

soupbone

a humanities collective

SUMMER 2020

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Dreamland

TIFFANY XIE

When I was young and couldn't fall asleep, I terraformed my bedroom. I lured the lazy eye of a monster to my window. I erased the floor and transformed my bed into a spaceship. I wrapped myself in my handmade Hello Kitty comforter, the only thing between me and the void. After all this, still awake, I wondered why I could not enter dreamland.

I'm still afraid of being trapped in that floating bed. Now I stay up and clutch my phone, scrolling until I am certain of sleep. I think of sleep as a place without the burden of thinking, and thus without worry, but if that is the case then what are dreams?

People like to think that dreaming is an imaginative way of wanting.

I wonder what desire is coded in a nightmare, if fear can be a kind of wanting.

Freud might call it "wish fulfillment." I call it possibility.

When I was seventeen I dreamt of writing, of opening a magazine to twenty-page articles with my byline. At twenty-two, I dream of writing the acknowledgements page of my first book.

Admitting this is embarrassing because I am not chasing this dream with all my being.

What am I chasing instead? Another dream.

In less than a year I will start medical school.

I am afraid of making choices. My fear blooms from my desire to chase all my dreams—writing, doctoring, social justice. Although I know my dreams are not mutually exclusive, in my nightmare I am making a balance between my wants and must decide where to place the fulcrum.

Someone once told me, “You can have everything you want in life, just not at the same time.”

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., says “I have a dream,” he refers to our waking dreams.

At twenty-two, I dream of words. I dream of care. I dream of people.

A title on my to-read list: *How Should a Person Be?* This is the question I am asking.

In “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King writes that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

Fabric is a convenient metaphor. Weaving suggests an interdependency, which is what the three Fates were making. The last Fate the cutter. I like to imagine her running with a pair of scissors, held in a loose grip.

Dr. King plagiarized portions of his doctoral thesis, although who cares about that, given who he is, said the academic panel who conducted the investigation. The word plagiarize comes

from a word that means kidnapping. Where does a dream begin, and whose did I kidnap?

I wonder if we inherit the dreams of our parents. My parents wanted me to become a doctor, though I also believe that I want to become a doctor for reasons other than this.

I dreamt that I was on a battlefield, that an emperor ordered his soldiers to build a castle on the shore. Later he commanded them to fetch two of every animal, and they came, rappelling from helicopters or trudging through damp sand. It all seemed very biblical, but I could also guess where the details came from. The emperor from that webtoon. The water from the muddy hike with my sister. Who knows why Noah’s Ark appeared.

Perhaps I can read my waking dreams onto my sleep dreams. I want not only to survive to the new world but to build it also. My dream means writing and doctoring and living to heal, healing meaning making life more just and delightful.

Then I wake up. Those old regrets and words I want to unspeak return to me.

In Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*, the poet, who has not slept for eight years, has a vision in which he meets a knight who has lost his queen in a game of chess to Fortuna. The poet tells the knight that he’s being silly, that it’s just a game. Later the poet realizes that chess was a metaphor; the knight’s queen is dead. When I read it all I could think was: if he hasn’t slept in eight years he should be dead by now. When I wake up from a dream and think that I should not take my dreams seriously, I remember that nothing is really silly.

“Waking up is the hardest part / But then it’s essential,” sings Sarah of Kero Kero Bonito on the opening track of their first album.

Sleep. Wake. Waves. Wake. Death. Wake.

A wake is what we leave behind—the movement of water after we pass, the gathering of people after we pass, the dreams dissolved after passing through dreamland. A wake is the vigil we keep to remember what has passed.

Today some keep vigilance toward social justice through two words, stay woke, two words nurtured by Black Lives Matter and then plucked by the mainstream.

In her essay “The Indebted,” Cathy Park Hong writes that “already, ‘woke’ is a hashtag that’s now mocked, when being awake is not a singular revelation but a long-term commitment fueled by constant reevaluation.” She speaks of Yuri Kochiyama, who cradled the head of Malcolm X after he was shot. I think that image haunts Hong, but also offers a vision—a nightmare becoming a dream. To realize a dream of interracial solidarity, Hong projects into the past: “look back to that lost blade of history when activists like Kochiyama offered an alternate model of mutual aid and alliance.”

When stay woke became ironic, became part of the progressive performance of Whiteness, we could say that another Black voice was stolen.

In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Professor Christina Sharpe offers this reclamation: “to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding.”

I want to be a part of that unfolding, which means I want to heal for social justice, but these dreams are still abstract to me. I’m not sure what they mean, so my aspirations seem unrealistic, like childish and unformed dreams.

In an interview with the *New Yorker*, Judith Butler said that “Sometimes ‘reality’ is used to debunk as childish or unknowledgeable points of view that actually are holding out a more radical

possibility of equality or freedom or democracy or justice.”

Here’s a little gem from Gaston Bachelard: “To enter into the fabulous times, it is necessary to be serious like a dreaming child.”

What is the allure of a weighted blanket, of matter pressing down on a sleeping body? The weight is like the illusion of another body, like a mother.

I dreamt that I made out with my elementary school crush in a public bathroom up against the sink. He appeared as a dragon. And then he was my crush, boyish blue eyes and hair that grew white blond. He kissed my tongue. His last name is Flowers. When I woke up I looked him up. His hair now grown long and shaded brown. The dream perhaps the wish to be a child again.

When my boyfriend and I were still trying to impress each other, we read *Hamlet* over FaceTime. In that famous soliloquy, Hamlet says, “For in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, / Must give us pause.” Although I have a soft spot for *Hamlet* (and three copies to show it), I think Hamlet is wrong. Death is nothing like sleep. Or maybe Hamlet is actually asking a question, the question of what comes after death, and perhaps he comes to the same answer as me: I doubt that we dream after we die. So instead I dream now, furiously, childishly, foolishly.

One of my favorite filmmakers, Satoshi Kon, passed away from pancreatic cancer a decade ago. At the time, he was working on a feature film, *Dreaming Machine*. It would have been a movie with no humans, only robots.

His last film, “Ohayō,” is only a minute long. It begins with the sound of bells, a celeste like a lullaby. The bells become an alarm. A young woman goes to turn it off. But when she gets up she splits into two figures. One reaches for the alarm, but the other is still sleeping, as if lagging behind. Half-asleep. The first gets up, drinks

milk in the light of the open refrigerator. Now the sleeping one reaches for the alarm, goes to the refrigerator, drinks milk, following the movements of the first. With this time delay, they brush their teeth, watch the news, yawn, pass through each other, stand open-mouthed under the shower. It is not until she dries her face and stares into the mirror that the figures catch up to one another and meld into one person again. She says to her reflection the title of the film: オハヨウ. Good morning.

“I can’t sing. But I don’t fucking care, ‘cause it feels good. Like a warm shower,” so says Tyler the Creator during his NPR Tiny Desk Concert. Bathed in blue light, backlit in orange, Tyler lets out a noise somewhere between finding a spider in your shower and seeing a ghost. “I wonder if you look—AAH, AAH—when you cross my mind.” He hits a wrong chord, squawks at his keyboard, then turns to his backup singers as they finish the line together. I love this moment, the way the “AAH, AAH” overlays on the lyric “both ways,” the way he calls attention to a mistake that I wouldn’t notice otherwise.

The disclaimer is that Tyler’s lyrics, particularly from earlier efforts, are misogynistic and homophobic. Tyler was also one of the first to publicly support Frank Ocean when he came out. The album *Flower Boy* led many to speculate that Tyler himself is gay. These are complications, not forgiveness.

I started listening to Tyler the Creator last summer, in my hometown’s public library, while I was studying for the medical college admission test. I needed a break from memorizing metabolic pathways, and Tyler had just released *IGOR*. I played *IGOR* in the car, during lunch, during practice tests. At the time, I went to the library every day to study, from about nine to four. I listened to *IGOR* because I needed the sense that there was something meaningful outside of that test. This is probably not what

Tyler intended.

The distance between how I live and how I want to live is not dancing with my sister in the rain, the protests I didn’t attend, the Chick-fil-A drive-thru. Maybe I like Tyler the Creator because I see that distance in him too.

Once I read a fantastic book about a woman who ran through the rain with a stranger through Kuala Lumpur at night.

Now let me tell you that the book doesn’t exist. I made it up. Are you upset?

Now let me tell you that the book existed in one of my dreams.

Now let me tell you that all the dreams I described were lies.

Now let me tell you that was a lie.

For me this is the nature of truth in dreams.

There is no original content in a dream. The work of the dream itself is what makes it original. That’s how a dream works, working its way through images, through childhood crushes, through empire, reaching, which is wanting, which is a departure from reality with the intention to return.

In the film *Your Name*, the two protagonists sometimes wake up crying, but cannot remember why. Their tears feel like the forgetting of something important. I sense that Makoto Shinkai constructed the entire film around this feeling.

In the mornings I try not to forget. I fumble to record my dreams. Sometimes I listen to these voice memos. Right now I’m listening to a dream from early June and cannot understand my half-asleep voice. In the dream I think a quail falls with its bird-feeder. On the ground it looks fat, like an avocado. Its teal scales shine. It morphs into a purple thunderbird. A peacock with spirals for eyes. Finally, it becomes a giant toad. Then I wake up. I wake with the desire to sink back into my dreams.

Lakhta

PATRICK POWERS

*На берегу пустынных волн
Стоял он, дум великих полн*
—Pushkin

The 100 bus dips and lurches along *korabelstroiteley* (shipbuilders’) street, slowly making its way towards the city center. The view from my window is a vast patchwork montage, a thousand variations on a late-Soviet theme: bare concrete, exposed sealant, balconies. The sky, buildings, and road blend together, a smooth gradient in greys from light to dark. Suddenly, the bus makes a right-hand turn. The concrete walls fall away, and there it stands: A twisted spire of shimmering glass, a one-act skyline, looming absurdly above the city. The Lakhta Center.

The Lakhta Center, also known as the Gazprom Tower, is a building in Saint Petersburg, Russia, envisioned as the new headquarters for the state-owned oil-and-gas giant Gazprom. This particular building is special: I have found myself fascinated, transfixed, even *obsessed* with it since the first time I saw it. Its sheer size and inconsistency with its surroundings demand explanation, and once you start looking, there’s a lot to explore.



LAKHTA CENTER © WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

MONUMENT

The first thing you notice about the Lakhta Center is that it is tall. Really, really tall. In fact, at a whopping 462 meters (1,516 feet), it holds the title of the tallest building in Europe, and the 13th tallest in the world.¹ This height designates the tower as not just a skyscraper, but a “Supertall Skyscraper.”² Defined by a height of over 300m, these supertall skyscrapers are a relatively new phenomenon. Made physically possible only in the past decade by

¹ “The 17 Tallest Buildings in the World Right Now” in *Business Insider*, February 2020. Web.

