

American (De)solitudes: Henry Thoreau, Ralph Ellison, and Jonathan Lethem

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The prison system must be dismantled and never rebuilt.

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I dedicate this thesis to the imprisoned.

List of abbreviations

Chronic City—*Chronic*.

“Civil Disobedience”—“CD.”

Fortress of Solitude—*Fortress*.

Invisible Man—*IM*.

Thoreau’s Journal—*J*.

Walden—*W*.

Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the works of Henry David Thoreau, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, and a wide variety of Jonathan Lethem's stories. Situating my argument within the nascent field of solitude studies, I argue that solitude has so far been incorrectly defined. It is not loneliness, not alienation or isolation, disenfranchisement, ennui or detachment. I say that solitude is harder to define, and I go further to claim that attempts to define solitude are doomed to fail because of the very nature of solitary practice. Solitude is a praxis through which these authors resist various totalizing narratives that seek to delimit or control bodies. I suggest that solitude as we know it owes its life to Thoreau, but that our understanding of Thoreau's solitude has been coloured by misinterpretations or misattributions. The hermit's teachings reject the idea that solitude can be defined by space, time, or friendship. Solitude can be inhibited or promoted by these states, but it is never singularly caused by them. Solitary practice exists on the threshold.

Thoreau as a writer had boots on the ground during the beginnings of the industrialization of the American prison system we know today; the insights he was able to glean from seeing firsthand the development of solitary confinement are especially relevant to our encounter with contemporary America. Almost all critics agree that a study of solitude must begin with Thoreau, but almost all of them immediately lose sight of the three main things Thoreau was attempting to do: resist historical hegemony, refuse 'progress' a voice, and remind people that however political a discussion, real bodies and real people were victims.

Several important contexts inform this study, but the main discussion touches on issues surrounding gentrification, incarceration, trauma and loss, and how writing confronts

the unimaginable. In each section of this dissertation I emphasize especially the ontological dimension of solitude—its undeniable *body*—and the way writing itself can be used to disrupt or confront narrative hegemonies that seek to control or limit. I examine Thoreau's idea of the threshold, his development of a theory of solitary practice, Ellison's conscription of solitude as a mode of resistance against dispossessive narratives of historical progress, and Lethem's beautifully haunting commentaries on individual and national trauma.

I situate my discussion of solitude against a number of exigent contemporary issues, especially trauma and prisonhood. The American obsession with incarceration creates and perpetuates traumas both individual and national. I map Thoreauvian solitude against the modernist anti-historicist novel *Invisible Man* and conclude the discussion by seeing how Jonathan Lethem's novels, especially those written after 9/11, can further explain and expand our understanding of contemporary solitudes. My argument is not developmental or chronological, other than for convenience. My purpose is not to show that things change over time; however, I do demonstrate the continuities of solitude across the past two centuries. Instead, I am engaged by the idea that solitude is a useful and versatile framework for understanding how authors might resist the prisonization or supermaxing of American culture. These authors, disparate as they might be, are all fascinated by solitude. I ask a series of questions I believe have been overlooked in contemporary Americanist studies of solitude: what happens to solitary bodies; what is going on with incarceration in America; how does solitude help us understand trauma; how does solitude affect writing?

*“I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning,
when nobody calls” (Walden 137)*

*“The biggest problem the black community may face today is the severe isolation,
distrust, and alienation created by mass incarceration” (Alexander The New Jim Crow 137)*

“Becoming American [is] an ideological act” (Lipset 18)

Introduction

In 1880, Henry David Thoreau set about to map the dates when the Spring ice totally disappeared from Walden Pond. 138 years later, his figures are still being used. The irascible naturalist’s measurements have revealed, amongst other things, that Walden Pond will soon be an unsustainable ecosystem—due, in part, to the amount of human waste introduced into the water. One team of researchers has suggested that a pool be built next to the lake, because waste management systems have so far failed to prevent the acidification (Stager et al. 1). In very simple terms: tourists won’t stop pissing in the pond. “America renews her youth here” indeed (Thoreau *J* 663). It suggests the question: what other value can still be found in the cranky hermit of Walden Pond?

This thesis argues three things. First, the nascent field of solitude studies can learn a lot from Thoreau, in part because he refused outright to define what solitude might mean. Thoreau articulated a *practice of solitude* rather than a definition. Definitions could never quite get at the thing itself, so instead they had to be lived. Secondly, the practice of solitude gives us a new way to understand related, complex issues like gentrification, trauma, and

dispossession; it does this by emphasizing the primacy of the solitary body. Third, the practice of solitude is staged at the level of narrative, as a frame. I do not argue that solitude undergirds or structures these disparate concepts; I argue that solitude provides a new and interesting perspective on these authors and these issues that animate their writings. I discuss the works of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Ellison, and Jonathan Lethem. I argue that the clearest intersection between these ideas is in the modern carceral state, illustrated by debates on gun control, environmental disasters, and contemporary race politics. In particular, I emphasize the consequences of solitude at the level of narrative, and the ways these authors reject traditional narrative schema as a means of resistance.

