Wesleyan University The Honors College

Palimpsest

by

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From the bottom of my heart, thank you:

To my family

for teaching me how to love and to fight,

for trusting in me to find my own truth within theirs.

To my girls

for knowing me beyond these words,

for loving me through the changing of the tide.

To my rocks

for being my compass, my north star, my route map,

the only home worth having.

To my many muses

for the strength necessary to speak,

for the manuscripts of survival they have left behind,

for their bold and daring hope,

for our inheritance.

To the storytellers,

mythmakers,

illusionists,

self-conscious poets and

keepers of the truth,

for their truth.

To you and you and us

for the stories we will tell,

for the ink we will spill,

for it all.

To our ghosts

for what remains and what once was.

Let this not function as an explanation of the work, a reductive translation of movement(s) to word(s), a disclaimer of performance as valid academic practice. Let this be an open invitation into our wild and active imaginations, a plea for the emergence of a new reality. Let the work speak for itself. Let it breathe.

"I am writing these words as a route map
an artifact for survival
a chronicle of buried treasure
a mourning
for this place we are about to be leaving
a rudder for my children your children
our lovers our hopes braided
from the dull wharves of Thompkinsville
to Zimbabwe Chad Azania"
--Audre Lorde from *Our Dead Behind Us (1994)*

"*Neither black/red/yellow nor woman but poet or writer"*
--Trinh Minh-ha from *Woman, Native, Other (1989)*

"May I write words more naked than flesh,
stronger than bone,
more resilient than sinew,
sensitive than nerve"
--Sappho excerpt from *Dictée (2001)*

The very act of introducing *Palimpsest* provokes anxiety. What impelled me to produce a performance-based thesis? Why *Palimpsest*? I often find myself at odds with language and this is no exception. The intimidating task of writing "clearly" requires what Roland Barthes calls an "ablution of language" in which the author must, "incessantly prune, eliminate, forbid, purge and purify" (Minh-ha, 1989: 17). I find the demand for clarity and the instrumentality of language nearly impossible to satisfy. Normalized practices of writing as an expression and communication of

meaning necessarily reduce writing to a mere, "vehicle of thought that may be used to orient toward a goal or sustain an act, but it does not constitute an act in itself" (Minh-ha, 1989: 16). In her prolific text *Woman, Native, Other* filmmaker and academic Trinh Minh-ha speaks to the odds against which, "a writer of color / woman writer / woman of color" writes (Minh-ha, 1989: 6). To echo Minh-ha, the impulse to write from a position of power and domination in which the author situates herself *above* her work and exists *before* it, rarely simultaneously *with* it, is further intensified upon finding herself at odds with her *relation* to writing (Minh-ha, 1989: 6). The woman writer claims to not fully comprehend why these texts came to her and others did not. It is common practice for writers and their critics to mystify and obscure the creative process *as if* it were merely happening through their bodies. The writer defaults to a position of mediation between "God" and "the masses"—a mechanism through which "the truth" is transmitted. Truth is always already constructed as external to the author's respective life, thought, passion and work. Rather than conceptualize, "writing as a practice located at the intersection of subject and history—a literary practice that involves the possible knowledge (linguistical and ideological) of itself as such," it is mistaken for a prophetic practice of translation (Minh-ha, 1989: 6). Indeed, the self-consciousness and pervasive sense of guilt aroused in every act of writing,

reading, thinking, imagining and speculating leaves the author paralyzed and estranged from their own work. The guilt is maddening. It accumulates until it spills. We, as writers and poets, are left with nothing but an acidic taste in our mouths like the residue of a shameful, venereal disease (Minh-ha, 1989: 10). And so, my desire to write against these odds and break from the habits of distraction, distortion, discontinuity, and silence served as the impetus for this most urgent and ambitious undertaking (Minh-ha, 1989: 7).

At the precise moment in which I surrendered to the guilt of producing a thesis that endeavored to tell a story rather than revive a History, I re-discovered the electrifying words of Minh-ha and another accomplished artist and scholar, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Additionally, I took a course on paternalism and social power that reinforced the pressing need for speaking in one's own name from one's respective position(s). Indeed, the paternalistic impulse of the liberal humanitarian to speak on behalf of the "voiceless minority" must be put to rest. The devastating anti-paternalistic critiques helped to direct and inform my vision for *Palimpsest* as an implicit critique of the construction of marginalized peoples as passive victims of "unfortunate" and coincidental circumstance. At the time, I was experiencing an unprecedented yet familiar moment of crisis and panic. Lost in the opacity of my own thought,

I felt caught in circular logics and indiscernible shades of gray. As a rising senior, I felt no closer to naming a politics beyond the narrow scope of paternalism. I was overwhelmed by an anxiety of illegibility. I felt swallowed whole and consumed by master narratives of History and Subjectivity—stuck, "in the same crowd, the same coup, the same revolt" (Cha, 2001: 81). It seemed as though the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. What would it take to break out of the endless series of concentric circles? Rather than waste time posing rhetorical questions, I wanted to take on the challenge of telling my own story. I felt strangled and limited by language and cognition. I wanted to stage a work in the same vein as Cha's *Dictée* and Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other* that extended far beyond the margins of a page. I needed to believe that I could imagine and occupy an altered state of consciousness—an alternative to what the experts call "reality". I wanted to produce a thesis that dealt less with critique for critique's sake and the negatively constructed self (I am *not* this, therefore I am this) and concerned itself more specifically with naming practices and the desiring subject (I want / I am). As poet and novelist Nicole Brossard eloquently states: "I am a being of desire, therefore a being of words…who looks for the body of the other: for me, this is the whole history of writing" and likewise of performing (Minh-ha, 1989: 32).

