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Naima Karczmar-Britton

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WORKS CONSULTED

I

At ten o'clock one Tuesday night, I sat with a friend on a wooden bench. He had texted to ask how I was doing, but I think this question was more of a plea, or a statement of fact. When people say "how are you doing," as opposed to "how are you," the doing means something has been done to you, the gerund implies reaction. We spoke so softly that the only way hearing could be accomplished was through a strange kind of mutual leaning.

We were afraid that if we did not lean into each other in this way, we would fall and be lost in the grass of the surrounding field.

We spoke of the fact that we had to speak of anger in whispers lest our anger be seen as hysteria. "White women," he said, "cross the street when they see me," and this held echoes of a familiar kind of story. Black men murder white women.

I had cried that day listening to many echoes of the same story. People had spoken in microphones of a psychic toll, and I had cried listening. It was a protest, but it felt more like a funeral, as if we were all holding candles over a mass grave.

"I'm sorry," said this friend, and I knew it to be sorrow, not platitude.

Echoes of the story are, of course, not the story itself – they are implied reactions. The story is a popular fiction disguised as truth, like bright red apples or the American middle class. When the restaurant where he worked had been broken into, this friend had had a difficult time convincing police that he was not the robber. The facts, in this case, were not enough. Facts are rarely enough when truth has undergone a process of articulation. Truth is not a bright red apple. I am sure that

police tell themselves, in the face of the story and the truth, that the law is an ethical mandate. This certainty may be too generous.

II

When a story is familiar, it is because it has been built, like a country or an ideology; or, by a country; or, by an ideology. I will try now, to speak of the bricks and bones of it. I say try because I believe that language is itself participant and co-conspirator of whoever wants to do the building.

Subject to colonial subjectification: women, black people, black women, half-black women, women with unpronounceable names, women who are ethnically ambiguous.

If I am a colonial subject, I am being defined in terms of racial and sexual difference, and do not have an original identity.

From anthropologist Homi Bhabha: "The stereotype vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved."

Judith Butler, of course, might counter that the very notion of an original identity is not useful: "if I say that I am already affected before I can say 'I,' I am speaking much later than the process I seek to describe. In fact, my retrospective position casts doubt on whether or not I can describe this situation at all, since strictly speaking, I was not present for the process, and I myself seem to be one of its various effects."

This is the problem with attempting to assert oneself independent from, for example, one's ethnic ambiguity or colonial subjectification. Bhabha argues that the stereotype, though made independent from truth by its lack of reliance on proof or logic, bears some resemblance to what might have once been reality. It is this seeming that makes something already known, or convinces people that their stories are always already true. Perhaps what I am saying is that destiny can, in the absence of inherency, be made manifest. In order for something to already be known, I think, it must first have been built. But how do we identify the builders? We arrive, in the absence of a convenient or usable scapegoat, at abstraction: we can say 'the colonial imagination,' or 'white supremacy,' but to say either of these things is to recognize them as universally identifiable powers, after which we might embark on a process of analysis or of living whereby we recognize racism as useful, stereotypes as capi-

talist discourse, the unavoidable conclusion being that they are permanent. This is the unwelcome reality.

From Barthes: “Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. Now this process is exactly that of bourgeois ideology...What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality.”

If something is self-effacing for long enough, it can't help but become fixture. When I said abstraction, then, what I meant was mythology – and isn't the natural image the most terrifying one?

The stereotype is the anxiously repeated character of the white imagination. The story is what the character does.

Here is a list of mythology, anxiously repeated: The black man rapes and murders, or, the black man goes to prison, or, the black man joins a gang. The white woman faints and dies, or, the white woman dresses provocatively, or, the white woman wants to have sex with the white man. The black woman shouts, or, the black woman is pregnant at sixteen, or, the black woman is a stripper. She takes up too much space, provides the comic relief, dies in the gutter on her way home from church. Her body is the natural image.

Here is a list of mythology, anxiously repeated: of bodies changed to other forms. Love can overwhelm the senses. When the white woman is raped, she is to be pitied, unless there are no bruises, in which case she is a liar with an unreliable memory and clothing that invites attack. When the black woman is raped, she is a liar who probably deserved it anyway. Which, I want to know, am I supposed to be? I'm sorry. I don't mean to imply universality. What marriage rites might mean, or, so terrible beat her breast, or, the bright sudden radiance of her robe, or, the Gods reclined, or, this is my wife.

III

Stories simultaneously describe, build, and refer to their own reality. Their tools are frames and fields of reference, which I picture as chain link fences, maybe because I would sometimes climb them in high school, emerge on the other side with blood-

ied hands.

From Harshaw: "Within [an] Internal Field of Reference, we judge the truth values of propositions using whatever other information for the same Field that we may have. This holds both for assertions made in the language of the text itself and for propositions accounting for readings and interpretations."

Overlapping frames must, necessarily, make a field, and once the field has been made, there may or may not be a way out of it.