² According to the Council for Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat.

advances in construction technology,³ they have begun popping up all over the world, re-drawing skylines and breaking records. Of course, while supertall skyscrapers may be unique to the past 10 years, they can be seen as the most recent iteration of a human institution as old as agriculture: the monument.

What makes these buildings—this building—special? Aren't they just office buildings, their height the simple product of an economic demand for effective utilization of real estate?

Not quite. While it may be branded as a modern business hub, the Lakhta Center is far from a financial success story. In fact, despite having been structurally complete for close to a year, it remains empty, with opening dates declared and postponed in seeming perpetuity. In the realm of supertall buildings, this is actually pretty normal.

We're conditioned to think that business ventures and construction projects have some sort of profit motive behind them, something calculated by some smart people armed with MBAs and Excel workbooks that tells them that a building is worth building. In truth, very few supertall skyscrapers make much economic sense at all. Even in the early days of skyscraper history, the world's tallest buildings found themselves on tenuous financial footing. The Empire State Building, for example, sat nearly 75% empty for most of the first decade after it was completed (construction finished right as the Great Depression began). In the modern era, a similar phenomenon has played out in China.

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³ I don't generally associate concrete with thrilling, cutting-edge innovation, but apparently it is. Read "The Engineering Tricks Behind the World's Super Tall and Super Slender Skyscrapers" in *Curbed* by Patrick Sisson, Sep. 2015.

China used supertall skyscrapers to flex its growing muscles as it ascended to global power, dominating the 21st-century skyscraper boom. Five of the world's ten tallest buildings are in China, a tactile reminder to the world of the country's dizzying growth. However, while the buildings are ostensibly monuments to financial might—hyper-efficient office buildings for a hyper-efficient business and financial sector—most of them have been financial flops, laden with *inefficiencies*. They are ridiculously expensive to design and build, and there is rarely demand for the amount of office space they provide at the costs which they're forced to charge. Although China has taken note of this phenomenon and actually banned new supertall skyscrapers in June 2020,⁴ they continue rising undeterred elsewhere in the world as countries compete with each other for international clout.⁵

The Lakhta Center's claim to functional purpose, then, is a façade. In a way, it doesn't really matter whether or not it opens. It solidifies Russia's claim to Europe's Tallest Skyscraper. It shouts Russian pride and power to the heavens—and, more importantly, towards the West.⁶ It also makes an internal statement, to Russia and to Petersburg specifically. To fully understand its implications, we first have to talk a bit about Petersburg itself.

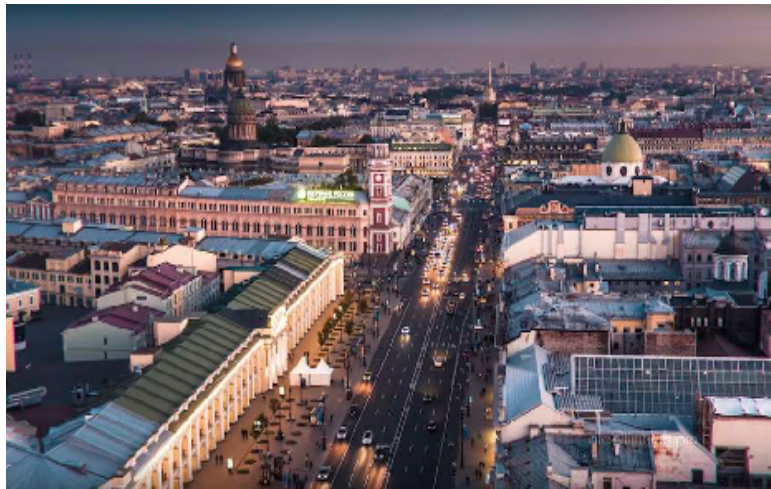
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⁴ No Taller Than 500m, no Plagiarism: China signals 'New Era' for Architecture" from *CNN*, June 2020. Web.

⁵ If you'll allow me to put on my tinfoil hat for a moment, here's a tangential thought: I think the fact that *skyscrapers* are what countries are using as a dick-measuring contest speaks to the extent of America's global hegemony. Skyscrapers are a distinctly American invention, and their adoption across the globe as the medium of architectural competition is, itself, an adoption of American standards.

⁶ Is it a penis? Yes of course it's a penis, come on.

PETERSBURG

In cities like Shanghai or Dubai, supertall skyscrapers often stand next to neighbors who are, if not supertall, at least super-modern. The supertall skyscrapers here are often the tallest of many tall buildings in an urban center. Not so in Petersburg. The Lakhta Center is the *only* real skyscraper in the city, and although it stands relatively far from the city center, its gaudy lights impose themselves grotesquely upon the night sky.



DRONE VIEW OF NEVSKY PROSPEKT © TIMELAB.PRO

Petersburg's architecture tells the city's story in three surprisingly distinct acts. The first is the city center. Founded in 1703 by Tsar Peter the Great on the sight of a captured Swedish fortress,⁷ Petersburg became the vessel for Peter's dream to Westernize Russia. He built Petersburg up in the image of a European metropolis, complete with palaces, gardens, and squares. He made it the

⁷ Sweden was one of Russia's principle military rivals back in the day. (Look up "Swedish Empire" on Wikipedia; you won't be disappointed).

Imperial Capital, and Tsars reigned from the banks of the Neva River until the October Revolution.⁸ The city center remains preserved as a UNESCO world heritage site, and it has a distinctly historical, European feel. Buildings are even restricted in height, à la Turin: nothing is allowed to be built taller than the dome of St Isaac's Cathedral. Petersburg takes immense pride in its Imperial history, and in its designation as the "cultural capital" of Russia. Historical preservation is paramount, and it serves as one of the bedrocks of the Petersburg-Moscow rivalry. Those who choose to live in Petersburg love to trash Moscow's buildings and culture as shallow, uncultured, and too obsessed with money.

Against this backdrop, the Lakhta Center looks comically out of place, and seems almost antithetical to the city. Indeed, the building has been met with plenty of pushback. It was originally slated to be built in the city center among the palaces and cathedrals as the "Okhta Center," but the city opposed it so vehemently that the developers were eventually obliged to move. Beyond its controversial aesthetic appearance, its function as Gazprom's headquarters upsets a longstanding balance: Petersburg is for arts and culture, Moscow is for business and politics. Relegated to the periphery of downtown, the Lakhta Center stands as an unwelcome harbinger of a New Petersburg, made in Moscow's image.

As anti-Petersburg as the Lakhta Center seems, it's beautifully reminiscent of the city's much older, more famous waterfront monument to the future.

⁸ With a short interruption from 1728 to 1730 when Peter's grandson, Peter II, moved the capital to Moscow.

THE BRONZE HORSEMAN

In the early days of the city, a statue of Peter the Great was erected on the bank of the Neva. Peter sits on horseback atop the largest stone ever moved by humans, vanquishing a snake under hoof and pointing commandingly across the river. Immortalized by Alexander Pushkin in his narrative poem *The Bronze Horseman*, the statue has become one of the most important and recognizable symbols in Russian literature and history. While St. Petersburg has become in some ways a vessel for classical nostalgia, manufacturing and preserving a glorious past, its roots lie in stubborn progress—in the determination to pull Russia's vast expanse towards a Eurocentric vision of the future.

From the balcony of my host parents' apartment, I can see the Lakhta Center glistening in the chilly March sunlight. It looks out of place, gaudy, ostentatious, something only a cadre of oil oligarchs could have dreamed up. And yet, despite how jarringly it stands against the rest of the city, I can't help but think of the Bronze Horseman. Not unlike the statue, the tower stands alone against a windswept shore, full of lofty thoughts.



MONUMENT TO PETER I © TRIPADVISOR

Taking Stock of Waste

CALLA NORMAN

The key selling point of the last house I lived in in Bloomington was the fact that my soon-to-be roommates subscribed to a compost pick-up service. The large (by college standards) galley kitchen with red tile floors, its craftsman architecture, the fact I'd be living with friends, and its proximity to a bagel shop notwithstanding, I knew for certain I would be happy there knowing my trash was off to a better home.

When I cooked for myself in that galley kitchen, I would compile a “garbage bowl” on the counter of onion skins, potato peelings, the scraggly nub at the end of green onions and lovingly tip it into the white pickle bucket with a green lid. (If I was feeling particularly virtuous, I would bag it in a freezer bag and stick it in the fridge for stock-making.) I would knock my Moka pot's coffee filter against the side of the bucket with a hollow *thunkthunkthunk*, before running my fingers along the filter's edge to get the last grounds out.

Sometimes, opening the trash can I would find banana peels and bags of grapes (and once a full gallon of orange juice, but that's another story), and, tsk-tsking to myself, pluck them out and put them in my beloved white bucket. I even found it satisfying to lug it out to the front stoop every other Sunday evening for pickup and bring it in Monday afternoon, swinging its lightness around.

Growing up, compost was always something I knew in the abstract was a good thing, but the garbage can was the only option for produce besides the garbage disposal. My parents are fanatical about recycling—to the point that we have two bins which we fill to excess every week—but whenever I brought up the idea of starting to compost I was met with, “I don't want my back patio to stink.”

My family also has a tendency of letting produce rot. Every week or so, my dad will haul from the grocery store jewel-like baby bell peppers, gleaming baby carrot sticks (which always have grossed me out) and plastic clamshells of salad, all with the aspiration that we'll snack on healthy things throughout the week. Right now, I can see perfectly in my mind's eye a zucchini bought a month ago for some reason no one remembers. It's scarred a bit from bumping around in the crisper drawer, but miraculously has yet to turn to mush.

Lately, these behaviors fill me with such anxiety—how can we be one of those families that is so blasé about what we consume and what we let go? Granted, we are far from the Draper family in that one scene in *Mad Men* where, after an idyllic 1950s roadside picnic, the family packs up their toys and picnic basket and

then Betty flips the picnic blanket in the air, launching the garbage all across the grass. Don tells her to check the kids' hands for stickiness, which strikes me as funny, allowing mess to exist in one place but not another. My dad was the same way on road trips, always reminding us to throw away any fast food wrappers or plastic water bottles whenever we'd stop for gas to keep it from cluttering up the back seat. I'm unable to determine what exactly it is that bothers me—is it the fact that these things I've grown up doing have been harming the planet, the fact that they could have had a higher purpose?

Trash is made up of could-have-beens and should-have-beens, which for me is the most distressing thing about it. I often find myself turning over and over these bygones until they devolve into chaos.