I experience writing as an existential imperative rather than a choice. In spite of the sentiments of despair and frustration that writing induces, I write out of necessity and with the impulse, "to shake syntax, smash the myths and unearth some new linguistic paths" (Minh-ha, 1989: 20). Ideally, I would write without permission, without restraint. Although we are bound up in complex matricies of asymmetrical power relations, we still have the capacity to *produce* power and maneuver highly contested terrains. Cha's gratuitously experimental text *Dictée* satisfies the desire to "unearth new linguistic paths" in its opening up of a new space that resists easy classification and refuses to fulfill the readers' expectations of what constitutes a racially marked text (Minh-ha, 1989: 20). In reading *Dictée*, I discovered the possibility of manipulating language to expose the power relations it seeks to establish and maintain. As a writer caught in the triple bind, where reductive identities (the feminine ethnic) are ranked and weighted against one another, I seek to explode the paradigms that confine the politics of its subjects to a mere nexus of singular identities. Similar to *Dictée, Palimpsest* avoids grounding any "meaning" in grand narratives of "History" and "Subjectivity" by evoking a reading of the surface that draws attention to the displacements of the text and its gaps. It is only with the movement towards the surface where multiple conflicting cultures and languages interact and collide

with one another that one truly begins to de-stabilize fixed cultural assumptions. The truth lies somewhere buried within the gaps, fragments, breaks, blanks, lapses and silences of the text. In many ways, *Dictée* functions as the blue print of a radically re-imagined and re-appropriated memoir that departs from the repressive conventions and formalist elements of autobiography. It laid the groundwork for self-conscious poets like myself to test the boundaries of genre and medium further.

In my naïve attempt to stage a memoir, I have been acutely aware of the ways in which the memoir genre is implicitly categorized and encoded as a "feminine type of writing" with "confessional," "personal," "narcissistic" and "neurotic" elements (Minh-ha, 1989: 28). Women writers are positioned in opposition to men as, "inept for either objective, subjective or universal—that is to say accurate—thinking" (Minh-ha, 1989: 28). In other words, man *thinks,* woman *feels*. The "personal"/"impersonal" paradigm works to compartmentalize if not sever the head from the heart. However, Minh-ha reminds us that, "we write—think and feel—(with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts" (Minh-ha, 1989: 36). And yet, as writers, as women, as women of color, we are given the impossible ultimatum: "(to write well) we must either espouse his cause or transcend our borderlines…we must forget ourselves" (Minh-ha, 1989: 28). This is not an exercise in writing

well. Rather, it is about "creating an opening where the 'me' disappears while the "I' endlessly come and go, as the nature of language requires" (Minh-ha, 1989: 35). It is precisely about problematizing the "personal"/"impersonal" paradigm that constructs the two as mutually exclusive of one another. However, the discourse will be not be transformed by asserting femininity or disavowing sex and sexuality. Instead, it requires that we re-conceptualize writing as, "an unfolding process of becoming that contains within itself an insatiable generativeness, that is, a compulsion to reproduce itself in every diverse fashion" (Minh-ha, 1989: 39). We must begin to identify and occupy the area of overlap wherein theory and practice co-construct one another and the tenuous meaning of "personal" / "impersonal" collapses on itself.

As a writer occupying a particular ethnic-gender identity, I am constantly expected to speak for, defend and disclaim my multiple subjectivities, positions of subordination and perceived conflicting allegiances. Rather than fulfill the expectation of an ethnically marked text, *Palimpsest* breaks away from a presupposed political project of visibility, representation and recuperation. It refuses one singular or singularizing reading. *Palimpsest* is my attempt to disprove the myth that there exists one stable, monolithic experience, history and memory that holds true across heterogeneous marginalized populations. To borrow from Cha and

Minh-ha, I work to de-stabilize and unhinge fixed categories of identity by adopting a postmodern, self-conscious political project that critiques the grand narratives of “History” and “Subjectivity” while understanding the ways in which they inform and influence local, anti-essentialist narratives. Both Cha and Minh-ha resist the impulse to recuperate an essential, founding identity. As scholar-activist Shelley Sunn Wong argues in her essay "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée,*" Cha, in the unraveling of her mother's story, "does not seek to reproduce herself upon the authentic ground of the Korean feminine. Rather, the text proceeds with the recognition that identity of origin, in its ahistoricity, is at best an impossibility and at worst, a delusory consolation" (Kim, 1994: 126).These two works also problematize the very notion of “making sense” of text and reveal the reader’s tendency to reduce complicated, multilayered themes into generalized, simplified ones. Neither author provides the reader with an easily digestible guide, index or glossary to help better understand or ‘translate’ the fragmented, jarring textual body. Instead, the reader must confront his/her compulsion to order the sections in addition to “understand” and to “know” (read: to conquer) the narrative through an essentialist “Asian American” or “post-colonial” lens. *Dictée* embraces a multiplicity of identity in which its constituent parts do not simply coexist

and synthesize; rather, they are constituted through and against their interaction.

"El medio es el mensaje."

-- *Inverted Utopia*: *Avant-Garde Art in Latin America (2004)*

"Performance is about presence, not representation; it is not (as classical theories of theater would suggest) a mirror, but the actual moment in which the mirror is shattered."

--Guillermo Gómez-Peña from *The Artist Talks Back Gomez-Pena (2000)*

While Minh-ha and Cha sparked the thesis fire, I turned to a wide range of performance artists to explore the possibilities of staging a text like *Dictée*. The decision to produce a performance-based thesis evolved organically out of the initial idea of staging a memoir. It would be a mistake to think that the performative nature of the project was a matter of coincidence. Personally, I am of the belief that it is the medium through which the content is expressed that affects us. This begs the question: why performance? First, performance has been and continues to be, "a place where we [marginalized peoples] have reclaimed subjugated knowledge and historical memory" (Ugwu, 1995: 220). It serves as a powerful site for the imagination of future possibilities (Ugwu, 1995: 220). With a focus on radical subjectivity, performance artists attempt to re-claim the stage as a potential space of transgression (Ugwu, 1995: 220). Radical performance

art similar to experimental texts like *Dictée* proposes questions that engage and disturb desires (Kim, 1994: 35). Second, the artistic "genre" of performance, as distinct from traditional forms of theater, is a live act. It is concerned with the spontaneous over the rehearsed. I wanted to work with a flexible and lucid medium that reflected my own constantly shifting state of mind. As performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña argues in his experimental autobiography *Dangerous Border Crossers*, "performance is in a constant state of crisis, and is therefore an ideal medium for articulating a time of permanent crisis such as ours" (Gómez-Peña , 2000: 9). The production and creation of a performance exudes a potency and sense of urgency that does not exist in other artistic fields (Gómez-Peña , 2000: 9).Moreover, I was drawn to the potentially playful element of staging the mundane on a literal stage to call attention to the performative quality of our everyday interactions. The performance medium allows for an irony that simply cannot translate as powerfully or convincingly in a written text.

