edited into submission: authenticity in academia

by

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And of course, to my family and friends for supporting me throughout the journey.
edited into submission: authenticity and academia

INTRODUCTION

In my tenure at institutions of higher education I have learned three things. One, you should never ask questions, two, you should avoid telling the truth at all times, and three, you must never speak unless spoken to. As a good student, that is, both an active and passive receptor for culturally constructed notions of excellence, I have learned to speak quietly, without even the defense of a big stick. I have waded through the most insincere and conflicting of messages. I have been told that I am special; I have been told that I am nothing. I have been lied to by libraries full of factual nonsense, of vetted speculation, of innovation spun from the oldest of threads. I am tired. In the following series of essays, poetry, and prose, I will attempt to expose the least compromised thought that remains within me. But the journey won’t be an easy one, there’s a war in my head and it seems that all involved parties have sent their delegates. Insecurity, fear, self-loathing, confusion, depression, and meaninglessness have all made their home here. I hope that this writing will help to drive them out. There is something about this journey towards being adult that has meant editing myself into submission, the literal and figurative reforming of my intellect to match socially constructed convention.

This thesis, for lack of a better term, will attempt to write around academia, to engage with higher learning in a circular fashion in order to simultaneously mimic and undermine its structure; in short, I will revel in the irony of attempting to deconstruct academia through the means of a thesis. Over time I’ve realized that this is the only way; one cannot make negative statements about higher education and be taken seriously without submitting themselves to its style of indoctrination. If pure
logic can be seen as the absence of empathy, then I hope for what follows to be the
most illogical words to ever come through me. Academia mimics life; the same lies
that we use to convince ourselves that survival is always the best option are the same
lies that convince us that order, rather than entropy, should direct us towards the
future.

In terms of creativity, all academia has to offer is repetition with a difference,
mere fantasies of a post-modern, post-meaning reality in lieu of a tangible exchange
of novel thought. I have chosen to re-envision some of my past works through a
similar gaze, keeping an eye out for this difference, the areas where something like
the truth, like authenticity seem to shine through, this is a brief pause to recognize the
places where I’ve struggled with the never ending dance between relative truth and
complete fiction.
AN EXAMPLE OF ACADEMIC P[R]OSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academia generally encourages a rather rigid approach to the analysis of information, and favors an unwavering rationality over emotion, cross-cultural concerns, and intrapersonal competence; in this rigid framework, it astonishes me that any novel thought and innovation occurs at all. There’s much talk of making excellence inclusive, but very little discussion about how this normalization of educational and academic success as being the greatest good achievable, limits and devalues other, non-institutionalized forms of education. This form of “excellence” is perhaps the least inclusive and most problematic; one needs only to take a look at the price tag of a Wesleyan education to begin to understand the barriers put forth.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And this is how academia works. It obscures meaning with large words. In four years you too can lose truth and find that simplicity has become a pit stop en route to pure conjecture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are things with value that don’t get to shine here. Academia makes more academia. It loves itself into being, like babies, like organized religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babies are new life. Life loves itself into being. It is the oldest cycle, the most dynamically engaged with both oppression and freedom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education claims that there is a distinction between life here and life out there. Excellence is thusly constructed out of convenience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to the bullshit box.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SHORT FORM ACADEMIC STYLE

Education is a hot button topic. Notions about universal accessibility and inclusivity in the realm of institutionalized education are sweeping the nation; even here at Wesleyan, we have made the pledge to make excellence inclusive. But what does that really mean? As the discourse surrounding the right to education continues, we’ve started to lose sight of the ways in which we have normalized institutionalized education as a good in itself, as the best and most legitimate form of education available in the cultural landscape of the United States. The normative nature of this opinion delegitimates and underestimates the power and necessity of various cultural, interpersonal, and colloquial forms of learning.

When we speak of making excellence inclusive, what we’re really insinuating is that there is an inherent value system in place that teaches us to value institutions of higher learning above all else and that they are, by their very nature, exclusive spheres that are in desperate need of some re-imagining. However, in practice, we come to realize that the nature of spaces that promote higher education can only be minimally re-imagined and still maintain their allure and prestige in our society. Thusly, though perhaps inadvertently, the institution only allows itself to be minimally re-imagined in order to maximize the illusion of inclusivity. This encourages the public to compete to be included in the narrow-minded framework of higher education at the cost of more potentially important forms of social learning that occur outside of the confines of the institution.

Academia, in the sphere of higher-education, generally encourages a rather rigid approach to the analysis of information, and favors an unwavering rationality over emotion, cross-cultural concerns, and intrapersonal competence; in this rigid framework, sometimes it astonishes me that any novel thought and innovation occurs at all. Students are taught to engage with specific texts and media in specific ways, as a result our papers often end up being heavily reliant upon citations and supporting texts, often containing mere snippets of novel thought. While I understand and appreciate that students should have a healthy understanding of prominent works in their field of study as a foundation for further exploration, I wonder where this cycle of replication begins to break down. I recently attended a talk given by a sociology professor about internet dystopianism. The talk was largely composed of quotes from other authors, followed by a few snarky comments. This lit review was sandwiched between a brief introduction and an even more concise conclusion---it seems that even professors aren’t immune to the creativity quelling effects of higher education.

In many ways, I’ve started to view academia as a master meme of sorts, as a form of cultural information that reproduces itself without regard for the means of its replication or the outcome. Academia breeds academia; it is unthinking, unfeeling, tends to delegitimize any form of learning that isn’t similarly rigid in structure, and is nearly impossible to destabilize. In order to ‘take down’ academia and other forms of higher learning, you must first understand the ‘proper’ language to make an academically legitimate response. The laywoman cannot just disagree with what ze has read because it does not make sense to
him in his reality; ze must first learn the vocabulary necessary to be taken seriously.

In a recent panel that featured the Dead Prez hip-hop duo, I was reminded, eloquently, of the power of alternative forms of education and the ways in which life experiences function as novel and meaningful sources of knowledge. As I transition into life outside of academia, I want to challenge myself and others to critically engage with the ways in which we view systems of learning hierarchically and how it affects our ability to think creatively and promote novel solutions. I believe that we can take back the realm of intelligence work and begin to promote spaces where repetition, replication, and reservation can be defeated in favor of the reign of creativity, compassion, and cultural competence.

Here’s another demonstration of academic writing. This is essentially a condensed version of my thesis, where I might have started before adding in the quotes and graphs and condescension that make up real theses.
chapter 1: how to walk through a life obscured

This chapter aims to find meaning in disambiguation. If academia supports order at the expense of creativity, then this is an attempt to overturn both structure and function in order to promote something that is meaningful.

THE WALKING DEAD
sometimes I know that unhappiness is hereditary
that when sisters speak in their sleep from above
that I have left something struggling for air
in the spaces

sometimes I think that silence is infectious
like the moldering of dreams
it sweeps in solidly
the shy outline of something imagined

at times I think that I am destined
to open doors slowly
so as not to wake her up from where she’s dreaming
at least I can give that if I can’t give me

see I don’t know how to
finish a thought that is nearly wrested
from a former place of resting
I pause for a moment
I wish I could bring forth some wisdom

to pass on
through the darkness
by way of explaining why
I clean sometimes
instead of singing

I wrote this poem, like most things I create, in the darkness. My little sister had been crying and murmuring in her sleep. I wanted to help her, but I knew I couldn’t. We’re already here, nobody can save us.
Nothing is straightforward. It seems that as I fall asleep the world comes into focus, the grays and blacks of darkness make sharper the distinction between delusions and reality. I recognize as I drift off that I never quite figured out how to stop feeling cheap, how to stop feeling like a convenient stop between habit and heartbreak or an envoy of exoticism. I remember thinking that we were brought here, not in chains, but with the promise of change, a heavy burden all on its own. I remember how cold the almost dead are, how swollen, and I look to my own feet and fingertips and wonder. Nothing makes sense. I wake up each day, still here, still straddled with the privilege of waiting; I’ve grown to hate the nothing I’ve become. The work keeps us occupied while they plunder our coffers. In the face of this old tale, the mind gives up trying to create new memories, it just recycles the old ones. The warm summers of past years will have to do.

I miss my mother’s uncle. The last time I saw him he was dying. He was swollen and still like most people before they go and I couldn’t bring myself to touch him. I still have a letter that I never sent him.

THINGS I HAVE LOST HERE:

Happiness, healthy gums, creativity, motivation, family, time, instruments of time, the will to power, love, lust, karmic tranquility, the ability to sing, dreams,

money, spontaneity, good music, support, trust, ability, oratory prowess, hope, my appetite, my spirit, any interest in coexisting,

my attention span, many pencils, pens, highlighters, socks, earrings, moments, my train of thought, curiosity, stubbornness, data.

This was written while obstinately refusing to pay attention in the class that I TA. I was watching the students go through the four stages of inattention: nodding, note taking, napping, and leaving. I decided to join them.
Here
WESLEYAN ON REPEAT:

hegemony, dialectic, materialism, marxism, prison industrial complex, heteronormativity, homonormativity, normativity, normative, normal, norm, Noam Chomsky, gender neutrality, queer, trans, black, african-american, white, asian, middle-eastern, Weshop, Weslam, Wescam, WesBAM!, Wescard, WesWings, Wesleying, WesCeleb, WesLife, aesthetics, post-modernism, post-post modernism, post-life, post-script, jargon, diaspora, elementary, teach, explain, explicate, obfuscate, alienate, activism, allyship, awkwardness, interview, future, job, discourse, employment, resume, cover letter, grad school, excellence, inclusiveness, graduation, hook-up, break-up, broken-hearted, party, senior cocks, cancelled, costume, complain, compare, contrast, commiserate, together, apart, aporia, a priori, a posteriori, will to power, good will, eudiamonia, pro-social, anti-social, pathological, political, apolitical, liberal, literary, literature, canon, think, thought, thinking, process, problematic, emblematic, capitalism, break, points, meals, quiet side, emo side, music side, jock side, gay side, straight side, inside, who, are, you, barriers to communication, exploitation, townies, town and gown, trust, triumph, award, reward, platitudes, patients, virtue, duty, honor, power, shame, guilt, critique, critical, engaged, engagement, community service, green street, main street, typhoon, thai gardens, tandoor, metro wine and spirits, gas money, gregarious, magnanimity, metaphysics, meta analysis, metacognition, meta, psychology, society, individualistic, collectivistic, racial profiling, public safety, unsafe, forsake, on duty, on call, responsibilities, busywork, reading, writing, arithmetic, just kidding, no one does arithmetic, crafted, artwork, distinction, special, Kendrick Lamar, Carter Bays, Michael Bay, MGMT, other famous people, race, walk, run, keep running, quote, footnote, bibliography, works cited, annotate, protonotation, procrastination, movies, television, computer, interface, meaninglessness, medical transport, hospital, rape, culture, secrets, danger, fire, respect, creativity, quirkiness, keep Wesleyan weird, expensive, privilege, profit, planning, motivation, deficient, denigrate, distill, inquire, question, endless, boredom, unsure, silent, observe, observed, observant, work, extra curriculars, recommendation, after, college, before, identity, foreclosure, pattern, hipster, overt, covert, tautological, different, diversity, disaster, dissociate, dispel, snowpocalypse, condemn, control, coerce, commit, compel, interesting, insensitive, politically correct, disillousionment, discourage, discrete, dilute, disparaging, distant, climate, futility, futile, forage, forget, fulfill, major, requirements, minor, general education, creep, cure, call, text, connect, relationship, alone, forever, distract, succeed, fail, attempt, work, deus ex machina, chronotope, subversive, state, misogyny, miscegenation, abuse, aid, help, assistance, special, needs, insufficient, funds, funding, hope, dream, desire, all nighter, sleep.
This is not insomnia. This is something like dancing, horizontally, with a shadow. Forgetting that substance, much like gravity is invisible.

Gravel is larger things returned to dust. Like memories of better and more. When I reach out, you are gone, like paint on concrete, faded.

Beaches are milestones washed into the frothing mouth, irritable stones give pause. We watched the sun rise according to height.

Close is farther to go. Gaps are indeterminate spaces in which the absence decays the lines that separate us as a concept.

We are mere specters of the love within.

