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Consuming Trauma; or, The Pleasures of Merely Circulating

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Wallace Stevens begins his poem, "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," with delicious nonsense: "The garden flew round with the angel, / The angel flew round with the clouds, / And the clouds flew round and the clouds flew round / And the clouds flew round with the clouds." But I want to exit from these giddy circles and come down to earth, asking the reader to join me on a journey less certain of its pleasures. Come down, then; let us run the length of this field, sallying back and forth between two ill-matched citations: the first an inviting statement of purpose from a new academic journal, the second an oddly moving, oddly spectral statement from Derrida:

Journal x is not committed to any particular set of answers or even approaches to the question of pleasure, only to the question itself. . . . Our immediate editorial goal is a good deal more modest, indirect, and open-ended: to serve as a sort of ongoing research archive into what Žižek might call "enjoyment as an intellectual factor" by publishing scholarly and personal essays that themselves give pleasure. (Kamps and Watson 2)

First of all, mourning. We will be speaking of nothing else. It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead (all ontologization, all semanticization . . . finds itself caught up in this work of mourning but, as such, it does not yet

think it; we are posing here the question of the specter, to the specter).
(Derrida 9)

L'Allegro, Il Penseroso; gang of pleasure, gang of pain; Team Jouissance, Team Specter. Running over and through this field, I really want to run around it: to run, if nowhere else, amok. But for me there is no other way. If I am to write this essay, I have to navigate the work of mourning in order to arrive at pleasure's archive, sliding between opposing manifestos, hoping to create a small universe in which I can suture two inverse inclinations — namely, our irrepressible longing for pleasure and our traffic in specters: our omnivorous conversations with the implacable dead.

As I start to write this an announcement comes in from Pretoria. Five of the murderers of Steven Biko have confessed under the auspices of a general amnesty. A few days later, *The New York Times* article on Biko's death features a strange double picture from a museum exhibit in Pretoria. At its outer reaches the camera has recorded a grand, upflung portrait of Biko's head — suggesting a persona already classicized, at a distance, monumental, heroic. A didactic body, yes, but also, in its way, a body for pleasure, evoking identification with the spirit of a deeply ethical man. Beneath this picture the museum has flung another replica of Biko's person (this time solid, tactile, plastic, inert) depicting a body facedown, on the floor, bound, contorted, bleeding, opened: a terrifying representation of a person battered and left to die on the floor of a South African jail (Burns 4).

Between the heroic picture and its obscene plastic double, this exhibit attempts to instantiate two different versions of mourning. First, it offers a body that is easy to introject, to sublimate into a system of great, representative men. But beneath this sublime portraiture we meet something more tenuous and closer to home: a body that seems harder to swallow. Instead of Biko's greatness we are reminded of the power of his political adversaries and his own loss of agency: of flesh that is open to brutality, inertia, decay; of a world unapproachable through grief but openly melancholy over the body's vulnerability and its unfinished projects — a space with too much ancestry. In presenting a butchered body that refuses to be consumed (tipping the viewer back and forth between anger and melancholy, between heroism and the desuetude — the disquiet — of unusable grief), this double picture attempts, as Derrida says, to "ontologize remains," to give them density, spatiality, to identify bodily remains "by *localizing* the dead."

How do we speak to the dead? Or speak about them? What weight should they have in our texts? Last week I waved the picture of Biko's bodies at my students, trying to drive home the contrast between the semiotics of the upflung body and the relentless grotesque, trying to say, "Look, body politics is not just a topic in this course but a set of tropes we constantly deploy." And yet my voice breaks when I talk about the body that inhabits the bottom half of the frame, and I think, I don't like my dead to be this local. It upsets the balance, calls out too many ghosts. But every time I get rid of one ghost, another takes its place. This time I am shopping. I see a placard in the back window of a large van. "My son was killed by a drunk driver. I am MADD." Once again

the unexpected ontologizing of remains, the making present, the relentless localizing. I want to walk away, and yet my own flesh surprises me with its vehemence, an anger directed not at the drunk driver, but at the narrator, the driver of this car. I think, "Why is she saying this to me?" before I construct the proper empathic response. Of course this woman has as much right to hurl invectives, to call out the ghost, as anyone.

What do we owe to the dead? For IRA nationalists (those who became political prisoners during the 1970s and supported Bobby Sands throughout the Hunger Strike of 1981), the dying demanded a special brand of silence; they aroused a painful new consciousness about the irrelevance of everyday speech.

When a guy was on hunger strike in the wing, the noise level went down. Everybody was conscious all the time that there was someone next to you dying. When the food came around you had to be conscious about not shouting, "What do you think of the meat today?" Your complaints were relegated to something meaningless. You couldn't go to the door and shout, "There's something with this grub." (Feldman 248)

It seems all too clear what one owes to the dying, but with the dead, the case seems utterly different and perhaps more diffuse:

The night Bobby Sands died was just . . . you never heard a sound for hours. Nobody spoke and nobody would go near the door. The way we knew he was dead, a screw came down and there was a grill at the end of the wing, and with his baton he started banging the grill slowly, Dong! — dong! — dong! — like a church bell. It was just a hollow sound. From that point on whenever someone died the screws would ring the grill and another one would walk up the wing slowly pulling a trolley behind him, saying, "Bring out your dead. How many dead do youse have for us today?": It was like the plague. (249)

Once we enter this hollow space and try to imagine Sands's slow and deliberate death, the thematizing question — what do we owe to the dead? — seems both impertinent and much too obtuse. And yet deferring this question seems equally counterproductive. We need to take note of the ease with which Bobby Sands's heartbeat, his voice, can be displaced by a screw, a prison guard, banging the grill slowly. As the guard cries out in his mocking voice, the empty space left by a man's death becomes frighteningly co-optable, available to others; it demands renewed efforts at counter-speech. Yet how do we narrate or speak for the dead? What allows this speech to grant them proper weight, substance, dignity? If this weight is too heavy, can we go on writing? Do we want to? If the weight is too light, can we do justice to the injustices endured by the specter?

In interviews with members of the IRA prison collective recorded in Allen Feldman's *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, we learn that for those who bore witness to Sands's death, "a new sense of urgency . . . set in all around. It meant that you were scriobbing

[writing] all day. . . . [I]t gave everybody a sense of doing something" (247). It is the question of writing, of finding proper tropes, that obsesses Sands's fellow prisoners:

The Hunger Strike completed the textualization of the prisoner's body. As Bobby Sands and subsequent hunger strikers lay dying, the rest of the Blanketmen engaged in the intensified production of political texts that were smuggled out of the prison. These texts constituted a literature of conversion, letters to international organizations, political groups, unions, governments, and prominent individuals which publicized the Hunger Strike and asked support for the protest. Certain prisoners writing with pen refills on cigarette papers were able to produce 200 letters a day. It was a remarkable literary production which seemed to flow directly from the dying body of the hunger strike. (250)

The ventriloquism we lend to the dead, the tropes we clothe them in, can have the power to re-dress their bodies, to speak volumes.

Differently positioned (not only *not* incarcerated, but at relative leisure to pursue polymorphous political passions), liberal academics also reproduce for themselves and their students stories of trauma, structural violence, systematic injustice, slaughter, inequality. These painful stories — about deterritorialization, decolonization, people pushed past the margins, bodies brutalized, children victimized, populations dying, in exile — suggest a world of subsemantic history that demands the weight of political speech. At the same time (or within the same heterodox space but under another name), we inhabit an academic world that is busy consuming trauma — busy eating, swallowing, perusing, consuming, exchanging, circulating, creating professional connections — through its stories about the dead. We are obsessed with stories that must be passed on, that must not be passed over. But aren't we also drawn to these stories from within an elite culture driven by its own economies: by the pains and pleasures of needing to publish, by salaries and promotions that are themselves driven by acts of publication, by, among other forces, the pleasures of merely circulating?

From within this complex matrix of pleasure and pain, I want to come back to my earlier question. Given the danger of commodification and the pleasures of academic melancholy — of those exquisite acts of mourning that create a conceptual profit — what are our responsibilities when we write about the dead? In describing the fate of Bobby Sands, or the bodies of "cunts" (designated male victims of political violence) and "stiffs" (dead bodies that deliver a "message" of feminization to the other side) that have transformed Belfast's political geography, does Feldman meet these responsibilities, does he take the right tone? Do I? How are we allowed to taste the dead's bodies, to put their lives in our mouths? How do we identify the proper tone, the proper images, for holding — for awakening — someone else's bodily remains?