To echo Gómez-Peña, "performance is about presence, not representation" (Gómez-Peña , 2000: 9). If and when properly manipulated and executed, satirical and parodic performance acts can dramatize the exacting moment in which the metaphorical mirror is smashed. In the same vein, *Palimpsest's* only life is in the present. It

refuses to participate in what academic Peggy Phelan calls "the circulation of representations *of* representations" at which point it becomes something other than performance (Ugwu, 1995: 221). According to Phelan, "to the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance" (Ugwu, 1995: 221). Political scientist David Graver elaborates that performance is a dream of dramatic representation rather than a dramatic representation of dream, it is a dream of dramatic representation" (Graver, 1995 172). I was seduced by the capacity of the form to interact and mimic "the content". That is to say, *Palimpsest* is an excavation of memory that simultaneously "plunges into visibility and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control" (Ugwu, 1995: 221). The audience must engage in the archaeology of individual and collective memory (in a broader sense) as they revaluate the void and emptiness that punctuates the performance itself. As a liminal, negotiating arena of social efficaciousness, performance also has the potential to introduce a new undefined space that departs from problematically contrived narratives of the self often found in uncomplicated memoirs, ethnographies and autobiographies (Joseph, 1999: 7). Oftentimes,

autobiography is understood as a project of self-representation. However, emergent and emerging autobiographical experiments mingle with discourses of self-reflexivity to identify compelling parallels between individual experience and collective consciousness. And yet, there exists a pervasive and identifiable tendency among "postcolonial, third world, feminist" autobiographers and essayers to recuperate a coherent, monolithic identity from the wreckage of the past. The objective of self-chronicling is then constructed as the restoration of an idealized real and authentic self. Performance artists like Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco take advantage of the performance medium to expose the hoax of authenticity and offer up alternative strategies of staging memoir. The performance medium can work to bridge gaps between, "practice and theory, transgressive aesthetics and radical politics, and the obscured private realm of the creative process and the public realm of distribution and presentation" (Gómez-Peña , 2000: xiii). By breaking down the fourth wall and deliberately letting the audience in on the live act, the performer can effectively interpellate his/her audience in the complex dynamics and relations of power at play in the performance.

There are crucial distinctions to be made between various performance spaces. For some, like feminist scholar bell hooks, performance space refers to "democratic cultural terrain including street

corners, barbershops, beauty parlours, basketball courts and a host of other locations" (Ugwu, 1995: 35). For others, performance space is reserved for the educated and cultured elite in a society. Furthermore, it is most commonly associated with notable avant-garde movements. As someone who tends to agree with political scientist David Gravers' premise that, "avant-garde is to be enslaved to a shallow notion of innovation for innovation's sake, to favor the outrageous over the well-wrought, to cloak mediocrity in the robes of the rebel," I tend to favor more accessible forms of performance art (Graver, 1995: 1). Despite my best efforts to stave off avant-garde classification; however, *Palimpsest* has been mistaken for some tragically contrived experiment in "subversive" theater. In fact, one Argus staff writer described *Palimpsest* as an "intentionally incoherent cerebral gymnastic performance" (Overbeke, 2008: 11). Early on, I found the gap between my explanation and the interpretation of my explanation nearly impossible to close. Eventually I lost count of the daily misrepresentations and co-optations of *Palimpsest*. I was either resented for choosing an illegitimate academic medium or condescended for "story telling". In the end, I found myself unexpectedly liberated from the burden of maintaining the illusion of achieving the impossible –utopian universal audience comprehension and legibility. I abandoned all previous investments in clearly and straightforwardly

communicating "the content" that almost always necessitates significant compromise in the name of "transparency" and "accessibility". However, I decided to resist building any expectation(s) as it is impossible to predict the wits of one's audience(s). To underestimate the audience(s) is an act of sabotage. Lastly, to treat the performance medium as somehow inherently avant-garde or intentionally incoherent is to miss the point entirely.

"Life itself is not the reality. We are the ones who put life into stones and pebbles."
–Frederick Sommer from *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer (2004)*

"On the brink of this bungee jump into the past, I feel suddenly dizzy. How can I begin to recall those long futile hours, as elusive as drops of mercury from a broken thermometer?"
-- Jean-Dominique Bauby from *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (1997)*

"Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in Time's memory. Unemployed. Unspoken. History. Past. Let the one who is diseuse, one who is mother waits nine days and nine nights to be found. Restore memory. Let the one who is diseuse, one who is daughter restore spring with her each appearance from beneath the earth. The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it stops writing at all"
--Theresa Hak Kyung Cha from *Dictée (2001)*

One question remains unanswered: why *Palimpsest*? The word "palimpsest" refers to any writing surface on which an earlier writing has been erased or effaced and a later writing is inscribed or overlaid on that

surface, often with traces of the former inscription appearing underneath. However, in my unique rendition of "palimpsest," I transfer the notion of inscription and effacement to an excavation of memory. I have described *Palimpsest* as the following:

> A moment is never completely erased. Instead, faint traces remain, upon which another moment is imprinted. This process of inscription and effacement is repeated as moments overlap and build. Palimpsest is a staging of these accumulated iterations of memory—it is an excavation of what remains and what once was.

