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Towards Illegibility: A series of reflections on living beyond language

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TOWARDS ILLEGIBILITY

A series of reflections on living beyond language

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Language and Literature and The Division of Social Studies

of Bard College

By

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

For you, Ema, zichrona l'vracha

My first editor in writing and this world. I will forever miss your fingerprints—your edits, your eye-rolls, your excitement, your frustration, your love—all over my work. I feel your absence palpably in these words. So too do I feel your presence. Your diligence, your demand for excellence, your constant push that I reach out and ask for help. I have written these essays for you. Everything I do, I do in your name. Because everything is הכל, everything is pouring. You into me into life, the way I keep us alive—an inseparable creature—in this work and world.

* * *

I began this thesis in September of 2023. On October 7th, 2023, the zionist regime escalated its 75 year occupation of Palestine into a fullscale genocide on the people of the Gaza strip. With the world's eyes on Gaza, the zionist entity also intensified its regime of terror in the West Bank. While I was unsure how to incorporate a discussion of the ongoing genocide within my thesis, it feels paramount that I name and honor the martyrs of Gaza as well as the steadfast resistance within all of Palestine and across the globe.

I finished my thesis from a tent in the Columbia University Gaza Solidarity Encampment. Students, professors, and community members within the encampment proofread, workshopped, and supported me materially in completing this work so that I could participate in the student Intifada to the best of my abilities. This thesis is dedicated to you all who made small and large sacrifices to stand in unwavering support of Palestinian liberation. No matter what comes, you have reignited and seeded a revolutionary spark that cannot die. It is the honor of a lifetime to learn from and stand by your sides.

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COMING TO THIS WORK

Sleeping, I stalk the fields of language for a word

that will carry

“wrenching” or “gutted”

and only ever come back empty handed.

In the thimble of purple before dawn

everything is vast and possible.

Shadows and memory overlay one another

convincing me

that we are still alive.

Where is relief except in dreams

where time isn't linear

and grief is just a wind,

opening all the doors.

* * *

I came to this work because I was curious about the ways in which language makes us legible, what the costs of this legibility might be, and why certain experiences exist outside of legible articulation.

When I read Adrienne Rich's poem "Planetarium," the line "I am an instrument in the shape of a woman trying to translate pulsations into images for the relief of the body and the reconstruction of the mind" (Rich) undid a knot in my heart I didn't know I'd been holding.

I came to this work because language, as it is traditionally structured, fails to name what I felt in my body, it being "the most accurately transmitted, most untranslatable language in the universe." (Rich)

I came to this work because, in the words of poet and swimmer Sarah O'Neal, "I have never been legible. Always existing in the unnamed spaces in between. Always having to invent a way to explain what I was seeing and feeling and living and knowing. To break through the silence. To surface ways of naming it" (O'Neal).

I came to this work because my mother died and there is a small room inside me that has never stopped screaming. Because prose failed to contain this scream and poetry failed to name this scream, and all that was left to articulate the scream was itself—the kind of sound that cleaves everything in its path.

Because language "as such" fails to capture the affective, the sensorial, the way certain moments show us that words are just sounds and bodies are just flesh, spilling and bleeding across experience.

I came to this work because I wanted to practice writing that is more concerned with sensation than legibility, with wildness than respectability, with experience than truth, with the kind of clarity that comes in moments of existential rupture.

As such, form will follow content. Prose will give way to poetry; theory will give way to lived experience; description will surrender to sensation, the shadows that hover over the “thing in itself,” the haunting over the object.

In addition, this piece will not follow a traditional “essay” form. Rather, it can be read as a collection of reflections on disparate yet interrelated phenomena. A constellation or network. As with any project, some threads tie up at the end, while many remain loose, open to what this project may inspire for myself or you, reader, in the future.

At times, I will speak of the literal dead, the specters that haunt me; the bodies and beings I have loved who—in their deaths and their haunting—shape me as much—albeit quite differently—as they did in life.

* * *

Language makes us legible to ourselves and those around us. However, certain experiences are extra-linguistic and cannot be made legible in language. This is because language as such is codified by power, which produces normative subjects that reinforce the hegemonic status quo; all experiences that do not align with the power’s objectives are evicted beyond the borders of language and into a broad “otherness,” pathologized as “crazy” or “criminal.”

Jacques Derrida's theory of hauntology identifies that which power cannot consume as spectral—ghosts that haunt the border of the normal. In building on Derrida's work, Sadeq Rahimi argues that language is the basis for consuming, co-opting, regulating, and normalizing certain behaviors and life ways. Anything that cannot be co-opted by power is a threat, and must be evicted. Once evicted, it becomes the border of legibility, creating and haunting the border itself.

Conceptually, I valued this work but needed to understand how it played out in the real world. In reading Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, I saw how the law was created in ways that criminalized some and absolved others by using reductive, logocentric, and patriarchal language. Any case that did not fit within the clean lines of the law was criminalized, thereby making the border a place of physical violence rather than just a spiritual alienation.

I became curious about what happens when the other and the norm come into contact at said border on somatic rather than juridical or intellectual levels. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, first introduced in her 1980 book *The Powers of Horror*, located illegible experience as a scene of psychic rupture that results in a visceral revulsion. Abjection provided language for that feeling of existential disorientation when one encounters something they cannot integrate into their web of meaning. However, I found myself unsatisfied with the solutions proposed. I did not want to reject this space of rupture, to live constantly fearing it, yet another specter haunting; I yearned for a way to live inside of it.

I turned to Audre Lorde's 1985 essay "Poetry is not a Luxury," wherein Lorde offers up poetry as a tool for breaking white supremacist language and remaking it to actually hold experiences that have been expelled beyond the borders of normality. More than a tool, poetry became a language for living beyond the border. It articulated spectrality and the experience of haunting without having to make these experiences fit into the mold of legibility.

I was pushed further into the capacity of poetry to bridge the psychic and the somatic—which language as such works so hard against in an attempt to maintain so-called mind body duality—by Claudia Rankine's *Citizen, an American Lyric*, in which she uses repetition to induce a visceral response in the reader.

No one theorist, poet, or source used in this text provides a single, holistic answer. It is in their ever evolving relations to one another that these theorists and poets both deepen and begin to tackle the questions this work aims to explore.

I – THE ECSTATIC AND THE MUNDANE

In the morning, I walk through the woods, hoping for some kind of peace, and mostly fight impatience, lost in restless daydream. But every once in a while, prompted by a song or the way light stretches through the trees, that ecstasy comes.