This question has been called forth unexpectedly, reluctantly, unpredictably, by the last issue — also the first issue — of *Journal x*. Turning its pages with a prospective happiness and dread (a bizarre, all-too-familiar happiness bred of proprietorship: there's my name, I'm part of this editorial board;

there's my space, I've been asked to write a review-essay on "Reading for Pleasure"), I'm enjoying myself. I like reading about late-night TV in the essay on Céline and "Lettermania"; I'm interested in Civil-War American freaks, and then I turn to the next to the last essay, "Estranged Fruit: Making and Unmaking in Mississippi's Jails" — thinking randomly, circumlocutiously (as I sit in the dusky half-light of a midwestern afternoon, awash in that meditative frenzy bred of reading too much southern literature) — I think — oh, here's a piece on the South, and I dive into the article, feet first, before my exuberance turns to dust.

"Estranged Fruit: Making and Unmaking in Mississippi's Jails" is an essay that begins with portraits of black men who have died in Mississippi's jails. Andre Jones, the son of local NAACP activists, was brought to the Simpson County Jail on August 22, 1992, on multiple charges that included carrying a concealed weapon and possessing a stolen vehicle. He was 18. Less than twenty-four hours later Jones was found hanging in his cell — dangling from the shoelace of his own Nike sneaker.

Reading this essay about Andre Jones and other people who have died in Mississippi's jails, I no longer feel able to write about my own acts of reading for pleasure. Instead, I want to take up the status of griefwork, of the work of mourning, in academic writing. What happens when we "textualize" bodies, when we write about other people's deaths (or other people's cultures) as something one "reads"? The author of "Estranged Fruit," Barry Gildea, argues that "jails are sites for complex and plural readings, especially where contested hangings occur. The incidental death category marks the first opportunity to explore a more imaginative or creative interpretation of the jail hanging as a mythic and literary act of incidental annihilation through intentional civil disobedience" (124). What does it mean to convert someone's death while in custody into a "literary act"? If this *was*, in fact, a suicide, how should we respond to the suggestion that Jones's failure to leave a suicide note must be "read" as an act of resistance? (That is, what constitutes proper evidence for drawing such a conclusion? Who is doing the "writing" here — and why?) Or how do we evaluate this conclusion: "By resisting the urge to determine and dictate the meaning of his death, Jones has insured that he will be heard. He imposes no meaning, but still 'imprisons' you within a text, a world of his own (un)making, a world which soon becomes peopled with the texts of other hanging bodies" (116)? In what sense can a hanging body be "a text"? What happens when "imprisons" becomes a floating signifier that slips away from its referent so easily? No longer a description of the physical crisis experienced by a black man in custody, it becomes a loosely held metaphor describing the psychological status of an elite group of readers.

This transferability suggests a too easy equivalence between epistemological prisons and actual ones, between the dead and the living. What are the dangers inherent in figuring — or dis-figuring — the specter? How far should we go in invoking the ghost, how far in consuming its traumas? If circulating the suffering of others has become the meat and potatoes of our profession, if this circulation evokes a lost history but also runs the dangers of commodification, then how should we proceed? In producing figures that are either too vacuous

or too lurid, too theatrical or too theoretical, can one reproduce trauma or loss in the wrong way? To put this somewhat differently, how do we control our own acts of *écriture*, of seeming to read bodies, when we may really be reading, then acting upon (interpreting and reinscribing) our own figurations?

To answer these questions, my argument needs to extend beyond “Estranged Fruit”’s local strategies. To stay honest, I will have to turn back on my own mode of troping the death of Steven Biko, my own act of invoking the specter. (Is this a too opportunistic, too lurid way of inviting the audience into this essay? And who decides?) But I also want to focus on two urgent questions. First, what is the role of the critic’s own writing in producing someone else’s death as a “text”? Second, what resources should elites bring to bear in ventriloquizing the world on behalf of non-elites — how conscious should we be about usurping others’ worlds with our words? These are questions with subtexts: in asking whether there are proper and improper styles for eliciting the stories of the dead, we need to reexamine the appropriations of anthropology’s powerful methods within the burgeoning field of cultural studies. And in asking whether we can participate in critique without overriding the effects and affect of local mourning, we need to reexamine the thematics of loss that so preoccupies a post-Marxist academy. For if the abiding question of this essay is what we owe to the dead, this question has to be nuanced once again. The question is not only what is *our* stake in their narratives, but what is *their* stake in ours.

With these questions in mind, let us turn again to “Estranged Fruit: Making and Unmaking in Mississippi’s Jails,” for here is an essay that speaks about the recently dead, of a young black man, and then another black man, of white men and women, all found hanging. The deaths of these black men while in custody have been interpreted by their own African-American communities as lynchings but labeled officially as suicides. Gildea’s verdict, as well, is that these deaths are suicides, that they “indicate a strong commitment to live or die by a *nomos* other than that of the state of Mississippi: namely, the dignity, honesty, and sovereignty of a pure form of American individualism. Inmate suicide is a singular act of subversion, both a renunciation and an enunciation of violence” (139).

Before launching into my critique — set off, in part, by disbelief in such purity — I should say that I’m convinced Gildea embarked on this essay with the best will in the world — that is, with every intention of making new space for the dead to speak. But for me the fine line between ventriloquism and depersonification (what I will later describe as the de-anthropomorphizing of the persons of black men who have died while in custody) gets breached here again and again, perhaps because Gildea is so eager to close the door on the possibility that these men were murdered; or perhaps because, in the specter’s presence, “appropriate” acts of personification are hard to control. In any event, Gildea argues that the quick availability of southern narratives of lynching for describing deaths while in custody may cause politically minded, left-leaning critics to overlook the despairing sense of agency that drives some men and women to kill themselves while in jail. That is, enthralled by victims’ stories, critics of state violence may fail to register an inmate’s desperate attempt at embodied protest.

But the desire to construct this alternative scene of instruction is complexly motivated. Gildea insists that the “theory” that Jones and his compatriots were lynched “has abstracted the villains, so that all of white Mississippi is implicated as a mob” (120). Indeed? What are the author’s own transference points, the nodes of racial crisis or white writing that motivate such observations? What anxieties might the narrative of a black man’s “heroic” suicide attempt to ward off? Later in this essay I want to generalize from the particulars of this essay to explore the problems in transference thinking that can remain sublimated or subliminal within the current methodologies of cultural studies. But for now, let me suggest that Gildea’s argument about heroic suicides in custody suffers from numerous epistemological glitches, including its misapplication of a romantic version of unified selfhood (felt in the invocation of “a pure form of American individualism”), its description of the possibility of a purely instrumental response to prison trauma (in ecstatic tones reminiscent of Byron’s “The Prisoner of Chillon”), and its ends-dominated interpretation of events (the notion that we’re allowed to write history backwards, from results we can see to intentions we can only intuit). But however strong my sense of epistemological recoil at the model of history that constructs these conclusions — the teleological assumptions about how history works, the transcendental assumptions about how imprisoned subjects function — my first response, in reality, was not this academic.

What disturbed me even more than this essay’s facts or its argument is the question of how the dead are narrated — how their bodies are glossed. The pivotal, mediating figure, the point of transference that introduces this essay, is Andre Jones, a black man found hanging by his own shoelace. The section introducing his story begins with a subtitle, “Starting on a Shoe String,” a string of words that makes Jones’s body the subject of cleverly nuanced academic play. What is gained by this painful irreverence, by a pun that works over and through a dead man’s body with the cavalier bitterness of a good Gershwin song? I think, what am I able to demand of the author of this or any essay, as she or he holds open the bodies of others for my gaze? I think, language is difficult, and objects never go into their concepts without leaving something behind, without leaving a remainder. But in this essay that so appalls me I find something more than a remainder: I find too many remains. There are too many bodies here, and too little care for them.