Palimpsest calls into question clear delineations between truth and fact, story and history. In *Woman, Native, Other*, Minh-ha identifies the transformation of history to History by the indulgence in the accumulation of information and facts (Minh-ha, 1989: 120). Story-writing and history-writing are pitted against one another. Whereas story is relegated to the realm of tale, legend, myth, and fiction, History upholds the factual—it maintains and documents "what *really* happened" (Minh-ha, 1989: 120). Both Minh-ha and Cha advocate a return to and retelling of the story. *Palimpsest* similarly interrogates the construction of History as factual and story as fictional. It seeks to expose the compartmentalization of History and story in order to highlight the areas of difference(s) and overlap between truth and fact, fact and fiction. Our rich, intersecting histories embody an ephemeral art of discontinuity, dislocation, and displacement. We, the "women writers of color" shunted to the margins, are obliged to

resuscitate and retrieve "whole" histories out of scraps, remnants, fragments, debris and the ashes of memory (Joseph, 1999: 63). In many ways, *Palimpsest* serves as an ode and testament tooracles and storytellers who preserve and pass on the living memory of time and their respective people. *Palimpsest* is invested precisely in sustaining the politicization of historical memory in performance practice—it resuscitates the missing, reminding us that the absent and the present, like all tensions between identities, constitute each other within a text.

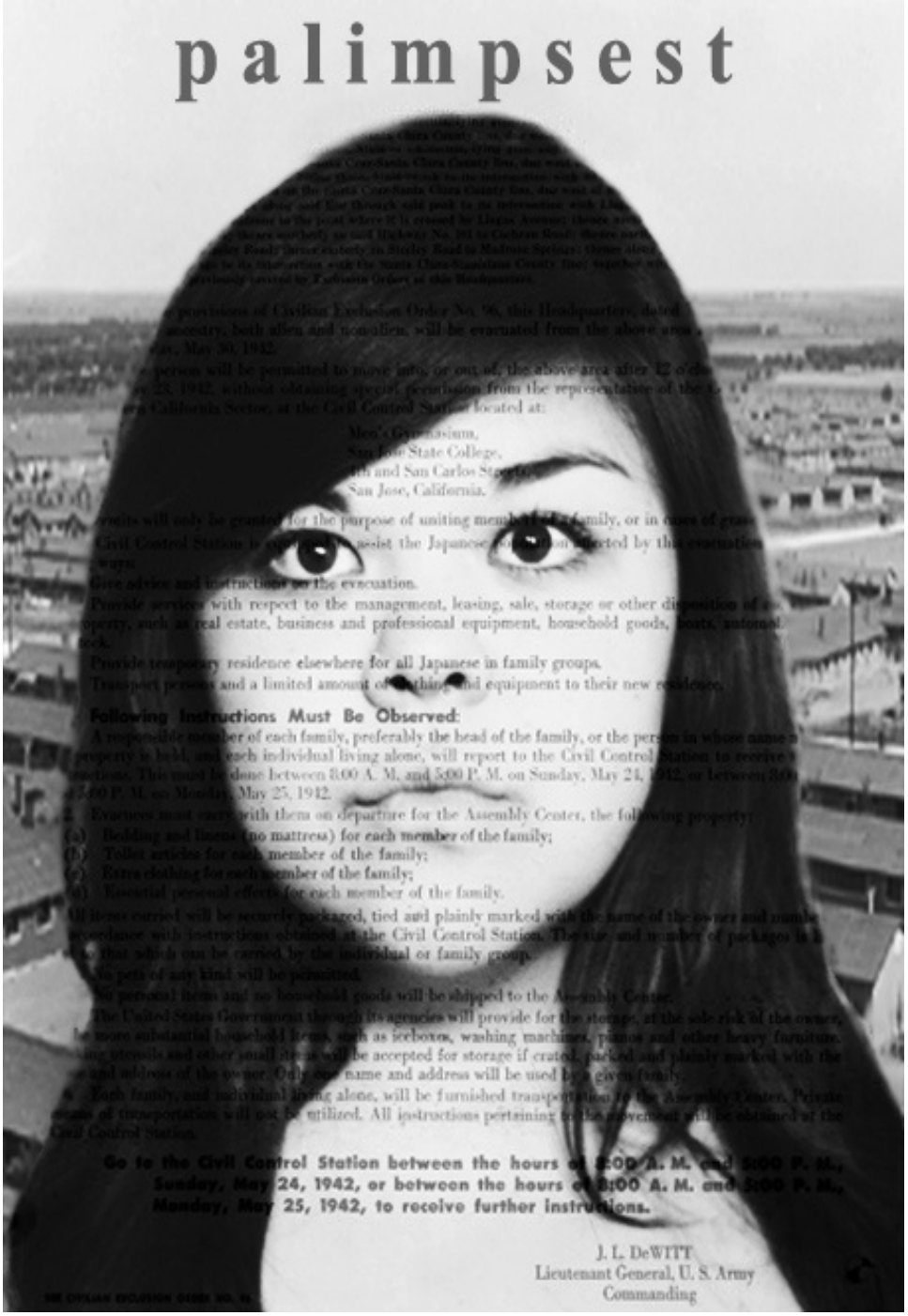
In her collection of essays *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance,*Jill Dolan unapologetically proclaims that she is:

> "unwilling and unable to give up identity, however constructed, positional, and unstable, as a place from which to begin my work – not as an ontologically meaningful home and a safe, idealized origin, but as a place of material circumstance that has deeply marked my own embodiments and movements through culture and discourse" (Ugwu, 1995: 220)