It comes, and it breaks me open and apart, and for one moment, everything is clear and serene. For one moment, I am not parts and wholes, but an indescribable, formless opening.

And then, quickly as it comes, it goes. And I chase after it, turn and turn to face where it has gone. But it has gone.

And then there is just the hard work of waiting and trying not to wait for it to return.

After you died, the ecstatic and the mundane collided and exposed each other. One moment there was your body in the grave, and the mud we poured over you and the people under the umbrellas in the rain; and the next, everything shredded by a wail, and there was only the cold, the wet, the wood warmed to life in the grip of my palms. Each object and phenomenon losing its space and signification in time, the implications of its presence, and its meaning in relation. Just an overwhelming sensation that could not be named, located, contained; tearing and pouring all the way through.

Quickly as I'd left, I'd return. The mundane is full of forms—the way days begin and end, the way one gesture means love and another violation. We make our lives and our bodies legible through language and then storytelling, losing much of the texture of experience in the process.

The ecstatic is one. The way a gesture meant as loving triggers an inarticulable past, and the memory of violence eclipses intention, our bodies flinching with fear before we can register what is happening.

We run for cover before realizing the sound of a gun is a firework. Turn cold with fear before realizing the man at the door is the coat on its rack. turn runny with pleasure before remembering that this pleasure is wrong, is perverse, or merits shame.

My mother wasn't buried in a coffin. I leaned into the grave and placed branches over her shrouded body so that it would soften the sound of mud and rocks falling.

She wasn't buried in a coffin — I held her forehead, her cheek. I clenched my jaw and would not let them lower her. The mundanity of this touch, made ecstatic in death. A body cold, a chest still. And a wail—shredding everything to shards of color and heat and sound spilling—a broken window exploded across a parking lot's asphalt.

Each object and phenomenon losing its space and signification in time, the implications of its presence, and its meaning in relation.

Just an overwhelming sensation that could not be named, located, contained; tearing and pouring all the way through.

Before the experience can be categorized as one thing or another, there is a moment of openness, of infinite disorder. It is this moment that I am most excited to explore within the following contexts: death, the body, relationships, and as a manifestation of the power structures that dictate our lives.

* * *

Once you said, *unconditional love exists on a metaphysical plane that we cannot access in the day to day. You must learn to love in ways the people can see.*

A couple of years later, I remember how we fought for hours until, at the end, I looked at you and said, *Ema, I think we've reached the unconditional place of love.*

And that's how it is, isn't it? We fight and fight, for and against, until, through hard work, ceaseless trying, sheer luck, or the motions of others, we fall into moments like this. Where I do not have to show that I love you through a hot cooked meal or a text replied; a bed made or hair ruffled. Where the love just spills across the space between us; pushes us across the brink of what is known, of what has a knowable form, of what we can legibly express in and through language.

Growing up, you—*Ema*—sang me a lullaby:

b'shem hashem

b'shem hashem

elohai yisrael

meyimini michael

oo'mismoli gaviel

oo'milfanai uriel

oo'machorai refael

v'al roshi v'al roshi

shechi-i-i-natel

each night before bed

my matter was re-

consolidated

by angels who stood

at each bodily edge.

Why did you—*Ema*—invoke angels at night? From what were you protecting me?

Are the angels the edges or the spectres that haunt them, perforate them, remind us that we are not separate?

On the phone, Isa says atoms
that once touched never
forget each

other, when one
is impacted so is
the other.

this illusion
of separate.

when the world behind isa's

eyes bursts
with light / pain she looks
to the sky and wonders
if some atom
amongst the stars
has tripped
on a comet
and how

could we maintain

this illusion of singularity?

how long will I keep denying

how desperately

I need you?

What constitutes form? Matter (particles, atoms, stars) jitters in space. Edges form from other matters; scrape against each other until they hitch. A container forms, compressing the jittering atoms inside until they are, apparently, solid.

Matter, therefore, is consolidated by edges that exclude. But what is on the other side of these edges?

Jaques Derrida's theory of hauntology, first introduced in his 1993 text *Spectres of Marx*, ruptures ontology. Ontology, the predominant theoretical approach that deals with the nature of being, focuses on what 'is'. The 'is' in question is defined as "being and presence" and is constructed through knowledge. This notion of "knowledge" is developed through the meanings that are assigned to words that represent things-in-themselves.

Hauntology, on the other hand, centers the spectre, which Derridean scholar Colin Davis defines as, "a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate." Knowledge is established through language which seeks to create intelligible regimes of signification, then the spectre, in its ambiguity, sits fundamentally outside of language. Davis confirms that the spectre "does not belong to the order of knowledge." The mere presence of the spectre, which can be identified by its inability to be situated within language as such, "pushes at the boundaries of language and thought." At the same time, anything spectre is that which cannot yet be "articulated in the languages available to us." In short, spectres are inarticulable and anything inarticulable becomes a spectre that then haunts being, and therefore language,. Hauntology's focus on that which is undefinable,

incoherent, and illegible makes it an incursion into the predominant ontological way in which we understand the world and our experiences of it.

But how does such “incursion” present itself?

Like the name “hauntology” suggests, all that is incomprehensible, “within our available intellectual frameworks” manifests as “a wholly irrecoverable” haunting. This haunting throws ontological frameworks into confusion, as it proves that, in Davis’ words, “the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us.” Any exposure of a given social order’s material, political, and social instability is a manifestation and sign-post of the spectre’s haunting. Rather than shy away from these incursions in the hegemonic social fabric, Davis argues that it is by engaging with spectres that we may be opened up to, “an essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know.”

Derridean scholars argue that it is not the role of the hauntologist to “return the ghost to the order of knowledge.” Rather, “Derrida wants to avoid any such restoration and to encounter what is strange, unheard, *other*, about the ghost. For Derrida, the ghost's secret is not a puzzle to be solved...Hauntology is part of an endeavor to...explore the boundaries between the thought and the unthoughtnot reducing it [the spectre] prematurely to an object of knowledge.” (Davis) In demanding that the spectre remain ambiguous and elusive, Derrida makes a striking claim that the job of the hauntologist is not approach the spectre as “a determinate content to be uncovered” (Davis) through exorcism, categorization, and incorporation into the ontological fold of meaning

and being. Instead, his stance is that one must engage with the spectre on its own terms: releasing the desire for understanding in favor of an “openness to what exceeds knowledge” and “towards a still unformulated future” (Davis) and approach the spectre as a formless entity and experience at once “unthinkable and the only thing worth thinking about.” (Davis)

As liberating as this task may be, a hauntological orientation fundamentally threatens the legitimacy of any regime because language—the basis for legibility—is used to create and maintain power within any given social order. Given that the illegible nature of the spectre exposes the insufficiency of a system to convey particular experiences, we must consider the psychological, spiritual, material, and social consequences of incursion and spectrality.