In October 2017, a series of unexpectedly huge wildfires razed large swathes of the Californian landscape. In the first ten days of October 2017, 12 separate fires caught, destroying around 3500 structures, killing more than 40 people, and forcing over 20,000 evacuations (“California’s Wildfires”). Wildfires are an annual, expected, predictable event for parts of the United States, but 2017’s fires provided a stark reminder that whilst our capacity to predict natural disasters may have improved, our *response* to them remains firmly locked in the past (as does our willingness to do anything about the causes of these fires). 200 female prisoners, interred across California, fought these fires on the frontlines for \$1 a day, or \$500 a year, with bonuses. They are part of a larger force of carceral labourers: there are 3800 prisoners serving in California’s firefighting service, around 13% of the entire force. This fact, one magazine praises, ‘saves’ taxpayers “\$124 million per year” (“Incarcerated Women”). In November 2018, another series of destructive wildfires ravaged California’s forests and cities. These have killed upwards of 60 people and destroyed tens of thousands of buildings. A few months earlier, at the peak of wildfire season, the California Corrections

corporate Twitter account gleefully and without irony reported that, “Today, more than 2,000 volunteer inmate firefighters, *including 58 youth offenders*, are battling wildfire flames throughout CA” (“@CACorrections”; my emphasis). Last year it was women; this year it’s children.

This kind of reportage is all too common: working conditions for these prisoners are troubling, but inmates join “voluntarily.” In California, black people are 5% of the demographic, but represent 30% of the prison population. As Michelle Alexander says, “More African Americans are under correctional control today—in prison or in jail, on probation or parole, than were enslaved in 1850” (151). In 2006, *one in every fourteen black men* were in prison (102). 60% of black men who drop out of high-school will go to jail (Coates 21-22). When the anti-police brutality protests scorched the NFL, led by Colin Kaepernick, the owner of the Texan NFL team revealed something absolutely telling about the legacy of incarceration and Jim Crow: “96% of Americans are for [these] guys standing... *We can’t have the inmates running the prison*” (Stites “Texans’ Bob McNair”). Whichever way the fire spreads, what remains true is that people of colour are disproportionately overrepresented in the carceral state, and we, as of yet, are unwilling to address what Alexander discusses as the reality of the modern Jim Crow: “What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it” (9). In this context, ideas of volunteerism are incorrect and offensive.

It is true that prison firefighters sign up voluntarily, but it is also true that if they wish to survive, they have no choice: money has to be earned to live once someone is freed, as most prisons pay only a nominal bus fee for exiting prisoners.¹ It is this *illusion* of choice

¹ CNN reports on a man wrongfully convicted to multiple life sentences in prison. Freed 31 years into his 115-year term, the man was given \$75 (Andone “Man gets \$75”).

that has driven narratives of imprisonment and the ways we attempt to think about the military-prison-industrial complex that has come to dominate American domestic and foreign policy.² The illusion of choice is an illusion of agency, giving prisoners the sense that they are saving *against a future date* which will one day be realized, a day of emancipation from the concrete solitude of the prison walls. Leaving aside the fact that in many American states, the concept of parole exists but is almost never granted, these indentured labourers “earning” \$1 a day for their “volunteer” work exist in a political space that is poorly defined but deeply embedded in the discourses of race relations in the United States.³ Our understanding of solitude must acknowledge these complicated networks in order to best articulate clear resistance strategies *and* advocate for a more humane approach to imprisonment.

That we are so receptive to uncritical words like “voluntary” is indicative of the way in which the logic of the prison system, illustrated by this story above, provides an entry into a discussion of solitude. First, imprisonment creates a suffocating, shame-filled silence that extends to people and events outside of prison; second, this silent shame becomes an operating principle of how prisons are designed and run.

Step one requires the creation of a shame-filled silence which has two consequences: it limits our ability to properly criticize or understand prison conditions, and it is damaging to prisoners or ex-prisoners. As Alexander says:

² Even the name is a euphemism: there’s absolutely nothing technically complex about the process: wars abroad, wars at home: privatized war.

³ See Coates’s discussion of Odell Newton, for example, or the troubling relationship between the Maryland Parole Commission and then-governor Martin O’Malley (8 *years* 220–224).

Imprisonment is so shameful that many people avoid talking about it, even within their own families ... [but] the harm done by this social silence is more than interpersonal. The silence results in a repression of public thought, a collective denial of lived experience. (139; 142)

Alexander gestures at a figural silence that structures the way we imagine imprisonment, and how prisoners might try to experience it themselves. Such a logic extends far back, for example in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* with its ambiguous "A": this A structures a silence, it is spoken *about* but never addressed, spoken *around* but never for. The A's essential force is the collective denial of lived experience. Guilt is made visible, silence tangible. We can see this in both Alexander's disembodied silence, and the everyday experience of a convicted person applying for a job.⁴

Extending and concentrating the logic of silence and shame, Thomas Dumm and Caleb Smith, in their books on American prisons, argue that modern prisons were designed around the idea of solitary confinement. Craig Haney's *Reforming Punishment* offers a readable overview of the development of American prison systems from the 19th to 20th Centuries and concludes along similar lines: "prison is a supremely individualistic response to the social problem of crime" (6). Solitary confinement is the simplest physical manifestation of that ideology. Whether Puritan or Quaker, the "removal to prison was to privatize punishment, to make it intimate and anonymous" (*Democracy* 80). American prisons were premised on the individualized, privatized, anonymized foundations of solitary confinement. The collective shame surrounding imprisonment stems from this specific foundation, and this shame produces a visible, tangible silence. Solitude is no longer

⁴ Ex-felons represent up to 7.4% of America's eligible, adult workforce, or about one in fifteen: <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2011/dec/15/study-shows-ex-offenders-have-greatly-reduced-employment-rates/>.