That is to say, performance art is not black and white—it can be interrogated and contested until it works as meaningful intervention (Ugwu, 1995: 220). This production has pushed me to put into practice the undoing of what bell hooks calls the mind/body split—an explosion of problematic logics of compartmentalization. To be sure, I am also deeply invested in using *Palimpsest* to show how the personal *is* political; that the two are mutually constituted through and against their interaction. Integral to the political project of *Palimpsest* is the re-conceptualization of

theory and its 'appropriate' presentation. Whereas many texts construct 'theory' as *objective* knowledge external to the Self, I implicitly argue that theory is constituted by and through the subjective personal-political experiences of both the author and reader / performer and audience member. The resuscitation of the "I" that is explicitly omitted in academic writing stage, performs and reinforces hooks' engaged pedagogy thesis that "the personal is the political". Thus, the act of producing *Palimpsest* necessitates re-claiming theory as a form of story-telling that departs from static and traditional conceptualizations of theory as emptied of any and all radical subjectivity. Rather than abstract larger histories of racism, homophobia and xenophobia, I recognize the ways in which I am implicated in these histories. In order to avoid obscuring historical, political and cultural context, one must admit and work within complex matrices of race, class, sexuality and nation and the asymmetrical power relations they imply. And yet, as poet Audre Lorde and bell hooks suggests there is a certain struggle in asserting the "I" while leaving necessary room for reader identification. That is, it becomes challenging to personalize general experiences shared by large numbers of people without falling into dangerous traps of essentialization. Throughout *Palimpsest,* I oscillate between a variety of unmarked voices and subject positions to call into question the meaning and measurement of authenticity and authority. At

once, the audience member is confronted with his/her desire to locate a discernable essence that can be captured and contained. Ultimately, *Palimpsest* is an effortful attempt to speak, move and be moved in return—it is my manuscript of survival.



You cannot assassinate the story, only its tellers.

Black out. A sound recording is cued. Semblances of speech, sound and sound bites are heard. A collection of miscellaneous voices play over each other, it becomes difficult to discern who is who. Spotlight illuminates ISA center stage. Nick Drake "Song for Jesse" plays quietly in the background.

Omniscient Voice:

Tell us a story,

Begin wherever you wish,

Tell even us.

ISA:

I forget when it begins or ends but I remember the sea…

I remember fighting for my first breath

against the push and pull of the tide.

I remember coming into consciousness;

That unsettling adjustment period marked by

A dizzy spell from resisting external pressure—

A force much stronger than my own.

All I could see were hues of blue and gray mixing and then separating

into shifting amorphous shapes

I saw the world through a distorted kaleidoscope

of formless color.

Naming the sky felt like a futile exercise

so I focused on floating.

On the feeling of water lapping over my body.

On the rhythm of the waves rippling back and forth.

I remember bursts of light breaking into the quiet of my breath.

And so I sank deeper and deeper into the sea.

Seeking refuge from the strange world above

into the unknown world below.

I liked to get lost in the thick clouds of

black dust that collected at the bottom

where it was cold and dark.

I felt oddly safe there—submerged in ambiguity.

I remember looking up,

chasing the silhouettes of stars reflected at the surface.

The rays of light illuminated

the turquoise sea of bodies around me where

I dreamt the moon in all of its brilliance.

Sometimes,

I still forget the undulations of breath.

The echoes of waves crashing against a distant shore.

I forget the others and their names.

All I can remember

is the sensation of moving inside the currents,

the turbulent episodes that would push me into new waters,

the insignificance of it all.

I remember sinking into sand in search of secrets buried

long ago by unknown wanderers.

I remember their markings,

faint traces of what existed before me.

I remember these things because I have to,

because everyone else forgets

about us, the fish, and how we got here.

People still write our existence

in myth and magic,

in mist and smoke.

"Song for Jesse" fades out…
Red light breaks in from above

You see,

I came into this world with a flood behind my back.

Apple orchards and hospitable Charlotte couldn't soak up momma's

tears that day. And daddy always said that it was a black and white

world and no one liked red.

I fought to preserve those petals;

fought against droughts and the flood that still flows behind me.

But today I was re-born

JUST NOW!

Justnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjust
nowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnow
justnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjustnowjust
now

Chaos echoed across the ocean floor,

subsonic vibrations break the earth's surface,

fractured roots exposed unearthed truths,

and we stood there, *unmoved.*

An attempt to convince the earth of our worth,

fuck the apocalypse,

let us not become the survivors of the end times,

the last days of days: our inheritance.

I don't want to change the world or save it,

freedom has its costs

and there will be no currency left to spare on bail

only ashes and the deferred dreams of our unborn children.

The wind will carry their screams to form new life

and reality will soon die.

Making transparent this black magic,

white rabbits feinding for childhood tricks

there's nothing an illusion can't fix, convince.

We're convinced there's an exit,

still searching for the before-before and hereafter.

After falling down with dizziness

we finally found the door

only it didn't exist

but we believed another truth, duped.

we are our own punch lines and sometimes no one laughs

they just clap like automated audiences on citcoms

hold your applause

pause the tv

a slow motion spectacle.

Stare into the absurd nature of things like "the fourth dimension"

time tests the limits of our minds unfinished

and we're still hoping to finish

maybe not first place but one day

we'll realize there's no finish line to cross even,

just an endless distance to fall.

We pretend to understand infinity

it's beyond what language captures

we're captured by these master narratives

histories retold, untold

the missing l i n k s

the forever g a p s

When will the search end?

The thirst for someone else's treasures

preserving what never was and never will be.

We are too busy pretending

to pay attentionto the changing of the tide.

You see,

it’s only a matter of time before we are cast back

into the sea.

We remember how to fish

but forget we were fish first

Saint Anthony offered me as a gift to the humans,

I had developed a reputation of being a talkative trouble maker

he thought he'd return silence to the sea

and so I was born,

chronically content.

Sick like my smile: a blessing and a curse.

They still accuse me of stashing secrets in my cheeks,

behind my teeth(the dentist denies these truths)

and I stopped apologizing for laughter

and for love

just kept jumping in between frequencies,

the making of a dissonant soundtrack.