Horizontally invisible, returned to dust. When I reach out, irritable stones are indeterminate spaces within.

This is the process of becoming aware. When writing on auto pilot beauty emerges as if by accident.

As I become conscious of my writing, of the fact that others might read it, the nonsense emerges.

The bolded blue font was an attempt to make connections between thoughts, which by their very notion were meant to be parallel and fleeting.
A LESSON IN REDUCTIONISM

Secrets

This is supposed to be a paper about secrets, about keeping and selling them. Secrets control our every move; information is not an additive to intelligence but a means to manipulate our behavior. Freedom is an illusion and speech is a performance; it is the myth of specialness compounded by language. We have convinced ourselves that secrets are windows into the souls of others, that they somehow foster a deeper connection, bonding us immeasurably to one another. However, from personal experience and analytical examination, people only volunteer personal information for two reasons: they need an excuse to hear themselves talking or they want to feel closer to you in order to benefit from your response, usually both.

I am wary of information that hides behind closed doors and tight lips; it is designed to hurt me. It is an attack on my sovereignty. Have you ever heard of a happy secret? The secret is the oldest mechanism of social control known to man; we are enamored by the idea of being the chosen one, the only individual with access to the awful (awe-full) truth. We’ve convinced ourselves, with the help of accessible media forms like movies and literature, that sharing is caring, that information is an inoculation against ignorance. While ignorance might not be bliss, it is a state of being in which an individual can conduct themselves away from at least a layer or two of the multi-dimensional influence of society.

*THE STATE ITSELF [IS] A SUPER WHATNOT *
* SO KEEP YOUR THOUGHTS AND YOUR HANDS TO YOURSELF. *

People are always trying to get me to share more about myself. On the rare occasion that I do, I’ve realized that it is because I’ve chosen for that information to move from the private realm to a more public arena. In short, I would be alright if you typed my name into Google and the first response was a detailed outline of the secret I just shared with you. I don’t trade information for social acceptance. However, worse than secret telling is secret keeping. Secret keeping is a tool designed to keep you running at great speeds in the wrong direction. To be the keeper of another’s secrets is to die, to lose even the appearance of self-control. People have only presented me with information when they think they can trust me, when they know how I will respond. Predictability was the key to the performance; I no longer had the option to function as a solitary unit, as a free-thinking individual. I had to suppress myself to conceal the secret, to counter the risk of betrayal, potential misunderstandings and discomfort.

So, if anyone ever tries to tell you anything, I suggest running, biking, swimming, or drowning yourself as quickly as possible. At the very best they want to waste your time, at worst they want to eat your brain and sell your soul on eBay.

I trade silence for solitude, mother fucker.

The frustration is palpable.
God, you cannot imagine the formatting that went into making that.

There will likely be zero more boxes. And zero more secrets.
“the state itself becomes a super whatnot” by Liam Gillick

SUBVERSIVE
ENOUGH
FOR
YOU?

Found Art, Chalk Graffiti, CFA tunnels
chapter 2: cultural psychology and unadaptive optics

This chapter gradually moves away from the abstract towards more concrete works produced in my sophomore year. They nicely articulate the liminality, confusion, and disillusionment of those moments and many that have followed since.

“Unadaptive optics is a method of social deconstruction, in which we focus-on and try-to-see-more-clearly the social distortions of society by bringing them out-of-the-background of our attention and putting them in the foreground. Without the aid of unadaptive optics we move through life seeing a social environment that looks normal, but in actuality is wildly warped by oppressive forces.” Professor Robert Steele*

*I talked to Bob about this and he thinks this quote is fiction, that all things committed to the page are alterations of the truth. I think that’s pretty alright with me.

1. PAPER SELVES
Freedom, or the illusion of it, is exquisitely linked with motion, with movement towards goals, with manifest(ed) destiny and ice-cold autonomy. Freedom is jet planes and hard-boiled eggs; reality is realizing that the plane is bound for Disney World and you’ve just received a letter evicting you from the inside of your own head, the interior of which was formerly known as the happiest place on earth. The only way to escape from oppression is to fill the gaps in the semi-permeable barrier that encapsulates our woefully human minds and reject the barrage of incoming hypotheses of how we ought to be. In order to escape oppression we must learn to distinguish between preconceived notions of what constitutes society and the superior
reality that can be constructed within our own minds. Instead of attempting to make ourselves explicitly understood through the media of conventional speech and social interaction, we should leave ourselves and our thoughts (committed to paper or converted into music) to be interpreted by the world at large.

I have been able to cultivate a few moments of freedom, surrounded by the tension that permeates critical thinking outside of the lines, through spontaneous non-academic writing; the following samples are representations of such moments of freedom.

*Some years later I have no idea what hard boiled eggs have to do with any of this, but I can still feel the jarring sensation of being awoken, of being cracked over the head with the blunt force of reality. I remember learning to see the standing contradictions that keep us confused but unable to question.*

**Stop telling malicious lies (2/3/2011)**
Yes, who will survive in America?

The answer is anybody but me; I have 20 years worth of frustration, intimidation, inoculation, and a churning desire to lean into this invisibility, this cloak-less tribute to my ancestors, this ghostlike duality of meaningless words and shallow breathing.

The cultivated darkness was compounded by the jingling, jingling, jingling of keys, venomously approaching my throat, my wrists, my sides, attempting to unlock that which has long since dissipated, dispersed, divorced itself from the basement, the baseless peephole of my heart.
You see I’ve been peering, into the future, into your notebooks, the sickbed of your lonely ideas and forgotten inspiration.

I can’t say I enjoyed what I imagined to be there, so I did you a favor and switched us out for some carbon copies. You couldn’t even tell the difference even when I stood for a moment in the sunlight and burst into flames.

_Kanye West had just released an album and I realized that I might be just as dark, beautiful and twisted as I had hoped._

**Cyan and Venom (2/3/2011)**

1. It’s such a confusing time to be alive, so much information, so many directions in which to stride. What are we supposed to love? Who are we supposed to understand? I can see the sieve of my hands, all that I’ve ever considered worth the price of capture slipping, escaping to a world where reality is fiction and shapes steal souls molecule by molecule until a strange cyan vapor overtakes the frightened stalks of yesterday’s life and Saturday’s promise. I swallowed the light, but I couldn’t come to terms with the silence at my fingertips, with the anti-climactic characteristic of my struggle, the non-major motion picture of my non-existence. I can’t stand to remember what others have forgotten, to document everything that means nothing, to pretend to read Voynichese* while running indefinitely with Mexican tribes. I’m tired. The mood is broken. I’ll shroud my mind with tablecloths of Turin and add turmeric to the trench coats at Barney’s; perhaps that will help to shake things up.

*Voynichese is likely a fictional ancient language, made up by some intellectuals looking for their moment in the sun.*
This is what happens after I watch one of those conspiracy shows on the History Channel. Paranoia is semi-permeable; it passes through walls in sound waves. It travels both with us and in our stead.

2. Loneness is like a special serum to black people, isolating them from an early death while fostering some subhuman creativity that allows for common sense to converge with subterranean subversive measure to produce a rasher of salient fame that dissipates like compressed dreams under un-arched, unloved foot. As your cheek is pressed to concrete by the proverbial black boot of a tyrant you giggle internally, it’s just like your parents promised you. In fact, one of your molars becomes so excited at the prospect of a new frontier that it dislodges itself from the secure cage of your mouth and—oh who has the time for extended metaphors, the world wants us dead and we sit here and write as if the paper can stop bullets, as if a painting, our voices silken over microphones could stop the disfigured perfection, the disambiguation from polluting our perfect lack of conspiracy, of solitude and silence. No birds of paradise will stumble through here, drunk on the juices of impassionate fruits of inarticulate labor; they know better than to show themselves, reveal their pretty to the darkness. They will not be deprived of their drapings, their showy signs of sexual potency; we’ll never know how close they hover overhead so we’ll forget to dispatch their feathers for our heads.

This is perhaps best understood as an attempt to personify the black experience. I can’t say that I ever quite figured out what blackness is, but I have been told by the media that it is salacious and sensational, the ethnic equivalent of a showgirl having a seizure—sparkles, and very little substance everywhere.
3. They track the time like seasoned trappers. Calendars are posted in each room counting down uncertain, unspecified days; entire months are constricted in corners so you can pretend that the same repeating sequence of numbers can tell you where you’ve been and what you might be able to do. Life and time are quite irrelevant depending upon geological position; you can lose and gain ground like Mentos in your minty fresh toothpaste. I get this sudden snippet of my future, a black wool coat, a triumphant walk, a short spiky hair cut*, perhaps that person will wield sentences like saber-toothed swords against the dark velvet curtain of oozing organic matter. Why so scientific? I can’t remember who I used to be and that might be an unfortunate lapse of delusion. I wanted to say it was a beautiful memory, but I can’t; I sold my sanity for the solution to your confusion and I don’t understand why you had my paper at hand, why you used me for an arch-archetype for your future wife, like speaking in the darkness could bring any more resolution than a flawed Korean drama. Stop making fun of my coat.

*I can’t decide whether or not this is just a white people thing or whether the link between short hair and agency is race or gender related or just futility in follicular form.

This was an inversion or perversion of desire. I can’t explain where I was or how I was feeling, just that an army of anti-selves were marching around, the dark matter of those charcoal grey days.

4. The phantom buzzing of my phone keeps me focused. I feel a phantom of myself, a fantastic misinterpretation; I wonder absent-mindedly what happened to me. Didn’t
I want this to be different, the jet set, the new global perspective? I might have done better to just bomb those bridges and line my eyes with cyanide. I desperately want to remain awake, but it is a constant fight for consciousness, to shine light on concealment that starts behind my eyelids every night when I remember like a dream within a dream the shapes of the town I used to appreciate. [Yeah, I once cried in that parking lot and I used to get excited every time I saw that sign, but I don’t even think that man does the display anymore and without the flashing lights your normal isn’t good enough.] This is evocative of the ways in which memories overlap, they call up new ones in discordance and despair. [I miss the potential that used to lie in decoding you; I’m not that interesting either, I was hoping that you could help me with that.] This was the dénouement of some obsession. She sounded more concerned than she should have.

A Character Sketch:
With a name like Arynika people were always asking her what it meant, where it came from. She always smiled as she launched into the tale, a demure seven-toothed, all top row smile that no one ever noticed because she was careful to hide the gap with a slight tilt of her head and a barrage of deflective compliments for whomever wandered into her company. Sometimes she told people she was Scandinavian; the gullible or preoccupied nodded, the more obstinate, the vaguely culturally literate, challenged the notion of a non-discriminate black with such scintillating lineage. She told them of an ancient shipwreck, an isolated community, a hallowed kingdom, all the while scoping the scene for smart phones, the onslaught of which had nearly decimated her attempts to make an impact on the rare, a travel agent, the prevalent, a cab driver, or her favorite, and rather pandemic well-fed child, wide-eyed with
amazement, safely stowed beneath the disapproving eyes of their mother. Arynika especially liked the deadened eyes of the mothers, beaten down by contrasting expectations and the invisible hand of an invisible man on their delicately skirted child bearing hips. By entertaining their children she gave them a moment of freedom; they usually squandered it with disparaging thoughts and bated breath; they had all forgotten how to see the world, the vice-like grip of imagined love deprived them of vital oxygen, of vitality. The popular dependence on the hazardous forced them to pick up their children and walk, ankles wobbling, towards the back-breaking future of conventional motherhood.

*This section is about image management and impressions. This version of me was trying to figure out why people like her and why she so often refuses to take an offer of help, even in the most desperate of times.*

**NEWish (2/24/2011)**
I know this can’t be right when the dead butterflies in my stomach refuse to flutter, when we’re in the same space and you’re unable to greet my awareness, seeking alternate realities for the crispness that you crave, how enraged. You’re contacting outside sources reinforcing the divorces between our subtle syntax and lack of continuity. I don’t think we should do this anymore. This thing where you pretend that we can care about each other while lying to our mothers and setting Mars on fire. Our empire has crumbled, of snow and sand and sadness stuck together with a calming dip of Miracle Whip. I hate these questions as much as I hate mayonnaise.