However bitterly or acerbically it is meant, the pun “starting on a shoe-string” functions too glibly to lighten the burden of writing about the dead. In taking a body already disfigured by violence and making a “figure” out of it — a trope, a pun, a sleight-of-word — the author relocalizes Jones’s death, his bodily remains, within the entrepreneurial space of academic play. Elsewhere in the essay this disfiguration seems even more dangerous:

For Andre Jones, jail hanging may have been a somatic form of cultural criticism attesting to the incontestable reality of the pain and torture of Mississippi jails. But as Scarry would predict, the “language” of this hanging event is not entirely clear. You cannot be sure what the hanging is “saying” about the pain of the inmate. This linguistic problem calls into question the source and agency of Jones’s unmaking.

Scarry's work emphasizes the importance of reading the body as a text, a valuable approach to the story of Jones's death. The posture of Andre Jones emphasizes the body in a way that cancels the contents of the world: the suspension of a body from the shower bar, dangling like fruit, fleshy, pulpy, a liquefying solid. The human involved is reduced from a sentient being into a mere body, matter, the object of gravity's pull. In the case of Jones, a single shoestring unmakes the made, for in his world shoes were both a possession of status and a position of plight, as in "I wouldn't want to be in your shoes." His hanging synthesizes each connotation so that the plight of pain becomes objectified and he becomes, like the shoe, something that dangles from a string. Andre Jones the sentient being disappears and is represented by a black Nike hightop sneaker, the kind young urban blacks sometimes kill for. Because of shoes, some urban teenagers kill others; by means of shoes, do some jailed urban teenagers kill themselves? Andre Jones did not kill for shoes but instead died by means of them, his Mississippi-made body transformed into both a shoe and a field of crisis. Unfortunately for Mississippi, however, the hanging of Andre Jones has the appearance of bearing the antecedent state insignia of lynching. (115)

These paragraphs ride on the same somatic techniques that the Pretoria museum exhibit uses to vivify Steven Biko's death; they swerve between a heroicizing classicism and the prurient anarchy of the grotesque. The author begins with a small gesture of heroism. If Jones has killed himself, this act becomes a form of "somatic cultural criticism": that is, in death his body is wedded to theory; it becomes a visceral act of cultural critique (it is "like" a cultural critic's acts of cultural criticism). But almost immediately Gildea retracts this violent yoking of unlike subjectivities, and his text moves dialectically to acknowledge that the remains of this death are bodily, not linguistic, so that any act of "reading" must come to a halt, at least until "theory" can come to the rescue. To cope with the subject's silence, the critic must borrow figures that permit the reading of this body as text: "a valuable approach." (But valuable for whom? Who profits when someone's else's body is turned into a set of tropes to be perused as an academic commodity? Here even silence can become a surplus value the reader can reap.)

Here two different modes of problematic thinking become visible. First, this paragraph appropriates figures from Billie Holliday's "Strange Fruit," a bitter song about the effects of lynching and mob violence in the postbellum South. In the initial verse of this song, death is almost made bearable — it is lightened — by displacing the traumas endured by once-living men onto an aestheticized object from the natural world: "Southern trees bear strange fruit, / Blood on the leaves and red at the root. / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." But while "men" and "fruit" are so easily linked, what the song points to again and again is the distance between the living metaphor and the dead body. That is, the fact of displacement (the way that the personification of "fruit" is so eerily mapped onto the de-anthropomorphized bodies of black men) in itself makes a political statement. It suggests that these bodies have already endured such displace-

ment long before their death. In the pre-civil-rights South, African Americans, whether dead or alive, were barred from crossing the symbolic threshold into personification; from the perspective of the dominant culture they were forced to hover in the uncivil space between human and inhuman worlds. As Hortense Spillers describes the lives of black women during this period:

Slavery did not transform the black female into an embodiment of carnality at all, as the myth of the black woman would tend to convince us. She became instead the principal point of passage between the human and non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference . . . the route by which the dominant male decided the distinction between humanity and "other" . . . [decided that] black is vestibular to culture. In other words, the black person mirrored for the society around her what a human being was not. (76)

Billie Holliday's song defines the hanging bodies of black men as another point of impossible passage. That something as heavy as a body can be made so light, so irrelevant, so metaphoric, is the first ironic point of this song. The second is that this very lightness is only possible because African-American men have already been de-anthropomorphized by white society. Thus Holliday's allusion to the lynched bodies of black men as "strange fruit" resounds so caustically because these men have died several deaths. As metaphors, the song's spectral bodies offer a doubly mimetic space, the frightening specter of "emphasis added" to injury. This song not only calls out to the traumas endured by black men but opens a space for exploring the dehumanization (the lost personhood or personification) suffered by the African-American community at large. The re-imagining and de-animation of black bodies as "fruit for the crows to pluck" offers a commentary not only on the practice of lynching but on a white metaphysic that makes blackness vestibular to humanity.

My central critique of Gildea's "reading" of Andre Jones's body is that his metaphors are complicit in rather than critical of these older acts of dehumanization. He ignores what the Holliday song knows too well: namely, that the dangers implicit in the rhetoricization of a black man's body can have material effects — that the depersonification of African Americans is an ongoing, repetitive stratagem within American history. The argument his essay proposes — that in creating his own hanging death, Andre Jones "objectifies" himself on his own shoestring — seems too self-serving. In "Estranged Fruit" men are made into metaphors so they can be harvested by the critic.

To put this somewhat differently, the racially-marked bodies of Gildea's essay seem all too available for acts of rhetorical seizure and conceptual violence. Gildea begins his essay with the deaths of two black men, Andre Jones and David Scott Campbell, even though he wants to argue that the inmate "suicides" in Mississippi's jails are evenly distributed among black and white males as well as among black and white females. Color is essentially effaced as a *topic* here, but it is all too present as the spectacular site of exoticism and readerly transference. What part does race (or ethnicity or sexual or religious preference) play in making bodies available for academic consumption? For example,

in the paragraphs just cited, Jones's body is said to cancel the world. (But does it? For whom? For his parents? His peers?) A string of metaphors follows, as if the body of a hanged man could dangle from a series of tropes, transformed from fruit to shoe to ghetto tough: a persona killed (or killing) because of his shoes; a person who is already depersonified.

And this is my second critique of the problematic thinking that makes these lurid figures possible.¹ While "world-canceling" is meant to suggest the world-negating capacities of suicide itself, this cancellation of the world offers a limit case for examining what happens when we read synecdochally, when a body becomes a "text," is excerpted from its context, and then asked to re-represent the meaning of this dissipated context. That is, this illusion of world-canceling marks the spot where Gildea's own prose starts to saturate the dead man's "evacuated" space; this is the beginning of a series of phrases that attempt to make trauma available for a certain kind of argument, a certain kind of consumption. What does it mean to turn bodies into rhetoric?

Let me give a brief overview. First, we are told that Jones's dead body is hanging, like fruit, like the hanged men from the old Billie Holliday song. But if it's "like" a fruit, it's also not like a fruit at all: a shower head is not a branch, a shoe string is not a twig, and Jones lived and died in a postmodern era, when even the Ku Klux Klan has its own web site. So, the author concludes, this body is not such "strange fruit" after all; instead, it is "like" a shoe — it hangs from a shoe string, doesn't it? And "young urban blacks" sometimes kill each other for their shoes — that's common knowledge, isn't it? — whether such "knowledge" is relevant to Jones's life or not. (Notice how cultural context returns in this selective way as the outgrowth of the textualization of Jones's body, of the selective pressures of a chosen field of synecdoches). Well, if kids kill themselves *for* shoes, then why not *with* shoes? All this demands is the shift of one preposition — not a big deal. The body becomes — not itself—but *an effect of reading*. It is transformed into an Ovidian site that can be manipulated for the sake of a certain form of academic mastery.

What I am trying to show, in crudely approximating the logic that drives these two paragraphs, is the way this narrative mimics a set of techniques that cultural critics use all the time, techniques that cultural studies borrows from anthropology and anthropology borrows from literary criticism: a method James Clifford calls "textualization." (It occurs in "Estranged Fruit" when a young man's body is excerpted from both its jailhouse and neighborhood contexts and made into the critic's own plangent metaphor: "a black Nike hightop sneaker.")