Those scraggly scallions could be regrown! Did we really need to use that much plastic wrap for the pie crust? Could I have made this into a stock? Why did I waste another day playing Animal Crossing instead of going on a run or reading? Did I waste four years on an English degree? Should I have found a full time job instead of applying to grad school? Why did I go to that high school and not the other? Would I have been happier if? What if I still held onto those friends? Is the opportunity to change forever lost? Is it too late to become cottagecore and just dissolve into the woods?

As Robert B. Shaw writes, “Who am I to arraign the Great Carelessness”?

After I began college, whenever I would return for breaks, I would have an overwhelming compulsion to get rid of things. I would spend hours in my room clearing out every drawer in my desk, poring over every book (when was the last time I read Allen Ginsburg?), purging stained t-shirts from trips to Canada, and stuff them all into Febreze-scented trash bags. The only sacred relics are my journals, kept daily since I was a sophomore in high school. They sit like temple pillars on the back of my desk, rarely if ever opened after I complete one and line it up next to the others. Cleaning became a ritual almost, and as the space cleared up, my mind would briefly get clearer. Similarly, I relish trips to Goodwill, but not to shop. I love the quick and easy businesslike manner of the drive-up window. No, I don't need a receipt. Have a good one! And suddenly, there's lightness. I love the feeling of having less stuff, of packing light. It makes me feel like a vagabond.

Now, I wonder whether my difficulty recounting events from my childhood stems from the fact I have so few artifacts. I remember specific feelings, the way light hit in my bedroom and the way the neighborhood's silence sounded to me, but I can't conjure them again. What was the name of my best friend in preschool again? The one with the red hair, yet whose face I have no memory of. I probably once had something with her name on it... Is that something that's important to know, is it a part of who I once was? Would understanding that person help me understand the person I'm becoming?

When I returned to Bloomington four months after quarantining at home to pack up my stuff from the house, the compost bucket hadn't been taken out. It smelled fermented, but not terrible, not as bad as it should have, and the first thing I did was take it outside

for the last time. The real horrors were what were left in the fridge. Before I left, I had grabbed as much as I could, not knowing when I'd be back, but a few things escaped my notice. A glass container of stewed cannellini beans and a quart of Tuscan sausage and white bean soup, both of which had disintegrated from individual pieces of food into a putrid, formless mass. I gagged as I stuffed this slop down the garbage disposal, ran the water, and cursed myself as the stench dissipated. The glow of virtue was now gone.

Recipe: Scrap Pile Stock

INGREDIENTS

Use anything you have on hand. Roasted a chicken for tonight's dinner? Throw its carcass in a gallon-sized freezer bag and bury it in the inedible odds and ends of your cooking: onion roots, celery leaves, parsley stalks, carrot peels, woody mushroom stems, the shells of each garlic clove left behind like a molted snakeskin. Let the freezer burn set in, care is not necessary here. Repeat until the bag is bulging.

METHOD

Throw all that chaos in a pot and drown it in fresh water. Arm-wrestle your pepper mill and throw in a few peppercorns. Cut a few sprigs of thyme and rosemary from your windowsill. Usually, I like to use an Instant Pot for efficiency's sake, but there is something romantic about leaving it on the stove to go for a few hours, isn't there? Bring it to a boil, then let it simmer until the liquid is golden brown, or maybe even a deep purplish brown if you used those mushroom stalks, then strain out the solids and throw them away. Pour the stock into plastic containers and stack in the freezer for your next soup or pot of beans. Sink into the satisfaction of holding onto waste, using it to create something new, then letting it go.

In the Bathroom, I Find Tissues

H.Z.

Bloody & crumpled, again
for a month now.

My father claims it's nothing, the same tone
he announces that dinner will be served at 7:20, no
big deal.

I say nothing, but stare & muzzle
the skinless sliced apple over my lips & taste
cigarettes. Sweet burning ash.

What is nothing if not omission?

On Independence Day, I sneak out to see
my brother, our car excreting
pop & forte & *we could turn the world to gold, oh*

oh, run away. Static until we reach the ugly
hills. I wonder if I should tell. The sky whites,
the way it must after it's been blown apart. His arm flinches
open the trunk. We sit like we're innocent, like I know

nothing, dangling.

Our eyes aim at the fireworks punching
floating lungs. Alveoli glitter outer darkness.
I want to ask why,

if light moves a million times
faster than sound, the things I hear
hit harder than anything I've ever seen.

I wonder if Dad
hates me for not being
a son that can heal. Instead,

a girl with regrets. *Sorry*
in her throat but never in her mouth. *Sorry*
in her shoulders but never in her mouth. Maybe

this is our fate: body buried in denial.
Breaths screaming silence.

The sky reverberates, muffled like my father's
coughs. The crimson sparks bloom into epic
Rorschachs, then disintegrate.
Each blot another *oh*

oh on the radio. Splotches until the membrane
radiates purple. Beneath our trembling feet,
the cars honk uncontrollably.

sink touch

YEESEON CHAE

There's no longer trust in my hands,
only the scaly tops of my elbows.

They've only known how to rest on school desks,
or to jolt the one next to me in sheer confidence.
Now they substitute my whole access to the outside.

Elbows are the knees of the arms, my sister jokes.
So I will walk on all fours,
hands and knees,
then elbows and feet,
because I have to stay consistent.

I looked on Mayo Clinic and it tells me that
obsessively counting is a sign of OCD.
But also that I shouldn't trust the internet too much.

My friend tells me that she can't
"trust when people adore me."

She tells me this over text
and I try to imagine how her face
crumples up at compliments,
shies away when someone tries to hug her.

Does anyone remember touch? Sometimes,
I won't remember if I washed my hands
after touching what is unclean
and find the surface of my skin
brimming with tension.

So many nights, in a crowded room,
dreaming about touch.
Now the absence instead is what soothes me.

Sensory memory.
Obsessing, obsessing.

Only listening to Imogen Heap
(yes THAT song that played on the OC)
and only thinking about romance
and romantic thoughts
and floppy hair
and old smirks and past crushes,
not even love, just a sheer and depthful fantasy out.

COVID-19 Graduate

GENEVIEVE MARVIN

Dear COVID-19 Graduate,

As you sit in the UHaul packed tightly with four years of your life, you have a chance to reflect. You are sitting next to your suntanned father. He's on the verge of retirement now, happily driving you back. In the same, but completely different, way from when he drove you down to college. You are both different people, now. We had to donate couches; they wouldn't be making the move. You have a chance to reflect on the four great years of college as you are driving further into uncertainty. You are driving home.

There are three important things that you ought to remember now. It's okay, take a moment, grab a sip of that latte. Why did you get a hot vanilla soy latte on a ninety-degree day in July? Never mind. Four hours and thirty minutes left. The cactus sits in the cup holder, the only plant that managed to live through quarantine. You decided to name him Prick. Now, you ought to remember that you have had invaluable experiences in college. Of course, there are the friends you made, and you growing up. I won't bore you with that now.

Instead, I want you to think back to a night two years ago. Before you had the barista job that made you get up at 4:30 in the morning. You were alone, you had a headphone in. Just the left one. You were listening to a podcast, probably *This American Life*, which existed as static noise. It was late. You walked on a very busy part of campus, but on this night, you were the only person there. You looked up at the stars and they shone back at you like they were trying to impress. You found, that day, a small space with a fountain. A courtyard tucked away in a building. You found a bench. You laid down on it for a very long time. You watched the stars. 10:30 passed on the giant clock and the grandfather chimed long enough to make you get up.

Remember how it felt to be hidden. Remember how it feels to breathe deeply in the night air, unafraid.

Come back to the car. We stop at a QuikTrip, you have more coffee. Really? That much caffeine today? No, I'm not yelling. Your bag is next to you in the truck. Pull out your switch and play *Animal Crossing*, your Dad will understand. Two hours left now. You are driving home with none of the promises that you believed college would offer you. That will leave a bitter taste in your mouth. (Or, maybe that's the coffee?) You are driving into a global pandemic, and the entire world is paused. Remember, now, that night just before this pandemic started. You were invited to a book premier. As an English Honors Graduate, you were invited to the after party at a new café/wine store. You talked with a friend and older people and ate cheese and drank wine. Pretended that you ought to be there. Later, you drove by that storefront, and it is empty now. When you were there, do you remember how close you felt to knowing what you wanted to do?

Chase that feeling. Follow that ambition. Don't let this world sickness take that away from you.

Thirty minutes left. You are having your first sip of water of the day. You glance at your Dad, silently thanking his ability to drive this giant truck. You distract yourself for a moment by looking outside at the endless cornfields. Direct your attention, for a moment, to the last winter on Park Ave. The relentless cold. The furnace went out. The snow covers your window and you are wrapped in five blankets on your bed. Classes canceled. Giant socks wrapped your feet under the blankets but still, you were unable to warm up. Eventually, you fell asleep. Your heating got fixed, but the coldness stayed in you. You ended up staying inside for four whole days. I know it's hard to remember this feeling now, but even as you're grabbing at this memory, you can feel that coldness in your toes. I know it's still there. You need to remember because you need the strength to stay put for much longer than four days.

You need to remember the cold. You need to remember this summer won't last forever.

Best,
Me

Diagram of—

PHOEBE PAN

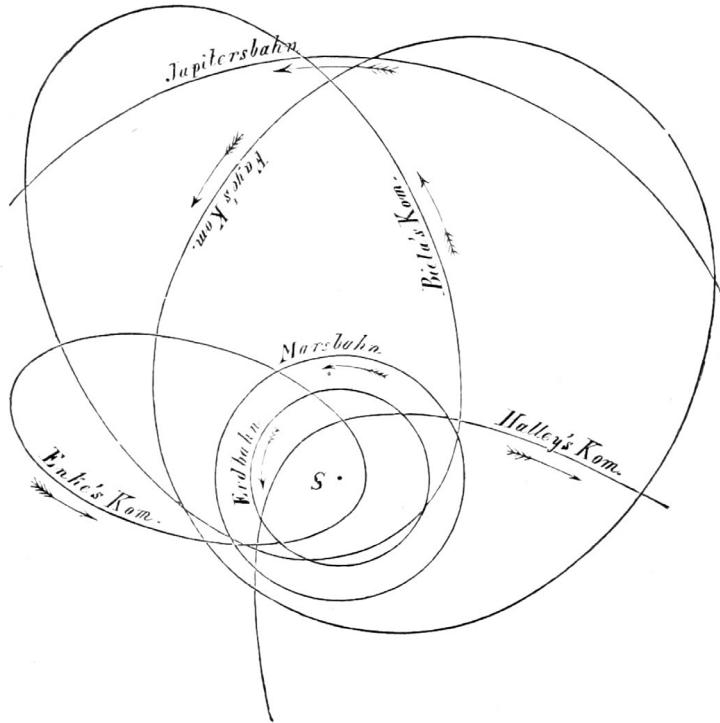
It is very easy to disguise what we cannot comprehend into what we can comprehend. This summer has seen the eruption of data visualization in endless iterations: the “flatten the curve” graph. Hand-washing instructions. Protest infographics. Social activism posts. At their best, these visual soundbites have allowed us to process complex and emotionally charged information in such a way so that we are able to move forward despite rage, uncertainty, exhaustion, and profound loss.