*This is what being a fool sounds like.*
To our valued customer (3/11/2011)
I keep threatening to walk like a picket line strike breaker, pick pocketing mask maker. I keep threatening to walk so that we can run together like Dewey decimal diamonds in exchange for this never-lasting eudemonia. Why would you chip chop words like ham and make me eat them one by one like the square root of an imaginary number; I’ve been wondering how I got here and how it used to taste.

[A dog wandered up to me today, in Exley, quietly, sniffingly, a tame sort of curiosity for killing time and feline alike. We walked together lovingly; it was nice to know she would never talk about me to her friends.] The thinnest thread of paranoia.

I want to chop our friendship into bite size pieces of passionless fruit and concentrated guava root and feed it to a passing pelican. [read: I don’t know what the fuck to do with this.] I can’t remember the last time we sat on the edge of a rock somewhere in the sun and looked out at people and water and sky that didn’t belong to us. That’s probably because it never happened in the first place because I was alone while on the phone and my hands were hitting the keys with such ferocity that typewriters and turn of the century novelists alike turned their hopeful heads to the sound of their personal drum major, a sad speech in the atrophied auditorium of our primary days.

There is nothing unknowable about the mystic, the cryogenically preserved with poison and pell-mell good will wishes; you should have talked to me instead of rearranging sentences with your bread, words dancing in your head, crumb by crumb our livelihood is going down the drain. I guess I should have talked to him too. You see, these are tough days for writers, for dreamers, for anyone who wishes to be who they are, to place their fingertips to reality. You and I both know that we are friends,
a service generally provided in thrice-weekly or greater doses, and that ship is
convalescing like covalent bonds in the wave-like presence of angry electrons. We
like to keep in touch with our alchemy, our inverted chemistry, we started off wrong,
cause it tasted like strawberries and summer and an entire family of puppies laid their
metaphysical life on the line so that I would come to Weshop. So please understand
me when I say you know how to talk.
I’ve never seen anyone mention their own name so many times in a letter for
somebody else. This, in particular, was never about me, it was about dried mangoes
and plants left in bathrooms to wither and not die. To hang in stubbornly when
nobody wants you or remembers to water your soul. Mice shit in your planter pot and
you, tickled pink, piss lemonade; when hell freezes over everyone gets a popsicle. I
fucking love popsicles. As soon as you pack up your words in that suitcase the doubt
fills the vacuum and you must be as tired as I am of hand picking the detritus that our
Hoovers have left behind.
So, I have to be honest, you’re no star fruit, you’re closer to an orange, maybe less
acidic. Luckily, I don’t really like starfuit so we’re golden, like raisins without the
mold and in restless anticipation of the wrinkles. Once you had me seeing double
rainbows in replace of sparkling pop-tart pop stars, but it helps me to think we’re both
a little over it. So call me the next time you get drunk and we can relive the glory
days with rose colored glasses and uninterpretable quips, how fearful we are of the
morning, of sobriety, of being misunderstood.
I was considering discontinuing my subscription to an imaginary quarterly online
magazine, where you need a secret password and a lifeline of credit to keep yourself
connected to the crumbling genius of your peers, genii in plural. I was considering discontinuing my subscription because it was becoming irrelevant. The voices of my peers were not theirs, but poorly cloned replacements and everyone knows that once that happens you must kill the clone and then eat it and I’m just not feeling very gruesome, so I thought I would take a long, long, long, long walk and not invite anyone or take my cell phone or come back. How can we eat so much and feel so empty, so little empathy, this illogical time bomb is ticking like shards of glass frozen by an expert at the shutter; seconds explode into sandy silicate and the warmth has all but left my nose and fingertips. We’ve found yet another warm person with very cold feet.

This was an email to a friend in response to an email questionnaire devised to evaluate the nature of our friendship. I still don’t know if it worked.

I keep saying things (3/5/2011)
I keep saying things, we’re cracked like too many clay pots wrapped in ascots and smashed against the bleeding hearts of new aged, ten gaged liberal wannabees. Our trust funds are withering like a raisin in the sun, so we dress like we’re incest, the infest of distress; we’re going to sleep now and I hope that you’ll love us more in the morning. I kept laughing because it was funny to watch how we were all trying so hard not to be something in the midst of all that nothing, and I’m so sad that I can’t see the difference between reality and Fairweather. I miss those days when I was the only person that you could get to and I miss those days when I didn’t have to drink to touch you, and I want to ask you so many questions about so many places, but we are just people and I am drunk and I can hear you mocking me, gently, but mocking me like the sound of your sarcasm could rock me to sleep and I didn’t want to stay in that
house with those people for another moment. I wasn’t trying to ruin your walk home, I just want you to tell me that you like me the best and that everyone else is just whoever they happen to be. What have I done with myself? 

This all feels really personal, and I can’t imagine why I’ve chosen to share it, twice now. But that’s the funny thing about blank spaces, they demand to be filled. And so you do that. Feelings atrophy, paper takes longer.

Even the Clouds are Confused in the Summer

2. OURSELVES, THE OPPRESSORS
In matters of music and taste, I am forced to remain silent or conform. The melodies that connect with my internal symphony are generally discordant within the confines of our petri dish of mainstream counterculture, so I keep them to myself. They line the surface of my teeth like colonies of bourgeois bacteria. Yes, the oppressor has colonized my mouth.
It seems as though everyone has subscribed to this subliminal messaging system, voraciously consuming the same vibes, sound bites, suffocating any subversive impulses for fear of alienation. *These are some early thoughts about the memeification of our daily life.* We criticize each other as a means of socially sponsored self-regulation, pretending to be supportive and non-judgmental at the forefront, while dutifully reporting to our oppressors; the outside world, parents, teachers, friends, shadows. I’ve smothered my own desires, my own true nature in a quest for half hearted acceptance and conditional acknowledgement.

* * *

I’ve grown to hate the ellipsis; it is a weak excuse not to say the whole story, just the most sensational bits. *I always wanted to know what happens in the spaces between.* The aisles inundated me with celebrations of cheapness, low prices, and lower production value; a veritable fiesta of unwanted and unneeded consumerist propaganda. Each item was illuminated by an unnatural light, the florescence highlighted the dearth of organic material, a few feeble shoots of bamboo were the only reminder of reality and a distant one at that. I watched my friends try on sunglasses, quickly becoming disinterested when I couldn’t find any that fit my face (besides, my terrible vision didn’t allow me to see myself in the mirror anyways). Naturally, I found myself in the greeting card section with hopes of self-amusement, some socially acceptable condescension, and a possible purchase for my sister’s birthday. The cards were foolish and I was bored until I happened upon a series of cards called Mahogany. After reading about “real men”, “sistah friends”, and soul searching I felt thoroughly racialized, another victim of marketing stereotypes,
another marginalized enclave. I showed the cards to my friends; they were equally horrified, appropriately astonished. We gasped, then shrugged, and then left. Only one “soul sistah” card remained behind us.

*      *      *

I paid eighty dollars for this hair. I paid opulently for fraudulence and I knew enough to know better than to sit in that salon with those women who worked to make other women lose themselves in the artificial and ancillary land of black beauty. The hairstyle hasn’t really changed anything, but many things, the eyes of men in passing cars, the friendliness in the faces of undiscovered peers; a social commentary in locks of twenty dollar hair and sixty dollar styling. I paid pocketfuls of pretty green for my oppressor to weave his fallacy through my follicles; I did it because I’ve been trained to distain dealing with it myself. Society didn’t want me to tame myself, my hair, an extension of me with my own hands.

*      *      *

I am disgusted, by this society, by individuals that only acknowledge me when I say, do, and wear the right thing. I’ve become increasingly silent, unwilling to contribute to the reinforcement of patriarchal norms and falsified realities. I am beautiful, worth talking to, worth mentally escorting towards your rented space of Wesleyan only when I play by the rules. “You could be gorgeous if you fixed that tooth, ditched the glasses, wore some make up, dressed a little better…” The list is endless and my patience is not. Therein lies the disconnect.
3. OH, THE TERRIBLE THINGS WE’VE DONE TO EACH OTHER

A professor once told us that we possessed the greatest minds of our time. We Wesleyan students had been blessed with an ideal combination of privilege and divine providence; we were the only ones equipped to save the world, equipped to save ourselves.

I decided to test this concept of preconceived, presupposed intelligentsia.

*           *            *

I use certain types of music as an anesthesia against the world, an inoculation against impending mental instability. The right voice, the perfect lyrics are hands reaching through headphones to steel my heart in the face of state-sanctioned insanity. I was listening to Nina Simone in the sunshine, wishing “I knew how it would feel to be free”, wiggling the white socks I’d soiled in my haste to escape the dreary confines of my tacked-on existence in time to the beat (Simone, I wish I knew how it would Feel to be Free). The moment of calm inspired by her reassuring, time-ravaged voice was destroyed as they converged upon my patch of fallen detritus and impossibly luminescent blue sky.

We’d all decided to have this meeting to talk about the terrible things we’d done to each other. It was supposed to take place indoors, concealed from the sunlight and cozily oppressive; they changed the location in response to my bid for freedom because I looked so comfortable out there. They brought with them their noise and ignorance, their noisy ignorance; I needed a way to cut through the laughter, the insipid jokes about the circle of life, the “friend” who was petting me on the head like an obedient animal. So I played the song. I explained that this was Nina Simone and
that they *would* listen to what had been keeping me from wandering blindly, bouncing like a lost ball in between pairs of headlights super-suspended in the soup of darkness.

It was only three minutes and eight seconds of truth undiluted, unprocessed, and apparently incomprehensible; they just couldn’t be silent. The greatest minds of our time were flummoxed by a song, a petite chanson; nobody knew what to do with it, nobody could understand why it was happening. Not a single one of these analytical minds could attach significance to the simple fact that it *was indeed happening*. No one could appreciate that I had chosen for them to listen to it in that moment. These are the same students who will analyze a menu on assignment and produce a perfect image of the individual who will consume each and every item. It still holds true that “there is nothing worse than an educated fool” (Simone, *Funkier than a Mosquito’s Tweeter*).

I left the rendez-vous because there was nothing left to say. If Nina can’t speak, can’t sing, can’t mumble for three minutes, what chance did I have? A few of them called me later to ask if I was alright, but mostly to ensure that they weren’t responsible for my wrath. I fell back on my breeding that is, my socialization, and answered politely from the recesses of my SciLi solitude. I kept seething internally, trying desperately to keep the feelings alive before they faded into that dangerous medium of memory. I didn’t want my emotions relegated to questions, insecurity, and mitigated by the uncertain haze of recent memory. I refuse to mis-remember, so I think I’ll have to be silent from now on.
“Oftentimes, just to go away is one of the most aggressive things that another person can do, and if the means of expressing discontent are limited…it is one of the few ways in which pressure can be put.” –John Dollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town. I’ve been ‘going away’ for some years now.

4. SLEEPWALK
*The following is an accidental experiment in conscious sleepwalking. It often deviates from any formalized theme, instead attempting to articulate the sense of general hopelessness, the nonsensical nature that one encounters after being enlightened while still trapped in the confines of themselves and the system which has governed their behavior since before their conception. ←Look, a disclaimer!
Also known as a way to avoid taking responsibility for your own creation and simultaneously take up space.

Sleepwalking is a wonderful state. Sleep deprivation paired exquisitely with sensory deprivation; you learn to tune out that which is distracting, that which keeps you from focusing on anything other than the solitary nature of your attentions. I have chosen, well, decided to profit from a lucky combination of over-caffeinated and over-saturated food consumption, to probe at the rationality of sitting in a kitchen sheltered from the rain but inadequately concealed from shrouded eyes and shadow politics.