romantic or transcendental, but punitive. Solitude has not been coopted or appropriated, but its underlying logics have been poisoned. If the logics of solitude are at use in solitary confinement, in the solitary cells that are “the concrete sign of civil death” (Smith 83), and Alexander is right that the silent-shame extends far beyond the prison walls, this civil death is enacted and re-enacted in the everyday life of the imprisoned or released. This prolongation of the prison state suspends normal rules of civic engagement and creates “so much dependency on external limits and constraints that internal controls may atrophy or [for young people] fail to develop at all” (Haney 177). Receptivity towards uncritical ideological language therefore runs the risk of replicating the logics of imprisonment that we want to critique.⁵

This thesis will discuss silence, gentrification, and trauma as a way to think through this complicated network and develop a more critical understanding of how solitude can help us imagine prison.⁶ It is my contention that in examining solitude, we can better understand prison.⁷ As our understanding of solitude developed, so did the prison system. It is not my contention that these two were symbiotic, or causative, but that solitude replicates a number of the logics of imprisonment beyond the more obvious solitary confinement. I want to ask: is this replication a problem? Or, is it revealing? What does it tell us?

⁵ I expand these thoughts further in sections on racecraft, both in the introduction and throughout. Suffice it to say here that what is imperative is to be sceptical of what the Fields would call “invisible ontologies”: that is, embodied ideologies that *seem commonsensical* but that disguise an underlying truth.

⁶ Smith remarks that the “penitentiary [meant] to Thoreau and Emerson a kind of metonym for broader social structures” (154).

⁷ When I talk about prison, I am referring specifically to incarceration in the United States, unless otherwise specified.

In this thesis, I will first discuss the works Henry David Thoreau, especially *Walden*, his journal, and some of his shorter essays. In chapter one, I examine how Thoreau defined society as a split between social and the individual, emphasizing what I call “self-labour.” I also look at how Thoreau used silence, and laid the foundation for his critical examination of solitude as a kind of labour. Finally, I introduce an idea very important to this thesis: the *threshold*. The threshold is an imaginative space, found in metaphors of day and night, or the river and bank. Thresholds manifest physically and metaphorically, but they always act as sites of possible resistance. I borrow Laura Dassow Walls’s idea of the commons, and cite Kate Marshall’s *Corridor* extensively to articulate how Thoreau uses thresholds to disrupt societal discourses that aim for clear boundaries or smooth limits. In chapter two, I argue that creating a life of *practiced solitude* was Thoreau’s most important philosophical contribution, and that it was imperative he never define either his target or the scope of his inquiry. In chapter three, I look at *Invisible Man*, examining how Ellison situates his anonymous narrator against the alienating space of the white city. I show how Ellison uses the refrain of “dispossession” to navigate a re-energized black politics aimed at resisting or dismantling vestigial, racist structures of power and their manifestations at the level of narrative. Dispossession for Ellison functions as both resistance strategy and traumatic wound, in turn producing a politics of solitude divorced from the naturalistic, organic world of Thoreau. In chapter four, I read Jonathan Lethem’s *Fortress of Solitude* as a novel of gentrification, plagiarism, and invisibility, arguing that his use of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* further complicates ideas of narratorial ownership and narrative stability. I claim that gentrification can be seen as an example *par excellence* of how threshold space can be coopted into power structures that evacuate any notion of authenticity or social integrity, and

demonstrate how Lethem uses plagiarism as a means of articulating this complexity. In chapter five, I turn more broadly to Lethem's work to conclude my analysis with a discussion of trauma, amnesia, and what I call de/solitude. I find that Lethem uses forms of amnesiac writing, an ironically self-aware form of plagiarism, to articulate modern solitariness. In each of these chapters, I find echoes of solitude, but I do not argue that these issues are all simple synecdoche for what is really solitude. Solitude is not a puppet-master; solitude enables us to see and create new connections between these politically diverse ideas. This project contributes to the nascent but rapidly burgeoning field of solitude studies.

These authors are not traditionally viewed as similar. One is a transcendentalist from the 19th Century, a founding thinker in America's individualist movement. Another is a black writer from the 20th Century. The other is a still-living middle-aged Jewish man living in Brooklyn, famous mostly in the 21st Century. These diverse authors have diverse ideas, but what persists is an interrogation of solitude.

The groundwork for this thesis has been laid by scholars such as Philip Koch, Ben Mijuskovic, Caleb Smith, Rebecka Fisher, Toni Morrison, Thomas Dumm, Rob Nixon, Michelle Alexander, bell hooks, Ta-Nahesi Coates, Laura Dassow Walls, Craig Haney, and Jeanne Theoharis, but few of them focus on solitude. Koch and Mijuskovic have books on solitude, but they disagree entirely on what solitude is. Smith, Dumm, and Alexander have all written extensively on prison conditions. Smith argues, usefully, that the prison became a site of solitude, a space of social death. Dumm contends that prisons were foundational for the development of democracy. Alexander teaches us that prison leaks into the everydayness of life. Fisher, Morrison, and Theoharis all articulate a vision of civil rights movements

bracketed by oppressive structures of white dominance. Because there are so few specific studies of solitude, I borrow heavily from these literary and sociological analyses, trying to demonstrate a solitary *praxis* rather than relying on definitions or specific articulations of “what solitude is.” This, I argue, is more in keeping with Thoreau’s original aim. In their own ways, these critics all represent counter-narratives to dominant modes of understanding: whether that’s about rehabilitation, the function of weaponized racist ideology, the prolongation of violence, or simply being alone.