Identified as illegible, the spectre is deemed as “other”. This “otherness” is always defined in opposition to a “normal” whose borders are constructed to patrol and protect all those within from said other. The other, cast beyond the border, spends its time violently displaced—both physically and linguistically—if the normative structure is to maintain.

But what happens to that othered entity evicted beyond the borders of normality? When the “normative” and the “other”, the solid and the spectre, come into conscious contact? When the borders brush?

* * *

Now, I find peace only in dreams where reality gives way to impression, emotion, and the nonsense that makes so much more sense than a world in which you are dead.

After night has filled you, what foothold is leftover?

The sound of dreams in earthy

splinters around

you for whom everything

has fallen to pieces

by waking.

leveled to your knees by the memory of *loved*:

singular and without reference,

where do you relinquish resistance?

After you died, I found a notebook in which you had written *I did the best I could because everything is hevel.*

In the wilderness of calling—or calling *out*—I try to build intimacy in a senseless place.

Like groping for the light in a room without walls.

Hevel hevelim—everything is pouring. I feel it in the striated sinewy muscles over my skull, my eyes; in the tracks where tears run and ribs spread in the roll of hips and where shirt seams fall.

I don't know if I feel you reaching back to me. I know I feel you and that it is never enough. This endless well of need, stretching without reaching anything except more yearning.

Today I think about hevel – vanity of vanities, breath of breaths, vapor of vapors, futility of futilities. Hevel hevelim.

And for a split second I hear your voice, its textures of desperation-exasperation-well-spring-love saying, *okay. okay sweet girl. ok. They'll forget. You'll forget. so what? Everything is hevel.*

who do you be in the face

of unanswerable questions?

the breath that ends in an open

mouth

the hebrew “ma” meaning “what”

but sounding so much more like “mother”

we sift through reality at the moment

where a note ends

making bare the answers

to open questions,

the question itself being:

the mouth that opens

to linger

a vision of “how”

an abundance of sound rummaging through air seeking

its perfect resonance

darling—

you will still be waking

when the note has ended.

do not listen for its perfection—

moment where sound meets silence,

pent breath before the exhale

[in my mothers voice as I hear it in memory and dreams]

listen

instead,

sweet girl,

for its pouring.

Death seals off every door in the house. And despite it all, we live. Everything is pouring. Love into death into heartbreak into loss into futility into love.

* * *

We walk along the edge of life until we pause at the ruins of conviction which—in their fall—have become travelers' prayer halls.

Holy in their fissures: the way light streams through tumbled-in ceilings, how rays catch dust.

A temporary resting place in our reaching, because *it's like there's a mini big bang every time somebody dies*, and we spend the rest of our lives wandering around, trying to recollect the shards.

You must know by now that wholeness will never be restored. Not in the way we imagined.

The most delicate shrapnel of your life embedded in my sternum,

Neither of us know what healing looks like

But I'd like to be loved by you in whatever way remains.

I cannot speak of spectral incursions into the hegemonic structure's borders without talking about transness on conceptual and deeply personal levels.

When I am trying to explain abjection, I usually begin with a formulaic story. A cisgender straight man walks into a bar. He meets a woman. He is attracted to her. He takes her home. They get into bed, He realizes she is trans, he kills her. As much as this story is a trope, it is also true. It has happened before and it will happen again.

In prefacing abjection, Kristeva writes that, "abjection [is caused by] what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva, 4) --anything which makes obvious the constructedness of our lives. In other words, the abject is the spectre's incursion.

Abjection, she writes, looms like, "one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant inside or outside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable." (Kristeva, 1) Here, Kristeva places abjection as both in and outside the subject, but undeniably *outside* what the subject considers "possible" or "tolerable".

Kristeva goes on to write that, "it [the abject object] lies there, quite close, but cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced." (Kristeva, 1) This is to say that the subject, let's call them "you", rejects this abjection-inducing- object. But you can still see it, like something out the window. Or closer, just on the other side of a line drawn in the sand.

A terrible fear sparks inside you. The thing repulses you, but it repulses you because it reminds you of some deep repressed desire. You want it, but to want it is to invite ruin. But in rejecting it, you reject a part of yourself.

Despite your fear, your revulsion, you cannot turn away. “The jettisoned object is radically excluded and draws me [you] toward the place where meaning collapses”. (Kristeva, 2) In the face of that which you cannot integrate, meaning-making fails, something in you shatters, and a violence ensues.

* * *

In short, the man in the bedroom could not accept this woman’s transness because her transness implied, to him at least, his own queerness. In order to nullify the possibility of his own homosexuality, he killed her in order to protect his own heterosexual sense of self.

When the man was a child, before he learned to be heterosexual, there was the possibility of “queerness” because he was not a fully formed subject, controlling his drives according to the structures of power that demand his heterosexuality. As he grew, he learned to be heterosexual.

But the vestiges of a queer potentiality haunt him. They whisper in every corner. It is these desires and these whispers that demarcate the boundary of his own heterosexuality. They are invisible sign posts that help him orient towards his “heterosexuality”, his own socially acceptable subject formation.

Queerness is the ghost of a future made mute by his desires to be “normal”. And when he encountered the woman, and his desire for her, he found his back unexpectedly turned on normality and was faced with the ghosts he had spent his whole life stumbling further and further away from.

He found himself facing homosexuality, heterosexuality’s constitutive boundary, the edge where heterosexuality ends, the clear border that in relation. And in order to maintain that border, he killed the other side of it, hoping to kill that part of himself that exists within that “other side”.

On an internal and individual level, abjection brings us to the place where meaning, coherence, and language collapse. It brings us directly to and momentarily *across* the line in the sand.

On a societal level, queer and trans people induce abjection in cisgender and straight people. We show them something they do not want to see in themselves, something they thought was outside their world. We show them their desires. Trans people are the ghosts that haunt cisgenderness. We make up the boundary of cisness, lick up against its limit. We are the constitutive edge. And our presence is a threat.