Let us define our terms.

The frame is the black man and the white woman, or it is the bed and the bedroom. When the white woman dies in this bed and the black man emerges from the room with bloodied hands, the frame begins to make a minefield.

I am thinking now of the kinds of fields that stretch yellow under skies that always seem to be grey. There was one across the street from my high school, where telephone poles were taken at the bottom by brambles. It was fenced off, but it was possible to climb over the fence and stand in the middle, where you were more at risk for lightning strikes.

A field of reference can be internal to a text or external to it; any given frames can reach into the field adjacent and pull sideways until they are connected.

I don't know that we can escape our connectivities. A fictional text could, theoretically, build a field that was only internal, but there has yet to be an example of something that doesn't use frames that are already known.

It would be hard, I think, to build a world divorced from the one you have already seen and lived.

Because a frame can be two referents or more than two, theoretical or material, known or unknown to a reader, I am unsure, when I remember certain things, if I am inventing or reconstructing.

I think that the process of subjectification that denies me an original identity consists, necessarily, in the implicit suggestion that I am a liar. If you don't have an original identity, you must be inventing one. I wonder how much of what I have invented was invented for me.

I remember, for example, particular things about Paris; that the door to the apartment with the tiny kitchen was a vibrant blue, that I went into a bookstore while the bridge was swarming with police and could think only that if I were to be killed by a bomb or a gunman, I would die without saying I love you to the people who deserved to know because I hadn't bought data for my cell phone.

Paris was invented for me. I looked at it in pictures and paintings before I ever saw its cobblestones or learned that the Seine is full of hundreds of thousands of cigarette butts.

In Paris, there was a tiki bar called Dirty Dick. The bartender had many tattoos, one of which was three teardrops on his left cheek. I wanted to ask about them. He was American. I hoped that he was in Paris because he had murdered someone in America and his life now consisted in speaking perfect if heavily accented French to drinkers at a tiki bar called Dirty Dick.

A tiki bar called Dirty Dick is a frame, but I think it could also be a field if you wanted it to.

I could also be a field, if I wanted to be. It is possible that I am denying myself an original identity.

If I am reconstructing and I get my frames confused so that there is accidental variation, if I remember a field as being across the street when it was actually two blocks north on the same side, if I remember the water surrounding the roof of a club at sunrise as purple when in photos it is closer to the lightest of blues, does that make me a liar?

IV

I have been told, in classes and in advertisements shown at bus stops, that there is something inherently violent about black men. This is a familiar frame, its pulling of a familiar kind, its content heavily and dangerously material.

Let us define our terms.

Before Iago appeared, I think, Othello might have looked at Desdemona and thought he would never hurt her. Because there is no real room for painlessness

in a Shakespearean tragedy, he hurts her anyway, so we might look instead at *The Tempest*, in which Caliban's curses can be comical or intensely painful depending on the actor and the audience.

I think about Othello sometimes, his brutal innocence, and wonder if stories written by the Iagos of the world are enough to mean that black men must kill white women. I have argued in papers that Iago is Othello's author, and because he is the author, he is also builder of a chain link fence. Iago is a master rhetorician.

The construction of Othello is a process of articulation, the story one in which black men murder white women.

Iago is the perfect villain because he invents on the margins of what is believable. Believable to men, and to Othello: women cheat. Believable to audiences, and to Othello: black men murder. Modern audiences are afraid of the curtained dark of the marriage bed. There is a certain obsession with the black man's spine. Two backs are more bestial than one, but all of them, at one time or another, have been cut by a whip.

From the paper: "Hegemony is an Iago-like phenomenon."

A white man who taught me about analytic philosophy once said the word "nigger" in the middle of a lesson on speech act theory. Because I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach, I did not hear the rest of what he said. I wonder if the Iagos of the world are the people who have taught me about analytic philosophy, though wondering in this case may be a misnomer given that I already know the answer.

The phrase "Bigger Thomas killed Mary Dalton" carries truth-value in quotidian speech because to say "Bigger Thomas killed Mary Dalton in the fictional world of *Native Son*" is to say something similar, the fictional world implied, its frame known. Othello killed Desdemona, Bigger Thomas killed Mary Dalton, Sethe killed her own oldest daughter for fear of something worse than death. I am thinking about the reification of a stereotype and wondering if frames can make a field more or less believable.

I am wondering, also, if once a field is believable, it will also be real. Wondering is, here again, a misnomer. I know this because police shoot black men.

The difference between Bigger Thomas and Othello is that Bigger Thomas's original

author is not Iago. Bigger Thomas's original author has been taken over by builders of the Iago variety.

If a field is believable enough, will it paint its own grey sky?

I am looking for other stories in which black men kill white women and am met instead with a headline that says "BREAKING: 17 Black Thugs Arrested for Burning White Girl Alive." The text underneath says this may be reducible to race after all; a fragment of it says also "her having intimate relationships with dangerous and abusive black men" and I decide not to click the link. Below it is a headline that reads "Statistics | Violence Against Whites."