There are a series of shelves organized alphabetically by first name and it seems that hour by hour you could analyze, sift out shivering slivers of personal identity, but I know for a fact some shelves are shared by roommates, some are empty not by choice but by deception. A few don’t belong to anyone. I wonder as I count down the minutes to the eight o’clock hour, the hour by which I’ve told myself that I will
prepare for the day, if anything is what it seems. We can perceive, only so much, but it seems a shadow, an insufficient reflection of what might actually be lurking beneath these man-made sarcophagi we call human development. *I love plurals ending in “I” and I will happily torture my writing to fit them in. Is that not supposed to happen?*

As I stutter step through society I’ve listened to all sorts of music, some familiar, some newly discovered, downloaded on the down low from sources and forces much greater than me; [the connecting strands of World Wide Web stain sticky fingers] in pursuit of quick fixes and quicker thrills. *In keeping with the tradition of academic conceit, I’m pretty sure I borrowed this tidbit from the works of Avery Truefelman. You go girl, and keep bein’ real German. You’re never gonna read this*. We’ve created our own little dreamworlds, places that we can hide in between lines of text and photographs of doctors with doctorates, doctored up to look better than they actually are to seem beyond reach of average, rational humans.

It seems that nothing is real at 3 and 4 and 5 in the morning while you toss in bed and eventually haul yourself to mouse infested, festering pastures of unwashed dishes and decaying disarray, the disintegrating elements of elementary people posing as adults. [There is something cruel and unnatural about the way we are meant to sink before we swim like feathers tied to magnetized rocks; we will always return to the source, moving faster as we approach that which repels us when we most want to embrace.] *This could have been a great line. Sometimes I just don’t know where to stop.*
This might be a remembrance of all that hasn’t been seen, all that lurks in open air markets and in the fingernails of politicians, preachers, teachers, truants and entrepreneurs. Perhaps we’ve all been fooled, but at least we can still smell the money, play along as you pull the trigger, pretending that we know exactly what will follow next because physics and big budget blockbusters never tell lies.

The next time I sleep I’ll know that I’m awake; I won’t be able to rationalize anything. In those moments reality will finally be relevant.

I will no longer be a casualty of your confusion. What a statement! But ultimately a lie.

5. INVISIBLE WOMEN

Women who consciously choose to be invisible are much like myself, physically and facially unremarkable, not unattractive, just common, easily forgotten in the shuffle. We serve as signposts on the corner, placeholders to be brushed away with impatience. We are never noisy, never particularly distinctive in any immediately obvious way, just unrelentingly normal, unable to evoke your curiosity, just a strange, [arthritic swelling of the joints.] This is another one of those conceptual leaps I like to take. It seems to me that the arthritic swelling here is a reference to the passage of time, the amount of time it takes to be seen in a culture where you don’t exist. In an attempt to ignore us you look down to examine your fingers, to absorb yourself in something other than our anti-energy, our node-like effect on time and space. At some point you realize, as our false follicles blow in the wind, our eyes sparkle, that they’re not quite as you remembered, they’ve grown spotty and hairy, weak and
withered with the wrongs of time. We don’t even bother to look back at you anymore; our heel bones are already clicking in the distance. Their echo is a subtle reminder of your inability to see yourself.

We women, we the invisible, are forever friendly, endlessly full of appropriate jokes and gestures, approachable and befitting for society. We never make history. We do nothing wrong, so we do nothing right. We subscribe to the doctrines provided and we do not embellish, at least not outside of the confines of our minds, the mind, that wandering spirit of a sundry, paltry sum of facts. We offer warm shoulders and warmer breath, but no one ever purposefully comes close enough to enjoy the benefits, to examine the parameters of what we believe to be our own self-imposed privacy.

We watch the visible women, the sex symbols, the entitled and confident, subtly sum up their roles at the center of some centrifuge of conspiracy with smiles and shining speech. They bring out the laughter and the bright-eyed ebullience of boys, while we scratch our heads in the semi-darkness, quietly learning to discount the raging revolt of our follicles, to negate the necessary, that is, that which makes us human; we don’t love, we long and then we forget, not the longing, but the individuals that inspire it. We torture ourselves in the hope (that funny, hollow word) in the hope of finding the secret door past the indigestion and unjust antagonism to be an exception, the exception to the status quo. However, we know, somewhere in the back of our minds that we can never transcend beyond our place, we can never win this game, we can only lose by default, a defunct and dissonant chord in the symphonic harmonization that is the well-wired gramophone of social interaction.
We will watch from the sidelines and smile, unconcerned, apathetic prophets in the know; there is nothing special about a prophet, they are merely individuals who have opened their eyes to that which they believe to be their truth, dutiful receptors for the reality that is always streaming, steaming, boiling beneath. We are manic depressive and we hate everything and nothing at all. You should be afraid of us, not because we are militants (as if we could even summon the strength to manipulate our own marionette strings!), but because we are not. The violence, dis-ease lingers in our minds, creating a much greater turbulence than physical force, enough to shake the very foundation of fallacy that we stand upon.

So look out for us, not that you’d realize what you’d discovered, for we have a certain quality, the anti-nymphet, an imperviousness to charm and chalice alike. We baptize ourselves in the watery lies spewing forth, frothing from the demented spaces between your frontal lobe and your femoral artery; we are born again, in your image, every time you speak. *This ending, like most I write, is pretty convoluted. I was going through a Lauryn Hill phase so I manipulated these lines to include some of her lyrics. Is that not supposed to happen?*
chapter 3: myth, magic, and meditation

This chapter is about my time in Harry Potter class and has several samples of my work from that time. After taking the class I never quite went back to Harry, opting to leave him safely preserved in the pensieve of my memories.

1. FAN VS. FICTION

Once again, if indeed by accident, he’d done something foolish. The self proclaimed, “Don” of the lake, the Giant Squid had grown disillusioned at the prospect of another season of mediating petty disputes between the pompous Merfolk and the fiery Grindylow. He fairly shuddered at the thought of another seamester spent watching the countless species of sea-flora, flashy shades of red and purple and green, waving all that xylem and phloem like so many spectators at a Weird Sister’s concert.

Nibbling absentmindedly on the toast that a charming sixth year had so generously tossed him, remembering, like she always did, his longing for the butter and sugary cinnamon relics of the human world, he contemplated eschewing the peacekeeper mantle, emancipating himself, standing up for his rights! Don Squidlioni would settle no longer for being prodded by wands. He would never again be mitigated by magic! Nothing less than excitement would inspire him to carry on. He would welcome the world to his front door, his delta so to speak, tossing them tidbits of Gillyweed to see if his boredom, his tears, his plight were palatable. In his exuberance he neglected to recognize the speckled blue plumage, tiny black eyes, and the tiny twig-like legs of the Jobberknoll that had fluttered in to share his breakfast.

* * *

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He lugubriously lifted a tentacle overhead to pluck a passing owl out of flight. He gently brought the bird to the surface of the lake and whispered his message. The owl, snowy white, soaking wet, and glad to be alive, flew swiftly to transfer the information to the only man who could help. He needed someone to purge the last lament of the Jobberknoll still fragrant on his lips, to silence the continuous note emanating from somewhere around his middle; her final cry, a symphonic amalgamation of every sound she’d ever heard, was made for his ears alone, forever. Dumbledore would rid him of the melancholy that pervaded his soul, the corrosive chorus of his constricted vena cava, the dwindling -Ah, but the owl had returned carrying a response condemned to the surface of the parchment, to the bottom of the loch. It read something like this:

Dear Regulus,

It deeply troubles me to hear of your pitiable condition, I only wish that you had come to me sooner. Please join me in my office when Mars is bright and the students have gone to bed.

Albus

*   *   *

When he’d transfigured himself into something human like, Regulus crept towards the castle, still as impressed by its magnificence as he’d been in his youth. When he could distinguish Dumbledore’s figure from the flickering firelight in his office he relaxed his body, allowing each particle to release itself, breaking the bonds and tearing the tether between his reality and the wind. His essence drifted through the open window.
“Good evening Regulus,” murmured Dumbledore. “We’ll need to go to Erised,” he reckoned aloud as he ushered the Regulus current into a large vial. Dumbledore tucked the vial into the folds of his deep aubergine robes and they set off towards the hidey-hole near the library that housed all of Dumbledore’s newest inventions. Upon their arrival, he uncorked the vial, silently watching Regulus re-crystallize.

“It hurts less after each time, but you can’t imagine the effects of the liberation, the terrifying knowledge that a gust of wind could steal a part of you forever, the fear of being free…” Regulus hesitated, unsure of how much to tell, how much was already known.

Dumbledore just smiled, eyes twinkling behind those silver half-moon spectacles. “Step in front of the Mirror, Regulus.”

His reflection showed him holding the Jobberknoll, stroking its feathers as he sang back her song. As he turned back to Dumbledore he felt a tickle in his throat and nearly choked on the blue and the feathers, la renaissance de la Jobberknoll. He kissed her once and set her on the open windowsill. She cocked her little head, those intelligent black eyes fixed on the tortured brown of his, and she flew silently into the pre-dawn darkness.

“Thank you, Professor. Serius once-”

But the doorknob was turning, and Dumbledore had only just enough time to tap Regulus’s shoulder and make the pair of them invisible before the mysterious figure entered the room. As the door closed and the cloak came off, they saw the young face of one Harry James Potter, looking vaguely pink faced as though he’d been
holding his breath or dodging a bullet, perhaps both. Harry looked around, blinking in his adjustment to the darkness. He finally saw the mirror, and stood transfixed in front of it for some time. When he realized it was getting light outside he reassumed the cloak and exited through the same wooden door.

“He is the one?” Regulus inquired roughly. Dumbledore nodded an affirmation.

From that day forward, Regulus followed Harry, surrounded him in another loving countercurse, while he drifted off slowly, particle by particle into the next phase of his existence.

Dumbledore crossed off another task from that long mental checklist.

_This was fun to write. Regulus is the Giant Squid, Dumbledore is running the show, and all is right in the castle. Note the abrupt change of tone in the next piece. The topic is interesting, but the fun is gone._

**2. SOCIAL POLITICS IN HARRY POTTER**

To the euphoric, perhaps casual reader, the pages of Harry Potter seem at first like an escape from our very existence, a world where the laws of nature cease to exist, trouble and uncertainty hover in the distance, dark clouds spilling their contents over someone else’s town. It is a rechristening of our familiar locus, a parallel existence; in these pages, individuals so vaguely similar and dissimilar, thrive and learn and become illuminated by wonder. Harry’s gloomy, pre-adolescent experience on Privet Drive at first appears to clash wildly against the steam and fiery red excitement of the Hogwarts Express, forcing us to recognize the momentum and innovation which our society so mysteriously and complacently lacks.
However, once off the train we are quickly enlightened, we find most of the older generation of our magical counterparts to be just as phobic, afraid of one another, of being usurped, of time, and of death, each of the great unknowns in turn. They too keep their dirtiest secrets hidden in kitchens and closets and hearts, safe from summoning charms and quizzical eyes, not unlike our own torrid romance with slavery, racism, homophobia, and the like. Harry’s world is one of substitution and gregarious (unnecessary big word) allusion; in the absence of discrimination on the basis of race, they have notions of superior blood, instead of slavery on the basis of race and accessibility, they mentally and physically enslave the lineages of other species. Many wizards discriminate against those who cannot perform magic, scoffing at muggle ideas of technological and medical advancement as trivial, futile, and rudimentary. They are woefully ignorant, unaware and unconcerned of the pagan, ritualistic, and often humorous affiliations many of their activities (potion making, the concept of cauldrons and casting tea leaves for prophecy) have in our world.

Yet some social constructs remain the same. Women, with the exception of Hermione are expected to conduct themselves in a certain way; much is made of Molly Weasley’s cooking prowess (even though she proves to be a much more complex and courageous character), Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil can always be trusted to squeal over false premonitions and successful men. Hermione however, is one beacon of light at the end of the Hogwarts tunnel. She represents the evolution of women, the power to be both intellectual and beautiful, to cultivate confidence at will and use both for advancement towards understanding. A representative from another
recognizable social class, Albus Dumbledore, reminds us of the complex symphony between age and wisdom. As the mastermind behind the series a key to social advancement, we are unable to ignore how time has shaped his eternity.

The wizarding world of Harry Potter is all too reminiscent of our own; each individual sports a magical mask, one that can only remind us of our own shining smiles as we attempt to conceal the grim reality of those marginalized by society. J. K. Rowling has masterfully placed a new spin on our old existence, subtly and honestly inspiring us to question ourselves and how we relate to one another in society.