It is possible that this argument appears historically questionable: why these authors, why these periods? Here, I am indebted to Ta-Nehisi Coates’s framework of what he calls “the Dream.” The American Dream is a lie, Coates argues, built on the backs of the “black people left to the street” (26). It’s a dream founded on generalizations (36), a dream defined by a list of *nots*: “the nigger, the fag, the bitch illuminate the border, illuminate what we ostensibly are not, illuminate the Dream of being white, of being a man” (42). Quite simply, the American Dream is an invention of whiteness. The Dream is both a product of racism and its continuation. The binary between black and white, however illusory it can be demonstrated to be, has persisted for hundreds of years. While I don’t claim that solitude carries this totemic importance to lived experience, Coates’s historically sporadic but non-developmental argument offers a guide for arguments that admit to shifting contexts but do not rely on historical fidelity; in other words, the debate around presentism. This debate—that texts must be read only in their specific contexts—informs much of my discussion; for now, suffice it to say that I agree with Jeffrey Insko, who calls such readings “orthodoxies” and demonstrates the way that presentist views rely on “a liberal-progressive *view* of history that is oriented toward the future” (190; my emphasis). It is *the very nature of this view* we

must question. So I am aligned with Coates: historical context is important, often vital, but it is not the only context that bears examining when we look at an event.

This discussion does not attempt to offer solutions to the catastrophic racism plaguing America; it is an argument illustrated by racial politics in America. The wildfires were devastating, to both the environment and people's homes and businesses; they were devastating, too, to the volunteer firefighters, and this devastation is entirely manmade. But this disaster should not be depoliticized or seen as a metaphor; the tendency to reduce catastrophe to metonymy should be avoided at all costs; the intellectually corrupt attempts to foreclose discussions of disaster as "politicizing tragedy" should be ignored.⁸ These poetics and dissembling are one of the subjects of chapter three. Nonetheless, in looking at their devastation we must conclude that the fires illustrate a larger problem facing American radical politics. There are logics in solitude that can help us understand silence, trauma, gentrification, and the operation of the mechanical prison state. The punishment of solitary confinement is in the exposition and anonymization of the crime and of the shame; guilt is doubled, like Hester's "A," and inscribed as a kind of radically silent interiorization, a deep wound. As Howard Zinn says in his influential *A People's History of the United States*, "The prison in the United States had long been an extreme reflection of the American system itself" (557). Such a reflection gives new views to old questions.

Before beginning in earnest, then, it is valuable to spend some time looking at some key contexts that will be explored in this thesis. This is not merely to provide a taxonomy—useful as that is—but to offer a summary of how we can begin to conceive of these seemingly disparate ideas as networked. These contexts will be explored throughout the

⁸ This is the thesis of Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007).

thesis, so I offer here a brief walkthrough of the salient points, critical scholars, and broader trends. I begin with the three authors, then move on to the threshold, racecraft, prisonization, gentrification and plagiarism, amnesia, and solitude. The final significant concepts of this thesis—silence and trauma—are discussed throughout. I also introduce, as an additional context, a brief discussion of the ways solitude has been so far defined.

Thoreau

In chapters one and two, I will discuss Henry David Thoreau.

Thoreau (1817-1862) was a leading transcendentalist, whose philosophy would come close to modern libertarianism were it not for the reverence he bestows upon nature. The majority of Thoreau's work—some twenty long volumes—is dedicated to the finding of true communication—correspondence—between the thing in nature, and the word on the page. This, in turn, is an attempt to find the purest reality of a natural object itself. This mode of being was an explicit rejoinder to capitalist excess and forced labour. Thoreau's major political works, "Life Without Principle," "Slavery in Massachusetts," and "Civil Disobedience" cover this ground. His naturalism can be found in *Walden*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Walking*, "Cape Cod," and "The Allegash and East Branch." It is a mistake, however, to draw this kind of taxonomy, as if politics and nature were superable. For Thoreau, a decent politics was predicated, acted on, and drawn from our imaginative engagement with the natural world.

The first important feature of Thoreau's writing is that it represents a complex mediation on three interrelated topics: solitude, silence, and society or nature. He says it best: "As the truest society approaches always nearer to solitude, so the most excellent speech finally falls into Silence" (*Merrimack* 454). This is a typical Thoreauvian thought: time

is meditative, with unclear agency; it is opaque whether society approaches truth through its proximity to solitude, or if solitude is a necessary trajectory of a society. We have also the ambiguous “So,” like a candle’s “short-lived blaze” matched against the “faint but satisfying light of the stars” (348). The “So”: in consequence of the approach, or analogous to? Is the excellent speech determined by society’s approach to solitude, or vice-versa—is solitude determined by the silencing of excellent speech? What determines, here, “truth”? The truth of poetry—independence of experience? (364). The truth of friendship—to stand in full relation to another? (394). Or is it the “one historic truth”—the “*actual glory of the universe*”? (380). Could it be the truth of relation—to be a “fact in a fiction”? (395). And more, what of society? Books are a society we keep (364), humanity defines society, (401-402), and fate itself is “social” (390). Meanwhile, society is “machinery” (“Civil” 21), too cheap (*Walden* 136), and, famously, created by three people or more (140). There are two plausible readings: (1) these concepts are imaginative states that exist in the structure of the imagination itself; or (2), approaching these concepts is to fall victim the whims of scientific fashion (450). As is so common with Thoreau, we should likely favour the subjective or imaginative reading. What *is* clear is that society, solitude, and silence were animating ideas for him.