Othello killed Desdemona. Bigger Thomas killed Mary Dalton. Black men are more susceptible to violence. Black men are more susceptible to murder, as in, more likely to be murdered. Stories and world do not here seem unrelated.

Bigger Thomas killed Mary Dalton because he knew of the frames that would say he had raped her; the frames that compose Bigger Thomas's internal world are the same that are used to build Othello's external one. Some of them look like advertisements shown at bus stops.

But why, then, did Bigger Thomas rape and kill Bessie Maers? If you google "native son characters," the name Bessie Maers does not appear.

Mary Dalton's field is the same as Bessie Maers's, but her frames are more important.

I have, now, made the mistake of clicking the headlines that reads "Statistics | Violence Against Whites." It is a wordpress blog, the header of which is a pixelated image of a woman with a bad dye job whose name, according to the overlaid text, is Rhea Paige. One of the links below her face reads "Black People Enslaved White People." The background to her picture is bright, primary red.



The thing that is difficult to realize is that if I am subject, I am also author. I am necessarily pulling at connectivities in order to define in terms of racial and sexual difference.

Authorship is, in this case, a dangerous game because if it does not involve unmaking, it will necessarily be a hegemony like phenomenon.

If I write a story and call it false, I am implying a break in continuity. I am implying, in other words, that there is no connection between Bigger Thomas and Tamir Rice. I am implying, in other words, that Iago and Othello are only Othello, are not also author and subject. As if my existence or anyone else's isn't co-authored by myth-makers. And so, when I say fiction, I do not mean to imply an absence of truth or of power.

From Judith Butler: "What does it mean to require what breaks you?"

Here is what I am saying: all mimesis is discursive biography. All autobiography is mimesis.

To write autobiography is something like remembering a fiction. As if a self could leave a body it was never bound to and imprint in the grass of any surrounding field.

When we speak, as Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda do, of the racial imaginary, we encounter the danger of implying that there is any imaginary that is not racial. I am referring again to the breakage when I say that whiteness is not neutrality. The 'I' is identifiable and addressable subject that does not – cannot – precede subjecthood.

Here is what I am saying: if a text simultaneously constructs and refers to its own reality, and if this text can be assumed to have been authored, there is no way to chop discourse into sectioned categories. Harshaw's proposition that fields of reference (FR's) can refer to reality has to be pushed further; we have to assert that they must refer to reality, and further, that the mimetic object does not reflect one or ten existing frames of reference (fr's), but absorbs and reproduces them. This is not to say that there is no room for invention in fiction. My suggestion is instead that to invent is necessarily to describe, and to describe is to refer to an already existing field and its fences.

VI

I will give an example. Writing a paper on diasporic trauma, I discovered an article that informed me. Contrary to popular belief, it said, the author and colonial subject will preserve traumatic memories in blistering detail so that when she tries to write about her sixteenth birthday party she will find herself unable to remember the

color of her dress, but if she begins to author the sexual assault by the side of a river, she will remember word for word the conversation that preceded it.

I will give an example. To remember something is always to make it anew. The brain does not retain things like scenes, fully formed. It splices image-text-text-image, weaves it with smell, and finds a way to store it. The brain is more concerned with mapping connectivity than it is with helping you know what it is that you have seen and lived.

From Judith Butler: “To the extent that the page substitutes for memory or becomes the figure through which memory is understood, does that figure then have philosophical consequences, namely, that introspection as method succeeds only to the extent that it is performed in writing on the page? Is writing not precisely the effort to solder a new memory to the will...And does this writing not implicitly require the hand of the one who engraves and the body as surface on which to write, dispersing bodily figures throughout the explanation of the soul?”

The body, of course, remembers better than the mind does; my body remembers how to move on ice even though it has been five years since I was a figure skater. Butler is concerned with Descartes’s question, a metaphysical one, maybe, famous and written by candlelight, his famous answer: I think therefore I am. Butler’s responsive interrogation is concerned with discourse. What, she wants to know, is the body if not the language we use to describe it? She does not believe that the body is bound by language: the body cannot exist without its description, but even though language is its primary reality, words must always fall short in their attempts to circumnavigate the bounds of their own subject.

This is convincing to me; I think that the experience of feeling your own stomach tighten or watching your hands shake in response to trace that prompts memory is not the same as saying “my stomach tightened” or “my hands were shaking.” The problem is that to say these things is not to make them universal reality – if you say “he raped me” the response might well be “are you sure?” The body will not prompt such a question; if you collapse on the sidewalk outside of a Neiman Marcus in downtown Chicago, nobody will stop and ask if you have collapsed. They might, however, ask later if you are misremembering.