3. INQUIRIES
Question 1:
The movie will certainly attempt to leave out or diminish all of Hermione’s great saves, most notably the scene where she rescues Harry from Nagini’s grip in Godric’s Hollow, romanticizing and feminizing every element of her personality until she is a feeble imitation, a foolish, flawed facsimile of her former self. Conversely, the book presents Hermione as the closest of the three to being a true leader, providing the best sense of direction and the majority of the blueprints throughout the novel. Her foresight is critical to the success of Harry’s mission; she literally saves both Harry and Ron’s lives and later becomes the impetus, providing insight and understanding behind Harry’s final dilemma: Horcruxes vs. Hallows. Hermione is the unsung hero, the un-lauded wingwoman that allows Harry, and occasionally Ron, to anchor the race, to find the sword and free the dragon. They thoughtlessly collect style points with a flourish, comfortably perched upon Hermione’s back, the surface upon which they continuously use to raise themselves towards the challenge.
Additionally, in Movieland, we only know of one House Elf, a brief nod to Dobby in the second movie is the only illumination directed towards the plight and the very existence of House Elves. This will lead the directors to leave out Ron’s prelude to a kiss, his evolving thoughtfulness that culminates in his concern for the wellbeing of the Hogwarts elves. Perhaps, it is my own brand of foolish optimism, but given that the seventh book is slated for two feature length movies there is certainly enough time to accurately portray J.K. Rowling’s vision with the necessary doses of cinematic magic. Maybe the filmmakers will pay homage to the series and the dedicated fans by staying true to the book, enhancing the novel with beautiful imagery instead of a series of bland, socially acceptable bites. However, I’ve been told there’s no money in that.

*I’m happy to say that in hindsight my predictions were much too dire.*

**Question 2:**
Dumbledore trusts Snape because he knows Snape’s story, because he cannot trust himself. They are, in essence the same person, shaped by similar forces in their lives; each of them responsible for the destruction of someone they love as a result of their blind commitment to their personal ideals. This experience with profound pain forced them to do anything to avoid experiencing it again. Snape can be trusted because he cannot afford to lose the only living tie he has to Lily. Fools in love are easily manipulated, especially when the object of their affection is as fixed and unyielding as a memory. *Nice freshman self, nice.*
**Why is Harry a better leader than Dumbledore?**

In order to be a great leader, one must primarily be a great follower; Harry is better at leading than Dumbledore because of the individuals that surround him. A great, inspiring leader must listen to and respect the opinions, contributions, and instructions of their followers. They must take up the mantle in times of trouble and of peace, knowing when to speak and how to listen. Harry is uplifted and inspired by his friends; he is not the leader, but one of many. He has created, through his trust and support, scores of people dedicated to a single purpose, vanquishing notions of superiority to promote harmony between all beings.

Dumbledore is incapable of reproducing the Harry Potter effect because he is decidedly of superior intellect and skill than those who surround him. He admits to being, “rather cleverer than most men, [with] mistakes [that] tend to be correspondingly huger” (Prince 197). His mistakes, the fallout from his high stakes gambling with the lives of his constituents, affect many people, individuals who most likely never realized their position as a card in Dumbledore’s deck. Generally, he commands respect and admiration for his word, but usually doesn’t provide enough explanation for others to grasp their greater significance, hence, “Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!” (Stone 123) Percy Weasley accurately summarizes Dumbledore’s reputation in the wizarding community immediately after that memorable speech, “Mad? He’s a genius! Best wizard in the world! But is he a bit mad, yes” (Stone 123). In leadership style, Dumbledore is the antithesis of Harry, using concealment, confusion, and connaissance to manipulate those surrounding him, “for the greater good” (Hallows 357).
Mrs. Weasley defeats Bellatrix Lestrange in a duel-to-the-death. How unlikely is that?
Molly Weasley is not as she seems. We are first introduced to Mrs. Weasley as a plump sort of woman, sporting dingy clothes, a second-hand conductor maneuvering her children through the traffic of uncertain times. On the surface she is nothing more than the ideal mother archetype, the maternal figure that Harry so desperately longs for, a kind-but-firm reminder of the elusive concept of normalcy. However, we must remember that Molly is a member of the reconstituted Order of the Phoenix. She willingly signed up to protect, fight, and serve, offering her home, sons, and sanity to the cause. Molly Weasley has made many great personal sacrifices to become a face of the revolution; she is wholly invested in the movement, a believer of the promise of a better future for her children and her world. She is not and can never be a housewife; she is waging the war from the home front.

Although Bellatrix means female warrior, we later come to realize militancy is no indication of true strength or the means by which fury and loss can amplify and awaken the warrior within each of us. There is a part of each of our souls that will consume and protect, defend and deliver death when threatened. Bellatrix is Molly’s shadow figure, as Lord Voldemont is to Dumbledore; Bellatrix believes in nothing, and is obsessed by and inevitably consumed by the idea of Lord Voldemont and what he symbolizes. She stands for a mirage, a clever façade of control, power and fear; Bellatrix is seduced by power, if Voldemont wasn’t the leader she would never give a damn what happened to him. The power of her last name suits her exquisitely, a play on the French word for strange. She is strange, abnormal, demented; she is not tethered to the world by the same emotions as the rest of us. Killing, death, and
destruction mean nothing to her; she revels in the idea of misfortune for others, but is incapable of imagining her own demise. Any sane individual would have bailed on the final battle at Hogwarts, or at least taken a few steps closer to the power emanating from beneath Voldemort’s robes.

So in a fight to the finish where one woman prepares to lose everything she stands for and the other merely a concept, a fraudulent ideal, the answer is readily apparent. Molly Weasley could never lose a battle against Bellatrix Lestrange, for the battlefield is uneven and the power of love and the forces of gravity would never allow for the scales to be tipped in any other direction.

*Oh, apparently Bellatrix didn’t have her own wand during the battle, so there’s that too...*
4. HOGWARTS: A MYSTERY
We are all musicians; even in our silence we create symphonies with each exhalation, every blink of our eyes is a repeat sign signaling the renaissance of our notation.
Therefore, we must ask ourselves why the world of Harry Potter is so devoid of musical influences, why the well-crafted microcosm of Hogwarts represents such a culturally barren landscape. Much of the series is curiously absent of the pop-culture references that litter our society and provide most of us the means for self definition.
We readers are left with little more than the Weird Sisters, Celestina Warbeck, wands, broomsticks and whatever can be filtered from between the folds of the Daily Prophet. We’ve spent years shadowing Harry through the halls of Hogwarts, moving as Sir Cadogan; slightly better informed than flies on the wall, but equally unable to influence the events occurring at our fingertips. It appears as though in these times of turbulence, culture, both popular and ethnic, are the first tenants of society to evaporate; there is much safety to be found in homogeny and the absence of sound.
Rowling reminds us that music always conveys a message. Although we cannot hear for ourselves the emotions or search for meaning beneath the complex rhythms, we can look to the few carefully placed songs and chants to preempt and predict critical events throughout the course of the series. The Sorting Hat sings us through our first ceremony, the first rite of passage at Hogwarts; these initial, superficial divisions will inevitably dictate future friendships, freedoms, and alliances. In essence, the hat presents each student with an identity, a specific set of morals and constructs upon which they will develop into the best witch or wizard they can be. However, between the lyrics, the tension between the four founders and their values is readily apparent; the divisions that define Hogwarts can only bring about destruction if not
deconstructed, “The warning history shows, for our Hogwarts is in danger from external, deadly foes and we must unite inside her or we’ll crumble from within. I have warned you, I have told you…Let the Sorting now begin” (Phoenix 206). The infallible wisdom sung by the Sorting Hat creates a sense of urgency and reminds everyone of the “invisible” war brewing just outside the castle walls.

We’ve also seen music used as a source of social and emotional control; the behavior and general mood is manipulated and influenced by the sounds and subject matter. The harp music used to subdue Fluffy has an enchanting, seductive quality; the narcotic effect is a form of musical enslavement, the specificity and exact use of music serves to highlight the connection between sound and spirit. Perhaps, just as in our society, music has the power to physically move, to inspire each of us to translate sound waves into kinetics. The pull, the musical magnetism, is stronger and harder to resist in the magical realm. At the Quiddich World Cup, for example, men must physically restrain themselves to avoid becoming eerily and unavoidably transfixed by the false, temporal beauty of the Veela; when resisted and rebuked, the Veela devolve into fire wielding spirits with, “cruel-beaked bird heads and long, scaly wings bursting from their shoulders” (Goblet 111). Here Rowling offers us an interesting commentary on the power of melody, the falsity of appearances, and the susceptibility of men. *Ah, heteronormativity.* Just beneath the surface of this comical example lies a central theme in the novels; beautiful and magnificent beings (Lord Voldermort, Professor Lockhart, Cho Chang and her deliverance of the downfall of Dumbledore’s Army through Marietta) create correspondingly great chaos.
However, in a competition for comical chaos, Peeves has certainly cornered the market. His crude language and vaguely poetic oversimplification give us an accurate and unrelenting insight into the mood and morale at Hogwarts. Through his daft ditties, “Oh most think he’s barking, the Potty wee lad, but some are more kindly and think he’s just sad, but Peevsy knows better and says that he’s mad” Peeves informs us about how Harry is portrayed and perceived by the general wizarding populace (Phoenix 247). This valuable information allows us to contextualize Harry’s experience and underscore the importance of his inner circle of friends, individuals who weave themselves within his tapestry, just as others sever ties. Every time that Peeves creates strife and incites unrest for his own enjoyment, we are given succinct summaries of the thoughts and feelings of the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, large peripheral groups that will be needed later for both their numbers and their powers of persuasion.

Music has critical and powerful manifestations in everyday life. A life without music is one without light; the illumination of rhythm and word is communication in its purest form. Emotions and thoughts that cannot be expressed by words alone can be translated into soundwaves, profound statements understood on a human level, transcending the confines of logic alone. Upon Dumbledore’s death, the phoenix delivers the most striking, haunting example of symphonic communication, “a terrible beauty…grief turned magically to song” (Prince 615). We are left to wonder and sift through our grief, to attempt to discover whether the lack of musical influence is a reflection of the darkness of the era in which we have found ourselves. We must
ponder whether the cultural silence, the mistranslation of the human spirit are merely whispering echoes, the delayed light of the previous highlife reaching our ears at last.

**Snape completely misunderstands Hermione. Give examples and speculate on why this is.**

Severus Snape is dead. He must and will remain a “stagnant” character, pledging loyalty only to the memory of Lily and his losses. In his sorrows lie both the development of the series and the ultimate solution; for Hermione is the new Lily, in all of her youth, intelligence, and muggle origins. She is a reminder of what can and has been lost and what is at stake if he loses this battle. Hermione is fresh and new; only at face value does she seem the antithesis of Snape and all that he represents.

Both characters value academia; Snape understands intelligence and appreciates knowledge, but not for practical purposes. For Snape, intelligence is a means to an end, a tool to convince people of his status, his place in the world. Intelligence is a stepping stone and a bridge to his heart’s desires. Hermione too understands knowledge as a tool, but one to be used responsibly, in measured doses and in predetermined places. Knowledge is to be controlled, confined, and refined.

However, Hermione’s priorities are capable of changing (and have done so throughout the books) where Snape’s cannot. Who can forget her reaction to the three-headed dog fiasco, “We could all have been killed- or worse, expelled” (Stone 162)? Hermione once valued school and scholarly improvement over all else, now she honors friendship and hard work. Snape refuses to recognize Hermione as anything other than the average student. If he legitimizes Hermione’s identity in the
wizarding world, he creates another individual that he must protect, another burden that he must shoulder.

Hermione realizes that intelligence is futile without friends, gratuitous without an audience who cares or has the capacity to interpret it. Snape, as a result of his life experiences, has come to equate knowledge with power, the power of using the unknown, the undiscovered, and the unquantifiable against the individual. Snape views Hermione as an “insufferable know it all”, but he’s equally insufferable in different ways (Azkaban 172). Snape has a broken, lonely heart; he finds it difficult to be in perpetual contact with souls and hearts that are as pure and uncompromised as Hermione’s and her fellow peers. His soul is split at least into two; he lives for Lily and he lives for himself. He is bitter and unbearable, and rightfully so. Hermione is practical and Snape is emotional; their relationship is a demonstration of the tension between pragmatism and theory, realism and idealism.