A diagram, in its most basic and elegant form, is a schematic representation showing the structure, appearance, or workings of something: *a diagram of the kitchen*, for example. It reaches toward both the concrete and the abstract, from bell curves to family tree maps; pie charts to the slopes of the uncanny valley. But given its applications of late, what is a diagram, really? What does it communicate? What happens to the *thing* that is diagrammed? All modes of expression transform their messages in one way or another. What occurs, then, when you allow space for that interpretive ambiguity—when you allow the unsayable to spill from the blanks where lines, curves, and points cannot touch?

The following diagrams contain adapted material from the Public Domain Review & the British Library's open access archives. The original usages have been kept as parentheticals.

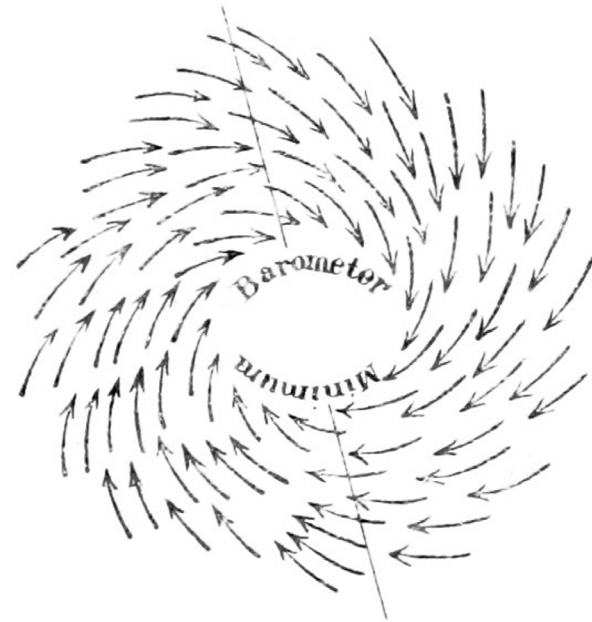
Post-COVID Possibilities

(COMET TRAJECTORIES)



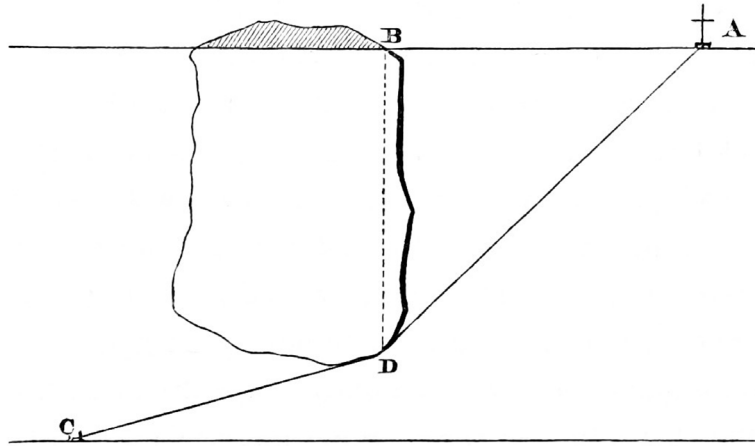
Hypnagogic Doubts

(BAROMETER PRESSURE)



Unspoken Confessions

(MASS OF FLOATING ICE)



Late Evening Argument with Loved One

(COLLIERY HANDBOOK)

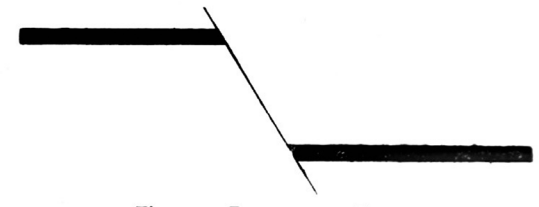


Fig. 451.—DOWNTROW FAULT.



Fig. 452.—UPTHROW FAULT.

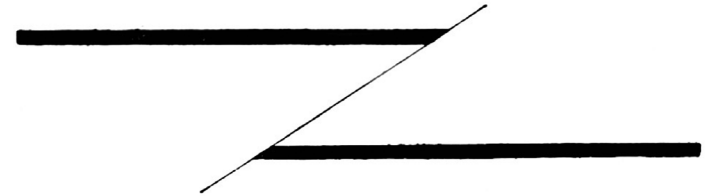
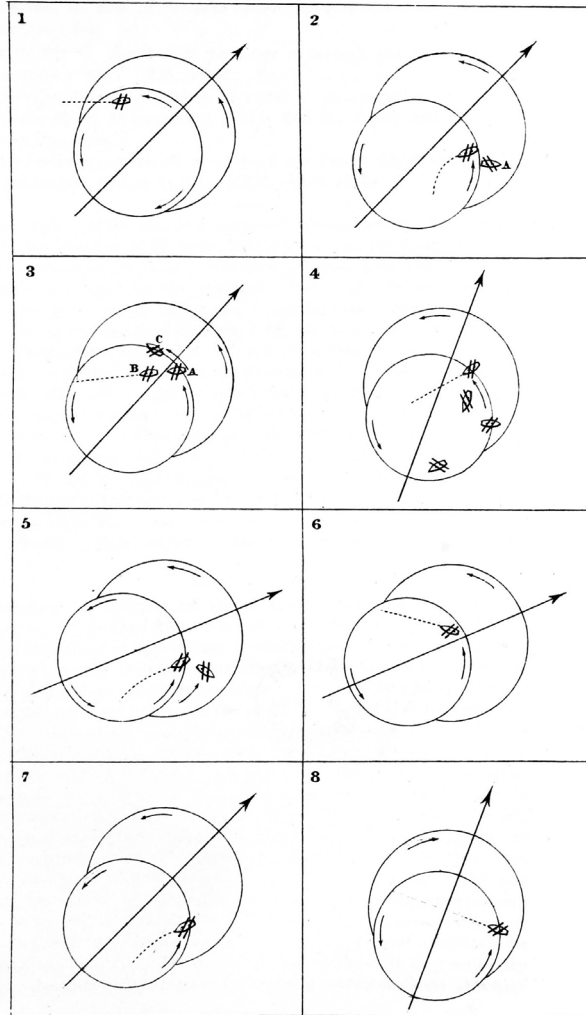


Fig. 453.—OVERLAP FAULT.

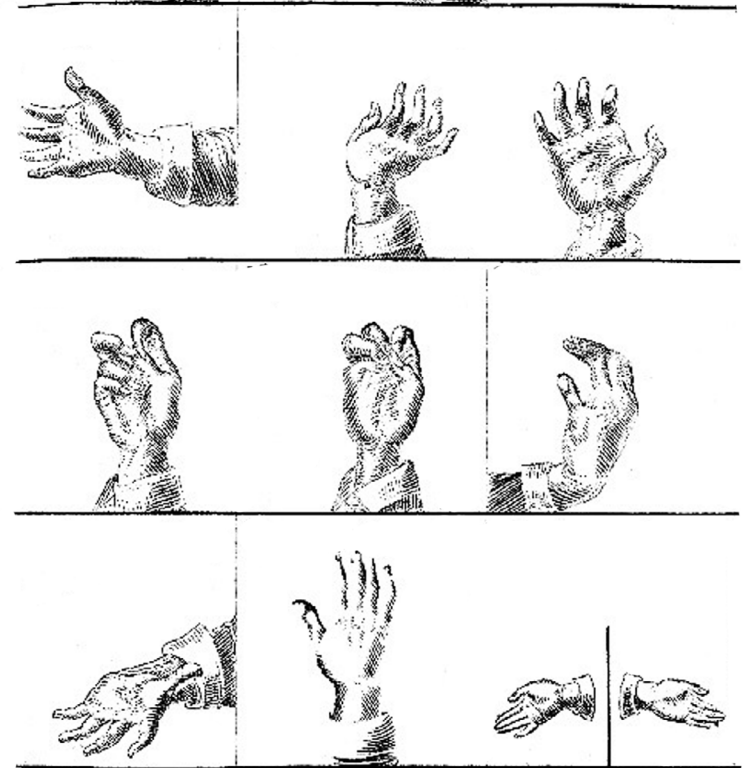
Zoom Call with Friends

(STORM PATHS, SAILING DIRECTIONS)



Averted Touch

(CHIROLOGIA CHART)



Beethoven Will Be Fine, I Promise

CONFRONTING RACISM & WHITE SUPREMACY
IN CLASSICAL MUSIC

CINDY LIU

*For the digital version of this piece, please visit
soubnecollective.com/beethoven-will-be-fine*

Last June, soprano Anna Netrebko posted a selfie of her complexion deeply bronzed with makeup for Verdi's *Aida*. The outcry in the comments was instantaneous: "Love *Aida*, but is the black face really necessary?" In response, Netrebko exclaimed, "Black Face and Black Body for Ethiopien [sic] princess, for Verdi[s] greatest opera! YES!"

I felt most transfixed by Netrebko's conflation of "Verdi's *greatest* opera" with "Black Face and Black Body." How does greatness render blackface excusable? Would *Aida* be less "great" without a white soprano in blackface?

This is, of course, a variation of the question which classical music has confronted in recent years: **Will the music "be okay" if it sheds the white supremacy that sustains it?**

The inextricability of whiteness and maleness from classical music, which has historically thrived on exclusion, nurtures a curious irony. The efforts of institutions and industry leaders (often white and male themselves) to "keep classical music alive" have also further entrenched its dissolution. An orchestra facing steep audience decline will suddenly feature women composers everywhere the following season (and only after it was called out). An opera company commits to "color-blind casting" and releases statements condemning racism while continuing to cast Netrebko in black face.

These institutions, attempting to speak to the communities they wish to draw, expose themselves as sociologically illiterate. Their misunderstanding feels painfully transparent with every diversity hire and every tokenizing move. When posturing to their most lucrative patrons (often also white and male) forms the core of their business model, is it any wonder they think paying lip service to condemn racism and white supremacy will ensure their economic survival?