The fact remains that misremembering is as much of a misnomer as wondering sometimes is, that to remember is necessarily to construct, that I am, in authoring, running my finger around the edge of a frame in a chain linked fence that demarcates a field. The point is that there are many inescapable realities.

Here is a story that will be repeated: I had a husband, my mother used to smoke.

If we are authors even of our own memories, we must also be complicit in their making. It makes, I think, little sense to call truth anything but a story. I am thinking now of fields that stretch yellow. Let us define our terms: when I say story, I do not mean to imply an absence.

Here is a list of mythology, anxiously repeated: Love can overwhelm the senses. of bodies changed to other forms. to be pitied, unless there are no bruises. Which, when the black woman, I want to know. so terrible beat her breast, What marriage rites might mean, or, or, or, the bright sudden radiance of her robe, this is my wife.

**A bright grain of wheat fell into the earth, and so
I will retell a story**

**A BRIGHT GRAIN OF WHEAT FELL INTO THE
EARTH**

I

I had a husband who used to be upset about the stains that got into the carpet. I cleaned it faithfully in pursuit of domestic happiness, but told him that stains were a necessary part of raising a child. He was at work while she was throwing apple juice from her high chair and could not understand the messiness of her innocence. Domestic happiness exists only in television commercials for dish soap and old sitcoms in which women bake bacon into pistachio flavored custard. We worked, I realized later, harder at subsistence than we did at happiness, which I

think is the mistake of most couples who want to have children. I tried to say as much, once. We stood together, arguing, near the nurse's station. They had found our daughter, whose name is Honey. They had called me first. I had called him. We were fighting over who would take her home. I wished, while we fought, that I had not called him. He told me I was insane. I had let my hair grow almost to my knees. It was dripping water onto the linoleum, and so I felt that I wasn't really in a position to contradict him.

II

I will try, now, to speak of the things I did when she was gone. I say try because to speak of a memory is necessarily an exercise in connectivity, and my ability to connect is lacking.

I stood in a field in upstate New York, believed myself to be immune to lightning strikes, and had nightly dreams in which I scrubbed clean a carpet that held pints of my own blood. During thunderstorms, I stood in the center of my field and dared the sky to strike me into violent decay. On those nights I came home and dripped water onto the carpet.

The field wasn't really mine. It belonged to some mysterious section of government that didn't seem preoccupied with keeping it free from brambles or from dogs. When faced with emergency, the nervous system must make a decision conventionally understood as fight or flight, but which really consists in the option to fight, flee, or freeze.

I think I stood in the field out of a need to flee and freeze where I had fled so that my body could surrender itself to whatever awaited me. The brain is supposed to recognize emergency.

In an attempt at self-improvement, I see a shrink once a week. She tells me unimaginatively that all of the habits characteristic of this time in my life (the need to live alone in a tiny house with no furniture and a single plate, fork, and mug; the proclivity for walking aimlessly for several miles in the midst of the fiercest thunderstorms; the abandonment of all my many friends) were all manifestations of guilty self-punishment. My husband practiced yoga faithfully and drank green tea in the morning instead of coffee, and so was able to meditate his pain away, which is another way of saying that he pushed it into the smallest corners of his brain, where it could be taken out and understood as hatred for me.

A man who visited me sometimes asked what it was, this self-imposed martyrdom. I told him that the neighbors were right and I had lost my mind. The neighbors thought that, because he collected reports of alien sightings, my visitor had also lost his mind.

“I don’t think,” he said, “That people really understand what they’re talking about.” We sat for some minutes. He occupied my only chair, and I sat cross-legged on the floor, where the wood scratched my thighs. After he left, I searched through the newspaper for weather reports, saw that it would rain tonight and wondered if there would be lightning.

The field, when I stood at its edge, stretched comforting in its pale infinity. Its edges were sharp enough that it seemed the sky was reaching toward it rather than the other way around, and the brambles tried to find their way through my boots. Because it was beautiful, and because rain had begun to fall, I wished that I could look at it in the form of a landscape painting. I moved to its center and stood, shivering and hoping my husband knew my bones were scraping their sockets, that I was suffering. In freezing, the brain sometimes fails to realize that bodily suffering has taken place. Adrenaline numbs sensation.

I was hoping to find my daughter among the brambles, but because I knew that I would not, I hoped instead that lightning would strike. I never got the chance to clean my own blood out of the carpet, which might be why I dream about it. I do not, strangely, ever dream about my daughter. Somewhere in a small living room next door to mine, mothers are talking about their children, are talking, also, about mine.

When I realized that she was gone, I searched for her among the brambles, did not notice that my hands and arms were dripping blood that would later stain the carpet. The police told me, as they bandaged me, that my failure to notice was a result of the adrenaline, but I believe, still, that it was something closer to negligence. I walked a mile and a half back to my house and my carpet with blood dripping from torn fingers, left a trail that would confuse police dogs, thought that people should not be able to disappear in fields so flat that they touched the horizon.

