unhiddenness is projective deconcealment as an occurrence happening in man, i.e., in his history" (*Essence of Truth* 55). The exposition of the thing and of man are concomitant here. Art reveals its face to us in conjunction with revealing our own selves to us. This is the compossibility of the event that occurs as a mutual illumination of the work and the reader. The work seeks to become in us, and we seek to find ourselves in it.

The thing cannot be mastered because it has no core; it is bereft of immanent centrality that we had considered it to possess.

The space that is opened up in the event of the thinging of the thing[10] does not belong to a particular location of general spaces, but the event is such that nothing happens other than the happening of the space itself. In other words, unlike the Cartesian model that abides by the universal and transcendental network of space and time where all phenomena can be mapped, the occurrence at play in art cannot be sought to be located in such pre-given frameworks of experience. Art is involved in showing us something that does not and cannot exist without it. Thus, whatever we come to see in art is due to the light and space it itself generates in our projection with it, and not an excavation amenable to dissection tools. Art makes things visible which had hitherto surrounded us invisibly, and it does so by effecting a new light into existence that makes this vision possible. But this nothing at the heart of things is not to be taken in the sense of non-being, for if it is a void, then it is always a shaped one, con-figured by that which brings it into existence.[11] Had the work really possessed a center, its discursivity must have been finite. The very reason why a literary work subsists in time and outlives all interpretations is that its alterity has nothing 'substantial' to offer other than occasioning the becoming of being of the reader in relation to how it appears in the act of projection. The otherness of the work is inexhaustible, because it is empty (Levinas 163).

Once the literary work is shifted from a concern for knowledge to a concern for being, untranslatability no longer appears as an impedimentum, but the necessary condition for the infinite scope of the event of becoming. This shift necessitates a fresh understanding of the experience of literature. The word Kant uses for aesthetic experience is *Erlebnis*, which comes from the verb *erleben*. *Erleben* means to be alive when something happens. "It points to the immediacy that precedes all interpretation" (Gadamer 53). The word *Erlebnis* occurs many times in the works of Goethe and is close in its temperament to the Romantic spirit. Poetry acquires intelligibility from what is experienced, "what is directly given, the ultimate material for all imaginative creation" (54). *Erlebnis* refers to both the experience and the result out of it, and the concept of the given [*Gegebenheiten*] is dormant in its empiricist attitude towards the world. However, in a worldview where being in the world does not grant any special centrality to the human subject, but advocates an understanding of being-with [*Mitsein*] other things, the indifference of human existence in not being involved in *Erlebnis* but only being a witness and a collector of happenings calls for a radically new formulation of experience. Gadamer suggests *Erfahrung* as that sort of experience which we undergo instead of simply having (xiii). In projecting actively to the other, a shift of literary experience from

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[10]If the thing, unlike a stable representation that forms an object, is to be encountered only in an event, then it is not merely a noun, but something that is revealed only in action. Heidegger 'creates' verbs out of nouns to focus on the event where it is revealed to us. The thinging of the thing, like the worlding of the world, is the becoming of the thing in the event. In other words, the thing does not have a self which can exist independent of the event in which it is disclosed.

[11]The notion of being is long-supposed to be associated with the notion of self. The work of art lacks an immanent nature that could be identically repeated, and thus its existence and its becoming do not partake of the same features which go hand in hand with being. There is no doubt that the work has an ontology, but it is empty of a core. This emptiness is contingent with the form of the work; it is not transcendent with respect to the work. Emptiness then is here not a negative condition or a lack, but rather the superabundance of possibilities.

Erlebnis to *Erfahrung* implicates a shift from result to participation, from ego to dialogue, from differentiated object towards 'conversation.'

Gadamer's metaphor for conversation is interesting in how he compares it with play. Players are crucial merely for the play to arrive at presentation [*Darstellung*]. Just like the game individualizes the players, the essence of literary experience consists not just in the work being individual, but individualizing us in the process. "The work of art is not a subject that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead, the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it" (103). Thus, the 'trans' of translation in reading (or extrapolated to experience in general) as subsuming one into the other has to give over to a sort of being in co-habitation with the other. Indeed, the Latin prefixes 'con/com' as meaning togetherness in contrast to 'trans' as exclusion of one for the other evince a fundamentally different attitude towards being. The negative connotation in Untranslatability makes it look detrimental to communication in literary experience. Levinas points out the fallacy as resulting from a problem of attitude in his essay "The Other in Proust,"

> But if communication bears the mark of failure or inauthenticity in this way, it is because it is sought as a fusion. One begins with the idea that duality must be transformed into unity, and that social relations must culminate in communion. This is the last vestige of a conception that identifies being with knowledge, that is, with the event through which the multiplicity of reality ends up referring to a single being and where, through a miracle of clarity, everything that encounters me exists as coming from me. It is the last vestige of idealism. (164)

To conclude with the issue of literary translation, untranslatability of the thingness of a work should thus, firstly, be taken as an indication that we might as well give up our efforts to reproduce the identity of a literary experience in another language. The work becomes a gathering of differences which cannot be boiled down to a self, neither can we, as readers, continue to nurture the belief in our own subjectivity by tampering with a work without ourselves being altered in the process. Once we accept the work not as identity but difference, the question of immanent essence being lost in translation too becomes redundant. Literary translation is repetition of a work, but repetition as Deleuze explains is a singularity, a unique instance of gathering of pure forces of becoming to the realm of creation. Translation, understood in this sense, would not be a return to the same, for the work absolved from selfhood would have its being only in occasioning a becoming:

> [R]epetition is being, but only the being of becoming. The eternal return does not bring back the same, but returning constitutes the only same of that which becomes. Returning is the becoming identical of becoming itself. Returning is thus the only identity, but identity as a secondary power; the identity of difference, the identical which belongs to the different, or turn around the different. Such an identity, produced by difference, is determined as 'repetition.' (41)

No longer chained to the duty of replicating and transferring knowledge, translation of works as well as translation as a mode of relating to the world would have the significance of moving beyond one's habits, of re-fashioning oneself infinitely in discovering and empathizing with the beyond-ness of the unknown and unknowable.