They always tracked me,

tried to pull me *in* and *down.*

I've been drowned more than once

they forgot I was a fish first

even the tide tried to steal my oxygen,

the life juice necessary to breathe.

I became a thief

but not a criminal.

An outcast of my own imaginings,

a series of collisions with the ones

who coerced me into choosing between *something* and *nothing.*

I was limited by their demands,

seduced into cynicism and

tracing the never-ending maze

of concentric circles.

I joined the search for something realer

the myth of what exists beneath the surface:

the deepest truths

the deepest wounds

and now upon my abandonment of this project

upon my recently retrieved resistance

against these misguided premises

against the further abstraction of pseudo-philosophy

against the romance of the inaccessible and unthinkable

I find myself alone again

contemplating different questions

similarly caught up but less invested.

I'm embracing this paradox,

it reflects my own contradictions.

You see,

we are not necessarily doomed

moving towards a trajectory of

death

    and death

    and death

I am a witness of the attempts, not futile

to convince the earth of our insignificant significance,

in spite of it all.

But let us not be blinded by ambition

for the world is not ours to change or save alone

and who are we?

the greatest pretenders

*s*uffering from collective amnesia.

I wonder how long it will take

to recover

to remember

to return to the sea

where I was born and soon rejected,

where chaos echoes across the ocean floor,

subsonic vibrations break the earth's surface,

fractured roots expose unearthed truths

and we stand here, *unmoved*.

Black Out. Light grid turns on slowly. Isa moves stage left.

ISA:

You want the truth? The real truth?

They can't even see us.

We're here,

Stuck in the same nightmare

So we wake up to new dreams.

No one sees anything anymore.

Every struggle rendered obsolete,

Every scream echoed into the darkness

Is lost to the shadows.

You see,

these intellectuals confused a new beast for progress

but we know the camouflage of change.

We've survived these mutations

of the same structures of constraint

and we can still smell the burning of flesh

from not so long ago.

The aroma of rotting corpses

curled underneath our nostrils.

It haunts us.

We have to forget how to breathe as

time keeps collapsing around us.

All we can do

is wait for another fire to ignite

us into flames

to feel again.

To bleed again.

So, who are you calling a liar?

We tell stories

without the facts

write in the supreme fictions of things

leave in the gaps

and half-truths.

While

you fall between the cracks,

afraid to look back

for fear you might forget the facts.

Whereas we

are matter / of / fact

and what matters is the truth

so we tell it, too.

According to the experts

we are nothing but the objects of studies

so study this:

You are simply the disappearing paper!

We are the ink

that runs deep

through shifting surfaces.

We are impossible to erase,

we stain

we bleed through

we absorb into.

For you,

we archive truth.

You provide the pens

and we spill,

filling the world

with our

scrawlings.

Every surface is our scripture.

Even when they cut our tongues

we find a way to speak.

We use our blood as ink.

Our stories speak loudly

buried underneath within,

carried by the wind.

You cannot grasp the truth.

You cannot assassinate the story

Only its teller so

tell her to hide her secrets behind her smile

Scatter her parts and

Save her bullets for the enemy

even when it means

getting shot at first.

Because we were never meant to survive.

But she said he killed her first.

Image of Jason projects on backdrop behind ISA creating shadows on stage, Isa finds her way to a chair. Nat King Cole's "Smile" loops throughout the duration of the speech.

ISA:

The truth is, you didn't even have to know him to know that what happened to him was wrong. I mean, how many stories have you heard of someone getting shot and killed? And I know people get tired of hearing about it, after awhile they start thinking it's some kind of lie or conspiracy theory or public service announcement to get them to feel guilty about things they never did. People they never knew. Personally, I think that's the ego talking. It's not about you. I always want to tell people that, it's not about you. Sometimes I sit around and think of all the things I want to say to people, like my version of the state of the union address. I mean, to what end do we make excuses for each other? Yeah, life is hard and it's a struggle to survive from one day to the next but not all of us are pulling the

trigger. And I'm not necessarily blaming everyone that is or has but damn, it's hard to keep apologizing for people, for understanding, you know? Some people say we just need to stop the hate and maybe it's really that simple. Sometimes this place convinces me that the complexity of every situation makes it impossible to just take a stance. Sure, it's not a black and white war, an us versus them reality but what do you say to someone pushed up against a wall with a gun pointing straight at their head? What then? You can't tell someone not to protect themselves. I mean things really aren't that abstract these days. We just walk around with our heads in the books trying to make sense of all the madness but what are we really looking for? He got shot in the back of his own car the minute he got off work and you're telling me this isn't war? He's just one kid. His story will get lost in all the others that came before and will come again, he'll be old news soon. Lost in the archives of premature death. He'll just become another name to add to the roster. But someone has to tell his story, someone has to keep him alive. I mean, it doesn't matter if he was taken by one of his own, he was taken. And everyone's asking why the men in our communities feel like ghosts, like strangers, they might be watching us, they might still be walking among us, in fact,

I'm sure of that, but the reality is they're missing. And all we have to remember is what little they left behind. All we have are our stories. We sound like a broken record sometimes but that's all we have, our stories. They have nothing to do with what happened. With fact. There is a difference, you know, between truth and fact. Somewhere buried within those stories lies each one of our personal truths and that's what counts. Not what happened. So, how do you convince someone to drop the gun when their block is patrolled by gangsters with badges and the state's permission to pop 41 shots in their back just for showing ID? I mean, do you ever feel like you're witnessing the apocalypse right now? I mean, what can we call this? What is an appropriate name for this death march? It doesn't matter how far away you feel from this reality because it exists. And we all have to wake up every morning knowing fully well it exists. I know it’s hard. Everyone feels the weight of the world coming down on their shoulders. Everyone feels attacked these days, backed into a corner. I never want to attack anybody but I keep feeling the walls closing in around me. Around us. Nobody seems willing to push with me, to fight. I don’t know, I’m tired, man. I’m tired of being tired, too. Nobody has time to sit with themselves and reflect anymore.