I wish my heart were more unfaithful and less willing to remind me of its presence. My visitor walked with me to my field one night and told me that it was very unlikely that lightning would strike. I told him I knew that and appreciated the subsequent silence. I asked him if he really believed in aliens. He shrugged.

This field is so flat that it touches the horizon. Standing in it, I could see persistent and athletic dog walkers from miles away. The most tenacious of them walked even when it was raining, when they were at risk of lightning strikes.

I wished, sometimes, that some kind of glowing starship had descended and taken both of us, my daughter and I, harvested our brains, returned us to earth vacant and together. After some unknown bodies took her from my field, there were pictures of her face that flickered on televisions in living rooms.

She did not reappear in the field, was found in a house in Rochester, but when it was raining so hard that I could no longer see the dog walkers, I saw her as grass or telephone poles. If I asked them, perhaps, gods or aliens would turn me into a telephone pole, which could be struck repeatedly by lightning and repaired. It might serve some function in its field standing.

The field, I am sure, touched the horizon, but I could no longer see where it began or ended. Water that was not mine soaked my hair and clothing, and I was grateful for my newly impaired vision. There was one athletic and persistent dog walker that night, features indistinguishable, feet sunken into the mud that was sometimes ankle deep. The telephone pole was lame against the wind; there would, later, be power outages.

If aliens were real, I thought, I would trade with them, give them my house, my blood, and my brain.

My visitor had visited, once, the neighbor whose name was something like Cynthia and her many children. He had asked them, the children, if they had ever seen aliens. He told me through bouts of laughter that she had covered their ears and gazed at him reproachfully as she told him he would be the cause of their subsequent night terrors.

I wish my own night terrors had subject matter more exciting than carpets. I think that because I do not ever dream about my daughter, I do not deserve to catch glimpses of her in grass or in telephone poles, or to see her when I do, on weekends. The sky seemed angry, as if it knew I still glimpsed her, and knew I did not deserve to.

The lightning struck close to us, to me and to the dog walker; they fell to their knees and released their hold on the leash. The dog ran, the grass caught fire. I watched the rain destroy its heat.

Anxious repetition, the process of remembering – when I say that reality is fiction, I'm not trying to imply that reality is further from the real than we imagine it to be, but that fiction is closer.

My mother used to smoke sitting, and what, I want to know, am I supposed to be? Bricks and bones of it, maybe.

I will remember a story

But even in the space between my going and our return, it might undergo a certain fictionalization. Barthes says myth is real distorted, like image of the world outside a moving car. Claudia says memory is a tough place, but insists that I was there.

**BUT EVEN IN THE SPACE BETWEEN MY GOING AND
OUR RETURN**

My mother used to smoke sitting at the kitchen table, the New York Times spread out before her like a puzzle, wearing a thin summer dress that was all blue. It was my habit to run in, still wet from the pool with chlorine fresh on my skin and inhale the remnants of her exhalations as I climbed into her lap and spoke to her, about what I can't remember.

She made me help her with the cooking; she held a cigarette in one hand, but I don't remember if the other held a drink. Maybe a glass of wine, deep and savory red. I came to just above the counter. My hair, wet and against my back, shouldn't get in the food. I had so much of it, she said, it was beautiful, and she wanted to eat it but nobody else would. We stood together overseeing simmering things. The stove was gas; electric stoves would have to be contended with later and she would grumble about their unevenness. I don't remember her grumbling on summer days in the kitchen, though she must have. My mother is a wonderful cook, and it might be because she grumbles that her food is always perfect. She doesn't have to measure any ingredients.

She made pesto in bulk out of basil that grew in the front yard, did not work and so had three gardens, one just for iris. This kind of greenery was possible in upstate New York, where the mountains are within walking distance and the forest with the coyotes in it is across the street. My mother's favorite flower is the iris, her favorite color the rich purple you find in its throat. She keeps, always, a box of baking powder on a shelf above the stove to stop potential fires. I once set fire to a pot of wax we were using to decorate Faberge eggs, and because baking soda was close at hand the flames didn't live long.

I have read the Harry Potter series approximately thirty times, cover to cover and book to book. As a child, I was proud of this and pulled it like a shiny coin from my mouth at family gatherings. People were amazed. They told me I was brilliant and precocious, which inflated my small head until I realized that people don't appreciate know-it-alls or children with egos. The ego is something to be crushed, especially in women.

There were times when baking soda would not help. For example, I was reading Harry Potter in my room – the walls were periwinkle blue and had at their edges a story about the moon – when I heard screams that pulled my skin. They didn't stop after a minute, or after two; after three I heard get it off me.