The second important aspect of Thoreau’s philosophy is in its context. For Thoreau, life is conceived through metaphors of nature: periods of intense thought and imaginative labour compare to day and night. The categorical imperative of Thoreau’s world is to guarantee that “[t]he whole of the day should not be daytime; there should be one hour, if not more, which the day did not bring forth” (*Merrimack* 365). The invented hour is both real and not, artificial and organic; this hour exists to bring a person closer to nature. This hour is meditative, rather than achieved through writing or observation. This hour is a response

to Thoreau's world: the Mexican annexation, slavery, industrialization, the railways, labour politics. This era of American history was one of transience. The transcendentalists conceived of a world on the permanent cusp of *something else*. Such a state was axiomatic to the development of transcendental poetics and a communion with nature. If the country was in suspension, writing must reflect, actualize, and hypothesize this suspense.

To read a clean Thoreauvian sentence is to feel suspended: The poet "would strive in vain to modulate the remote and transient music which he sometimes hears, since his song is a vital function like breathing, and an *integral result like weight*" (361; my emphasis). The poetics of Thoreau unfolds with unexpected comparisons and organic metaphors. For contemporaneous writers like Hawthorne, such ideas are mapped onto space itself; for instance, the uncolonized dark forest of *The Scarlet Letter*. This space is off the narrative map but still germane to the plot; it is a place that has no real structural integrity but has consequences for the actors who wander through it. But for Thoreau, to use the language of colonization to translate nature into a referential system rather than one "so universally true and independent of experience" that it requires nothing at all to inform its truth (364), is both false and dishonest. Honesty in experience draws us the same way as it does in friendship: "Serpents alone conquer by the steadiness of their gaze. My friend looks me in the face and sees me, that is all" (349). Thoreau himself would describe this moment with requisite ambivalence: "I live in a sort of border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only" (*Walking* 659).

All of this does nothing to diminish the importance Thoreau placed on direct action. Thoreau was a proponent of acting upon his beliefs, but those beliefs had to first be clarified, solidified, and properly explained. Thought *must* precede action, and so I dedicate

much of my early chapters to strict, close-reading of Thoreau's texts. This is, in essence, what I term 'self-labour', a concept of vital importance in Thoreau's project to reclaim nature from the machinification of thought that industrialization created.

Using Laura Wall's wonderful biography and Thoreau's own journal, I argue that solitude is practiced through these contexts. These contexts I name the *threshold*.

Ellison

In chapter three, I will examine Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Ellison (1913-1994) was a writer for whom modernism represented a grave crisis in black agency: in a post-slave context, *IM* (1952) challenges historical assumptions on the progressive nature of time, opting instead for a sceptical view of history as neutral ground upon which ideology is projected. Ellison's anonymous protagonist dismisses a linear view of history, embracing a complex narrative that spans an unspecified amount of time. *IM* is a consciously class-aware novel which ultimately seeks to disrupt the totalizing force of history. This historical scepticism enables Ellison to dissent from enclosed white ur-narratives that would define his task as the *furtherance* or *continuance* of some larger-scale, progressive, identarian politics. Similar projects are undertaken by writers like Toni Morrison or Ta-Nehisi Coates, through ideas like "re-memory" from *Beloved* or Coates's brutal critique of "the entire narrative" of America, its "Dream" (64).

IM tells its story in three parts. Although the novel's prologue takes place in what we assume is the present, the narrative properly begins in section one, in/around the narrator's childhood. We follow him as he navigates the complex politics of growing up black in the American South: through segregation, college, and his escape to New York. In part two, we

witness the narrator's futile search for work, and his adoption into the Brotherhood, a proto-union of black and white class activists. Part three writes back against parts one and two: the narrator throws off the yoke of black guilt, and rejects the Brotherhood's nominally 'scientific method' as emotionally sterile, stunted, and privileged.

Ellison's novel is relevant to this thesis for a few reasons, but I want to briefly mention one possible misinterpretation. *IM* does not represent a *bridging* narrative. It is not meant to show a strict chronological progression from Thoreau, leading us toward Lethem. Ellison is not an interim figure. While it is useful that he occupies a historical position between Thoreau and Lethem, this is not where *IM*'s importance comes from. As Ellison's novel demonstrates, there is nothing progressive about history *per se*. Instead, Ellison's narrative comes at an interesting moment for black politics and, as such, can teach us a lot about how the marginalized encounter solitude. The development of the prison was not linear: from Puritanism to Quakerism to the Enlightenment to the prison-industrial complex to Supermax Prisons is not a straight line. It is recursive, with ideologies and attitudes towards incarceration shifting and falling away as rehabilitation is superseded by openly racist policies of internment.⁹ Any analysis of these movements that is itself linear fails at the outset.

Additionally, Ellison's novel explores the intersection between solitude, silence, and society, further expanding on the discussion from the chapters on Thoreau. As the narrator tells us, "Invisibility gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead" (9). Ellison deploys

⁹ See, for example, Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power* or Craig Haney's *Reforming Punishment*.

metaphors of the threshold, demonstrating how modernist narrative practices affective metaphors of liminality and displacement. Ellison is able to demonstrate how threshold spaces are not neutral sites, but are concrete manifestations of the problems he identifies with history.

In my discussion of Ellison, I will focus on what he calls “dispossession.” This concept will be read against the framework of threshold solitude established by Thoreau. “Dis-possession is the word!” the narrator tells us (284), and we are wise to pay attention. I rely heavily on Coates’s idea of the disembodied to further articulate what Ellison means by dispossession. If the transcendentalists were articulating a vision of emancipatory solitude forged in the immanence of man and nature, Ellison reminds us that such access is neither free nor open. As I move into chapters four and five, I will expand on this discussion by explaining how Lethem uses gentrification to metaphorize solitude. Thus, while Ellison is not a chronological bridge, *IM* does work as a conceptual link between Thoreau and Lethem.