Someone once told me that transphobia is not a hatred of trans people, but a fear of people who live boldly despite the risks and consequences. Cisgender people see this. “This” activates something deep inside them, some desire to be non-normative that they have pushed deep down and away.

This tickling causes an eruption. Tectonic plates inside them shift. A vacillation occurs. An anxiety is produced. The cisgender person has a vague memory of their own deviance, their own experience of transness. It cannot be revealed. It must be suffocated. And so we are violated in the name of their sustained boundary, their normativity.

In the face of a failure to maintain the hegemonic structure (of cisgenderness, of heterosexuality as an essential, natural, and permanent thing), this excess, this slippage, (Rahimi) living-spectres are marked for death.

III – TRANSGRESSIVE BODIES

After she died, something shifted. Transness had always carried textures of grief, but now I was fixated on the way in which both transness and death threw the “natural” into stark relief, exposing its social constructedness, the absurdities we devoted such time and energy to, the cracks in the edifice.

Even prior to my mother’s death, I understood transness to be about so much more than a binary-crossing gender presentation. Rather than a commitment to a particular gendered performance that crosses from masculine to feminine or vice versa, I understand transness to be any life way that resists assimilation into the center, and makes the conscious decision to live in the border despite the risks. (Note to self: a principle and a commitment)

I am interested in exploring transness as any materially-manifesting lifeway that transgresses the borders of the “normal” and into the “other” in a way that raises ghosts.

To be trans is not necessarily to be transgender and to be transgender is not to constantly raise ghosts. To be trans is to rub up against the borders of normality in such a way that threatens said border’s stability and exposes their porous and fallible nature. *Transgender*—particularly nonbinary trans people—are one manifestation of how this phenomenon is inscribed on the body and projected onto society as we commit to a lifeway of perpetual transgression.

* * *

After she died, I thought about those people, most often women, who are “never the same after”. Widows and mothers of dead children who walk with the air of death around them. The way crowds part for them, the way men no longer meet their gaze. I wanted to be like those women, not realizing I already was.

The ways in which those marked by transgenerness and those marked by death threatened normality grew more apparent. It was not something innate in *transgenerness* that threatened social norms, but the courage to live transgressively. Likewise, I observed that choosing (however uncontrollable it felt at the time) to utterly abandon social norms and live my grief so entirely made those around me uncomfortable in similar ways to which my trans“generness” did. In short, both of these experiences were a sign-post of the “other”. They push us across the brink of what is known, of what has a knowable form, of what we can legibly express in and through language. As the carrier, transness and grief expose us to the ecstatic at a heightened rate. For those encountering transness—whether it manifests as gender presentation or grief—a recognition of the fallibility of language and therefore knowledge and therefore the entire social order is almost unavoidable.

This lyric is a meditation on longing for the dead, for transness, for women and womanhood on both abstract and deeply intimate levels, for the compounding desire for a life of rupture and the “ease” a life of “normalcy” provides. It is a meditation on what I am and am not willing to give, to give up.

* * *

I was at a party, the kind of drunk that left me a mischievous confessional. I looked good, knew it. Beautiful because I had to make myself up. I had no model. (Clifton) Close shaved head, paint splattered faded orange t-shirt. Black carhartts, leather boots, worn and wrinkled with age. My

strong, durable body. Chest bound flat. I didn't pass as a man. But I passed as illegible, as something no longer assumed woman.

Tom and I were talking. I was the only one at the party who has known him since he was a girl. The only one who could read the dead-name tattooed in Hebrew on his bicep. Together, we were full of a secret. Our transness was common knowledge, but no one else is on the inside of it the way we were to each other.

And then his voice, ragged with pent up and bitter grief, "no one wants to hear about the girl in me."

This bearded man, this raging boy. The entry point to this story.

I write from deep within. This means I write from the girl in me.

* * *

It is so easy to shock people with the girl I was. Too easy to be read as a series of contradictions. People hear about masc-of-center folks who grew up girls and think of repression, of violence, a state of trapped.

I was a joyous girl. An incredible one. Radiant, I burst at the seams.

I wore pink and dresses and believed that on my 7th birthday I'd wake to a secret letter inviting me to join the fairies living in the city's gardens and bay and hills.

I knew how to be scared.

I knew how to avoid the boys and hate the boys and be jealous of the boys and want the boys not because I wanted them but because I wanted what they had.

I knew how to leave. There is a certain kind of leaving that only women know how to do. A woman leaving means something. I left the way only women know how.

I was a girl obsessed with older girls. With their eyes and their laughs and their thin perfect wrists and how they talked and dressed and whispered.

I wanted to be them. I wanted them to love me, to protect me, to care for me, to stand up for me. I wanted to taste the inside of their mouths.

My favorite part of Nava's life was Friday evenings. The race to get ready before sunset, hustling kids in and out of showers two or three at a time. The steam and smells of dinner wafting through the old rooms. Berkeley's golden golden light. Someone crying someone screaming someone sweeping someone dressing. Nearly out of breath we would gather around the candles just before the sun slipped from the sky. Her mother—Tania—glorious woman, hawk-eyed, leading the prayer. A woman's honor.

Sometimes, in the rush of preparing for Shabbat, I would pass Tania in her room as she redid her *tichl*. I can still see her in the doorframe, winding the bright cloth around her head. I remember how special I felt every time I saw her hair. How special it made being a girl feel like. I had the privilege of seeing a woman without her headscarf. The shock of her jet black hair.

I don't know how to talk about Tania, my beloved teacher, mother, aunt, friend—the woman I so loved and feared—a giant in my childhood, without talking about Yonim.

I also don't know how to talk about Yonim.

Yonim. Eldest son. Silly goose. Mandolin player. Brilliant thinker. Prophet. Poet. Your long round face, full lips, soft earth toned clothes. Your mischievous smile, curly hair, *peot*. Your silly grin, head bent in thought, your eyes shining in an argument about dead ancestors. Your body rocking in prayer, your voice calling out to god, your voice calling out in love.

You Yonim you, alive alive alive. You, Yonim, living in the deepest eddy of a voice.

Yonim. Your name means doves.

After you died two doves built a nest in the wisteria outside your house. After you died....there is no way to end this sentence. Only the gaping wound of your life, your death, the gutted sound of flood-like pain.

But Yonim, your mother. Your mother and her religiosity gave girlhood a different kind of power. Access to a world men could never touch. The hair under scarves, new moon ceremonies, a still and quiet home, the power to light candles. Being a girl meant that on Friday nights when you, your brothers, and father left for synagogue, your sister Nava, your mother Tania, and I sat together on the old cracked leather chair and studied the Torah portion together.