For Clifford, textualization "is the process through which unwritten behavior, speech, beliefs, oral tradition, and ritual come to be marked as a corpus, a potentially meaningful ensemble separated out from an immediate discursive or performative situation" (38). This corpus has extraordinarily mobile and metaphoric properties. By extrapolating one detail from a cultural context and making that detail into a "text" — a site for interpretation, for reading — what emerges is a gathering of synecdoches that can be read in isolation from their dialogic field, allowing a world to reemerge under the control of images that the critic herself chooses to emphasize. In other words, a part is used to reconstruct

the meaning of the whole, but with content and context blown away. When context reemerges, it comes not as itself, but as a narrative spun out of the interpreter-anthropologist's poesis, her own acts of making.

The dangers of this spinning are obvious. That is, by extrapolating one detail from its "background" and designating that detail as a meaning-filled "text," what emerges is the invention of a tropological field that grows out of the abstracted detail itself. Even more disconcerting, the evacuation of a particular context can be disguised in tropes of abundance that both dehumanize the body and make it into an object so we can continue to "read" it — that is, to recreate it by piling metaphors and similes upon it so that it becomes something other than "itself."

This observation poses an additional problem. In perusing Andre Jones's death we can say that there is, of course, no "self" here at all. What happens when the corpus is really a corpse? You'd think the dead would be silent, over-easy, eager for the materiality bestowed by some critic's "texting." But the very opposite seems true, for the invocation of "Strange Fruit" has already summoned the borrowed figures of the dead into the margins of this essay — and once they are summoned, they will not bow down. "Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh / Then the sudden smell of burning flesh. / Here's a fruit for the crows to pluck. / For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck. / For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop. / Here's a strange and bitter crop." Holliday's song is acrid and heavy; it conjures the weight of the dead to testify around the "corpus" of another hanged man. Later, I want to address the problematic use of "Strange Fruit" as metaphoric space for imagining "the new" (here, as a set of metaphors that Gildea uses to construct an alternate theory of violent death while in custody). But for now, let me simply suggest that the ways in which this song is made formulaic and the subject of refutation has the effect of making the specter emerge even more palpably.

What does it mean to turn bodies into rhetoric? Rhetoric seems complicated in evacuating these dead men's worlds; it cancels the brutal facticity of the body's local fate for the appropriative potentials of metaphor. At the same time, some form of troping, of de- or re-anthropomorphizing, is inevitable whenever we speak of the dead. Given the fact that the dead can only live as tropes, as figures, for the remainder of this essay I want to explore the repercussions of this problem for cultural criticism.² I want to take on a series of open topics or questions.

1) How do we account for, and respond to, the weight of the dead and the potential dissipation of the body in writing?

2) What does it mean to make the dead into "texts"? Or, as my colleague Marlon Ross has asked, what are the dangers of doing anthropology with a dead subject?

3) What is the relation between reading (or writing) for pleasure and the specter? Marx suggests that the dead — not as the facts but as the "figures" of history — feed revolutions: their bodies are given leading roles in political movements and documents; their spectrality offers the metaphoric foundation of the new. If the specter provides the tropes we push off from, or push away from, in order to suggest other, more utopian orders, what can we conclude

about the relation between the spectral and the pleasure of “the new”? Or, to make a more local intervention, how does excitement about new ideas (part of *Journal x*'s motive in creating a journal focused on pleasure) depend on the specter, rest on the spectral properties — the tropics — of the dead?

4) Finally, what is the status of griefwork and the thematics of loss within the *fin de siècle* academy? How should we respond to, and in what tones should we write about, our obsessive recoveries of subsemantic histories? Are we inventing new “brands” of transgenerational haunting? Or is academic consumerism an inevitable outgrowth of the culture of late capitalism that nevertheless makes a crucial space for recovering the lost topos of transnational, transinstitutional mourning?

1. The Weight of the Dead

The Communist Manifesto begins with a ghost: “Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa — a specter is haunting Europe.” But in *Specters of Marx* Derrida stalks the ghost of Marx himself. He wants to conjure not only with the lost ghosts of communism but with Marx's own obsession with specters:

Men make their own history [*ihre eigene Geschichte*] but they do not make it just as they please [*aus freien Stücken*]; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past [*überlieferten Umständen*]. The tradition of all the dead generations [*aller toten Geschlechter*] weighs [*lastet*] like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (Quoted in Derrida 108)

In calling out to the specter we encounter a new kind of nightmare: not the gothic terror of being haunted by the dead, but the greater terror of *not being haunted*, of ceasing to feel the weight of past generations in one's bones. That is, the words we use to hold the dead, to call out to them, are too porous, too leaky. Even the English version of Marx's phrase, “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” has more heft in the German. In Marx's original text, the specter “*lastet wie ein Alp*,” that is, weighs like one of those ghosts that give nightmares; the French translation reads simply ‘*pese d'un poids tres lourd*,’ weighs very heavily; as often happens in translations, the ghost drops off into oblivion or, in the best of cases, it is dissolved into approximate figures” (Derrida 108).

The problem haunting my essay is precisely the danger of this dissolution of the dead into “approximate figures.” Take, for example, my own attempt to invoke the ghost in the paragraph on Steven Biko that begins this essay. Here I want to instantiate a physical dignity for the dead, to invoke the terrors of imprisonment and choicelessness (the nightmare weight that descends upon Biko) as well as the forces of history that Biko, in his political actions, sought to lift. I want some portion of this weight to descend on the reader's body, to create a burdensome space for thinking about the relationship between representational melancholy and political praxis.

But as soon as I open this scene, something else starts to happen; I remobilize the specter for a different set of rhetorical ends. Planning to talk later in this essay about what happens to black men in prisons, I ask the invocation of “Biko” to set the scene. His body lends itself to the project of making this essay into a well-working object, an echo chamber for my most urgent ideas. In the midst of such considerations, where are we, how close to the ghost? And what happens to the work, the figuration of mourning? I write a sentence, then strike it out: “I wanted to name my son after Steven Biko, but couldn’t, didn’t — a martyr’s name. But aren’t half the names in the white man’s canon martyr’s names — just buried under centuries of overuse?” It sounds too personal, it breaks the tone, draws too much attention to my own psychic investments in this project when I want to draw out something more serious. But one of my criticisms of Gildea’s essay is precisely the question of transference. In making a body into a text, what investments does the cultural critic bring to her work, and when should they become visible?

Meanwhile, I’m looking over my shoulder and thinking about audience: how well is my interpretation taking hold? Am I doing better than other interpretations? But before resolving this problem my efforts to invoke the specter are taken over by the sheer delight of thinking, by the spectacular lure of analysis. Invoking the ghost, I become half-acrobatic, take pleasure in associative vertiginousness and move farther from the lure of the specter. That is, the very act of thinking about the spectral object makes it even more spectral. Theodor Adorno defines the problems that the thinking subject encounters in each act of definition or analysis in his *Negative Dialectics*:

The spell cast by the subject becomes equally a spell cast over the subject. Both spells are driven by the Hegelian fury of disappearance. The subject is spent and impoverished in its categorial performance; to be able to define and articulate what it confronts . . . the subject must dilute itself to the point of mere universality, for the sake of the objective validity of those definitions. It must cut loose from itself as much as from the cognitive object, so that this object will be reduced to its concept, according to plan. The objectifying subject contracts into a point of abstract reason, and finally into logical noncontradictoriness. (139)

This is a ponderous passage containing a crucial idea. First Adorno marks the impoverishment of the subject, of the “texting” person. In seeking definitions or articulations with “objective validity” the subject cuts herself loose from the cognitive object. This object, in turn, is cut loose from everything except for its “concept,” its dematerialized idea. In writing or thinking we experience a need to turn things into concepts so that they can be spoken about. But this very need casts a spell that breeds disappearance: both subject and object are diluted and spent when they are described under a common denominator. Both object and subject “contract,” in a simultaneous disappearance of two different contexts. This is the very problem that the double-bodied exhibit in the Pretoria museum is trying — so awkwardly — to make intelligible. Neither of these bodies allows Biko to haunt us sufficiently; each flirts with the problem of disappearance.