There must have been a drive to the hospital, but I don't remember it. In the waiting room, nobody told me what was going on, and so I sat cross-legged, pretended to read, watched the emergency room processions: earache, stomach-ache, something that makes blood fall in puddles to the linoleum. My parents had disappeared into rooms where my little brother was being fixed, or rooms where irresponsible parents are screened for signs of child abuse. In the curtained room

where he was, nurses were applying salve to the places that skin used to be. He had pain medication, which was his answer when I asked him if it hurt. My father told me to stroke his hair. I know, now and because of my intense desire not to do so that my problems with intimacy, sarcasm, and commitment, began at an early age. I feel, still, guilt for not stroking his hair, for not wanting to hug him in greeting or in farewell, and for holding my family in one outstretched palm and my life in the other as if their intersection would result in some devastating and embarrassing combustion.

My mother had spilled, it turned out, a pot of boiling water on him while she moved it from the stove to the sink. It stuck his shirt to his chest and arms, and when he asked her to get it off, he did not know that it would take the skin with it. I watched him pick at the yellow of the crust-lined wounds while I hung upside down from the monkey bars. "Mom said not to do that," I warned him. Picking at scabs before they are scars increases the likelihood of infection, which is perhaps why I think it is ironic when therapists tell me to dig into scar tissue as a means of healing. "It's satisfying," he said. "You should try it."

Medicine isn't concerned with guilt the same way I am; a wound can be fixed if you know the cause of the injury, which is often obscured by people who lie about having stabbed their siblings or cousins with a fork during fights over Thanksgiving dinner. Guilt is, perhaps, the least productive of emotions, but I still wish my mother felt more of it. It was an accident, the water, but because I do not know whether or not she was drunk when it happened, I do not know whether or not it was also vaguely purposeful. My brother had scar tissue for years. Another thing I don't know is whether he thinks about the boiling water as traumatic or funny.

Many of my childhood stories could be traumatic or funny. For example, when he was five, my brother stood in my bedroom door and asked me to put a pillow underneath his window. He was using, it turned out, the threat of jumping as leverage against my parents. I refused the pillow for the same reason my parents refused the candy; nobody thought he would jump out the window until we heard a thump and looked out the French glass to see him sitting cross-legged on the ground. He doesn't threaten self-destruction any more, but practices it in the form of sequestration and marijuana-induced dissociation. He is, now, eighteen and does psychedelics, climbs with his friends to the top of Multnomah falls, where they sit and watch the rushing water, thinking of the things they are seeing.

That kind of remembering is different, though – fuzzy, but they weren't my screams.

I will remember some stories. Anxious repetition: this is my wife. What marriage rites might mean. This is my wife.

BUT HOW COULD A GIRL WIN?

I

On the roof of a club at sunrise, a white man held my wrist with one hand and told me that he was going to win the Nobel Prize. He talked like this in a way that was funny until his hands were at my waist and his mouth wet at my throat. Then, it was irritating, but because it had been funny before, it did not yet occur to me to be afraid. I told him that I found that very distracting, and because I was trying to have a conversation with someone else, when he whispered “Maybe that means something,” I laughed.

This man – I don’t remember his name – told me also that my earrings looked like globes, that he had once interacted with a supermodel who had my name, that she had wanted to fuck him, and that I was more beautiful than she was.

Men are often convinced that women want to be told they are better than other women. I sometimes think that they aren’t entirely wrong about that, but when this man told me about this supermodel, I thought only that he seemed like a cartoon parody of misogyny.

At eight o’ clock in the morning when the sun had risen and the water I could see on every side was tinted purple, I wanted to leave, said I was going to go, and the white man seemed hurt. I think his thoughts resembled a familiar kind of story, one in which women, upon being told that their earrings resemble globes by a man who has also said that his writing is better than Plath’s, will want to have sex with them.

“Don’t you want to come back to my library with me? I have many books in English.”

II

In France, a white man led me away from a group of assembled drinkers and tried to fuck me while he complimented my French. *Non, c'est trop publique ici*, and so he pulled me behind him until he had found the other side of a gate that he could close. After the gate closed there was only fence, wall, path, and dirty water.

In Italy, a black man put my hands gently at his shoulders, ran his own through my hair. I thought that he could crush me if he wanted to, knew that he wouldn't and was still afraid. In the street outside, there was wall and cobblestones and a bouncer who asked us to be quiet lest we disturb disgruntled neighbors, and so we spoke in whispers as he told me he wanted to know me not just for sex or for kissing. He watched as I took down his phone number, said he was offering himself to me and he hoped I would take him.

The white man was also whispering when he said I want to fuck you, but the difference is that saying you want to do something is fairly redundant if you are already doing it and whispering isn't really whispering when you may as well be shouting.

I recently saw a facebook status about a psychic toll carried around by people of color. Please consider, it said, and I thought that consideration might not be enough.

I sit, sometimes, in classrooms and worry that I will inadvertently reveal too much. For example, after Bigger Thomas raped a girl named Bessie, the classroom was concerned about rape as a literary device, was concerned also with Bigger Thomas's motivations. I wondered if too much would be revealed were I to vomit on the table in front of me.