It wasn't just Tania though. I grew up surrounded by wondrous, powerful, brilliant women. Tania, Batsheva, Ahuva, Efrat, my mother, my grandmother. Women who lived so loudly. Women of mythical proportion.

Women with rich voices and brightly colored skirts and big laughs and eyes that could break you with a cutting glare and arms that squeezed you until you couldn't breathe and stained aprons and words that made you laugh and words that made you cry and words that drenched you in shame and hands that held and cooked and loved and that dragged you into the circle to dance and pray and clap and study and cry and rise.

And how could I not become them? How could the future fall by my own hand? How could I do this—not to them—but to myself?

The giants of my girlhood. The women who populated my life.

When I speak to myself, I still speak to the girl in me. When I speak about myself, I still speak about a girl.

I never became a woman. I never got to become a woman. I wanted to be a woman. I wanted to be powerful. I wanted to be strong.

The men's side of the orthodox synagogue I attended with Nava and her mom was never as rich, never as colorful, never as joyous.

They wore black and white. They mumbled their prayers. When they danced, there was an edge to it, a hint of rage, of violence.

The women? These women taught me how to pray. How to wail with our eyes screwed shut, call out to god the way our ancestors did. Praying so hard we were mistaken for drunks.

They taught me to turn from normalcy and face the ecstasy of surrender. To god, to tenderness, to embrace.

And when they danced, they *danced*. Skirts rippling and billowing, tail ends of head scarves trailing like kites behind them, clapping, not worried about sweaty palms, loving love loving.

I began to seriously transition during the pandemic when prayer halls were closed. The first time I attended a gender-divided synagogue after beginning to transition was the week after my mother died. I stood outside not knowing which door to enter.

All my life was on the women's side. All my girlhood, all the giants who raised me, passing me from hand to hand.

Even in my rage, even in my rejection of them, even in their ignorance, even in how they misunderstood me.

In everything they kept loving me. They let me rebel they let me rage they let me leave them.

And there they were, with open arms, when I whispered my return.

Where will I go? I want bright skirts I want wailing I want to love and be loved the way only women know how.

But if the love I desire is a love between women, will I still be a recipient of that love? Will I still be able to give it?

Since transitioning the most common thing I feel is that of being on the outside looking in.

When I return to the synagogue, will I have to stand outside and lean in the window? How devastatingly accurate that would be.

I grieve the life of the woman I never became.

Will I always be trans? Will this ever end? Do I want it to? Do I want this to be just a phase?
What if, one day, I want to be religious again? Where do I go? Who will be my people?

I admired these women because they were unbelievably strong, and equally soft. They loved us relentlessly, loudly, physically. They hugged us and kissed our soft heads and cooked us soup. They filled us with stories and lessons and a strict moral code.

And, having named the glory of being loved so thoroughly, so inside-and-out, I can admit that they failed me.

They could not teach me how to be queer. how to love my queerness. They could not teach me how to be not-girl.

They taught me how to hide my body, how to fear, to keep a secret.

They taught me what it means to leave first, so that you are not the one left behind.

I do not blame them, mostly because I did for so long.

They didn't know. They weren't prepared for queer children, for trans children. They did not teach us how to love our bodies. Queer and trans children didn't occur to them. I did not occur to them. They loved me so much.

They still do.

I still do not occur to them. Children like me do not cross their minds. They know how to love Ariella. They do not know how to love my transness.

It's still love. In some ways, it's deeper, it's love cut with sacrifice, with misunderstanding. I have never been loved more than I have been loved by the people who make no effort to pretend they understand me.

I do not understand you. But I know you. You are not who I made you to be. I still love you. You dress like a frecha. I still love you. I found a pair of men's shoes on my porch, the same porch where doves nested after my son died, they are for you. You show up to my house and stand in the door frame where you once watched me finger-comb my jet black hair with your shoulder exposed. I will still love you.

And yet. I suppose I am writing into that strange edge wherein the people who taught you how to love are also the people who taught you shame.

* * *

Seven or eight years after her mother died, my mother and I cried on the couch. We did this sometimes. Usually in the spring, the time when she died. Passover was her favorite holiday. The house was full of her every April and later, in May, full of the death of her.

My grandmother was also a woman of mythical proportion. She overflowed with life. I wish I could have known her as an adult. God I miss her. My own mother said, *I was a better iteration of Oma and you are a better version of me.*

I am my mother and grandmother's legacy. I am their blood, their fire, their rage, their despair and their insatiable, nearly untenable will to live.

We all hunger. We all eat our dreams alive.

My grandmother was a strong woman. My mother is a strong woman. What does it mean for me to carry the legacy of strong women?

Do you all, my maternal ancestors, trust my body to live and carry the freedom you died before tasting?

I live for you. Every motion, every breath, every bite I savor so that you, inside me, might savor it too.

I know you expected a woman. I know that the liberation you fought for was meant to be savored by a woman.

I was a girl, is that enough? I am something on the edge of woman, does that count? I love you, I live for you, is that okay? Will you love my body if I change it? Do I still get to live in your lineage if I do not claim “woman?”

Your life and death haunt me. Your womanhood haunts me. My girlhood haunts my transness and my transness haunts my girlhood. Your body haunts my changing one.

If I medically transition will my face no longer be yours?

I will always have been your girl.

In other words, what does it mean to haunt normality on both intimately personal and social? To haunt the choreography of life we have been indoctrinated into? As grievors, as trans people, as both?

As much as I am haunted by spectres, I too am a spectre to life as we have been told to live it.

Living spectres cannot be incorporated. We threaten everything. our hovering produces a piercing vibration, an acute anxiety. In the face of living spectres, arguments of naturality fail.

On holidays, I set an empty place at the table. My sister finds it morbid, and says so. But my jaw aches from the effort of keeping them out, my teeth vibrate in their sockets from the humming that rushes through the gaps in torrents, *please let me home.*

* * *

To invite in the spectre is not so much to invite instability as it is to admit defeat. Love and loss lick at each other, an animal over their newborn, vaginal canals still gaping wide. The audacity to imagine such things could ever be kept from each other. To consent to love has always been a consent to devastation.