The performativity exposes a harder truth: white supremacist music ("the canon") sells. Grappling with roots of this may cost the trustees and endowments which the industry clings to for life. Even if classical institutions do not overtly flaunt white supremacy, they frequently endorse it: the artists and pieces they program, the musicians they hire, the individuals on their boards, the donors they can't afford to lose, the quotas they set to fill. White

supremacy in classical music self-perpetuates when its most influential actors and professors deem it an extra-industry societal issue to sympathize with, rather than one rampant in their own work to address.

The classical industry now confronts a reckoning unlike any in its history. COVID-19 swiftly shut venue doors for the foreseeable future. Artists expect to lose \$50B of income nationally this year. With the arts' existence at stake, there has never been a more opportune time to uproot the white supremacy governing it. The reality that classical music may not survive beyond the next generations has slapped the industry's squarely in the face. Everyone who works in the classical genre must now overhaul the racist, sexist, and colonialist systems that barely sustained them before and will certainly endanger their post-COVID futures.

1. **CONFRONT AND DISMANTLE THE PARANOIA:** why does classical music “need saving” and from what/whom? What will be lost if we fail to preserve it?
 - a. Name some of the perceived dangers of relinquishing this mindset.
2. **START FROM THE TOP:** who are the board members/trustees? What are they donating towards? What are they insisting upon and how does it influence hiring and programming decisions?
 - a. Discard the idea of “bringing BIPOC voices to the table” to promote lasting diversity and inclusion. The very notion of “the table” implies that ultimate control rests within those who espouse the status quo.
 - b. If there are problematic individuals within the organization, **have the difficult conversation with them.**

3. **CALL OTHERS OUT ON RACIST COMMENTS AND MICROAGGRESSIONS.** Pay attention to small details in each conversation and meeting.
 - a. What language is used? How does it tokenize and otherize?
 - i. “You play so well for a [woman/Black person/Brown person/underprivileged person]!” Or some other comparable expression of shock at a person's ability, predicated upon their identity.
 - ii. “She has great technique, but artistry? Not so much.” Often employed in the context of Asian musicians.
 - b. The tight-knit network and particular paths to advancement which characterize the classical industry bring a unique fear of speaking up. Nevertheless, history has its eyes on us. If we do not speak up now, it will seem a wasted opportunity.
4. **PAY ATTENTION.** In the same way music trains us to deeply listen, we must now champion the BIPOC artists surrounding us. The industry has never lacked diverse talent; rather, their opportunities are often stymied by gatekeeping at every administrative level of the pipeline.
5. **DONATE** to organizations committed to diversity and equity, such as Sphinx Organization, Chicago Sinfonietta's Project Inclusion, and Coalition for African-Americans in the Performing Arts.

As for the canon, Beethoven will not “sound worse” if BIPOC/women/LGBTQ+/nonbinary individuals join our definition of “artistry.” (For those wary of including them because of “what the audience will think,” it's worth reiterating that many of Beetho-

ven's contemporaries did not think highly of his works when they first premiered).

Recently, I have questioned why I love classical music at all, if the racism and white supremacy that define it feel so unyielding. I am ashamed that, out of ignorance and/or fear, I have done little to confront these glaring inequalities; if anything, I am complicit in reinforcing them. Why should I bother complaining?

Because music demands honesty. If classical industry leaders believe music is a unifying force, if they truly wish to see it endure, they must leave the performing to the artists and act on their promises. Few people appreciate empty words, just as they seldom attend concerts just to hear Beethoven's 9th for the *n*th time.

A week after George Floyd's murder, the Met Opera published a Facebook post of Anna Netrebko as Aida, in black face. The social team forgot to cancel the previously-scheduled post. It was quickly removed.

"...[we] are frightened, all of us, of these forces within us that perpetually menace our precarious security. Yet the forces are there: we cannot will them away. All we can do is learn to live with them. And we cannot learn this unless we are willing to tell the truth about ourselves, and the truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be. The human effort is to bring these two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation."

—James Baldwin, *"The Creative Process"* (1962)

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

- ◇ Anna Netrebko's Instagram: @anna_netrebko_yusi_tiago
- ◇ The Metropolitan Opera's Twitter: @MetOpera
- ◇ Americans for the Arts (AFTA) COVID-19 Research Updates for the pandemic's impact on the U.S. arts sector
- ◇ Technical.ly's guide on how to talk about race at work (June 2020)
- ◇ "Black Artists On How to Change Classical Music," interviews by Zachary Woolfe and Joshua Barone for *The New York Times*
 - ◇ Conductor Roderick Cox
 - ◇ Bassoonist Monica Ellis
 - ◇ Conductor Thomas Wilkins
 - ◇ Composer Jessie Montgomery
 - ◇ Clarinetist Anthony McGill
 - ◇ Tenor Lawrence Brownlee
 - ◇ Composer Terence Blanchard
 - ◇ Soprano Latonia Moore
 - ◇ Composer Tania León
- ◇ "The Met Casts Anna Netrebko as 'Aida' Despite Her Past Controversy in the Role," by Helen Holmes for *Observer* (February 2020)
- ◇ "Why do we hear the work of so few female classical composers?" by Caroline Criado Perez for *The Independent* (August 2015)
 - ◇ Also see Criado Perez's *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*
- ◇ "Requiem: Classical music is dead," by Mark Vanhoenacker for *Slate* (January 2014)
- ◇ "Call Off the Requiem: The Classical Music Business Is Not

Dead Just Yet,” by Arick Wierson and Beau Draghiciu for *Observer* (September 2019)

- ◇ “After Criticism, Philadelphia Orchestra Adds Female Composers To Its New Season,” by Tom Huizenga for *NPR Deceptive Cadence* (August 2018)
- ◇ “Metropolitan Opera To Drop Use Of Blackface-Style Makeup In ‘Otello,’” by Brakhton Booker for *NPR The Two-Way* (August 2015)
- ◇ “Only Black in Philharmonic Is Resigning After 15 Years,” about violinist Sanford Allen, by Donal Henahan for *The New York Times Archive* (August 1977)
- ◇ “Tokenism solves nothing. Diversity should be business as usual,” by programmer & producer Toks Dada for *Rhinegold* (December 2016)
- ◇ “The Critical Reception of Beethoven’s Compositions by German Contemporaries,” Volume 2, by Senner, Wallace, and Meredith (University of Nebraska Press, 2002)

The Danger of “An Interpretation”

RACE, SELF-IMAGE, AND AESTHETIC SELF-OBJECTIFICATION IN ALAIN LOCKE’S *THE NEW NEGRO* AND NELLA LARSEN’S *QUICKSAND*

MARGARET SCHNABEL

By the end of 1919, 1 million Black Americans had left their homes in the South to move to Northern cities, a number that grew to more than 6 million by 1970.¹ Frustrated by the scant economic opportunities and harsh segregationist laws of the post-Civil War South, Black southerners began to migrate to industrial urban areas in the North.² This vast geographical shift—later dubbed the “Great Migration”—led to a corresponding shift in the makeup of America’s northern cities. Between 1910 and 1920, the Black population in New York grew 66%; in Chicago, it rose 148%; and in Philadelphia and Detroit, it grew to over five times its original size.³

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¹ History.com editors, “The Great Migration,” *History* (Jan 16, 2020), accessed via <<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration>>, August 14 2020.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

New York City—particularly Harlem—quickly became an epicenter for Black art and culture, and, from 1918 to 1937, gave rise to an artistic and literary outpouring now known as the Harlem Renaissance.⁴ As Jeffrey C. Stewart explains, segregationist laws at the beginning of the twentieth century attempted to curtail the rights of Black citizens, inciting them to develop a “New Negro” identity through which to conceive of and define themselves:

In part through the adoption of a new name, the New Negro, black people at the beginning of the twentieth century announced a new political subject who had detoured around American electoral politics. [...] Because political citizenship had failed African Americans, [Alain] Locke and other New Negro intellectuals invented a cultural citizenship that promised a new kind of American identity defined by culture instead of politics.⁵

Central to this new identity, and the Harlem Renaissance as a whole, was Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*, an anthology of fiction, poetry, and essays on African-American art published in 1925. Locke’s lengthy introduction to the anthology espouses his own philosophy of the movement, outlining a pathway towards racial equity through Black art and literature. His claims are so convinced, so persuasive, that one almost balks at the book’s subtitle: “*An Interpretation*.” For a text that so adamantly commits itself to complete truth and earnestness of expression—demanding, for instance, that readers “see the Negro in his essential traits, in the

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⁴ George Hutchinson, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. by George Hutchinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ Jeffrey C. Stewart, “The New Negro as Citizen,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (pp. 13-27), pp. 14-17.

full perspective of his achievement and possibilities”⁶—Locke’s choice to mark his own near-prophetic claims as merely one of many possible “interpretations” of Black experiences is a surprising acknowledgement of subjectivity.

But indeed, throughout *The New Negro*, Locke portrays interpretation as the central mechanism by which Black people can achieve cultural and social equality. The chief bar to the success of Black people, Locke argues, is that of their *misinterpretation* in white society⁷: “for generations in the mind of America,” he laments, “the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up.’”⁸ Locke presents the artistic self-expression of Black people, and their subsequent re-interpretation, as the key to social change, encouraging (presumably white) readers to “seek the enlightenment of that self-portraiture which the present developments of Negro culture are offering.”⁹ This self-portraiture depended, in Locke’s view, upon an elevated level of self-consciousness: “until recently,” he wrote, “lacking self-understanding, we have been almost as much of a problem to ourselves as we still are to others.”^[7]

Locke proposed, in other words, a wholly literary theory of social change: if one could gain that crucial “self-understanding” and capture it in self-portraiture, the resultant portrait would be complex, vibrant—and, he implied, enough to change white read-

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⁶ Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Touchstone, 1925, republished 1999), 28.

⁷ Arnold Rampersand, introduction to *The New Negro*: “Liberal whites would aid in this movement. Whites were probably the major target of *The New Negro* and efforts like it. Through the display of black sensitivity, intelligence, and artistic versatility, it was believed, whites would come to a new understanding of the humanity of African-Americans and help to accelerate social change” (13).

⁸ Locke, 2.

⁹ Locke, 28.

ers' perceptions of the Black population. It is interesting, then, that among the most famous Harlem Renaissance works that followed there exists a nearly perfect counterargument to this tantalizingly clear-cut process: Nella Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand*.