I seem to have come to a binary impasse: either the ghost speaks, or we must endure — that is, become complicit in — its silence, the attenuation of the dead within the oblivion of approximate figures, figures designed to communicate but always encountering the emptiness of the concept, the flatness of theory, the excess of lurid projections, or the instrumentality of the body made spectacle. But there is a third possibility, one narrated by Homer in *The Odyssey*, in the scenes where Odysseus journeys to Hades to talk with the dead. Abandoning Circe for Ithaca, Odysseus is faced with another detour; he requires “the strengthless heads of the perished dead” to learn “how to make your way home on the sea where the fish swarm” (10.540). Faced with this journey, “the inward heart in me was broken, / and I sat down on the bed and cried, nor did the heart in me / wish to go on living any longer, nor to look on the sunlight. / But when I had glutted myself with rolling about and weeping, / then at last I spoke aloud” (496-9). Odysseus must find a form of speech not overburdened with grief, with figures of glut or excess. In fact, his strategy for getting the dead to speak will involve a similar self-regulation. Approaching Hades, Odysseus digs a pit and pours libations for the dead, “first / honey mixed with milk, then a second pouring of sweet wine” (519-20). Finally this pit is filled with the blood of the living:

Now when, with sacrifices and prayers, I had so entreated
 the hordes of the dead, I took the sheep and cut their throats
 over the pit, and the dark-clouding blood ran in, and the souls
 of the perished dead gathered to the place, up out of Erebus, brides, and
 young unmarried men, and long-suffering elders,
 virgins, tender and with the sorrows of young hearts upon them,
 and many fighting men killed in battle, stabbed with brazen
 spears, still carrying their bloody armor upon them.
 These came swarming around my pit from every direction
 with inhuman clamor, and green fear took hold of me. (11.34-43)

This “dark-clouding” blood becomes the locus of a bizarre plenitude; it provides three different conundrums for thinking about the “approximate figures” of the dead.

First, why is this blood necessary? It would seem that the dead can only speak when they partake of the things of this world. If the images clothing the dead are important, it is because these figures are the gateway to their availability. At the same time, the dress that we bestow upon the phantom is inevitably our own. That is, the trace of the specter’s speech resides neither in the dead’s wished-for presence nor in their oblivion, but in their inevitable hybridity. They must be fed on the life blood, the figures of the present, if they are to speak.

And here we come to a second conundrum. Odysseus offers this sacrifice so that the dead can become substantial. But when the phantoms begin to swarm, Odysseus instructs his men to draw their swords. Initially, only a handful among the restless “hordes of the dead” are allowed to drink; the rest are withheld figuration. Here we face the question of both posthumous harm and

equal access to figuration: how do we choose *who* can speak, how do we account for the missing persons of the dead? This gatekeeping function or archival censorship provided by historical narrative is also the source of Walter Benjamin's famous call for a materialist, interventionist history, one that reestablishes a possible voice for "those who are lying prostrate," that refuses to celebrate either the victor's monuments or his specters. "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. . . . Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (255). For Benjamin "the way it really was" is always an invention of the victor's culture. We find an example in *Z Magazine* in a parodic portrait of an anchorman reading the evening news: "This just in, a Pakistani jet crashed into a Libyan cruise ship killing all 5,000 passengers instantly." In the next frame he looks irritated: "I don't get it . . . where's the story?" A hand juts into the frame with an update and suddenly the anchorman reads with renewed emphasis: "*There were three Americans on board! Oh the Humanity!*" (17). For the phantom to speak, it must participate in the *telos* of Odysseus's journey, in his country-seeking quest.

Given this *telos*, is it surprising that, among those originally withheld figuration and left in the margins, is Odysseus's mother? When Odysseus sees her, "I broke into tears at the sight of her and my heart pitied her, / but even so, for all my thronging sorrow, I would not / let her draw near the blood until I had questioned Teiresias" (11.87-9). When his mother speaks, Odysseus wants nothing more than to hold her: "Mother, why will you not wait for me, when I am trying / to hold you, so that even in Hades with our arms embracing / we can both take the satisfaction of dismal mourning? / Or are you nothing but an image?" (210-14). What kind of mourning is this? Why does Odysseus, who at first refuses to talk to his mother, now long for her embrace? In addition to the question of gatekeeping, Homer opens a space for meditating upon the image as a way of both "holding" and "holding off" the material presence of the dead.³

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau suggests that we are always at the margins of Hades, always surrounded by meditative spaces that hold open (and speak for) the dead. "There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in" (108). But in a letter that questions these enchantments (at least as they were depicted in a recent essay collection on *The Geography of Identity*), my friend Richard Godden demurs:

Concerning your account of place as haunted with the residues of wasted work: the problem is that ghosts are the evacuees of memory and that to obtain substance they must be shed by the actions (and thoughts) of those who live. Unless spectres materialize through lived institutions, they will make no path, leave no track and evaporate. I have always been simultaneously impressed and skeptical over Volosinov's claim that "no word forgets its path" — would that this were so. Surely the linguist meant "no word should be permitted to forget its path."

In search of such memories, what forgiveness, what reprieve? In recognizing that every space is haunted, we are still at one remove from the enormity of transgenerational haunting. It is only when someone bears witness or gives the specter its due (its space of political and institutional articulation) that the empty images of the dead can be held up and held open. Given the importance (and impotence) of writing from within the complexity of our own killing fields, is “textualization” really so bad as a strategy? Isn’t the task of abstraction a potential response, a valiant attempt to answer Benjamin’s plea for a politically responsible history, one that reaches out deliberately, blindly, to respond to a moment of danger?

2. Doing Anthropology with a Dead Subject

To answer, I want to look at a series of books that ask whether it is possible to theorize other bodies, other cultures, while holding open a space for mourning, for the lost object. What relationship to theory will help us explore our repetitive love for the specter, our continual pleasure in being haunted by someone else’s dead?

E. Valentine Daniel refigures these questions in *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*, a book that frames a new anthropological discourse to describe the results of nationalist violence in Sri Lanka. Daniel began the research for this volume in 1982, when he planned a trip to collect folk songs by Tamil women who worked on Sri Lanka’s tea estates. But instead of lullabies, Daniel encountered a country torn apart by an unstoppable conflict between Tamil minorities and a Sinhalese majority. He begins *Charred Lullabies* by invoking the results of this ongoing war:

Many have died. To say more is to simplify, but to fathom the statement is also to make the fact bearable. Tellipali, Nilaveli, Manippay, Boosa, Dollar Farm, Kokkadicholai — mere place-names of another time — have been transformed into names of places spattered with blood and mortal residue. . . . Many have died. How to give an account of these shocking events without giving in to a desire to shock? And more important, what does it mean to give such an account? That is the burden of this book. (3)

Encountering these suddenly archaic remains, Daniel begins to question not only the narrative strategies of anthropology but its deepest structures. In confronting atrocities, what good are methods or theories “designed to enhance” our understanding of *coherent* social units such as castes or clans? These ordinary, structure-seeking explanations “had suddenly become inappropriate,” forcing the anthropologist to turn to more urgent questions. First, how does one write an ethnography of violence “without its becoming a pornography of violence”? Theory seems to offer one alternative. It provides a flattening-out of affect: abstraction instead of prurience. But theory also extracts a cost, namely, “the price of betraying those victims of violence (and in at least one instance, a perpetrator of violence) who wished to communicate with the

anthropologist and through him to the outside world some part of the experience of the passion and the pain of violence in its brutal immediacy" (4).

The burden of describing the pain of another is daunting, and Daniel describes the impotence any writer feels in the face of this demand. A possible solution would be to do nothing. But is this an adequate response to the anthropologist's dialogic contract with his or her subjects? The questions go on. How does one protect the anonymity of storytellers whose confessions will single them out as informers? Will Daniel himself be able to return to Sri Lanka after writing so frankly about the costs of civil war and human torture?

On these several points, Daniel judges his book a failure — the prurience of violence leaks in and theory is advanced with a vengeance. But in this deliberate space of imperfection something haunting emerges. By refusing the easy marriage of theory to world, what we get is a *nervous* system, an anthropology anxious about its own logos, a writing that recognizes its own status *as writing*, as "anthropography."⁴ For Daniel any theory pretending to account for the grim facticity of violence or death must stand both under and apart from the materiality it theorizes. Interpretation must proceed *without* complacency about its own accuracy; theory must never explain or evacuate "its" events. Instead, they must come together as "jarring juxtapositions."

While Val Daniel opens a space for contemplating the performance of a "nervous" ethnography, I want to open a coequal space for becoming nervous about the strategies of reading implicit in some forms of cultural criticism. To situate the need for a metapraxis both bold in its interventions and edgy with stutterance, I want to provide a quick overview of the historiography of ethnography that James Clifford supplies in *The Predicament of Culture*, in which "authoritative," "interpretive," and "discursive" anthropology offer three different sites for interpolating a cultural field.