* * *

In her 2014 book *Citizen, an American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine reflects on this notion of love and devastation in writing, “Not long ago you are in a room where someone asks the philosopher Judith Butler what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.” (Rankine, 49)

To choose being in relation is to open ourselves to the possibility of love. But love opens us like few other forms of relation do. To open ourselves to love is to open oneself to the possibility of loss, of grief, of devastation.

But how to explain such things?

* * *

One consequence of those “othered” spectres which exist beyond the borders of power is that we are stripped of the language needed to articulate and position ourselves. Depriving us of articulation is a method of sustaining our alienation.

How to evoke ourselves when we have been marginalized from language, from all ability to make meaning? How to write into that place where language breaks down in the face of such overpowering emotional experience?

How did we even arrive in this place beyond the border of articulation?

* * *

Even prior to modern structures of global colonization, imperialist capitalism, and white supremacy, poetry had been marked as a threat to the stability of hegemonic states. In the 10th and final book of *The Republic*, Socrates reverses his claim from Book III and decides that, in order to maintain an ideal polis, it is necessary to expel all poets. This is because Socrates believes that functionality determines essence. Artists and poets don't make things that can be used. Unlike math, art and poetry are not decided; they force us to sit with contradiction and multiplicity. “Instead of reproducing the ‘use’ part

of things, they just make a *useless* small ‘part’ of it: its sense impression” (Stocking, 2021). Poetry forces us back into the wrenching, tearing, liminal space where hate and love dance violently in the body. This, according to Socrates, leaves the soul in confusion, and art becomes a reminder that the soul is confused by nature. “This is why philosophy is at war with poetry: for philosophy exists precisely to reduce a body’s multiplicity of sense and meaning to univocal simplicity.” (Stocking).

Lasting Platonic Philosophy—created by and for men—denies people their “complex humanity” and makes them a single thing. In short: poetry opens us to each other and our own many-ness and takes away our ability to say what any one thing is “essentially” about. Socrates, who understands this, and knows how much it hurts, cannot handle it. He wants to transcend nuance, make everything sweet math. But poetry razes to the bone, brings even the most theoretical person into their body, screams for appetite, screams more! More! More! Screams desire, screams want. Poetry demands nuance and contradiction, a place where maybe we could hold paradox in ever changing relation. And Socrates cannot hang. So, he kicks them out. Better to be safe and dull or sure and hateful than ecstatic and without the illusion of control.

Audre Lorde identifies poetry as a container for the ecstatic in her 1985 essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”. At the crux of the text is Lorde’s idea that, “for women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (Lorde, 1). In this potent, spiritually charged work, Lorde argues that the “keystone” for women’s survival is the fusion of ideas and emotions, which reach fruition through poetry. Lorde claims that the “white fathers” notion of “I think, therefore I am” is an act of violence against the spirit, and writes that, “sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free” (Lorde, 1). She argues that the

mind-body dualistic nature of Cartesian philosophy, as it stands, was created by and for white men, and therefore does not have capacity to convey any marginal lived experience because said experiences demand a sense of affectivity that Plato's model denies.

Poetry, she argues, reworks language to convey that which is felt, but thus far unarticulated and inexpressible. Lorde writes, "the black mothers in each of us-the poet- whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary awareness and demand the implementation of that freedom." (Lorde, 1) She goes on to write that, "it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless-about to be birthed, but already felt" (Lorde, 1). Here, Lorde argues that the only way by which marginalized voices—particularly those of Black women—can be wholly expressed is through poetry, whose capacity for both form and formlessness is conducive for expressing the affective qualities of these lived experiences in a way that essence-driven philosophy denies.

With this context in mind, we will now turn to Rankine's employment of poetic-repetition to, in the argument of Audre Lorde, explore how the poetic employment of repetition allows marginalized people to rework language and "formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors" through poetry" (Lorde, 2).

As poet and swimmer Sarah O'Neal writes, "I have never been legible. Always existing in the unnamed spaces inbetween. Always having to invent a way to explain what I was seeing and feeling and living and knowing. To break through the silence. To surface ways of naming it". (O'Neal) The "other", banished from language and therefore meaning, is rendered voiceless by language as we are taught to speak it. For those of us who exist beyond hegemonic borders to speak is to haunt.

* * *

What happens to people who are not allowed into language? Who stand on the threshold or outside it completely?

Years back my dad and I passed by this deer on the road; all her legs splayed out, her rib cage picked open, these sinews fluttering like seaweed off of her body.

And my dad, he really didn't understand why I was so caught up on this deer

Unti, hours later: *that deer looks like a woman being raped.*

And he just didn't understand how his sixteen year old daughter would see that and think this, or that this would be something that could go through my mind.

And I wonder if I will be writing about this forever.

I will have to forgive myself for trying to make meaning from such senselessness.

I am only trying to be my most human.

* * *

Sarah and I spoke about how there is no such thing as moving on. How we are never done
grieving. That when we are wrecked *like that* we die,

are born from a canal of grief

But more than a reason you don't ever have to be done.

We joke about Sela being terminally ill *at least then you can tell him you are in love.*

So little left to lose she could leave, move in with the desert, do anything she wanted.

And she keeps writing these plays and making movies when we both know all she really wants is
his body in her mouth, his hair in her mouth, his chest crushing her like panic but not in a bad
way.

she hasn't been sick like this in years not since Runi and it's not that she wants more than what
she has

it's just that she wants it in its full expression wants the dog off the leash, let it run wild—

rip the air to shreds in its gunning jaws

I can see it running through fields like the ones Ada Limon writes about under skies that never end in Montana or Kansas or whatever wherever

I am tired of writing soft of writing yearning wanting longing sweet and tender there is a rage gnawing on the bars a demand to be known to be held down to make pretend of the things we most fear, play them out without the wreckage of.....

there's no final one who gets it. It's all approximation, different people who press different parts, touch different parts of us like what Sarah meant when she wrote that *even two hands pressed together are split*.

and there's still so much I want to know. (O'Neal, 15)

And now both of us aching, knowing that loneliness suffices for nothing

but that doesn't keep me from feeling such grief from something that was such an approximation of what my body dips and caves to be and be held in.

Stories only make sense in retrospect someone please tell me a story in which I am loved I want to be loved, loved right

someone tell me a story in which I am not a cavern with no dead ends

tell me a story in which I am not always angry not always illegible

tell me a story in which we are both eating and soft tell me a story in which we both scream

tell me a scream and call it a story

tell me a violence without anything around it just desert and nothing with this gaping wound and
no one to explain why why why why

tell me the story which will suffice for experience tell me the story that proves I will survive the
violence which could be around every corner but somehow never is...