"The thing things world" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 178). To approach the thingness of the thing would mean firstly to give up the world of the subject's fantasy, the world where all things are mere transferable objects of knowledge. And it is only by giving up this make-believe world and casting aside the calcified shells of the self that the untranslatability of things ceases to appear as a specter, as hindrance, for us being free now finally to be involved as thing among things, their erstwhile resistance flakes off, which was but a delusion born from the point of view we had adopted towards them. Borrowing the words of Alain de Botton, a genuine homage to an artist (and therefore art) "would be to look at our world through his eyes, not look at his world through our eyes" (213). We should thus be thankful to the untranslatability of things, for without it, we would never have undertaken journeys to become anew; for without it, translation in the truest sense of movement would never have been possible.
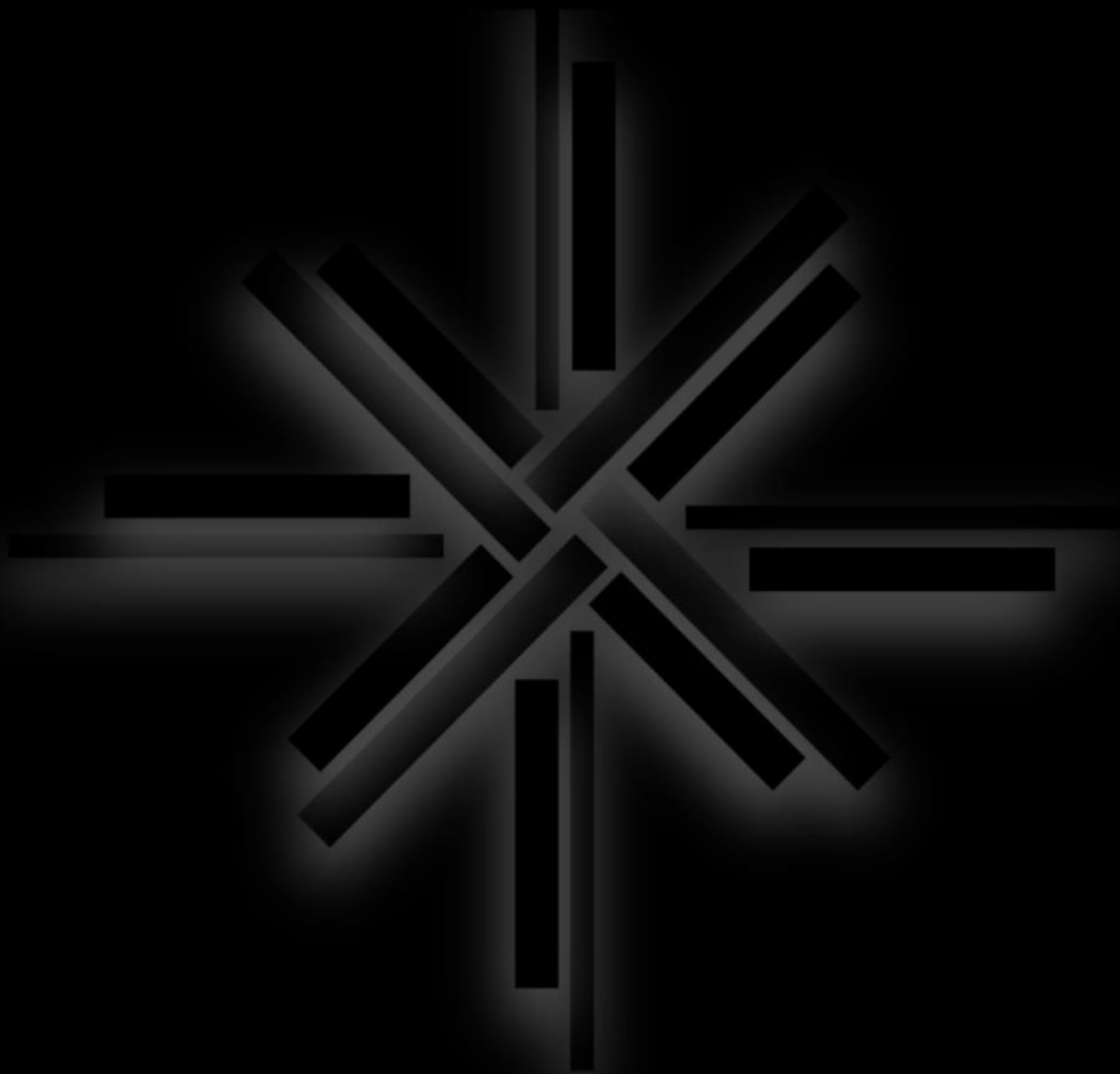
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