Clifford begins by mapping the techniques deployed by the ethnographer of the 1920s and 30s, an empiricist who embraced the fiction of an "authoritative anthropology." Defying the contradictory status inherent in the role of "participant observer," confident that the monograph could control the dialogic textures of other cultures, anthropology became a social "science" based on the belief that social systems could be abstracted from empirical evidence — and that these systems were separable from the anthropologist's own aesthetic practice. Since observation could amass a discrete body of data to get at social truth, the eccentricities and discriminating habits of fieldworkers went unsung. That is, the authoritative anthropologist made herself into a specter. Without noticing, she provided another culture's phantasmatic ground.

In the work of Clifford Geertz and Company the field shifts toward "interpretive anthropology" and the figurative nature of "the poetic processes by which 'cultural objects' are invented and treated as meaningful" comes into greater focus (38). We have already seen that "textualization," an act of abstraction in which an event or behavior is separated out from a larger strata of meaning, comes to be understood as the "prerequisite to any act of interpretation." But in this system of deliberate poesis, there are also blind spots. Material that is excerpted as "text" immediately assumes a stable relation to "context"; there is insufficient anxiety about the leap to synecdoche. When texts (parts taken

for wholes) hold still, the ethnographer can assume the role of the traditional critic: someone “who sees the task at hand as locating the unruly meanings of a text in a single coherent intention.” But without problematizing “the actuality of discursive situations and individual interlocutors,” what gets lost is the colloquy of the colloquial, the dialogic, the situational basis of all fact-seeking interactions. In a sense, there are two contexts missing: the ethnographers’ and the informants’.

And so Clifford clamors for an anthropology of the incommensurable: for “discursive anthropology,” a mode of writing concerned with “situations of interlocution” (42). Even here the ground is sticky and the specter may go missing. How does one “resist the pull toward authoritative representation of the other”? How “to maintain the strangeness of the other voice” as well as the quiddities of the exchange that produced that voice? If what emerges in both “authoritative” and “interpretive” anthropology is the problem of doing anthropology not only with abstracted subjects but with a dead or missing anthropologist, discursive anthropology also has its pitfalls. In trying to give the subject enough headroom, a discrete space of dialogic response, the anthropologist compensates with ample quotation. But the danger here is in using quotation in a subordinate fashion, as confirming testimony (50). How does one write an ethnography where the subject talks back? (Even worse: how does one write such an ethnography with the dead?)

Kathleen Stewart’s *A Space On the Side of the Road* provides delicious if partial answers. This is a book addressed from the coal mining regions of West Virginia, a space lacking monumental stature within an American imaginary where “African-American culture has become the talisman of ‘cultural difference.’” Stewart wants to rethink this dialectic of othering from within the space of an “Appalachia” texted from both inside and out as a backwater, a space on the side of the road. To make this space almost visible, Stewart argues for the clashing of epistemologies — “ours and theirs” — and she uses that clash repeatedly to reopen “a gap in the theory of culture itself so that we can imagine culture as a process constituted in use.” “Culture” is redefined as a site “hard to grasp”; it can never be found in “the perfect text and the quick textual solution” (5).

To prevent this fallacy of “perfect texting” Stewart projects a mixture of voices. The rhythms of her book move back and forth between the imperative voice — “imagine this, picture that” — and fragrant lists that conjure fragments of places. Jumping from someone’s front porch to a meditation on what it means to report “place” in this way, Stewart swerves into theory and then back again, meditating all along on the arc of her own voice. In reporting dialogue she tries to remember the circumstance of the telling, including her own “aggravation” at the “constant proliferation of stories” that will not hold still. Elaborating on one community’s self-description as “an old timey place,” she conjures yards filled with broken washing machines, scraps of metal, and cars belly up; she demands that we arrest the gestures of “academic essentialism”: “the desire for decontaminated meaning, the need to require that visual, verbal constructs yield meaning down to their last detail” (26).

In refusing to galvanize everything “into an order of things” Stewart tries to deflect “transcendent critique long enough to recognize the practices of con-

cealment and forgetting inherent in all modes of explanation, description, and analysis" (71). What if, instead of transcendent codes and systems, "there was only the anecdote"? What if we refused transcendent theories of culture and instead flooded our own markets with contaminating voices? What if every academic appropriation grew "nervous in the wake of its own partial understandings and dense under the weight of its own political unconscious" (210)? What then?

Stewart's call for a nervous system, her refusal of singular, duplicable models, makes for breathtaking reading, but what does it suggest about the specter? Doing anthropology with a dead subject already means that one is well outside the dialogic, talking with someone who can never talk back. "Interpretation is not interlocution. It does not depend on being in the presence of a speaker" (Clifford 39).

I feel this absence most acutely in Feldman's *Formations of Violence*, a book on the recent political struggles between Republicans and Loyalists in Northern Ireland. Here, again and again, terrifying events are torn from their context and "textualized." Often this involves an extraordinary feeling of violation. Feldman anatomizes a scene of violence and then theorizes the psycho-social sources of this violence, with little apparent concern for its victims, those defiled by inventive brands of territorial fury. At the same time, the very subject of this book is reflected in its methods. Feldman wants to unpack the volatility of violence, the way it escapes and fractures disciplinary structures, hacks its way into normative sites of legitimation. A question *Formations of Violence* dodges is, how can we talk about those who are offed by political violence without replicating its dehumanizations? Within the apparatus of *Formations of Violence*, theory itself becomes a kind of torture machine that processes the dead like so much odd filigree. And yet Feldman's insight into the particularly virulent world of injustice within Northern Ireland also "legitimizes" his book's violent method. We learn that sanctuaries function both to "territorialize violence" and to create zones of "reversible violence" that continually change the terrain of "barricaded communities" (36). The complex ethics of "hardmen" (an old breed of Irishmen who handled conflict with fisticuffs) changes under the pressures of insurgency and counterinsurgency into the violent ethos of "gunman" bent on a new species of genocide. Feldman argues that the political violence that ricochets throughout the urban environments of the Irish North offers an underanalyzed mode of transcription that "circulates codes from one prescribed historiographic surface or agent to another. . . . Struggles will occur over competing transcriptions of the same body," fracturing any vision of the body as "organic" or "natural" and accelerating one's sense of politicized subjectivity (7). In a sense, there is no space for griefwork here because this book's own accelerated rhythm of analysis reenacts the circuit in which violence becomes its own site for intensifying still more circuits of violence.

And yet I also want to argue that something like a "holding" of the violent, violating, violated subject also occurs in the nervous interstices between Feldman's own theories and his recorded interviews with IRA activists imprisoned by the British government. Here we find a particular intensive example of "tex-

ting.” For example, Feldman describes the prison’s rectal exams as “a ceremony of defilement and the highest expression of the prison regime’s optical colonization of the captive body” — returning us to the question of the pun and whether the academic writer should abandon the temptation to hypertextualize an already violated body (174). To refuse to mark this “colonic” space — that is, to refuse to notice or emphasize a pun already half-present, half-visible, describing the prisoners’ “colonized” anuses — opens a site of readerly risibility; once noted the pun is so obvious, so very much there. And yet to cite it is to make the bodies of others too available to the reader’s objectifying gaze. That is, to pun about rectal extrusion and intrusion (to make the context of bodily invasion and privation so playful) is to risk excessive figuration. But *not* to mark this space of punning violation seems just as reprehensible. As Feldman argues, for Republican prisoners reduced by this continued defilement, the colon became wonderfully powerful, allowing colonized bodies to fight back using the only means available — colon-ically.

The story behind these vagrant figures is textured and complex. Beginning in 1976 the “Blanketmen” (those IRA prisoners Feldman interviewed who refused to wear prison uniforms that could divest them of their political status by labeling them common “criminals”) began their terrible vigil. When prison authorities refused to grant them political standing, numbers of men lived for years divested of clothing, shivering in coarse blankets, their nakedness a political protest against continued deterritorialization. But without the protection of everyday clothing, these men became extraordinarily vulnerable. They were terrorized by guards who had easy access to their bodies, so that every available opening became a portal for excavation. Responding to repeated beatings and brutal searches of their anal cavities whenever they used the latrines, prisoners began to cover the walls of their cells with their own feces — to stink the guards out.