We write poetry because we have been cut off from language because language is how meaning is
made to reinforce systems of subjugation and oppression. Because to name our existence is to name the
artificiality of structures and phenomena that have been made to seem natural, eternal, and essential.

We write poetry because we are haunting life and because we want to live, to be legible if only to other
ghosts.

One of the clearest ways in which language is manipulated to reach the body is through repetition. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen, An American Lyric*, is a feat of auto-fictional essays, reflective prose, and poetry, supplemented with photos and visual art. The 2014 text is an intervention of academia's notion of "proper" writing and ruptures concepts of what is correct in both content and form. Rankine problematizes the way that "proper" academic writing pits reason against matters of the heart in an, "aestheticized distancing from Oh my God, from unbelievable" (Rankine, 85) and uses poetic-repetition to bridge the emotional distance between text and reader that traditional writing seeks to maintain. *Citizen* begins with a collection of anecdotes detailing a series of racist micro-agressions that, "send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs" (Rankine, 3). A Black man babysitting Rankine's children is mistaken by a white neighbor for a criminal; the narrator is mistaken for a trespasser when she arrives at a therapy appointment; a white woman and child would rather stand than sit next to a Black man on the train. Rankine's reflections on these anecdotes touch and tug on the wrenching qualities of her own invisibility, the uncertainty of her own existence resulting from this invisibility, madness, etiquette, and witnessing of racist "mistakes" within liberal white spaces. As the text continues, its shape shifts from scholarly prosaic documentation to, in the words of Kenna O'Rourke, lyrical "verse as the poet's attempts to articulate the toll of everyday racism become by necessity broken-down, faded, then eventually rebuilt into a recognizable paragraph form. *Citizen* is made up of a series of repeating events, which in turn are comprised of repeating language-images, stories, and phrases that build upon each other until they break, cascading through the mind, settling in the body, lodging in the heart as a profuse and at times intolerable ache. Rankine's employment of repetition as a means for creating a somatic reading experience

deftly subverts Cartesian philosophy's hegemonic tactics of writing that separate the body from the mind, and the mind from the heart.

First and Foremost, repetition overwhelms. It overwhelms the senses, the body, the mind. It makes things both hypervisible and a blur. It disrupts, it soothes, it worries like wringing hands, it drives a person mad. Repetition marks something as relevant, as in need of attention and care. It points to a rupture, a destabilization in the smooth machine of traditional academic writing. Repetition is a blemish, a plea, a scream given shape into words. It is hands waving in the ocean, when it is unclear from your angle on the shore if they are waving hello or for salvation from the riptide. There are two moments from *Citizen* that employ repetition to overwhelm the reader with an unparalleled profundity. In Rankine's "script for situation video in collaboration with John Lucas" Rankine honors the memory of Trayvon Martin, a 17 year old Black boy who was shot and killed by a neighborhood watch captain. Rankine writes,

The days of our childhood together were steep steps into a collapsing mind... They will never forget our way through, these brothers, each brother, my brother, dear brother, my dearest brothers, dear heart—

Your hearts are broken... The hearts of my brothers are broken. If I knew another way to be, I would call up a brother, I would hear myself saying, my brother, dear brother, my dearest brothers, dear heart— (Rankine, 89)

In this passage, Rankine repeats the word "brother" until it transcends its denotative meaning and cascades into the word "heart". By writing the word brother so many times, Rankine engages the concept of semantic satiation—repeating a word until it loses its meaning and holds potential for

previously unseen movement. The movement and meaning evoked from the repetition of “brother” is “heart”, and within the context of Trayvon Martin’s murder so too does it become imbued with existential, not to mention politicized, loss.

Later in the same passage, Rankine writes,

If I called I’d say good-bye before I broke the good-bye. I say good-bye before anyone can hang up. Don’t hang up. My brother hangs up though he is there. I keep talking. The talk keeps him there. The sky is blue, kind of blue. The day is hot. Is it cold? Are you cold? It does get cool. Is it cool? Are you cool?

My brother is completed by sky. The sky is his silence. Eventually, he says, it is raining. It is raining down. It was raining. It stopped raining. It is raining down. He won’t hang up. He’s there, he’s there but he’s hung up though he is there. Good-bye, I say. I break the good-bye. I say good-bye before anyone can hang up, don’t hang up. Wait with me. Wait with me though the waiting might be the call of good-byes. (Rankine, 89)

Here, Rankine repeats the words “raining” “talk” “cool” “blue” “he’s there” and “good-bye” once again to engage semantic satiation. She uses language to break language, to overwhelm the reader not with sense, but with sensation. The devastation is inescapable because at each moment that ordinary writing would let up and move on, Rankine loops back, pressing her intention further and further in, a hand on the chest that refuses to let up. As the narrator’s mind collapses, so too does the reader’s, inundated as they are with the cyclical nature of Rankine’s prose. The content is unbearable and the form reflects that, This is the effect of repetition in pushing language past sense-making and into sensation

Sometimes, however, the content a writer attempts to convey cannot be described even through poetry. In the face of such limits, Rankine harnesses repetition in such a way that it brings the reader into their body. Rankine writes,

To live through the days sometimes you moan like deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets. Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who knows; truth be told, you could no more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs about (Rankine, 59).

By repeating the words “sigh” and “moan”, Rankine brings the reader’s attention to the place where words fail and non-lexical vocables come in as a final and original point of rupture.

Rankine acknowledges the limits of language: where words fail, poetry enters. Where poetry fails, the body rises in sound. And so Rankine turns to the first, last, and most fundamental aspect of living: breath. Rankine writes, “The sigh is the pathway to breath; it allows breathing. That’s just self-preservation. No one fabricates that. You sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sighing is a worrying exhale of an ache. You wouldn’t call it an illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being. What else to liken yourself to but an animal, the ruminant kind?” (Rankine, 60).

By turning repeatedly to the breath, Rankine bridges any remaining gap between text and reader, forcing them time and time again to return to their body as they read, to *feel* the text instead of just thinking it. She ruptures Cartesian philosophy and its roots in mind-body dualism. She activates Audre Lorde’s claim that poetry is a necessity for women, and Black women in particular, in that it is “sensual”, of the body, and it is through poetry that the self is implicated. If

all else fails, the repetitive return to the body acts as an insurance against the ivory tower's refusal to read affectively and—in the case of *Citizen*—acknowledge the effects of racism.