III

Sometimes, I sit in rooms that are padded to prevent accidental injury during martial arts lessons. While I am there, I listen to a small man tell me that the only environment one cannot escape is the mind. “The future isn’t real,” he says. “The past isn’t real. Your fear and anxieties, they are all constructions of the mind.” There is, then, a long silence during which we are expected to focus on a white piece of paper at the center of the floor in front of us. The small man warns us that the paper might begin to shift, might float or glow, that this is a product of our intense focus on it. I worry, often, about what my intense focus will produce, worry that the white paper will become a white face and whisper that it wants to fuck me. A bell rings three times and I am allowed to acknowledge that my leg has been asleep for at least ten minutes.

I think that the telling of something is almost always a construction. Does an imperfect remembering constitute a lie?

The Seine is full of cigarette butts. I remember looking at the water and thinking it resembled glass. I remember wanting to drown in it, but I may be misremembering.

I have read that memory is so imperfect that each time we recall something we are building it anew. I feel sometimes that I have attempted to fit too much into my life, or that if I picture time as a room instead of a line, the messiness of it must necessarily be too much to clean. I feel this most acutely when I am putting my belongings in boxes and picturing years as similar containers.

I wonder if it means anything that the only men who have ever been violent to me are white. I wonder, also, if it means anything that Bessie gets only a first name, a brutal rape, and a murder and Mary Dalton gets a last name and a delicate if horrifying suffocation.

My wondering has a caveat, and it is this: the hands of men are almost always dangerous, regardless of their color.

The following is a misremembering.

IV

In the basement of a club at midnight, a girl put her hands at my hips and I put mine at her waist. It was permissible to smoke on the dance floor and the lights were of the seizure-inducing kind.

I have, still, photographs of this girl, of us kissing on the roof of a club at sunrise, and of us with the woman who approached us and whispered “Ménage?” in my ear. She invited us back to the apartment that belonged, presumably, to her and her boyfriend, who took the photographs.

The girl had a way of speaking that made it sound as though she could taste her words as she said them. She had, also, blonde hair, blue eyes, and a successful Fulbright application that would send her to Kenya the following year.

When I kissed her in the basement where it was permissible to smoke on the dance floor, a circle of men surrounded us and began to applaud.



Sometimes, I remember things and wonder if I am lying.

Claudia Rankine tells me that I fear the night, this night, is being locked in and coded on a cellular level and want time to function as a power wash. After the fence, the path, the dirty water, I found an unfamiliar bed at eleven o'clock in the morning and thought that sleep might encourage time to clean in this way. Instead I woke, tasted cocaine in my throat, and remembered: after the fence, the path, the dirty water, this white man kept his hand cupped over my breast, walked me back to the place he had found me, announced to assembled drinkers that I was, now, his wife.

I have read that memory is so imperfect that each time we recall something we are building it anew. Claudia Rankine says that memory is a tough place, says “You were there,” and I believe her, but I am not sure I want to. I might rather be lying.

I think if I were to catalogue the pickup lines that I have heard from white men they would contain a peculiar hilarity. One man told me he would give me a euro because he loved me, another expressed himself with a pelvic thrust aimed in my direction. I asked if that ever worked for him, realized that he wouldn’t understand the question, and laughed hysterically to myself against the tiled wall. I wish I were lying.

The internet and one of my many jobs both tell me that trauma destroys memory, or fractures our ability to reconstruct it so that when victims of sexual violence produce stories for the police, they exhibit all the signals that police are taught signify lies. I wonder if it is ironic or purposeful that police shoot black men who they think must, necessarily, be rapists and ignore women who they think must, necessarily, be liars.

Sometimes, for one of my many jobs, I sit in an office and write emails to people I do not know. We have a folder of canned responses so that we have communication prepared for any eventuality. Another requires me to make posters, another to tutor eighteen year olds, another to know what it is to be traumatized.

When I picture years as containers, I do so because I am trying to reliably construct and describe the bounds of my own reality. The small man in the martial arts room would say that this is a useless and counterproductive activity, that the only truth is in the present moment. He once told me that nothing significant has ever been achieved by anyone who was not capable of intense focus.

I have trouble focusing in this office; it often takes me longer than is necessary to write emails because the folder of canned responses only pretend to be adequate in the event that their eventualities are realized. I play tetris online while I try to think of embellishments on the prepared response to death reports.

I remembered the ADD diagnosis I received before ADD was dismissed and replaced with variations on ADHD (I lacked, according to a man who described me as “well-groomed” in a report that I stole from my mother’s bedside table and read on the jungle gym at the playground, the hyperactive element) and thought indelicately, that if the small man was right I was fucking screwed. I wondered, also, what his reaction to the phrase “fucking screwed” would be, decided that it would probably annoy me with its equanimity.

I think the fact that meditation makes me anxious says something about my self-esteem in relation to a lack of concentration. It might also say something about meditation, which I find to be irritating and subtly culturally appropriative. The small man would, I think, respond by saying that Zen Buddhist practice transcends culture.