Feldman’s thick descriptions of these atrocities suggest a mode of creative interpretation stretched past the limit:

The prisoners’ refusal to wear the uniform has been the first interruption of optical circuits. The guards responded by transforming nakedness into an obvious surrogate tool of visual degradation in place of institutional clothing. The No Wash Protest by the prisoners reclothed their naked bodies with a new and repellent surface of resistance. The fecal cell, which the guards tended to avoid and mainly entered to inflict quick terror, also interrupted compulsory visibility. In its soiled condition the cell was no longer a unidimensional and totally transparent optical stage. The stained walls and the stench endowed the cells with a sensory opacity, resistant depth, and blackness within which the prisoners could shelter. There was a strong analogue between the hiding of contraband by the prisoners in their rectal cavity and the withdrawal of the Blanketmen into the repelling depths of the scatological cell. Denied the surfaces of the inmate’s body and the interior of the inmate’s cell by fecal defilement, the prison regime extended its optic to the colon-ization of the physical interior of the prisoner with the rectal mirror search. (175)

Here, I would argue, the practice of “texting” may go too far, but it also fails to go far enough. That is, Feldman’s own colonic text defamiliarizes and disgorges a context so habitually violent that words can barely contain it. In stretching one’s figurative capacities on behalf of bodies also stretched to the limit, in inventing puns that insistent on making rhetorical capital out of someone else’s body by means of an extravagant and objectifying poesis, Feldman’s text becomes frighteningly mimetic. That is, in immersing us so thoroughly, so viscerally in cloacal politics (running the gamut from highbrow theory to lowbrow wordplay), Feldman’s version of “interpretive” anthropology veers deliberately off course and becomes, I would argue, “discursive.” This is thick description with an alienation-effect thrown in: rhetorical cavities held wide, figures violent and awkward, attempting to make readable (and therefore disruptable?) the space of the all too terrible and strange.

In criticizing the hard-trooping, theory-hungry bent of Feldman’s prose, I’m also arguing that its “evacuation” of griefwork or mourning is oddly compensated for by Feldman’s own far-fetched and farcical figurations — images that jolt us out of a too redemptive, too stultifying pathos. Given this self-contradicting conclusion, however, why do I object so strenuously when Gildea constructs equally “creative” and objectifying figures to inscribe the mute surfaces of Mississippi’s dead?

My objection is this: while Feldman tries to find a space to reinscribe the fecal contexts deliberately created by his informants, Gildea participates in a form of cultural criticism that doesn’t recognize its own lack of information: namely, the complexities of doing anthropology with a dead subject who cannot talk back. In the face of this silence Gildea creates a system that forgets to be nervous about its own certainties:

A convict who commits suicide out of the depths of despondency is an artist enacting a dream of expressive freedom upon his or her own body. In the complex creativity of these forty-nine men and women, you can see a reenactment of the whole history of human thought and art. . . . They perceived another form of sleep in their bedsheets. They found a new way to wear their old jeans. (132)

[S]elf-violence in jail . . . needs to be witnessed to be validated as art. In large part because of the debate over their authorship and their journalistic depiction as unmakings, the Mississippi jail hangings have not been presented to a public audience as works of art. Once revealed as makings, however, the power of their iconic imagery rises before you. It speaks of stillness, of liminality and resistance. This is more than giving the finger to the establishment, or burning the flag, this is offering a dead body as an installation piece in a disciplinary space designed to be utterly devoid of artistic expression. (133)

Gildea describes the victims of violent deaths while in custody not only as “texts” but as self-texting integers (the ultimate fantasy of the body as text, of a body eager for the critic’s resistant readings). Those who have died ambigu-

ously in jail become death artists, deliberate artificers of their own transcendental critique.

But where are the voices of Gildea's informants, where is his nervous system? To make such a grand argument out of anything but thin air, the cultural critic needs to cover a great deal of empirical ground, spending time in at least two different material contexts: in the streets, houses, and offices where incarcerated subjects roamed before their incarceration, and in the inferno of Mississippi's jails. Otherwise the dead offer a too timely Rorschach for the writer's own fantasies — especially those deaths whose causes remain ambiguous. Any ventriloquism or versioning of these now spectral lives must be largely theoretical or imaginary — and must acknowledge the potential arrogance and inaccuracies of its own hoped-for theories. Might we not see in these still bodies subjects who, meeting themselves on the way to jail, become frightened, confused, fragmented, insufficient — suggesting deaths that are just messy and meaningless rather than blithely agential and perverse? Might we not hear, in the margins of this essay, the murmurs of bodies that *do not* speak, because they did not ask to be unmade but were tortured or murdered or pushed into suicide? What kind of “installation space” would this make? “Estranged Fruit” needs to stutter here, to explore the possibility that some of these forty-nine men and women might experience their “texting” as posthumous harm, might not consent to the critic's own figurations. Without this discursive doubt, without an excavation of the critic's own transference need to reanimate the dead “as art,” the critical ecstasy and self-certainty that spin off these spectral bodies tells us too much. It creates the possibility that these hanged bodies tell us more about Gildea's own investments, and still more about the easy commodification of the dead in the face of a critic's own desire for an “installation piece.”

3. & 4. The Academy and the Commodification of Loss, or the Dead as the Source of the New

The source for this essay has been a gap, a space on the side of the road, in the margins of the first issue of *Journal x* where I lost myself two months ago and started writing. Turning from Gildea's penultimate essay on hanged men to Gregory Ulmer's playful and erudite “Exhibit X: Hoopla Dreams,” I felt lost. Is it permissible to make this trek from trauma to pleasure by just turning a page? What is the status of academic consumerism, of a world of words where we can channel-surf from trauma to pleasure and back to trauma again with so little cost?

Trying to reflect upon this discontinuity, I can recognize these feelings as something perpetual; they recur, for instance, during those dim moments of (pseudo-)consciousness I have while reading *The New York Times*. I'm horror-struck reading an article about Mexico, or Dakar, or Des Moines, or Dubuque, and then I glance at a body clothed by Lord and Taylor and feel reprieve (or anger, or desire, or bare nausea). On a really self-conscious day, shocked at the gargantuan presence of these ads next to tiny-print copy about people in pain,

I think, what kind of world is this? and why do I buy into it? — before buttering my bagel, folding the paper and putting my thoughts away. How can these modes of protest and packaging coexist in the same paper, in the same consciousness, on the same page? Why is it so customary to mix our pleasures with our horrors?

Reading the *Times*, I know from Benedict Anderson, is a much more complicated act than simply gathering fads and facts about the world. To marry the apocalyptic delights of consumerism (brassy women in boas, quiet young women buckling their bras, young men staring back at me with their sweet, erect nipples) and the chaos of the recently dead or the long dead or the soon to be dead is a ritual of nationalizing identity. I open my paper and the family across the street opens theirs — or used to, in any event. A sense of collectivity, of shared facts and shared modes of consumption (of consuming objects with our trauma) locates the self in a series of self-disciplining spaces.

There is, of course, something similar about the sociology of an academic journal. Collective acts of reading construct a community, as, in fact, *Journal x* has begun to construct its community around the question of pleasure:

Journal x instructs its reviewers to make pleasure an explicit criterion for acceptance and publication, alongside the more orthodox academic criteria of originality and responsibility. To poach upon Wallace Stevens's description of the supreme fiction, the *Jx* essay *must give pleasure*, must bring the thrill of discovery that has always alerted readers to the presence of a first-rate intellect engaged in the exploration of new territory and the definition of new problems and paradigms. (Kamps and Watson 2)

What does it mean to give an academic audience “pleasure”? After thinking hard about “Estranged Fruit” and the anthropography of violence, I’ve begun to suspect that such pleasures have a great deal to do with the dead. As Marx comments in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*:

And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. (103)

Marx suggests that “new problems and paradigms” depend upon the dead’s borrowed names. This means that revolutionary thinking is “never free of anxiety”; or, in Derrida’s haunting of Marx, “conjunction is anxiety from the moment it calls upon death to invent the quick and to enliven the new, to summon the presence of what is not yet there” (Derrida 108-9). I would add that such narratives seek an infusion of pleasure by instigating a powerful and satisfying “out-sourcing” of pain, an observation based on the self-gratifying cling-ons of late commodity culture. The Nike swoosh manufactured under subhuman conditions in Vietnam, the Barbie dolls made in Malaysian sweatshops, represent

an ultimate out-sourcing of the pain and alienation of labor that a “flexible” economy makes possible. Do academic communities that are pleasure-based work in a similar way? At the very least, the out-sourcing of pain into the traumatic narratives we read and write so freely may have the effect of creating a safely pleasurable source of self-shattering.