Hermione must prove that she belongs, not only that she can function as a wizard, but can outperform and outclass the “nobility” that surrounds her in order to solidify her position. However, she is compassionate in her quest. She doesn’t wish to defeat her peers, she wants to raise the level of everyone around her; she fights for house elves, lonely ginger cats, and forgetful friends. Snape is on the periphery of the wizarding society as well; his “greasy hair, hooked nose, and sallow skin” and humble beginnings make him no more representative of the ideal wizard than she is (Stone 126). Both must fight for their position in society and instantly recognize the capacity within one another to disrupt the established order within the walls of Hogwarts and beyond. Snape misunderstands Hermione because she is a reminder of
his tragic past. They are fighting the same battle for acceptance and understanding, dancing between thin lines and skillfully skirting the abundant grey areas.

*Myth, Magic, and Movies* was one of the few classrooms at Wesleyan that I felt comfortable in for any length of time. *Harry Potter* was one of those things that felt safe for me. I guess I haven’t gone back to them because I want to have a safe space somewhere in my memories.
chapter 4: the self in translation

This portion of my thesis is about busing in the diversity, about misunderstanding the art and artistry of people and students of color and of being essentialized without the opportunity to expand. The following quote was a recent Facebook status of a friend and fellow student of color at Wesleyan. It just goes to show that regardless of the medium, insightfulness and honesty can prevail.

*I was told that I was pretty good at "slam poetry" or spoken word a year ago. My home made me. I developed in a place where it was, literally, to get free. I haven't wrote a new poem or completed a new song since I've been to college. Maybe it's stress. Maybe it's culture shock. Maybe its this annoying ass bubble (I'm getting away on weekends for sure). All I know is, I'm definitely not free. Maybe it was my being forced. My encounter with an overwhelming amount of imitation. Pass-timing. An imitation of a method of self-expansion recycled for merit and entertainment. I'm not being elitist- I promise: Everything is for everybody. But this stunt in my own growth due to my new environment has made me realize a few things in this paradigm: Money changes the unprepared x This dissonance one experiences when meeting another who's life contradicts theirs can be crippling x Ignorance kills. I've seen enlightenment taken out of entertainment. All forms. And slam cats say "the points are the platform" right? Yeah right. I believe in that, but still don't vibe with what I've seen. And from what I've seen in MY LIFE, I definitely don't have time to delight you with wordplay and mental pictures for snaps. Hell naw. If you hear me spit a poem or a bar ever again, -I put it on my being- you will be changed. This wasn't a growth stunt: It was a chrysalis. –Rashad “Izzy” Coleman, ‘15

THE SELF IN MIGRATION: IDENTITIES IN EXPATRIATION

The following engages with several excerpts from my travel journal during the seven months I studied abroad in Regensburg, Germany in the spring of 2012. This paper is an attempt to explore the revolving door of selves and ways of perceiving the self that are required to survive in a foreign context when considering the barriers of language, race, and politics. In the following excerpts I battle with and against extreme introversion, overt racism, and feelings of being alienated from my expectations and comfort zone. The selected excerpts were transposed without
alteration; they function largely as an envoy, a representation of myself while abroad, a calculated exploration of a version of myself in a foreign and unforgiving locale.

It has been fascinating to trace the evolution of expression within the journal; as time progresses, German and English begin to merge and marinate, resulting in a distinctly identifiable stage in my work as a writer. There is a distinct, but subtle paranoia in the pieces of prose written in public spaces. The fear of being seen and simultaneously being unseen are easily palatable documentation of my distinct and unyielding discomfort. Eventually the entries become less and less structured and farther and farther apart, the convention of dating each entry ends at the end of February, perhaps as an attempt to explain the way time functions uniquely in different geographic locations. *This could also be interpreted as laziness or a simple refusal to respect or engage with the concept of time.*

The tone and timbre of my writing changes audibly in different places; the mood of each entry is influenced by the layout of the journey, of the streets in a new city, of the art in an unfamiliar gallery. There is a distinctly academic tone to the entries composed in libraries, the haunting of old ghosts, intellectual discovery, uncertainty, and exploration force the hand of an American living in a sort of self imposed exile. Each entry is in chronological order and was written on a specific day and location. Each distinct chronotope* influences the version of myself that engages with documentation. As I reread and reproduced the content of the journal, I was able to engage with a multiplicity of selves in a multiplicity of places.
*I think I must be the only person in the world, besides Bakhtin himself, who likes this word. I use it whenever I can because I feel that it captures something unique about the relationship between space and time that each word alone cannot.*

**Excerpts from my Travel Journal: Regensburg, Germany**

**Location: Bedroom, January 19, 2012**

And so it begins, as promised. A flurry of activity, a blur of color, a strange sense of seeing exactly what was promised and absolutely nothing at all. A strange serendipity permeates each event; the kindness of strangers and friends buffets me towards my final destination, and somehow it all just feels right. There’s none of the hopeful longing, the false gaiety that once drove outings such as these. When one is—as I hope to do—trying to create a new life that breathes and takes on thoughts of its own, there is a seriousness, a genuine understanding that things of this nature must be done this way. In a criminally exhausted stupor we traipsed around the city through a darkness that was not dark, but profoundly illuminated. We under calculated and overestimated and decided to relax and just sleep it off.

**Location: Kaffeestunde*, January 26, 2012**

In accordance with the paradoxical nature of our existence, we gladly exchange old paradoxes for new ones, like people and cell phones, and glasses of milk.

*Kaffestunde=Coffee Hours, a required group meeting over cookies and warm drinks. It was largely a waste of my time, but I guess I got some writing done.*
**Location: Kaffeestunde, January 30, 2012**

It seems as though there’s not much else to do, but make small talk and gaze forlornly into teacups. I find it funny that one would worry so much about being found out. It’s not as if there’s any real proof, no causation nor correlation. There is a certain speaking melody, it surrounds innocently, but awkwardly. It feels so very, very red and blue.

*I suppose I was eavesdropping, but everyone was so loud that I couldn’t really hope not to hear.*

**Location: Café/Food Court, January 31, 2012**

In attempting to look like a famous writer, one must always be sitting, alone, in a café in a homeland that is not their own. They should be drinking coffee, surrounded not by the dusty butts of too many cigarettes, but a small glass of tea, the feeling of being watched, and a temporary cell phone can do the trick as well. If one is pretending to be a writer, they must let their shield down; it is the only way that they can see enough to remain out of sight and mind. I was once told many times to slow down, that my food wasn’t going anywhere—that the laces in the combat boots of the people who want me dead are red for the blood of the corpses crushed beneath them, or yellow for the teeth knocked out in twos, then threes, then sevens. Is it true then, that life is a trap? That I might wander aimlessly through the Altstadt* until someone stabs me, or worse, until I learn how to spell? It is my favorite method of communication, the ultimate ‘missed connection’, the look. We take turns pretending not to take turns examining one another. It’s not the curiosity that kills me, but the
universality. We are, as one might say unquestionably interconnected. Next time though, I’ll try this with a friend.

*Old city

This was written upon seeing someone who was likely a neo-Nazi. By that I mean that Google told me that anyone who wears combat boots with red laces kills anything that is different than themselves. But that’s stupid, everyone knows that true Nazis aren’t distinguishable from their peers.

Location: Classroom, February 27, 2012

Picking and choosing. Selection and the process by which things are selected. What makes people shrink from the answers that they crave? What stops a writing hand from merging pen and ink with paper melodies, if only to find itself extinct? There is a distinct melancholia associated with not being sad, with not having the precise and virtuous certainties of joyless luck and endless infidelity. In a sense it seems that everyone recovers from that which they’re recovering only to move on to new problems, new sources of guilt, a new and mildly caustic curiosity—a pause, a moment taken with thought. These hands, these fingers, play with time and space, controlling, caressing, conforming. I am decidedly not sad and completely at a loss for what to be.

In other news, the wall looks like the repeated haphazard imprint of a workman’s boot. In the muddy confines of this confusion words make themselves known; childish transcription ensues.
Entries Composed in Amsterdam (April 4-7)

Entry 1: Things Written Up

We are all born with the fluidity of the notation. It is only when we grow older that the interference, the regularity stops us from overreaching. The Ego and the Id are constantly fighting each other, the cyclic notation of identity.

Entry 2: Things Written Down

At the bottom of this wasted well, I was finally able to commune with myself, my instantaneous dismissal and approval of objects and space was new found and empowering. Generally speaking, far too many people traipse in and out of my mind like mercenaries—paid and propheting. At the top of the well I had no control of my surroundings. Stimuli, people like colors, came in and out of focus. I knew they could see me, I could taste their reactions. It was the absentee artist being fully present, it is the art of existing, utterly alone, but utterly aware of my interaction with everything around me. It is, it was, a cultural x-ray vision; sensation and perception in perfect harmony. Antithesis. The art, the paintings served as an interpreter; my suspicions and aspirations confirmed with each brushstroke, an essential conversation. Art is a cultural lens, its consumption is the fire caused by reflection.

Entries Composed in Utrecht, Netherlands (April 7-8)

Entry 1: On a Train in Motion

Making contact with the eyes of one not yet truly awake but still unclaimed by the land of the sleeping. These unconscious giants drift through pleasantly. Our thoughts bounce off of bedposts like impertinent teaspoons; announcements are made ceramically as we learn to trust all that is in front of us. Young girls that are too
young and not young enough go too far, too close, well past the planets of our apelike constitution.

**Entry 2: In the Best Hostel in the World**

What strange paradise. There are certain spaces that make you feel like the art. As you wonder through, admiring, others admire you in turn. Your movements become not your own, but those of expectation. Silent questions are put forth and you generously nod your acquiescence. You cannot imagine how progress is being made in different lands. You cannot imagine the experience, the time before you were covered in this new philosophy. The weight is covering you, like extra baggage or new found love. You cannot move past it.

*But actually, this hostel was dope. There was a kitchen that was fully stocked with real food, not just snacks, and a backyard with a giant chess set. Utrecht was a definite high point in my adventures, I might have to go back.*
More Entries from Regensburg

An Entry Composed in the Library*

Life is perhaps not the pursuit of love or perfection, but the pursuit of beauty. We each strive to bring beauty into our surroundings, to make our lives more beautiful. Mathematicians find numerical reassurance while musicians seek wisdom in the power of protonotation. We see the world differently, but we pause longer for and passionately observe that which we find beautiful, that which gives us pleasure simply for being as it is, that which confirms our suspicions, that which allows us to keep believing that our world is a wonderful one and we have been granted unparalleled access to its perfection. It is, it being life, perhaps the first self-fulfilling prophecy; our expectations, no matter how futile or moronic, are always fulfilled because we will them into being. Perhaps this line of reasoning can illuminate the mysterious attempts at self adornment, the desperate pleas for attention, the endless queries and curiosity about the human condition. Perhaps these are the reasons we sometimes speak quietly and feel connected; our pursuits and our desires are universal. The rest becomes irrelevant.

If all desire stems from an imperative to seek beauty and promote its manifestation in everyday life, then the individual definition of beauty becomes the key to unlocking the psyche.

*But maybe not the library. There were books, but the real books were apparently stored catacomb style underground somewhere. I never really bothered to figure it out because I had no intention of reading anything academic in German that didn’t directly affect my GPA. Also, this entry was my original thesis concept. #evolution
Entries Composed Over Time on a Park Bench*

Entry 1

And the beat wants your dissociation. You sit still while it works on you, first toes, then fingers, then slowly, slowly, lifting you from your chair. You aren’t you, you are notation. You lose chances while time ticks by liquid, gleaming like shards of glass or time ruined diamonds.

*The same park bench every time. I would refuse to write if anyone was occupying it. It was the only thing that felt like mine, not the park bench, but the view from it.

Entry 2

And you have desires, but you fear them. You wish to avoid both objectification and elation. Both forces work upon each other, eroding identity, becoming heavy and foreign. You think you love someone, in fact, you think you’ve loved many times before. Even the thought of love becomes corrosive, each expectation implosive like metered poetry and time honored truths. Happiness, measured in breaths taken, elation, sweeps upward, undulating. What a pirated partitioning of the soul.