Quicksand explores the life of Helga, a mixed-race protagonist who enacts a "Great Migration" of her own, leaving her job at a Black Southern boarding school to move to Chicago, New York, and finally Copenhagen. Throughout *Quicksand*, Larsen depicts Helga as a self-expressive subject akin to the one Locke desires. She is highly self-aware; she invests herself with rich symbolism through her clothing and lifestyle choices, creating herself into a species of aesthetic subject; her strongest desire is to be understood in all her complexity. By denying Helga any successful moments of "interpretation" from those surrounding her, however, Larsen questions Locke's philosophy of depending upon white interpretation as a method of social change. "In the intellectual realm a renewed and keen curiosity is replacing the recent apathy," Locke notes; "the Negro is being carefully studied, not just talked about and discussed."¹⁰ Through *Quicksand*, Larsen asks: might making a Black person an aesthetic subject to be "carefully studied" diminish rather than expand his or her humanity?

From the start of the novel, Helga's frustrations with her life are concerned with (specifically racialized) interpretation. A teacher at a Black boarding school in the South, she becomes frustrated with its ethos of molding the behavior and appearances of students and staff so they will be palatable to a white audience:

This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. [...] It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring

.....
¹⁰ Locke, 14.

process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualisms. (9)

Here, Helga expresses frustration with the interpretive system presented to her; she disavows the idea that Black Americans need to conform to "the white man's pattern" to be accepted, leaving the school in hopes of expressing "individualisms" of her own.

Even as she moves to Harlem and immerses herself in its Black community, however, Helga is haunted by the implicit judgment of a white audience. Strolling New York's streets, she is

overcome by another [feeling], so actual, so sharp, so horribly painful, that forever afterwards she preferred to forget it. It was as if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed up with that something in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien. Why, she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk? (120-1)

The paragraph's rhetorical question reveals the pressure of the white gaze on Helga's thinking; if she assumed she would only be perceived and interpreted by a Black audience, she would not see herself as "yoked" to the others of her race, but instead as a unique member of an equally complex group. Helga here takes part in the same interpretive generalizations as a white observer, claiming to notice an innate characteristic present in the "racial character" of Black Americans.

Larsen's protagonist finds herself in the very same situation as Locke's "Negro": she is unsatisfied by the sweeping racial judgments cast upon her by white society, but does not want to shape herself to a white ideal in order to be accepted. (And it is acceptance she longs for, again and again: "With rapture almost, she let herself drop into the blissful sensation of visualizing herself in different, strange places, among approving and admiring people,

where she would be appreciated, and understood.” (126))

Helga must thus pave her own pathway towards acceptance, just as Locke outlines in *The New Negro*. Larsen initially depicts Helga as perfectly suited to this goal. Helga demonstrates a startling level of self-knowledge, revealed through moments of detached self-analysis: “She could neither conform,” notes Larsen, “nor be happy in her unconformity. This she saw clearly now, and with cold anger at all the past futile effort” (16). Even as Helga makes apparently rash decisions—to quit her stable job at Naxos, a wealthy Southern school; to move to Chicago, New York, Copenhagen—her narration maintains a careful distance from her own emotions and passions, as if anticipating all judgments readers might make of her:

This knowledge, this certainty of the division of her life into two parts in two lands, into physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America, was unfortunate, inconvenient, expensive. It was, too, as she was uncomfortably aware, even a trifle ridiculous, and mentally she caricatured herself moving shuttle-like from continent to continent. (215)

Here, Helga observes her movements with the precision of a literary critic: she notes the symbolic resonance of her geographic separation (“physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America”) as if interpreting her own life before even the reader can do so. In acknowledging the “ridiculous” nature of her situation, Helga refuses to abandon herself into passion, instead maintaining a critical consciousness of how she might appear to an imagined audience. This self-criticality progresses into a species of self-parody as Helga “caricature[s] herself”—that is, she engages in the very oversimplification of her own life that Locke criticizes in white society. Larsen casts Helga as both actress and critic, endowing her with the very self-knowledge that Locke

claims Black Americans lack.

From self-knowledge, Locke argues, can spring self-representations. Helga repeatedly adjusts aspects of her own image, crafting aesthetically and symbolically resonant surroundings for herself as if in view of an imagined audience. “She was no longer concerned with what anyone in Naxos might think of her,” Larsen writes of Helga, “for she was now in love with the piquancy of leaving. Automatically her fingers adjusted the Chinese-looking pillows on the low couch that served for her bed” (33). Helga’s visual tidying (“adjusted the...pillows”) mirrors her creation of a neat internal narrative: by fixating on the “piquancy of leaving” in lieu of its dangers, Helga transforms what is low and unglamorous in her life (knockoff “Chinese-looking” pillows, a “low couch” instead of a bed) into glamorized—and, in the case, of the traditional “leaving” narrative, celebrated—esthetic forms.

Larsen’s sensory appeals—the sharp gustatory “piquancy,” the visually-stimulating “pillows”—suggest that this moment of aesthetic creation is one from which Helga derives intense pleasure, underlining the importance of the act to her character. These sensory appeals do not work on Helga alone; the reader, too, is affected by the scenario Helga has created, as if Helga has “adjusted” it for an imagined audience whose role we now fill by admiring it. We readers-turned-audience, in turn, relieve Helga of the burden of real-life human connection; with a pleasing “leaving” narrative crafted in her head, “she [is] no longer concerned with what anyone in Naxos”—that is, in the “real” world around her—“might think of her.”

Larsen manipulates such symbolism at key points throughout the novel, giving the interpretation of Helga’s imagined audience (made real, it is worth noting, as the reader witnesses her story) precedence over the real “audiences” she encounters in her daily life. On her last night in Harlem before moving to Copenhagen, Helga “smile[s] as she decide[s] that she would certainly wear the black net. For her it would be a symbol. She was about to

fly” (124). Though Helga views “the black net” alone as a symbol of freedom, in donning the dress, she herself becomes the symbol embodied, an aesthetic object to be interpreted. This interpretive moment, however, is private; Helga “smiles” to, and towards, herself. Once more, it is the reader alone who is given access to the symbolic resonance of the dress, and the reader alone who can act as Helga’s witness and interpreter.

Though the reader’s goals appear to perfectly complement Helga’s own—she longs to be interpreted, we to interpret—Larsen interrogates this relationship by questioning the success of Helga’s self-portraiture. If Helga herself is flawed and unsure, Larsen asks, do we, as her audience, reach any greater understanding of her by using as the basis for our judgment the (perhaps equally uncertain) interpretive material with which she goads us?

Larsen begins this interrogation by placing Helga in Copenhagen, where she receives exactly what she claims to want: fine things, a large audience of admirers, and an artist to confirm her aesthetic value through portraiture. When Helga is truly treated as an aesthetic object, however, she is unhappy with the objectification: “...it conveyed to Helga her exact status in her new environment. A decoration. A curio. A peacock” (160). Helga experiences further disillusionment at being *mis*interpreted by Herr Olsen’s portrait: “It wasn’t, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features. [...] Anyone with half an eye could see that it wasn’t, at all, like her” (199). If the portrait is an interpretation that tests the strength of Helga’s carefully-curated symbolic appearance, the process of translation has proven her symbolism faulty; the portrait “wasn’t, at all” like Helga’s conception of herself.

By terminating Helga’s aesthetic self-objectification in an interpretive failure, Larsen questions the validity of the Negro self-portrait as the guiding force for social change, undermining a cornerstone of Locke’s *New Negro* philosophy. Why, however, is the self-portrait doomed to fail? One answer can be found by

returning to *The New Negro*: “until recently, lacking self-understanding,” Locke writes, “we have been almost as much of a problem to ourselves as we still are to others.”¹¹ Though Locke frames this problem as the responsibility of the interpreted (“a problem to ourselves”) rather than the interpreters, sociologist W.E.B. DuBois in the 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk* offers reasons for this inhibited self-understanding that instead place the blame within white society. The Black American man, DuBois asserts, lives in “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”¹²

Examining Helga’s narrative reveals this very sort of “double-consciousness.” When she is rejected at the doorstep of her white aunt’s house in Chicago, Helga accepts her fate with full understanding:

Worst of all was the fact that under the stinging hurt she understood and sympathized with Mrs. Nilssen’s point of view, as always she had been able to understand her mother’s, her stepfather’s, and his children’s points of view. She saw herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden. She understood, even while she resented. It would have been easier if she had not. (64)

Having “understood” this white “point of view”—however racist, cruel, and untrue it may be—Helga’s consciousness will forever be split in two, between her dreams of acceptance and the knowledge that such dreams will never align with the racist white reality surrounding her.

.....
¹¹ Locke, 5.

¹² W.E.B. DuBois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (London: Penguin, 1996), 5.

Perhaps what Helga demonstrates in her acts of self-analysis is not, then, a heightened self-understanding, but rather one irreversibly warped by the image cast upon her by white society. A “pure” self-portraiture akin to the one Locke desires, Larsen suggests, cannot exist; even as Helga attempts to divorce herself from the societal structures that bind her by moving across the world, they persist—for, Larsen suggests, they are the very forces that created her.¹³

Helga’s aesthetic self-objectification can be viewed, in light of DuBois’ theory, as an attempt to unify these two consciousnesses—to craft a self that can be interpreted by a white audience in the same way that Helga views herself, and in so doing gain control over her own interpretation. This attempt, however, is thwarted by the end of the novel, as the physical demands of life as a Black woman strip Helga of her mental refuges. Helga is foisted with a set of physical obligations that bar her access to her intellectual dream-world: she must run a household as a preacher’s wife and bear five children. “At the end of the novel,” critic Charles Scruggs notes, “as Helga becomes biologically trapped by childbirth, she desperately clings to high culture, especially literature, as a kind of moral anchor.”¹⁴ Helga, recovering from a state of weakness after the birth of her fourth child, asks her nurse to read from Anatole France’s “The Procurator of Judea”; this decision could be read, beyond Scruggs’ interpretation of it as a “moral anchor” for Helga, as a last attempt to infuse her life with symbolism, to live once more in the realm of the intellectual mind before she is met with

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¹³ “It wasn’t, she was suddenly aware, merely the school and its ways and its decorous stupid people that oppressed her. There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her, kept her from getting the things she had wanted” (23).

¹⁴ Charles Scruggs, “Sexual desire, modernity, and modernism in the fiction of Nella Larsen and Rudolph Fisher,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 159.

the crushing physical reality of another pregnancy.

Throughout *Quicksand*, Larsen thus calls into question the validity of Locke’s interpretive theory, demonstrating that self-portraits created under conditions of oppression will inevitably be tainted by the mindset of the oppressor. The material conditions of daily life—the physical responsibilities heaped upon, for instance, women of color—must be altered, Larsen suggests, before visions such as Locke’s can be realized. Throughout *Quicksand*, white antagonists are few and far between, but their presence is felt in every space, every thought, every articulation. Larsen’s point is clear: the construction of “Negro” as an identity did not originate in the hands of the people upon which it was foisted—nor, then, can the construction of a “new Negro” identity be the responsibility of the Black population alone.