In thinking about *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Derrida makes two more observations. First, those dead generations who weigh so thoroughly upon the “brains of revolutionaries” have a severe spectral density. “To weigh (*lasten*) is also to charge, tax, impose, indebt, accuse, assign, enjoin. And the more life there is, the graver the specter of the other becomes, the heavier its imposition. And the more the living have to answer for it. *To answer for the dead, to respond to the dead . . . in the absence of any certainty or symmetry*” (109). But this debt of responsiveness to spectral thinking creates a strange paradox. The more “the new” demands change or crisis, “the more one has to convoke the old, ‘borrow’ from it.” The *spirit* of revolution depends upon, even as it tries to repudiate, history’s *specters*. Facing this obstacle, Marx hopes for a sea change — a moment when the true revolutionary will find “the spirit of [a] new language . . . without recalling the old.” But is this anything other than a happy pipe dream?⁵ According to Derrida, “Marx intends to distinguish between the spirit (*Geist*) of the revolution and its specter (*Gespens*), as if the former did not already call up the latter, as if everything, and Marx all the same recognizes this himself, did not pass by way of differences *within a fantastics as general as it is irreducible*. Untimely, ‘out of joint,’ even and especially if it appears to come in due time, the spirit of the revolution is *fantastic and anachronistic through and through*” (Derrida 112).

Can the same thing be said about the spirit of pleasure? Certainly in “Estranged Fruit” the new can only be mediated, made conceptually profitable and figuratively pleasurable, via Billie Holliday’s old song. As Gildea comments: “Through the haunting beauty of her singing, Holliday was able to ‘harvest’ black southern lynchings of the 1930s and 1940s for a national audience, reaping jazz genius and political outrage from those barbarous acts. In recent times, Mississippi has produced fresh fruit from new nooses. . . . Now that these forces of estrangement have been descried with the help of theories of both unmaking and making, it is at last possible to harvest the fruit of these Mississippi jail hangings” (139). This is not just a question of taste, although “fresh fruit” is a painful figure (whether it describes murdered bodies or death artists). Nor is it simply a question of what we owe the dead, although this is important, too. Instead, I want to return to the image itself as commodity. In troping or turning death into figures, writing is once more exposed as an act of commodification and consumption: a space where death is converted into pleasure.

Suddenly, we are in the territory of psychoanalysis, of Freud’s death wish and pleasure principle, where it is customary to be swept away by gallows humor so reprehensible and consoling and giddy that it can only repeat itself. That is, in the very act of telling or troping, the object world is refigured not as a source of pain but of pleasure: its tension veering toward zero. Can one write and remain in the unpleasure of death? A question terminable and interminable.

Daniel responds to these puzzles in his chapter on “Embodied Terror.” In describing the pain of those tortured (by the Sri Lankan Army and by Tamilese militants), Daniel notes the peculiar de-animation of the men and women who describe their own torture to others. “There were no signs of contained passion. Rather, attempts to extract information were met with expressions of utter listlessness. Months later I found out that it was not so much boredom that weighed down on the victim as it was the overwhelming sense of the sheer worthlessness of all attempts to communicate something that was so radically individuated and rendered unshareable” (143). But Daniel goes on to argue that those who have endured enormous pain may find some reprieve in terror — in the felt remembrance of pain. In “second” or therapeutic terror, “a seismic aftershock” goes through the body, terrifying those who are present when a torture victim is suddenly wracked by sobs or anger or violent shaking or numbing withdrawal. These convulsions have been described by a Siddha physician as “the pain coming out . . . the trembling and fear that comes through remembering terrible acts” (144). This terror is not an emotion that is simply gothic or void of knowing but an overdetermined site for coming to deal with (not to heal — it offers no promise of healing) feelings so traumatic that they seem incommunicable, even to the self who endured them. In second, or therapeutic, terror, experiences that seemed utterly alinguistic become something the psyche can discharge, recharge, find access to, if not control.

By the end of this chapter Daniel discovers, in the poetry and street theater that flourished during this period, another opening where pain can be dislodged “from its fixed site.” Pain stuck “at the brink of language” can be freed into beauty, riding swiftly into our lives “on metaphor and icons of affect” (153). But just as swiftly, Daniel pulls back from the affective tug of his own aestheticizing argument. “Too easy,” he insists, much too easy. In seeking comfort in the process of recovering trauma for culture, we “need to ride our consolations between two echoes. . . . Poetry, prose, theater, and painting are not the only aestheticizing agents. The poesis of culture itself is a narcotic, and as such it summons us to respond to Emily Dickinson’s charge that ‘Narcotics cannot still the tooth / That nibbles at the soul’” (153). It seems that we can never be nervous enough.

Seeking such nervousness, let me turn to the letter “x.” When I first heard about *Journal x* — about the wonderfully new and borrowed name of this ambitious new journal — I felt a small shock of pleasure. The “x” seemed so *au courant* and flexible, so wonderfully twenty- and thirty-something, so outmodedly modish. But thinking about this journal now, as I do, through the scrim of pleasures derived from hanged bodies and the hard-to-read “scene of the gallant South,” I seem to see another “X” in the shadows: namely, the site of privation and violence that marks the loss of the African name. The capitalized “X” of a Black Muslim idiom is not cited here, and yet it resounds in the journal’s margins, an unknown *invariable* that conjures up specters from the Middle Passage and beyond. What do we look for when we seek out the “x”? Do we seek the *pleasure* of the spectral unknown, or its *burden*? Perhaps, as a way of short-circuiting the proprietorship of the name, this “x” must resonate in both contexts, “between two echoes.”

Let me end with an echolalia — with something like a parable. Last night at dinner we were playing a “Know Your US Presidents” game with the kids. I asked Kiri, the 7-year-old, “Which president freed the slaves?” and Noah, just 3, shouted, “Santa Claus!” We burst into laughter at his vehemence, his certainty, and his obvious pleasure in having such a good answer. He is learning his history from our culture’s Old Masters — discovering, in ways that I’d never thought possible, the stinging pleasure, the consuming narcotic, the deadening hope, of recirculating the commodified name.

Notes

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1. On the subject of hanging, Paul de Man, and lurid figures, see Hertz.
2. In a moving essay about the wrinkles and odors that still inhabit the garments of the dead, Peter Stallybrass writes about inheriting Allon White’s clothing — and inheriting with it the grief and pleasure, the lingering of someone else’s “human imprint,” even after his death. Stallybrass suggests another mode of continuity between the living and the dead: “Bodies come and go; the clothes which have received those bodies survive” (37).
3. To investigate this idea in depth, Christopher Bollas’s *The Shadow of the Object* seems achingly relevant. Bollas asks how we are held by aesthetic objects, by the shadow of the maternal other that haunts every work of art. He describes our early environment as “the experience of an object that transforms the subject’s internal and external worlds” (28). But in talking about, or thinking with, the dead, one faces the burden of having to become the transformational object oneself. That is, one reshapes material that seems at once too full and too empty, in need of transformative labor but unable to respond to such labor — an unknown invariable (see the penultimate paragraph of this essay).
4. The phrase “anthropography” is borrowed from Daniel’s subtitle. Tausig details numerous nervous systems in his description of the social as an ongoing state of emergency.
5. This is gorgeously glossed by Gibson-Graham: “When Marx attempts to banish the specter, in that same moment he sets himself up for a haunting — by all that must be erased, denied, cast out, mocked as chimerical or belittled as inconsequential, in order to delimit a certain objectivity. Indeed, the attempt to banish the specter creates the possibility and the likelihood of a haunting. In the very moment of exorcism, the specter is named and invoked, the ghost is called to inhabit the space of its desired absence. The more one attempts to render it invisible, the more spectacular its invisibility becomes” (240).

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