A friend once told me that they got into a fight with a monk at a Zen Buddhist temple, and because this Zen Buddhist temple is in the same city as the martial arts room, I think it is probably the same small man, who I also, often, want to fight.

I think if I printed the headline “Statistics | Violence Against Whites” on a small square of paper, I would find it easier to focus on, would also find that it would begin to shift, float, and glow. The small man says that this kind of mental work will mute things in a way that allows for clarity. He tells us to allow our thoughts to become background, that we can let them exist without acknowledging their presence, that we can gently push until our minds are a humming blank.

I don’t say that my leg has fallen asleep when I am trying to meditate, but I think sometimes that the deadness of a limb is a more interesting point of focus than a small piece of white paper.

My coworkers who are all, also, my supervisors, practice yoga and meditation and have small devices that tell them how many steps they have taken each day. My friends have similar devices. We discovered that, in our movement from nightclubs to cobblestones and from the park to the Seine and its dirty water, we walked an average of ten miles a day.

Bigger Thomas killed Mary Dalton. Bessie didn’t deserve what she got. I am not, thankfully, anyone’s wife, and whispering is sometimes not really whispering. I am wondering if memories make a believable reality.

There are occasions when I talk to friends with voices that require mutual leaning, when I tell them that the men who have been violent to me are not the black ones, and they say that it’s a hard issue, that they are not sure where fear of sexual assault ends and racism begins. On these occasions, we sit in silence for a moment and I think that thoughts should not be background and clarity cannot come from any kind of muting.

I flew United from the Seine and its cigarettes, and, a week later, went to work in an office.

My task was to respond to emails. I received one informing the office that an Alumnus of the college had died recently. The sender asked that we publish his obituary. My task became communication of professional and lightly veiled sorrow.

People email my office most often when someone has died or when they are having trouble accessing our website.

My boss walked by, asked how I was, and I could not stop shaking.

I have read that while traumatic memories are difficult to reconstruct in the short term, once successfully built, they are preserved in full color for years or for lifetimes. If the Seine is a belonging to be stored in a year as container, it is carefully wrapped and labeled fragile.

We're so sorry to hear about Carol, and sorry for your loss. Thank you so much for sending an obituary; I'll pass it along to the folks at the magazine so that we can publish it.
My sincerest condolences.
Best,

The job that first informed me of the nature of traumatic memory was only obtained after forty hours of training and granting of an official license from the state of Oregon. The training was designed to provide me with the tools I needed to adequately respond to the realized eventuality of sexual assault.

We're so sorry to hear about this memory, perfectly preserved in full color and fractured upon regurgitation, and sorry for your lost storage space. Thank you so much for trying to explain; I am legally bound to confidentiality, but my silence will not protect you.
Muting or whispering might as well be shouting.
Best,

Repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat.

39

Naima Karczmar-Britton lives and writes in Portland, Oregon, where she also works in a bookstore. Friends sometimes describe her as “a little intense.” Her work has appeared in *Drunk Monkeys*, *Gramma Poetry*, and other people’s living rooms.

COLOPHON

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The book is comprised of eleven signatures, hand bound with red wax thread, using stab-binding method.

NOTES ON FONT

The font used for the text of the book is Adobe Caslon Pro, designed by Carol Twombly in 1990.

The font used for the miniscule text on the title pages is Kabob Black.

The font used for the cover, title pages, and page numbers is Lithos, designed by Carol Twombly in 1989. It is a sans-serif font influenced by letterforms found in Ancient Greek building inscriptions. Throughout type and print history, this font became appropriated and used—along with Rudolf Koch’s Neuland*—to signify the “other,” or the “exotic” through advertisement and print-media. Not knowing precisely why these typefaces conjured up images or feelings of a generalized “world music” CD or the “Lion King The Musical” poster, we wanted to acknowledge, and discover more, about the stereotypography at play here. An essay entitled “The New Black Face: Neuland and Lithos as Stereotypography” by Rob Giampietro that explores the history of these two fonts and how they came to be known, seen, and used by white-owned industries and businesses to signify poc-cultures can be found here: <https://www.linedandunlined.com/archive/new-black-face>.

For this book, Lithos was specifically chosen as a way to acknowledge the existence and lack of scholarship on stereotypography in the graphic arts field; the epigraph in Giampietro’s paper acknowledges this very thing: “The Neuland[/Lithos] Question comes up regularly, and alas without much resolution....”¹. In its origin Lithos was inspired by Ancient Greek inscriptions and therefore, we saw it fitting in relation to this book’s dialogue with ancient mythology; as stories dealing in and with Blackness, identity, trauma, racism, and stereotypes—among many other subjects—we thought it apt to use such a script—demoralized and poorly used as it has been—in order to acknowledge and then question, its position in the typographic arts.

¹Jonathan Hoefler

*An example of Neuland:

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