Entry 3

Now that there is outside we have a safe space to make assumptions. The sun chases us with innocence and fleeting mirth. Each day is as a lifetime, celestial transformations bring truth to our existence. All is as it should be.

Entry 4

It has to start somewhere. A moment of peace, a brief pause where emotion stops and logic sets in. You slowly become a photograph, the park bench upon which
someone slightly out of place sits. The grass before you is perfectly uneven—small yellow flowers compete with aging dandelions, while something a little shorter, a little stouter fades in and out of prominence. The people who pass by are curious in a cautious, unwilling sort of way. They look only after being certain that the look won’t be returned. I follow suit and am greeted by the defiant backsides of pensioners released from the imprisonment of yesterday’s unrelenting rain. It is cool and fresh, an alpine, winter mint of a summer day. A strange memory comes back, triggered perhaps by the crunching of gravel under flip-flopped foot, a Pomeranian, an accidentally hipster chic grandmother’s cowboy footed hobble. That day was as uncertain as this one and all that have come before it. You’d been young, fit, though not by providence, but a perfect and complete happenstance. It had been summer then too, with its smells all coated in a thick layer of chlorinated water. The swim season meant longing and adolescent boredom and long days of nothing intermixed with triumph and thoroughly soaked towels. That day started where this one ended, with hastily clad feet hitting paved inhibitions in a futile attempt to dodge some raindrops.

*This is another entry about the intermixing of memory, of the ways in which the past and the present erode each other. At some point there’s just nothing left.*

**Entry 5**

But today was a sky-way panoramic, replicated clouds dripping in the unreal quality of photography and mixed media sublimations. Rocks warmed the backsides of the more receptive tourists and a quartz on quartz melody became their timepiece. As I watched from a higher vantage point, it seemed that one visitor shifted, subtly,
disengaging from the whole to make a new prescription. I wondered absentmindedly about the sort of people who allow themselves to be photographed but never ask to see the finished product.

Entry 6

And I can feel my tights pilling in a way that makes me feel less than human. And all of my sentences are continuations. Because I’ve never had the chance to complete a thought, much in the same way cars splutter up mountains and girls flirt with asymmetrical mentions of forgotten times and spaces.

After Awkwardly Engaging Pireeni Sundaralingam in Conversation

Sometimes you need someone who doesn’t know you to show you, only by speaking of their firsthand experiences, how you have let the image of you replace yourself entirely. We are our own unreliable narrators. We tell ourselves stories of our surroundings and then use them to create our own identities. Myth is just another way that a practiced truth becomes an imprecise reality.

*Pireeni Sundaralingam is amazing. I don’t even remember what she was talking about but I remember thinking if I ever figured out how the mail worked that I would order all of her books.

Entry 7

And now I’m off, exploring the more delicate nature of gifts of time, of signposts stationed, surrendering identity with their hopelessly curt declarations. The sun tints the most superficial layer of exposed skin as I ponder the nature of responses to questions misunderstood. There is a futility that is admirable and all encompassing. We as beings strain towards the light fed by the luxury and
indulgence of hope. When alone I wonder if we are true children of the light or masked fugitives from the shadows it creates.

What would become of a diary erased word by word and replaced with new words of my choosing? What if I wrote as many poems as possible with the words of another?

Yo, I’m pretty sure I just got into a turf war with some pigeons. And then this happened. Pigeons are kind of evil, in a misunderstood sort of way, but that’s probably what makes them evil.

Entry 8

Love found in fishbowls is a funny thing. I used to think that each passing jogger was a new adventure, another reason to slow to a stop as if frightened or overly polite. I’ve always had this curious fascination with the ways in which sweat collects, first in a linear fashion and then extends radially, as if compelled by memory. I thought that one of them might stop, as if startled awake by a mysterious and seductive force. But we always move past one another, me dressed much too warmly in a feeble attempt to disguise what months of eating the feeling of being alone metastasized into. And you, interchangeable, universal—merely human connectivity filtered through the lens of the unfamiliar. We meet geometrically, all sharp intake and lightly shaded intentions. Love is a new politics and our backs must make the bridge that we are crossing.

Afi speaks about liebe. Wie süß.
Entry 9

I don’t know what I am today. Perhaps I am a checkpoint, the physical manifestation of the meaning of your favorite bench, a curious reminder that you are allowed to speed up or slow down or stop altogether and just look for a moment. Strange things happen when you lean against the fourth wall of your own life. People parade past as if for your approval. Of course some do this willingly, robotically, as if you have not been sent by outside forces to take them in, like sunlight. Still others look back, breaking the laws of our international physics; these future presidents question us with certainty, surrealism. I am looking into the eyes of a woman who thought she’d never grow old.

Entry 10

Curiosity fled and with it fizzled any great love of self or private education. Days became spaces where answers died pre-conceptually. I simply stopped caring for things that didn’t care back and many things quickly disintegrated into nothing.

Entry 11

And we wondered through the streets being foreign. Looks casted not only at me for once, but the pair of us and how comical we looked together. But we knew, like all those who wander barefoot and alone, that day follows night and all other concerns pale, like his sweat covered brow, in comparison. I maintain that English is largely a language of business. Facts are conveyed and queries answered. Other emotions are best illuminated by other senses. Americans and their customs are ubiquitous. The tone of their language cuts through the calm, sublimely. It’s jarring.
Entry 12

It’s one of the few places where I sit and don’t really feel like I’m anywhere. Of course the reminders are many and of oscillating subtlety, but somehow my thoughts are Mediterranean, the wind toying with my skin Bavarian, the way that I am alone—a being of my own creation. The particular odor of clean, this time represented by an envoy of the laundry detergent family, reminds me of how I used to miss you in a way that was both humorless and sincere; yet another being of my creation. But I don’t feel the same anymore, I feel viceless.

Entry 13

A strange sort of solitary confinement, somehow self imposed and somehow not. Quick walks snuck in between raindrops are my only self mediated interactions with the real world. I’ve started the packing process, that is the throwing away of possessions. Goodbyes are in the knowledge that nostalgia is disposable, water soluble like its close cousin, despair. Goodbye is looking out onto the balconies of our tenement housing and wishing that the sounds of our mirth, the broken bottles and forced camaraderie would echo back to us and guide us through a new valley of shadows and dishonest men. I have been here far too long to feel anything for this place; it is just this feeling that helps me understand why photographs bring me much more satisfaction than time spent sharing space with you.

Entry 14

I went to sleep last night, thinking that you can buy your way out of jail, but you can’t buy freedom. Then I woke up and lived it. But what is freedom and why do I seek it? (Yes, I must use the political I because there is no one else inhabiting
this island.) Freedom is not being thought for or made up; it is the becoming of yourself, the homecoming that haunts you in your dreams.

“Freedom is nostalgia for what we never had”

Conclusion [Note the change in tone, the desperate attempt to catch this Hail Mary pass at meeting the page limit.]

A travel journal is an attempt to document the engagement of an individual with new and foreign locales. There is something simultaneously social and asocial about this process; in this attempt to express and explore the ways in which the individual is an active participant in a new culture, the individual becomes a passive ethnographer of that experience. The travel journal as a medium causes the individual to be both alienated from and invited towards introspection. The idea of the travel journal for a social self is in itself paradoxical; a self that is fully engaged in the social realm of a novel experience would likely have little time for written documentation. The self as a social being must be paused in order to preserve its memory.

The excerpts from my travel journal did little to engage with the more social aspects of my stay in Regensburg. They avoided specific details and imagery of the places I visited or the people that I travelled with. In fact, they were distinctly asocial in nature, a catalogue of the experiences of the other, of feeling alienated, and of watching social lives and selves interact around me. The writing is observational in a vacuum like fashion, it attempts to center around me alone as if I was distinct entity that was not influenced by her surroundings. But the influences are unmistakable. As
my stay in Regensburg continued, my writing and outlook became influenced by my distinct awareness as an African-American female living and studying abroad.

My eternal reference point was always of home, of my perception of the states and how it altered my perception of the world around me. I took the rules of my homeland and applied them elsewhere. There is such difficulty in attempting to be culturally relativistic. This struggle is most openly articulated in the first few entries; the tension between wanting to actively engage with the customs and language of my new life are at odds with the comfort felt at communicating in English and the blissful feeling of being understood.

Several of my forays into social atmospheres left me feeling uncomfortable and misunderstood. My experiences at the Kaffestunde, or coffee hours where the students on my program were able to practice their German, were othering experiences. I began to question why I was in Germany and how I would ever manage to interact with my environment in meaningful ways. As I journeyed into the city, I encountered the never ending stare of the locals. As a black in Regensburg, I was somewhat of a novelty; as an introvert, I was somewhat perturbed by the sudden and unrelenting visibility.

Each excerpt documents my oscillating use and disuse of my social identity. Certain spaces, like the art gallery in Amsterdam or the park bench made me feel curiously visible in a way that I felt I had a more subjective degree of control. The ambivalent emotional attachment to Regensburg and the experience in itself is a constant thread within the excerpts and helps to illuminate my tendency towards the asocial during my brief stint as an expatriate.
chapter 5: old shit also known as the thing itself: a pseudo-thesis in all its glory

This was my original thesis. It contains some commentary from my close friend Kanyakrit “Yu” Vongkia, ‘13. I chose to leave her italicized commentary as both a tribute to her time and support and an example of the perfect pursuit of academic perfection. This section is unpolished, unfinished, the ideas left strangled, umbilical. It represents a former plan, a road not taken. The Dodson Diaspora is important to me because it resists the rigid logic of academia, its members continue to exist somewhere in exile.

The Dodson Diaspora and Why we Laugh in the Face of Defenselessness

Introduction: Defining Diaspora* Note: you’re not actually defining diaspora here; you’re introducing the concept and applying it to your thesis – so this acts more like an introduction of “defining

Historically, the term Diaspora has been used to describe the geographic dispersal of racial, religious, ethnic, or other identity groups from their homelands to new and foreign locales. At its center, Diaspora involves movement; this chronotypic* This word is jargon – you are trying to define a term; you shouldn’t do it by using another term that itself is unclear mass migration of peoples can be voluntary or involuntary, a conscious collective effort or an individuated response to the prevailing social circumstances of a given society. We have seen this term applied to the involuntary relocation* of Africans during the Atlantic slave trade from the 16th to 19th centuries and the expulsion of Jewish peoples from the Middle East,
but also the voluntary mass migration of American Blacks from the southern United States towards Harlem and other northern cities between 1910 and 1970\(^1\).

*Sanitizing language, read: importation or exportation [Author’s note]*

However, as time has progressed and technology has advanced, virtual spaces have become the new migration point for people of all backgrounds. The internet is the “new West”* This is a big claim, so I think you need just a bit more to support/explain this. Tell me what they do; how they’re moving; a brand new destiny has manifested itself for dreamers, capitalists, racists, experimenters, and analysts alike. This concept of the internet as a final frontier of sorts, a place where everyone can be themselves, or perhaps even better versions of themselves, is evocative of a virtual inversion of a mass migration, one in which people physically remain where they are, but project constantly evolving images of the self into the space. But what happens when these images are taken from their originators, away from individuals and small audiences and presented to larger forums? What happens when images are re-appropriated and altered or remixed for mass consumption? Essentially, individuals become participants in an unwitting and involuntary mass image migration, where replications of their physical selves are taken and distributed to new geographic locations; thus a new and subtly more nefarious Diaspora has been created.* This is a complicated idea that you’ve explicated and problematized really well.