Although I'm not sure we ever did. By the time we crawl into our beds, the morning feels like a distant memory. And even though we're constantly interacting and colliding with each other, we still feel completely alone. Everyone feels stranded, estranged from their closest friends. Sometimes the senseless violence starts to make sense again. We live in a reactive state. There's no time to think before you pull the trigger.

Black Out. *Gun Shot. Heartbeat.*

Voiceover:

You have to let the silences reverberate

Do you ever feel like we never have enough time to breathe, I mean to sit with ourselves and feel our bodies and release all the tensions that build over a single day? We just mix all of our emotions until we feel nothing and everything all at once. We fix ourselves into tight corners until we get dizzy. Until we are short of breath and pass out. We are caught in extremes. We can't seem to focus on or enjoy one thought, thing or feeling for very long. It all starts to collide and build until we choke…have we forgotten how to live?

Take a minute.

Breathe.

Relax your shoulders,

Rest your eyes.

Feel yourself move inside your body,

Breathe.

Take a minute.

When was the last time you stopped?

Black out sustains for close to five minutes. Silence. Isa stands center stage shrouded by harsh light.

ISA:

They ask you for your name

Your date of birth

Your age

They are looking

At you /

for them /

through Them

To be and become

To expose

To know

To own

To choke

To chew

They are listening for

Their truth /

From *your* lips

It never matters what you say

or how you say it

It never matters

They want to

swallow you whole

They want to feel you

Inside of them

They are searching

For themselves

For everything they are not

For everything they hope they could be

You are their religion

Every time you stutter

They doubt

Every time you lie

They believe

They want to see you sweat

And bleed

and cry.

They want you to confess

They want you to break

To turn inside out

And

Exorcise your ghosts

Purge your shadows

They

Replicate your gestures

Mimic your movements

They live inside you

They are you

Chew

Choke

Inhale

Exhale

Swallow

Digest

Vomit

From a Far

What nationality

or what kindred and relation

what blood relation

what blood ties of blood

what ancestry

what race generation

what house clan tribe stock strain

what lineage extraction

what breed sect gender denomination caste

what stray ejection misplace

Tetrium Quid neither one thing nor the other

Tombe des neus de naturalized

what transplant to dispel upon

They came here to drag you by your teeth

A video plays in the background. The screen is split in three parts, the lines are delineated and mapped onto the face. The middle section is blacked out. The first and last section are in conversation with one another but engaged in paradoxical, contradictory behavior. The eyes are closed while the mouth remains hyper-active. There is a lapse in communication and comprehension. The video plays for five minutes. The following text scrolls at the end:

YOU SIT THERE, ISA, AND YOU TRY TO FOCUS, AND YOU WONDER WHY YOU CAN'T BUT YOU ALREADY KNOW WHY—BECAUSE NOTHING FEELS RELEVANT, BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO MAKE IT RELEVANT, BECAUSE NO ONE BUT YOU CAN DO THAT, BECAUSE THAT BOOK ON PRISON ARCHITECTURE PROVOKES NO SENSATION OTHER THAN BOREDOM AND YOU HATE THAT SHIT. YOU HATE BEING BORED AND YOU'RE STUCK IN YOUR OWN HEAD, YOUR OWN WAKING FANTASY, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE GAP BETWEEN REALITY AND DREAM? BETWEEN WHAT YOU WANT TO BE HAPPENING AND WHAT'S HAPPENING? WHEN WILL THE GAP CLOSE? WILL LIFE EVER FEEL LIKE YOUR FANTASY? WILL THE TWO EVER MERGE OR COLLAPSE? WILL IT EVER JUST BECOME REAL? INSTEAD OF LINGERING ABOVE YOUR HEAD AT NIGHT, YOU OPEN YOUR EYES TO NOTHING BUT A WHITE CEILING WITH DRIED

AND CHIPPING PAINT AND THERE YOU ARE: LYING IN YOUR BED WITH NOTHING BUT COVERS TO HOLD AND YOU ARE STARVED FOR THAT OTHER WORLD—THE ONE WHERE YOU ARE HOPELESSLY IN LOVE AND LIFE IS EXPERIENCED IN TECHNICOLOR AND NOBODY COMPLAINS WE JUST DANCE AND LOVE AND BREATHE AND BREATHE AND ALL WE HAVE TO WAKE UP TO ARE COMPUTER SCREENS AND DEFERRED DREAMS. I AM SO SICK OF THE PREDICTABLE. EVERYONE IS SCARED TO EXIST OUTSIDE OF THESE BOUNDARIES SO WE DENOUNCE THE BORDER CROSSERS WHILE WE WILL THE UNEXPECTED AND I AM THE BIGGEST HYPOCRITE I KNOW. WHEN WILL I BE ABLE TO LOVE? WHO WILL IT BE? UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES WILL IT REALIZE ITSELF? I AM SCARED IT WILL NEVER COME. THAT I WILL ALWAYS SEEK REFUGE IN MY HEAD, WHERE THERE ARE NO LIMITS OR EXPECTATIONS, WHERE EVERYTHING IS TRULY POSSIBLE AND THERE ARE NO MONSTERS I CANNOT DEFEAT. WHY DO YOU HOLD ON SO TIGHTLY TO YOUR FACTS AND HISTORIES? THERE IS TRUTH IN THESE FICTIONS, THERE IS LIFE. I AM NOT LOST, THOUGH IT OFTEN SEEMS THAT WAY. I ALREADY KNOW WHERE I AM AND WHERE I MIGHT GO. THIS IS MY EXERCISE IN FATE, IN TRUSTING

THE UNNAMED AND UNNAMEABLE, IN LETTING GO. I AM UNWILLING TO LET THE WEIGHT OF EXPECTATION CRUSH MY SPIRIT. WHERE DO WE BEGIN TO START FORGETTING? TO JUST BE. I WANT TO BE. I WANT TO LISTEN TO MUSIC FOR HOURS WITHOUT GUILT.