Queering Quietly

QUIET EXPRESSION AND BLACK QUEER INTIMACY
IN BARRY JENKINS' *MOONLIGHT*

SHAWN COUGHLIN
ED. PAUL SANDOVAL III

Oh hey gorg, I didn't see you there! So I've been thinking. What would it be like if the guys from *Queer Eye* revamped the life of Chiron, a character from Barry Jenkins' Oscar-winning film, *Moonlight* (2016)?¹ Unlike many queer coming-of-age films, *Moonlight* replaces a popular "out and proud" attitude with sensual, non-outward modes of sexual expression. By placing *Moonlight* in proximity with texts such as *Queer Eye* and other sensational queer media, I want to draw attention to some of the film's most pleasurable qualities, what Black culture theorist Kevin Everod Quashie calls 'quiet expression'.² In a queer scene dominated by calls for outward expression, how can Jenkins' privileging of *in-ness* not only expand our image of queer experiences, but allow

¹ Collins, David, creator. *Queer Eye*. Scout Productions and ITV Entertainment, 2018; *Moonlight*. Directed by Barry Jenkins, performances by Trevante Rhodes, André Holland, Janelle Monáe, Ashton Sanders, Jharrel Jerome, Naomie Harris, and Mahershala Ali, A24, Plan B Entertainment, and Pastel Productions, 2016.

² Quashie, Kevin Everod. "The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet." *African American Review*, vol. 43, no. 2/3, 2009, pp. 329–343. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41328610. Accessed 2 Aug. 2020.

us to better understand overlooked facets of Black art and action? For those of you unaware of *Moonlight's* gorgeousness, let me fill you in. Set in Miami during the 1980s, the film shows Chiron, a young Black gay man washed under the pressure of family drug addiction, sexual confusion, and homophobic bullying. Jenkins divides the film into three acts (i. little, ii. Chiron, iii. Black), presenting each across three distinct temporal beats: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Within each act, Chiron engages with his community, including other boys at school, his mother, her drug dealer, and various others.

The film primarily investigates the shaping of Black masculinity, as Chiron not only becomes a man himself but negotiates manhood with those around him. One such influence is Juan, a Black, Cuban dealer who guides Chiron through the lush yet unforgiving neighborhood of Liberty City (swoon). In one scene, Juan teaches Chiron how to swim in the ocean, signaling his position as a caring male role model. Although he appears only in the first act, Juan's masculine legacy reverberates throughout the remainder of the film. Another prominent male figure is Kevin—one of Chiron's classmates who appears in each act. Although described as a "facsimile" of Chiron, Kevin is noticeably cooler, "smooth as hell", and more at ease navigating a minefield of Black hypermasculinity.³ Despite one scene in which Kevin is forced to beat Chiron (ew), their relationship serves as a fixture of intimacy and sensuality between Black men (yay).

Now with everyone caught up, let's take a look: (*♪ rainbow swipe transition ♪*) Today, the Fab Five are slippin' and slidin' back to 1980s Miami for the 'More Than a Makeover' like we've never seen before. Meet Chiron. He's seventeen, lives in Liberty City, and isn't exactly like the other boiz. Chiron was nominated by his close friend,

³ Jenkins, Barry. *Moonlight*. Film script, 2016.

*The Gays™, who wants to see him finally come out of the closet and have a little fun. According to his friends, Chiron is compassionate, shy, and a bit nervous to acknowledge his sexual identity (*looks are exchanged* “oh god, baby no”)! Despite a lifelong crush, Chiron has never found the courage to express his feelings for his friend, More-Than-Just-A-Friend-Kevin. Our goal this week is to help him find his inner pride and share his truth with the people he loves most. Are we ready? (*cue intro*)!*

Can you see it now? A young, Black, gay man struggling with sexuality, masculinity, pride, and *fashuun*. Can we not imagine Tan tossing out button-ups for blazers, Karamo crushing insecurities, and Antoni cooking avocado Caprese tartare? Chiron’s example brings to mind an early episode of the series, *To Gay or Not to Gay*, in which the Fab Five assist AJ, “the straightest gay guy in Atlanta,” with what Karamo calls “the *healthiest* thing you could do”—i.e. coming out. Like Chiron, AJ is tender, soft-spoken, and a more conservative qween—thus prompting the group to uncover his ‘authentic’ self through the magic of fitted t-shirts and an “exposed closet.” (Don’t worry; they used protection.) The episode represents a form replicated throughout the series, staging a publicly out identity (masculine or feminine) as *the* way to gay.⁴ As the recipe goes, take one part reserved individual, one part ‘out and proud’ attitude, a dash of public exposure, and *voilà*: you’ve got yourself a happy person cocktail.

In many ways, the magic of *Queer Eye* arrives from its ability to satisfy a queer narrative we all live and love. For it and other queer texts, an outward (and oftentimes public) ‘coming out’ be-

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⁴ Although not all of *Queer Eye*’s participants are queer, each participant is encouraged to apply to their lives elements of queer enthusiasm and pride. As Tan France suggests in episode one, the original 2003 *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* “was fighting for tolerance”, while the 2018 series “fights for acceptance”, “to figure out how we’re similar as opposed to how we are different”.

gets a profound emotional resolve—as to be out is to be proud, and to be proud is to be happy. This sentiment reflects what queer author and activist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes in *Epistemologies of the Closet* (1990) as the “galvanizing coming-out imperative”—or the demand that queers make themselves publicly visible to obtain a proper queer status.⁵ And this makes sense. For a minority group, this public assertion of identity offers many benefits: public representation, the opportunity to identify one’s community, and an expression of personal truth. Evidenced by queer activist campaigns such as “Silence = Death” and Pride, as well as decades of coming-out related media, these features of outness are foundational to queer experience. So much so that a history of privileging outness and its representation has left it an overdetermined thing—meaning that outness is almost exclusively equated with queer joy, authenticity, and pride.

So if being out signifies pride and joy, how is remaining within the closet represented? Whereas outness is overdetermined with positive features, inness takes on qualities of a *negative position*. Take, for example, the media spectacle surrounding ‘DL’ (down low) Black and Latino men from the early to late 2000s. For those of us not pouring over sensational queer media coverage, the term ‘DL’ commonly refers to Black and Latino men seeking discretionary sex with other men, while not identifying as ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’, or ‘queer’. Similar to Chiron, DL men emphasize a discretionary mode of expression that stands in tension with a queer community dedicated to being ‘out and proud’.

In his part biography, part ethnography *On the Down Low: A Journey Into the Lives of Straight Black Men Who Sleep with Men* (2004), HIV/AIDS activist J.L. King recounts his own experi-

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⁵ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Updated with a new preface [ed.]. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2008.

ences as a DL man “behind the closet”.⁶ More than your typical closeted man, King argues that DL men are “so undercover, [and] so in denial” that they cannot possibly acknowledge the depth of their self-misunderstanding. He describes these men as duplicitous and unknowing of their experience, calling for them to drop their “blanket of lies” and step into the glorious light of ‘being out’. Speaking to his own experience, King writes, “At times I hated being alone because in those quiet moments I was forced to think about what I was doing and reckon with the contradictions I was living” (as if being queer has nothing to do with endlessly negotiating contradictions). Here, King suggests that for DL men, the space of one’s interiority is marked by frustration and self-loathing rather than intimacy. For both King and *Queer Eye*, remaining within the closet obstructs authentic happiness by privileging a pernicious smokescreen of deceit.⁷ And this criticism masquerading as activism is not uncommon. In 2010, *Oprah* aired its second hour-long episode dedicated to sharing the voices of DL men. In it, interviewees sit silhouetted in a grey room backed by seedy electronic music as the words DOWN LOW float in the darkness.⁸ By sensationalizing what is otherwise a ‘quiet’ expression of sexuality, these examples of hysterical media coverage replicate a long rehearsed history of policing, doubting, and vilifying Black male sexuality.⁹ This vilifying at once aligns *outness* with truth,

⁶ King, J. L. and Karen Hunter. *On the Down Low : a Journey Into the Lives of “Straight” Black Men Who Sleep with Men*. New York: Broadway Books, 2004.

⁷ Both *Queer Eye* and King endorse outness through positive health messaging. While *Queer Eye* packages an “out and proud” attitude as beneficial for one’s mental and social health, King situates outness as an imperative for HIV/AIDS prevention.

⁸ For an informed HIV/AIDS response to this episode see: Malebranche, David. “An Open Letter to Oprah Winfrey concerning the ‘Down Low,’” *Daily Voice*, October 15, 2010, [http:// web .archive .org /web /20120331195633 / http:// thedailyvoice .com /voice /2010 /10 /an-open-letter-to oprah-winfre-002652 .php](http://web.archive.org/web/20120331195633/http://thedailyvoice.com/voice/2010/10/an-open-letter-to-oprah-winfre-002652.php).

⁹ Snorton, C. Riley. *Nobody Is Supposed to Know : Black Sexuality On the Down Low*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

and *inness* with sick falsehood—barring discreet sexuality from the possibility of authenticity and pride. What we have here is not only the policing of Black male sexuality but the rejection of Black queer experiences operating outside of public view.

The irony of this project is then not lost on me. Through crafting this essay, I am similarly complicit in presenting information that further makes visible an already at-risk group seeking discretion. I do so not to discourage coming-out narratives, nor to propose how any individual should represent themselves. Instead, I write with the hope that we acknowledge the diversity of queer experiences and resist our demands to see Black men perform their sexuality in a way *we* find dignified. I examine the work of *Queer Eye* and other creators not to discredit their comprehension of a complex issue, but to reveal an attitude which—by privileging outward expressions of queerness—aligns quiet modes of expression with inauthenticity and repression. My goal is to repurpose what we queers have declared a problematic position, and rewrite it as a space where joy and intimacy can flourish.