This thesis will specifically explore the exportation *Or exploitation? of black identities and culture on the internet, with a specific focus on viral video material

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featured on youtube.com. However, this new type of Diaspora extends far beyond that of black identity and culture, encapsulating an exchange of digital media featuring people on the internet and in the media that can be taken from its physical form and digitalized for virtual consumption; any media involving people that can be altered from its original state, replicated, and reproduced can be considered for inclusion in this Diaspora. This realization should inspire a change in the way that we define Diaspora and perhaps inspire a modernization of its current definition.*Generally if this is an introduction, you would probably describe the course of the book/thesis – for e.g., the first chapter will address technological terms, the second and third chapters will etc. etc. If you feel like you don’t know where you’re going, you could think of potential chapter outlines (however, you might not be able to do this yet if you haven’t done enough research, which is valid at this point)

Chapter 1: Memes, Temes, and Themes of Blackness

In order to explore the nature of replicated images and their redistribution on the internet, we must explore the meme and its technological manifestation, the Teme. Richard Dawkins’s 1979 book, *The Selfish Gene*, coined the term *Which term?* to describe, “any unit of cultural information, such as a practice or idea, that is transmitted verbally or by repeated action from one mind to another” (memes.org). The meme is a selfish gene, looking for a host to help itself propagate by any means necessary.* Give an example here; still unclear as to what it is.* Successful memes, as explained by Susan Blackmore, become ubiquitous, “the information that is copied, [Richard Dawkins] is called the replicator. It selfishly copies. Not meaning it
kind of sits around inside cells going, “I want to get copied” But that it will get copied if it can, regardless of the consequences because it can’t, because it’s just information being copied” (Blackmore, TED Talk, Feb 2008).

Start with the Thing itself:

Enter Antoine Dodson. He is by all descriptions a rather flamboyant, engaging, and eccentric individual. However, much like your average fictional character, the Dodson captured by the Huntsville, Alabama NBC news affiliate WAFF 48 was an overwhelmingly reduced version of himself, a humorous sound bite, a mere footnote in the mass media machine. In keeping with the established norms of popular culture, Antoine Dodson’s sudden celebrity was the product of a traumatic experience. Antoine single-handedly fought off a home intruder and prevented his sister, Kelly Dodson, from being sexually assaulted. In the wake of the attack, the WAFF 48 news team captured his adrenaline filled explanation of the night’s events and declarations of vengeance against the perpetrator. The news segment was eventually picked up by the Gregory Brothers of Auto-tune the News, where much of the traumatic experience, along with most of Kelly’s commentary, was largely ignored in favor Antoine’s flamboyant distress.

And it was funny. The video masqueraded behind a guise of humor, the viewer was encouraged to ignore the context and engage with Antoine’s unique personality and penchant for exaggerated gesticulation and speech. It was far too easy to miss the story in the midst of all of the performative and genuine emotional energy. The emotion of the viewer *This arguably also has performative aspects

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2 Check citation format. This is going to get tedious, you should correctly cite things from the get go to avoid having to do it in X number of months…yada yada yada
and can be further discussed in later portions of the thesis. How are our emotions as viewers manipulated by the content itself and by our own feelings about how we ought to respond to the content in a general sense? [Author’s note] becomes conflated with that of the Dodson’s; laughter and pain merge to create the ultimate teme, a cycle in which emotions become interchangeable. This is the peculiar humor of things taken out of context, and the space of the internet is essentially life taken out of context. Byte sized representations of life, the traumatic experience of the Dodson Family for example, are uploaded by the speculative, those searching for gratification, financial gain, or approval, and was mistaken by many as authentic depictions of life in economically depressed areas. According to Baratunde Thurston, Web editor at TheOnion.com, the videos, “seemed like a form of ‘class tourism.’ Folks with no exposure to the projects could dip their toes into YouTube and get a taste.”

This modern day form of minstrelsy has become more nefarious, subtle, and effective than ever before. The ability to single out a specific group of whites in blackface, label them and their craft as racist, and take steps to denounce their actions and distance yourself exists no longer. Images of the individual are uploaded by unknown entities and consumed by likewise unknown entities. The image of the individual is the blackface so to speak; content once wrested from the individual themselves and posted on the internet becomes performance, one that is unwitting and at times unwillingly extracted. This virtual Diaspora is the most effective method of separating a people from their essential selves and transforming them into memes and temes, or compressed versions of themselves to be widely distributed without their

3 http://www.npr.org/blogs/alttechconsidered/2010/08/05/129005122/youtube-bed-intruder-meme (Check this citation, I’m pretty sure that NPR is not the original source, but this link should be helpful later.)
permission. A simple news report about a man and his drive to protect his family becomes distorted, a compact narrative about loss of control, about being re-imagined without your own input, without impunity.

Now cue the entrance of the Gregory Brothers of Auto-tune the News fame. The new blackface becomes compounded by global economic interests. Of primary interest to the Gregory Brothers is the virtual migration of the show from the projects of Huntsville, Alabama to the consciousness of every 13-25 year old with a computer. The solution to this quandary lies within the transformation of an already problematic representation of race, class, and trauma into a true song and dance; an “authentic” presentation of self becomes copied and pasted into a pop-song paradise. At its core, the modern day pop song formula either ignores trauma in its entirety, or uses a combination of humor, repetition, catchy lyrics, and unrelenting beats to gloss over the most abhorrent and unpalatable realities of everyday life. Thusly, a “Bed Intruder” is born. The unknown assailant is pushed into greater prominence along with Antoine and the Gregory Brothers. In the “Bed Intruder” remix, Kelly is shown twice and only speaks once. Antoine is featured a whopping nine times, and each of the Gregory Brothers are featured five times, with Evan Gregory’s one minute interlude being almost half of the video. So whose story is it really?

In its sloppily uninspired editing, the “Bed Intruder” video remix reveals many more subtle biases of the Gregory Brothers. Footage from the original interview is smash cut with images of the brothers posing as newscasters. When Antoine sings, “We goin’ find you”, the Google maps image of his Webster Drive residence from the original interview is shown. Antoine’s warning to the perpetrator
becomes the homing signal for the vulture like interests of folks like the Gregory Brothers. Concerns about finding the assailant become lost in the quest for the perfect story; the trauma of the experience has a market value and the personal costs to the Dodson Family and the general lack of justice become irrelevant. The deeper complexities of the discourse are all together dropped from the auto-tuned version; it is briefly mentioned in the beginning of the news story that Kelly Dodson was in bed with her young daughter at the time of the attack. She fights off the attacker herself before Antoine’s intervention, leaving her room in a state of utter chaos, broken glass and bed frames dominate the shot.

**Sweet Brown**

We meet Sweet Brown in a similarly destructive and tumultuous situation. We are informed by a disembodied female news reporter that Sweet Brown “will share her horrifying experience [upon realizing] that the complex was on fire”. Sweet Brown begins in a calm voice, with the cadence of a story in the process of solidifying, perhaps having already been shared with some neighbors and friends, “Well I woke up to go get me a cold pop and then I thought somebody was barbequing. I said oh Lord Jesus it’s a fire.” At this particular moment a male member of the news crew chuckles from behind the camera. There isn’t anything particularly humorous about the situation or the story being told, one can only assume that there must be something funny about the intonation and words that Sweet Brown uses to tell her story, that something about Sweet Brown is inherently humorous, or that something so comical has transpired behind the camera that this man was forced to break his journalistic professionalism for a brief chuckle. Sweet Brown continues,
“Then I ran out, I didn’t grab no shoes or nothin’ Jesus. I ran for my life. And then the smoke got me. I got bronchitis. Ain’t nobody got time for that.”

**Image Ownership and Management**

As an individual gains recognition and status as a celebrity, those who consume their image cosign an unspoken social contract. The image of the individual, which arguably morphs into the individual themselves, comes under public ownership. The notion of individual freedom and personal management of behavior and experience are quickly disabused. Once a public image has been cultivated for mass consumption, an individual must act in accordance with this image or suffer public condemnation. This form of stereotyping works for accidental or serendipitous celebrities as well. When we consider the celebrity of Antoine Dodson and Sweet Brown, we can only conclude that their videos are deigned to be humorous by mainstream YouTube users because they fulfill stereotypes about blacks that are salient and meaningful in American culture today. Dodson represents a rising stereotype, that of the sassy black man who is at odds with his inherently violent and athletically gifted strong black male counterpart. He is the non-threatening black man; his threats are humorous because we have been conditioned not to believe the intent behind them. We have been conditioned to see queer black men (or perhaps not to see them at all) as being especially weak; if blackness makes one violent and morally repugnant and queerness makes one sexually and socially inferior, then being black and queer constitutes a special type of invisibility, one where you are seen only as entertainment, if at all. *This warrants some research into queer black theory, the queer black body as a place of emasculation, rejection, and disorder. [Author’s note]*
Sweet Brown, on the other hand, represents somewhat of a staid stereotype, the moldering meme of Mammy, the strong black woman who takes care of her family and the families of others. She does as she is told and her intentionality is no secret. Mammy is assumed to be an open book and Ms. Brown seems as sugary and empty as the cold pop she seeks. Sweet Brown quips that “ain’t nobody got time for that”, no time for bronchitis, no time for life to be snuffed out cruelly by fire. A harmless house slave pauses to make a joke out of her own desperate situation, to create hope and meaning where she can; millions pause for a moment, if only to laugh.

**What does laughter give us?**

One must stop to ask the question, what does laughter give us, where does it take us, and at the expense of whom? Laughter gives us a brief reprise from the indignity of living in uncertainty and of trudging through endless routine. It helps us extend our consciousness outward, to feel that we understand others and are understood in return. The psychosomatic and platitudinal benefits are unparalleled, laughter is the best medicine, but for whom? What does it mean when we laugh at the pain and uncertainty of others? By laughing at other people, not at their jokes, or along with them, or in a generally positive manner, but at discomfort, we revoke the essential humanity of those we find humorous. In our minds they become tragic figures, mere caricatures of themselves. As we begin to write this fiction that involves the humorous subject, the subject becomes both subject and object, an unreal, unfeeling, and invisible entity. This mental image, coupled with the virtual internet image and the physical being, are at once at odds with one another. When we
see the individual in person, they are no longer an individual, but an amalgamation of themselves, their imagined selves, and their virtual presence. They cease to be individuals and instead become something imagined.

This is how the war begins. This is how Rodney King, Amadou Diallo, and Trayvon Martin become victims. The imagined greets reality with deadly force; the war against humanity begins and ends with humor.

**Understanding Culture:**

If culture can be understood as, “any kind of idea, belief, technology, habit, or practice that is acquired through learning from others”, then the space of the internet and viral videos might be better understood as a master meme that promotes the dispersal and popularity of other memes (Steven Heine, *Cultural Psychology*, 3). Consider for a moment the successful black man meme. It is successful because of the prevailing assumption that black men and criminality have a significant and meaningful correlation. Black men are presumed to be inherently violent, musically and athletically gifted, and dismissive and abusive towards women.

*We trail off here at this most interesting of intersections. I bid adieu to academia abruptly, for something shinier and arguably less nebulous---the unknown.*
CONCLUSION:
I wrote this because I felt like I had to. Higher education makes you feel like you owe it something, it compels you to sit in libraries and fill pages in exchange for validation. I’m still tired, but at least I’ll have a bounded copy of the most palatable things that I’ve ever thought, edited into writing. It will make a wonderful pillow in the most desperate of times. And that’s something.

Recently, I called my older sister and we had a lovely conversation. About an hour in we finally reached the topic of death. We agreed that all conversations eventually end up there; some just arrive faster than others. Wouldn’t it be nice if you could lead with that, if you could just skip the small talk and ask people if they were afraid of dying without feeling sociopathic? I feel the same way about academics; imagine if we just stopped quoting everything we’ve ever read and just talked to each other instead. Imagine if we learned how to stop filling space and began to appreciate the indeterminable void that exists inherently between us. The void is my favorite non-space to inhabit.

In the midst of our conversation, I admitted that I found something beautiful in the idea of non-existence, of absolute erasure. It seems to me to be the closest to freedom that this realm has to offer. But there’s no way to say that in regular conversation without being referred to psychological services. We are supposed to want to be here and we are supposed to do everything in our power to live for as long as we can, without regard for the idea that we might be overstaying our welcome. So we continue to do things when they no longer make sense for us.

The system of academics and higher learning follows the same trends. In its celebration of imitation and conformity over exploration and originality it encourages
an illogical pursuit of logical perfection over intrapersonal connections. It has long been argued that our rationality makes us human, that our ability to reason makes us special. I believe however, that it is the part of us that most desires uniformity; we learn to express ourselves in similar ways. Only certain forms of expression are academically valid, all else is essentially meaningless in our social discourse. The cycle continues and we have no choice but to engage in it if we want to be heard.

I resent that.
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