Lethem

In chapters four and five, I will turn to Jonathan Lethem.

Lethem (1964—) is a prolific writer: 11 novels, 5 short story and essay collections, 5 novellas, and 5 collections as an editor.¹⁰ He’s been active since the mid 1990s, and while many of his novels have met with wide critical acclaim, he remains under-studied. There are two books devoted to his work, but his name is mostly encountered alongside other American authors in footnotes and shorter articles. Lethem writes novels that are primarily concerned with three things: youth and/or coming of age; language; and loss/trauma. All of

¹⁰ Lethem’s newest novel, *The Feral Detective*, was released after this thesis was submitted.

Lethem's novels feature some kind of originary absence or wound that is worked through by an array of oddballs. Lethem himself describes this as a product of his mother's sudden death from aggressive brain cancer: "My books all have this giant, howling missing centre — language has disappeared, or someone has vanished, or memory has gone" ("Brooklyn Dodger"). Whereas his earlier works tend to wrestle with this loss, his later novels respond to the disaster of 9/11. Either way, they are novels about trauma. Most of his work is influenced by music and baseball; he sits alongside Don DeLillo and, to a lesser extent, Thomas Pynchon.

Almost all of Lethem's work is relevant to this thesis. In chapter four I will focus on *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003). In chapter five, I will discuss Lethem's other major novels: *Amnesia Moon* (1995), *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), and *Chronic City* (2009). I also discuss his smaller texts, such as *Gun, With Occasional Music* (1994), and *You don't love me yet* (2007), alongside his short stories. Like the book-length studies by James Peacock and Matthew Luter, I find that it is difficult to write about Lethem without ranging far and wide through his bibliography. I borrow their conceptual frameworks, discussing a wide variety of Lethem's fiction and non-fiction.

Fortress, the subject of chapter four, is a novel about suburban alienation, inner-city racial politics, noise/silence, and solitude; these are metaphorized through a lengthy discussion of gentrification. *Fortress* is a bildungsroman about two boys—Dylan and Mingus, one white, one black—who grow up on Dean Street, Brooklyn. (This is where Lethem was raised.) Dylan's mother leaves early in the narrative, and his father is a recluse, remaining holed up in their attic working on a painted, miniature film; the frames will become a film. Mingus then moves into the neighbourhood with his soul/R&B-legend father. Dylan and

Mingus discover a ring owned by a homeless man that grants the power of invisibility and flight. Remarkable as this is, it remains an almost buried subplot, and has led to many criticisms of the novel as gimmicky or glib. As I will argue, *Fortress* continues many of the themes Ellison brought into the bright, brutal neon light.

As with Ellison, the chapters on Lethem don't represent a historical continuation or evolution. Instead, I discuss the ways Lethem responds to the vernaculars of solitude developed in chapters 1-3. The two concepts I use are gentrification, inspired by Matt Godbey's fantastic article in *Arizona Quarterly*, and amnesia, borrowed from James Peacock. Gentrification relies on ideological or historical amnesia in its quest for authenticity; *Fortress* relies on narratives of displacement. Neither represents an "end-point" to my discussion of solitude: solitude does not become dispossession, in turn gentrification, in turn amnesia. Rather, I discuss gentrification as an act of amnesia, and amnesiac writing as a means of articulating solitude. From this discussion, I discover a version of solitude formed through amnesiac trauma: de/solitude, a practice of solitude that emphasizes immediacy and waiting as traumatic modes of apprehension.

Lethem's writing gives a vital third-perspective on the questions raised in chapters one to three. Chapters one and two discuss a very specific white solitude. Chapter three offers a black perspective on what is nominally the same (solitude). Lethem's work, however, particularly in *Fortress*, offers a white perspective (Lethem's) on white encounters (Dylan) with black solitude (Mingus). These chapters tell us little about the black experience of contemporary solitude, but a lot about white *perspectives on black solitude*. The complicated network of voices in Lethem's worlds complement the discussion of prison systems and

gentrification by illustrating how outsider perspectives tend to romanticize, euthanize, or totally misunderstand indigenous or local issues.

Threshold

“Thresholds are essentially places of change—from one habitat to another, from safety to danger, or out of one element and into another” (Kalman and Holdgate para. 2). The threshold is a major part of Thoreau’s philosophy. It began when he took a trip through Maine and happened upon a shipwreck. Standing on the shore of Cape Cod, looking at the wreck of the *St. John*, Thoreau is overwhelmed by the vague notion that while he stands on the shore, looking out across the wreckage and the sea, that his thinking follows a parallel course. This is what Kalman and Holdgate call the “existential threshold of the beach,” where “there is no guarantee of safety—but there is rhapsodic grandeur” (para. 12). What Thoreau encounters in this brief moment is two formative ideas: first, that the natural world often projects, mirrors, or extends ways of thinking; second, that there is something significant in spaces and places and moments that exist ‘between’, at the edge, liminally, not this and not that. In Joan Wry’s words, threshold thinking “is an aesthetic perspective [...] that calls attention to perceived margins and borderlines as points of active transition and transformation, but also focuses specifically on the ‘limen,’ or spaces between, as areas in which artistic processes and related spiritual transformations are seen to be generated” (2). The crucial term here for my study is “perceived”: these margins and borderlines do not have to exist, but, following the transcendentalist tradition, must be perceived to exist.