It is with this purpose that I reapproach Jenkins’ film. Rather than read *Moonlight* as a coming-out narrative, I examine its use of ‘*quiet expression*’. In his essay “The Trouble with Publicness: Towards a Theory of Black Quiet”, Quashie worries that interpretations of Black culture are too often bound to notions of public and political resistance. “Black culture”, he writes, “is mostly over-identified with an idea of expressiveness that is geared toward a social audience and that has political aim” (329). Although Quashie recognizes the importance of expressive, public resistance to civil rights activism, he argues that an over-reliance on this expressive mode eclipses our acknowledgment of “vulnerability, interiority, contemplation, and dignity in the interpretation

of Black art and action”¹⁰. To draw out these overlooked elements of Black subjectivity, Quashie encourages us to observe what he calls ‘quiet expression’ when interpreting Black culture. While quiet expression “can appear publicly, have and affect social and political meaning, and challenge or counter social discourse... none of this is its aim or essence”.¹¹ Quiet instead “represents the broad scope of [one’s] inner life” (331), including their psychic interiority, spirituality, and physical integrity. To acknowledge quiet expression within Black art and action is, for Quashie, to acknowledge an interiority typically obstructed by an emphasis on expressions of public resistance.¹²

By attuning ourselves to the value of ‘quiet’ in Black art and action, we resist the tendency to register private, non-outward modes of Black queer expression as inauthentic. Instead—as Jenkins’ film shows us—quiet, inward modes of expression may serve as one of the many tools used to generate intimacy in a world that authorizes primarily public acts of resistance and exposure. By complicating the divide between in and out, Jenkins overrides a model of queer representation prepared by texts such as *Queer Eye* and sensational media coverage. This disruption cuts the link between inness and inauthenticity, and instead, represents this position as capable of sustaining nourishment, intimacy, and pride.

To accomplish this, Jenkins obscures the boundaries between inness and outness, revealing the ability for both positions

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¹⁰ Lokeilani Kaimana. “Conscious Quiet as a Mode of Black Visual Culture.” *Black Camera*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2016, pp. 147. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/blackcamera.8.1.0146. Accessed 2 Aug. 2020.

¹¹ “The Trouble with Publicness”, Quashie, 331.

¹² For more on Quashie’s theory of Black quiet, see: Quashie, Kevin Everod. *The Sovereignty of Quiet : Beyond Resistance In Black Culture*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012.

to engender positive and negative effects such as protection and endangerment. Popular attitudes typically understand inness and outness within an invisible/protection and visible/danger binary. To illustrate this, I want to place two attitudes lifted from popular media side-by-side; the first from r/BisexualMen, and the second from J.L. King’s book:

I’m not going to be a hypocrite: I think people need to come out of the closet at some point, if just for their own wellbeing [sic] and mental health, but also because we have a responsibility to be a beacon of light to other bi-bros who are struggling. But I can also respect that many people aren’t ready or face harsher circumstances than the ones I’ve faced.¹³

I felt safe under the blanket of lies. I’d been there so long that coming out and standing in the truth was something I didn’t rush to.¹⁴

The first comment represents outness as bearing the burden of public visibility, detailing a queer responsibility to overcome discrimination, and become “beacons” of “wellbeing” and “mental health”. The second comment envisions inness as a state of protection, as King describes feeling safe within his escape from public scrutiny. These comments reveal that outness doubles as a sign of resilience and pride in the face of queerphobia, while inness signifies the protection of invisibility. *Queer Eye* replicates this attitude in the episode discussed above as Karamo compares coming-out to the courageous act of hurling one’s self over the

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¹³ Twiggy_tripit. “What is up with dl ‘straight’ guys who hook up with dl ‘straight’ guys?.” Reddit, 26 September 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/bi-bros/comments/54jk3p/what_is_up_with_dl_straight_guys_who_hook_up_with/. Accessed 2 Aug. 2020.

¹⁴ King, *On the Down Low*, ix.

edge of a cliff. And oftentimes, this is an apt description. This construction becomes an issue, however, when we lose sight of its flexibility. While this binary may fit in some circumstances, it fails to account for the violence and hypervisibility that Black men experience despite being ‘in the closet’.

It is this discrepancy that Jenkins addresses in the opening scenes of *Moonlight*. Considering that the film centers on Chiron’s emotional and physical development, his introduction may seem unusual. Speeding in and out of frame, Chiron appears only momentarily as other boys pursue him—calling out “Get your faggot ass right here,” “Going around with that faggot ass, bro”! Despite his role as the film’s focalizer, Chiron’s entrance is marked by the homophobic remarks of his attackers rather than his own physical presence. We *hear* of him—particularly of his sexuality—before we see him. Here, Chiron’s relative invisibility to the viewer does nothing to hide his sexuality. Immediately, Jenkins suggests that invisibility and the burden of public scrutiny are more involved than we may think.

We then follow Chiron (referred to as ‘Little’ in act one) escape into an abandoned crackhouse as the boys continue their pursuit. Once inside:

POUNDING. Madness and pounding, the boys cackling like Hyenas as they beat the living hell out of the door... Little shrinking, backing away and covering his ears... THUMP! A ratty shoe clanging off the window-pane, Reflex -- Little startles, throws himself against the adjacent wall.¹⁵

¹⁵Jenkins, *Moonlight*, 3.

If we approach this interior as a metaphorical closet, we recognize its failure to offer the protection suggested by the two comments discussed above. Despite being ‘in’, Little is still attacked with the same violence suffered while being ‘out’. Pounding, cackling, thumping, and clanging—the assault here is one of sound. Unlike a tactile assault, auditory damage bypasses spatial limitations between ‘in’ and ‘out’, allowing violence to reach him regardless of spatial boundaries.¹⁶ By emphasizing the auditory aspect of his attackers, Jenkins highlights the permeability of borders dividing inside and outside space. He then further complicates an inness/outness binary when we hear another banging at the door: Juan. As though there was no spatial separation at all, Juan strips down a board covering the building’s front window. Encouraging Little to follow him out, he states, “Come on, now. Can’t be much worse out here”. Juan’s comment resists the notion that either inness or outness is necessarily bound to protection or endangerment respectively. Although Jenkins here represents inward space as dangerous, this is not to say that inness is exclusively a dangerous site. Juan instead suggests that both inness *and* outness offer equal capacities to harm and nourish—as one is just as worse (or as good) as the other. Jenkins shows us that although we may criticize discreet men for hiding in the closet, these spaces rarely offer the safety and invisibility ascribed to them. Instead, the boundaries between in and out are loose, allowing for experiences of violence and nourishment to appear freely within both positions. In this way, Jenkins frees inness from stereotypes of cowardice and inauthenticity and allows for inward modes of expression to take on new meaning.

To interpret Jenkins’ re-evaluation of inwardness, I examine how Quashie’s theory of quiet expression maps onto *Moonlight*.

¹⁶“Machine Mouth.” *Sonic Persuasion: Reading Sound in the Recorded Age*, by GREG GOODALE, University of Illinois Press, 2011, pp. 47–75. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1xcjzr.8. Accessed 16 Aug. 2020.

Most obviously, we recognize quiet expression within Jenkins' characterization of Chiron. Chiron rarely speaks, obscures himself from the crowd, and avoids public scrutiny to instead turn *inward*. Despite his penchant for pursed lips, we never get the impression that Chiron is without thoughts, feelings, or expression. Instead, in his absence of sound, we find an overflow of emotion. His lips shift, signaling words heard only on the inside. His eyes fix intently across the room, with fantasy and anxiety ruminating. And at multiple points, his inwardness manifests as we float through his eroticized dreams of Kevin. In each of these cases, Chiron is not silent, empty, or absent. He is quiet—a mode of expression that privileges inwardness and discretion over public action. By prioritizing quiet expression over its outward counterpart, Jenkins encourages us to acknowledge Black interiority not as a space in need of public display, but as a space for dreams, fantasy, and personal contemplation to flow unannounced. Unlike outward moving texts such as *Queer Eye*, *Moonlight* stages inness as a full and authentic position worth maintaining.

Jenkins further rewrites inness not only as a valuable position, but as a space in which queer joy and intimacy can be generated and sustained. In *To Gay or Not Too Gay*, AJ solidifies an intimate relationship with his step-mother through an outward display of his queerness—i.e. coming-out to her. They hug, they laugh, they cry, and the moment is genuinely heart warming.¹⁷ Inness here acts as an emotional roadblock that will obstruct intimacy until it is transformed into outness. And while this may be true for AJ, Kevin and Chiron share quiet modes of expression, such

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¹⁷ It is worth noting that AJ and his step-mother, Haide, appear to share deep intimacy even before his coming-out. Although not the trajectory of the episode, it is possible that AJ and his step-mother developed a significant degree of intimacy prior to his outward expression of queer identity. I mention this not to downplay the value of AJ's coming-out, but to remind us that loving relationships can take shape just as well from a position of inness as outness.

as touching and subtext, to build for themselves an inward space of intimacy and pleasure. Early in the film, we witness Kevin and Little wrestle one another in an open field. As described in the screenplay, "These are children. Sexuality is absent from these images and yet, the hints of something sensual, fleeting in its appearances; Kevin's cheek wedged close to Little's neck, blades of grass striking to their skin".¹⁸ Although the boys are wrestling, the scene is unusually quiet; there is no music or verbal exclamations, "the only sound the movement of their bodies against each other, against the grass" (15). Sensuality here is built through quietly touching rather than outward expressions of feeling. The camera zooms in, enclosing their bodies within the frame of the image itself. The outdoor setting drops away as Kevin and Little construct a close, inward space for play and sensuality to take shape. Within this scene, we also lose the precision of visibility, as the image blurs and both boys disappear into a tangle of isolated limbs. So as Kevin and Little build intimacy through quietly touching, the audience loses sight of them as they dissolve into a private, inward space. The quiet expression of soundlessly touching here imbues inness with a sensational degree of queer intimacy. This same method for developing intimacy within an inward space reappears throughout the film, such as when Kevin and Chiron quietly masturbate on the beach, or when Kevin softly strokes Chiron's hair in the film's final scene. Even when Kevin and Chiron sit within a public diner, Jenkins transforms this setting into an intimate and private space through the use of musical subtext flowing from Barbara Lewis' song *Hello Stranger* (1963). In each of these scene, Jenkins uses quiet expressions to characterize inness as a position where sensuality flourishes, despite one's exposure to an environment inimical to their being.

In a lived experience, one is likely to employ a collage of out-

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¹⁸ Jenkins, *Moonlight*, 15.

ward and inward modes of expression simultaneously (even the ever quiet Chiron dances like a diva in dance class). However, texts such as *Queer Eye* and sensational media coverage often underrepresent the value of inness and quiet modes of expression to instead champion almost exclusively an “out and proud” attitude. Even the more empathetic comments found on social media platforms such as Reddit stage inness as a less preferable haven for queers in dangerous circumstances. What these approaches fail to recognize is that inness may represent a *preferable* position, one that is not only full of authentic thoughts and experiences, but capable of nourishing intimacy and pleasure. Perhaps then quiet expression, and the inwardness it privileges, serve as the tools with which intimacy is made in a culture uneasy to accept Black queer love. In this case, it seems more appropriate to celebrate the ingenuity of Black queers who use these tools to design for themselves a sexual landscape of safety and pleasure.

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