I WANT TO ZONE IN,

I WANT TO CALL HIM,

I WANT TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH.

I AM NOT WILLING TO HIDE BEHIND FORMALITY ANYMORE. TO PRETEND. TO GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS WITHOUT DEALING WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF AN UNINSPIRED AND IDLE MIND. WE ARE BREEDING IDLE MINDS AND WE STILL WONDER HOW EVERYTHING GOT SO BAD, AS IF IT SNUCK UP ON US. AS IF WE HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. AS IF WE WERE FREE. FREE. FREE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN SOMETHING OTHER THAN EVERYTHING AND NOTHING. THE TWO EXTREMES.DON'T YOU SEE? IT'S ALL THE SAME THING. IT'S ALL THE SAME ENDPOINT.

THE BALLOT OR THE BULLET.

THE PRISON OR THE GRAVE.

WHAT FATE IS THIS? WHAT EVERYDAY DEATH MARCH? I MEAN,

HOW ARE WE DEFINING LIFE ANYWAY? SOMETIMES I FEEL DEAD ALREADY. LIKE I'M SOMEWHERE ELSE. THERE IS SOMETHING GREATER THAN OUR BODIES. THERE IS SOME STRANGE SENSATION HAUNTING US. DO YOU FEEL IT?

IN YOUR GUT,

YOUR CHEST,

YOUR CALF,

YOUR NECK,

THE BACK OF YOUR HEAD.

IT STINGS. AND EVERYTIME WE IGNORE THE PAIN, OUR LIES DEEPEN, AND SO DO OUR MARKINGS AND INSCRIPTIONS. AND OUR STORIES GET DISTORTED AND TOLD UNDER THE PRETENSE OF FACT AND WHO WILL TELL OUR CHILDREN THE TRUTH? WHO WILL SHOW THEM THEIR SCARS? WHO WILL REMEMBER THE BLOOD AND BONE? WHO WILL BE THERE TO KEEP IT ALIVE? AFLAME? WHO WILL BE THERE TO WAKE UP IN HISTORY'S NIGHTMARE? WHAT CAN WE MAKE OF THIS...OF ALL OF THIS…

Isa stands on top of chair stage right with scroll in hand. Red and blue police sirens flare in the background.

ISA:

Here it is! The contents of a balled-up fist!

This is what they never tell you is happening.

It's happening.

We realize our dreams when no one is looking.

Materialize into things they never thought could exist.

We are here!

We are bigger than our words, our weapons.

More precise than our perfect aim.

We are much more than the sum of our parts.

We do not seem to know the power we possess

unless we pull the trigger.

We try and fail.

Figure this:

How many of us wake up in empty beds to white walls and call our

friends just to help us forget last night's nightmare?

They called our ideals naïve and

shoved their Reality down our throats

until we choked.

They tried to kill what little hope remains

buried inside of our stomachs,

Flesh-lining.

Still shining.

It was never our choice to begin with.

We were never meant to survive so sometimes

we fall through the cracks of time and slip into concrete.

At night, we litter our imprints on city sidewalks and streets

Maybe then they'll remember the soundtrack of sirens and police.

Maybe then they'll trace the trail of tears

To the gutters and see where we lay our young to rest

They say the cemeteries are full

There is no more room for bouquets of flowers

Or rocks

Arranged in the shape of broken hearts

Or clasped palms.

We are displaced in our own home.

Our bodies

Mistaken

For buildings.

The saddest skyline you've ever seen.

Light Change. Atomized, rectangular lights appear and disappear randomly

ISA:

I speak at the shoreline, crucial and alone,

hoping the echoes of my words will find her:

Audre, they swallowed our words again.

They are held hostage in the bellies of decadent men.

Where do we find the strength to speak?

From what reservoir of dreams do we breathe?

There are women crafting poems out of shivers,

writing in mist and smoke,

singing in silence.

There are magicians,

scribing poems in age-old trees,

writing with leaves in wind tunnels.

But we are here,

chasing the faint line in the center of our foreheads;

hungry for choice.

We came here to choke—

hoping the loss of breath would birth a new utterance

but all we can speak of is the dead

so we write in ghosts instead

and wait for the day

when the living will push its way through periods

and leave its traces to form new breath.

We are stuck in sentences

searching for an escape from the prisons that poetry makes.

The confines of a measured depth.

We occupy the lowercase-- the obscured and shadowed space

that never is or was but lives.

And we are afraid of what exists,

of what dissolves

of what forgets and is forgotten.

We are still writing History's nightmare

while everyone else pretends to be awake.

Break

Break

Break

They say that those

that came before us have been engraved

In the marble walls of monuments,

Where architects forgot to build motes to catch our tears.

They forgot the blood

And the bone.

All they remembered was the name.

The contours of their faces

So our memory continues to fade

And we, with it.

I have been here before

enmeshed in bone and flesh

searching for words to escape

the quiet of breath and body.

I have stood here unmoved

rooted in the tangled histories

of wilting flowers once arranged.

Here, I have waited patiently

for fantasy to seize reality

for dreaminglife and wakinglife to collide

for I do not fear the explosion ahead.

Embedded in dirt and rock,

I cannot fight against fate.

How much longer will I suffocate

under the weight of yesterday?

To what end do we force fragments

into recognizable shapes?

I am no longer invested in wholeness.

In pushing the boulder further and further uphill

until gravity betrays us

and we fall an infinite distance down.

Who will witness this clumsy bungee jump into the past?

In an attempt to hold onto what remains

we will fight forgetfulness

to fill in the gaps and omissions

of our fractured memories.

We will fail

for our foolishness

will not consider

the missing pieces to be complete.

There is a story to be told

A story to be rescued from the wreckage.

Who will live to tell?

Black out.

OMNISCIENT VOICE:

Tell us a story,

Begin wherever you wish,

Tell even us.

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