I therefore take Thoreau’s threshold poetics and politics and extend them via Kate Marshall’s New Historicist *Corridor*. Marshall meditates on modern, concrete, built spaces in much the same way as Thoreau thinks of natural, organic spaces, but she argues that these

“outer spaces and access points” where the liminal occurs are constituted by “the power (and power-holder), and this process is attached to the minutiae of daily life” (162). That is to say, an encounter with a threshold space, natural or otherwise, is also an encounter with a set of power-relations which determine both who has access to the space and what they can take from it. These spiritual transformations augured by threshold spaces, then, are affected by a complex set of power-relations. I am thus able to link Thoreau’s transcendentalist threshold with Ellison’s visceral, oppressive thresholds.

I examine the extent to which solitude occupies a threshold position, balanced precisely between a moment of transformation and a moment of return. Solitude’s threshold position, I argue, exists both in space *and* time. Thus it is that I focus on the very granular way Thoreau discusses time, texture, and space, in remarks such as “all the past is here present to be tried; let it approve itself if it can” (J 36). Solitude’s *thresholdness* is one of the reasons, I conclude, that it is proven so difficult to define.

Racecraft

A second important context for my study is what Barbara and Karen Fields, in their book *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (2014), call “racecraft.” The Fields use witchcraft as an analogy to describe how questions around racialized peoples are formed in three stages. First, they say, witchcraft is “imagined, acted upon, and re-imagined” (14). This imaginative action means that “witchcraft has no moving parts of its own, and needs none. It acquires perfectly adequate moving parts when a person acts upon the reality of the imagined thing: the real action creates evidence for the imagined thing” (15). An example is the modern rebuttal to an increasingly large surveillance state: if you have nothing to hide,

you have nothing to fear. Of course, any action you *do* take will look as though you have something to hide. Running from an accusation of witchcraft simply confirmed that you were, in fact, a witch.

These imaginative actions cannot operate alone. They also require “sumptuary codes” which “produce a regular supply of circumstantial evidence about what the world is made of and who belongs where within it” (29). Sumptuary relates quite literally to *consumption*, because the Fields’s model identifies modern capitalist movements as the main cause of these issues. Imaginative beliefs, such as “She’s a witch,” are reinforced by sumptuary codes, “Look at her buying a broom,” to become operative ideologies. These ideologies take “on the appearance of uncontroversial everyday reality—universally understood rituals regarding deference and consumption, self-confirming enactment in practical activities of all kinds, and continuously renewed barriers against the everyday flow of refuting evidence” (90). Ideology masquerades as everyday reality, and in doing so becomes irrefutable. Its very nature makes it impossible to refute, because each refutation proves its existence again. Dunking, or the practice of tossing suspected-witches into water to see if they floated or sunk, resulted in accidental drownings often enough that nowadays we imagine there was a plague of drownings of near enough every woman.¹¹ There is no way to refute a charge of witchcraft in this view because the only way to be free of suspicion is to be murdered.

Thirdly, then, these ideologies become *invisible ontologies*: “they are held up and helped along by props, without which they are unavailable to sense; but they are not creatures of those props and, therefore, not dependent on any particular one” (144). In other words, invisible ontologies are a form of ideology that are the product of certain triggers and

¹¹ Enough women *were* killed this way—one was *quite* enough—but the figures are far smaller than national mythos assumes.

signifiers. However, because these ideologies cannot be confined to any one signifier, they are irreducible. Additionally, these invisibilities operate on the ontological level—that is, they are embodied by persons. It is a question of bodies: how do bodies become entwined with sumptuary codes of ideological practice that form new, protean invisibilized modes of being?

In discussing racecraft, Ta-Nahesi Coates's definition of the American Dream is also useful; Coates says that the dream is predicated on an illusory binary (white/black), that race is imagined, and that "race is the child of racism, not the father" (9). For Coates, blackness is a visceral experience, so the Dream is a double-bind: it attempts to erase difference, but in doing so it also erases the everyday reality of being black in America. This "being black" is itself a euphemism that contributes to the Dream. He says that the mistake is to "accept the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and [thus] the invention of racecraft" (40). So for Coates, constituent of the Dream is a white amnesia, a habit of forgetting that extends and props up the dream (91). This amnesia becomes the central discussion point of chapter five.

It is therefore important to admit, openly, at the outset, that I am contributing to the prolongation and continuation of the Dream. Racecraft inheres in my analysis; I address the weakness of this model of analysis in the conclusion, with reference to Toni Morrison and bell hooks, particularly. Katerina Delivsky's phrase, "positional superiority" (19) is a useful thing to remember when we discuss race as that "absent presence, operating 'invisibly' beneath 'white' discourse" (112). I thus use racecraft not only as an implicit context for my discussion of prison, but as self-criticism.

Prisonization

Craig Haney's idea of "prisonization," is defined as the way people adapt to mores, customs, and lifestyles of incarceration (174-175). Important in and of itself, the study of prisoners-in-prison is less relevant to this study than what Haney identifies as a possible consequence of long-term incarceration: "In extreme cases of prisonization, the symbolic meaning that can be inferred from this externally imposed substandard treatment and these degraded conditions is internalized" (177). In other words, if a person fully adapts to the inherent violence of imprisonment, they are at risk of internalizing the premise *and* mentality of the carceral state. If a prisoner accepts that prison is predicated on violence—as Haney suggests (*xiii*, 3, 6, 11, 174)—they also accept the idea that they *deserve* this kind of life (178). In contexts where people come into prison "already having begun to think of themselves as marginal," prison compounds, magnifies, and exacerbates this feeling (178). Marginalized peoples undergo further marginalization. Eventually, ideas of civil reintegration become meaningless. Additionally, the sumptuary codes of prison—the "elaborate informal rules that are part of the unwritten, but essential, culture and code that prevail inside prison"—become so internalized that a prisoner's entire self-conception changes (178). Haney's text affords a useful sociological counterpoint to Alexander's psychological study of imprisonment and its effects.