But what happens when even poetry fails to convey?

VI — COMMITMENTS TO RUPTURE

Moments of rupture are experienced at a heightened rate within lifeways that transgress the borders of the norm and in doing so expose their fallibility. These moments and the bodies that activate them catalyze experiences in which sensation overrides sense. The subconscious overpowers “should”; emotion eclipses convention; gender-transgressive bodies rupture social expectation; love disorganizes our intended paths; sexual pleasure overrides the desire to be “normal”; death implodes everything —

In my memories

your face stands still

in dreams

you speak.

this—here—is the story

I’m in a city in a room that seems missing

who was it who told the story?

all I know is that once it was a thing

unfurling in real time that

today is emptied of memory

a crevice everything falls into and never returns

Why else would we lie here? Why else?

I swear I have other dreams, but the truth is

there is no refuge from your death

everything wends back to you

Every moment in which sensation eclipses sense-making conjures the spectre. The irony of trying to write about this is not lost on me. The spectre is located firmly and forever outside of knowledge i.e. language, but language as an agent of the state never fails to intervene.

Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments, published in 2019 by Saidiya Hartman, imagines the stories of Black women and queer people whose practices of pleasure and kinship trespassed the confines of the law. Drawing from an abundance of dehumanizing archives, Hartman infiltrates and implodes bureaucratic files by speculating the rich, sensual, and painful lives of those who lived in excess of the law.

Hartman's speculations make plain the ways in which sensation exceeds language as a tool of creating distinction. In addition, her work shows how the language of the law is coded to strip experiences of sensorial multiplicity in order to reinforce its repressive agenda.

Early in the book, she imagines the story of Mattie Nelson, a young Black woman imprisoned for having sex and bearing a child out of wedlock in a post-emancipation world that sought to

maintain slavery's grip on Black women and their sexuality. Hartman imagines Mattie's first encounters with sex as an exertion of agency and freedom, a shot at living as she wanted.

She writes that, "the bedroom was...a site for enacting, exceeding, undoing, and remaking relations of power...on the threshold of want, a reckless dreamer tried to unmake the colored girl scripted by the world." (Hartman, 61) Here, Hartman makes clear that pleasure was one method by which Black women broke free, if only momentarily, from their inscription as objects to be controlled in the eyes and word of the law. "The sweetness of bodies was stoked by self-forgetting. In that room she tried to slip away, elude the hold of the plantation and the police, and pry open time into an endless stretch of possibility." (Hartman, 62) These moments of pleasure, however fleeting, were like a portal into another world where freedom was possible.

But with freedom came the crumbling of distinction where, for Mattie, it was sometimes, "hard to discern between something painful and something beautiful. *Take all of me. Use me. Hit me. Don't hurt me.* There was a thin line between loss and expenditure, between yielding and breakdown." (Hartman, 62) Here, in the "enfolding of flesh" Mattie existed beyond demarcation; between pleasure and pain, doer and deed, agent and victim, "Mattie threatened to disappear, the force of it exceeding her and erasing the boundaries of the discrete body, making her something less than she was and something more. To be undone, against her will and with her consent...A state that was neither autonomy nor capture. It broke her down, it made her nothing at all, it laid her low, it transformed her into something else she wanted to be: like a bird flying high or a thing vast and boundless, oceanic—not a person at all. In the reek and warmth of a rented room she was all flesh and sensation; she was hovering at the end of the world. And she welcomed it."

(Hartman, 63)

Hartman's stunning speculation of Mattie's experience illustrates how moments of profound sensation override our ability to categorize them as a given thing. Pleasure implodes emotional distinction—bleeds into pain into desire into violation or perhaps even the desire for violation. It overrides the bounds of the law and unmakes us entirely. This unmaking into indistinction and indiscreetness leaves us utterly exposed to a moment of total opening to endless possibility.

But the law is forever on the prowl for bodies marked as excessive. When Mattie is arrested for her pleasures, she is forced to sacrifice huge swaths of her experience for the sake of legibility under the criminalizing gaze of the state. The social worker assigned to her imposes a language of clarity through criminality in order to hold *someone* responsible for such violations of the law. Hartman writes, "The dislocation of desire and the pangs of lust were impossible for her to describe, except in the language provided by others. *I went wrong with Herman Hawkins. I liked doing it. He forced me. I knew better. I wanted it.* How could she communicate the exquisiteness of the unexalted or the lovely repose of bodies spent after the act? Or the courage entailed in refusing shame or risking it?...better words were needed to convey all that transpired in that room—the things taken and given. So Mattie offered only his name" Herman Hawkins. He's the one been messing with me."(Hartman, 63) By creating a linguistic regime based in clarity that sought to criminalize one person or the other, the state forced Mattie to choose between pleasure and pain. In doing so, they cast her experiences of sensorial multiplicity beyond language, making them illegible and therefore non-integrable. In forcing her experience beyond language, they became abject and caste her, the abjection-carrier, as a spectre.

The vastness of Mattie’s pleasure made her a threat to the state. Her stabs at freedom were not integrable into the language of the law and were deemed as a threat to its legitimacy. Her pleasure crossed its borders and she had to be brought back. The state sentenced her to three years of imprisonment in a women’s reformatory where she might be brought back to the place of language. The archive includes confirmation that Mattie was tortured, treated like a dog, and that when her mother visited she heard her child weeping and screaming.

* * *

Hartman’s imagining of Mattie Nelson—specifically the moments wherein desire for boundless emotion and sensation overrode language and law—raises three questions critical to spectrality and abjection. What becomes of us when we abandon law and convention under the weight of overpowering emotional experience? How can we be in and relate to that boundless place beyond demarcation? What are the implications of living in a body or being inside spaces beyond language and where sensation eclipses sense-making?

* * *

When you died, I fell beyond the limit. Into the place of senselessness, “the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders; fainting away.” Alive and dead lost all meaning. There was only your body, cold from the fridge. There was only the way it warmed when I kept my hands over it, the way it warmed when I cried onto your chest. Only the way my *tallit* brushing against your shroud sounded like breathing, the way I gasped, hands over your chest, waiting for it to rise.

I remember waiting for my father to call and confirm what I already knew. How when he picked up the phone only to say, *Ariella* in a voice so broken I could only scream.

Clawing at the carpeted floor. A man came, stood over me. Turned to another girl. *What happened to her? What has happened? I don't know I don't know.* Until amidst the tears of sound I told them, [] and then screamed so loud I heard nothing.

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