Prisonization has direct consequences, chief among them: "people who enter hostile prison environments often are alienated by them, made to feel even more marginalized and different" (13). This creates a sense of "learned helplessness" (14). Learned helplessness results from living "in an environment where few actions reliably reduce pain or bring

pleasure” (14). The creation or re-creation of a ‘new’ identity, state-imposed and helpless, entails a “deep sense of damage, deviance, and even moral failure” (178). Essentially, the violent prison system, the “inherent violence of prison itself” (3), creates this prisonization effect/affect, where external identities are internalized, resulting in an idea of learned helplessness wherein prisoners feel wholly unable to act on their life in a way that can actually affect change.

Read alongside critiques from Michelle Alexander, Ta-Nehisi Coates, or Caleb Smith, the essential nature of prisonization seems to occur outside of prison walls: in the “collective denial of lived experience” (Alexander 142), the fact that “for African Americans, unfreedom is the historical norm” (Coates *8 years* 224), and that prison becomes a “theatre for the performance of its society’s founding political myths” (Smith 7). Both Smith and Coates share a similar concern: that the American Dream (or myth) is founded on the bodies of the enslaved, and that to perpetuate the Dream is to hold up a binary Othering (black/white, free/unfree) that enables society to continue functioning. And in this setting, Haney’s idea of learned helplessness and prisonization enables imprisonment to continue to exist even after a prisoner is freed.

In this study, it is important to view the ways prison has consequences even outside formal imprisonment: for characters like Mingus Sr. or Jr., for the invisible man, and—more importantly—for the very real prisoners discussed in this thesis, solitude is mediated, created, and enacted through a vernacular of prisonhood that permeates even the most informal culture. This idea should inform a study of solitude that uses prison as its main context. Haney’s phrase, “constant subordination” (179), should be remembered at all times when discussing the consequences and impact of imprisonment.

Gentrification & Plagiarism

This project relies on Matt Godbey's definition of gentrification. Godbey shows that gentrification occurs in subtle ways, over time, through a series of predetermined measures: the slow movement of the middle-classes away from centres of capital leads to "anomie" (138). Formerly authentic spaces that grew out of specific communities and local traditions are coopted by new residents who aren't "defined by [these] traditional associations" (138). New residents express their "authentic identity through the consumption of lifestyles associated with a geographic locale that has been symbolically configured as authentic" (136). In other words, new residents incorporate symbolic authenticity into their own brand of authenticity. This, in turn, "converts these sits into powerful symbols of authenticity upon which affluent whites trade for their own identarian concerns" (134). Authenticity is thus fractured, broken, and then reformed into a nominally authentic, affluent, white, suburban, middle-class ideology. Gentrification, in other words, uses the exact same logics as racecraft: authenticity, it is imagined, doesn't require any of its own moving parts, but can be created *sui generis* by anyone, as long as they're in the right place. New buildings and projects furnish the sumptuary, circumstantial evidence that authenticity still exists. Eventually, new, palimpsestic neighbourhoods are replete with enough circumstantial authenticity that they no longer require any visible ideological content. Gentrification is an invisible ontology involved in the erasure of authenticity at the local level.

My interest in gentrification is related to Lethem's thinking on plagiarism. Lethem likes plagiarism: his most famous essay uses only other people's words, unattributed. But he

is also poignantly aware of what Godbey calls gentrification's "rootlessness" (140). And rootlessness is the natural consequence of plagiarism, where symbolic authenticity is superseded by identarian authenticity. As Lethem says, "the citations that go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*; they are quotations without inverted commas. The kernel, the soul [...] the substance, the bulk, the actual and valuable material of all human utterances—is plagiarism" (*Ecstasy* 126). Lethem therefore strikes a delicate and often fraught balance between concerns about gentrification and a wholesale embrace of plagiarism. I examine the ways we can see plagiarism as a literary equivalent of gentrification.

I argue that this complex logic, in which plagiarism is valorized but gentrification is declaimed, demonstrates how problematic threshold space can become. Examining the relationship between gentrification, plagiarism, and threshold space provides insight into how Lethem's characters view their difficult relationships with authenticity. In much the same way as Ellison problematizes threshold space through the lens of dispossession, Lethem reorients our understanding of spaces in which solitude is encountered through long meditations on authenticity, borrowing, and identity.

Amnesia

Using James Peacock's *Jonathan Lethem*, I examine three kinds of amnesiac writing *as a response to solitude's threshold position*. Peacock identifies three versions of amnesiac writing. First, "wilful forgetting," (17) in which the person actively seeks to erase or elide their memory of someone or something. Second, "a kind of immobility" (37). This version of amnesia is not intended, but it obliterates "connections between past and present" and thus

precludes “the possibility of movement or change in the future” (37). Third, a version of amnesia that is predicated on writing as “both an attempt to recognize alterity and [as] a reaffirmation and fetishization of the novelist’s rhetorical power” (10).

These versions of amnesia are found throughout Thoreau, Ellison, and Lethem. For Thoreau, they are often conscious, because what we remember today might be usefully different to what we experienced yesterday (§ 336; 353; 354). For Ellison, they are often the result of context and a person’s subjective history (*IM* 397). And for Lethem, amnesiac writing is a function of gentrification and its literary equivalent, plagiarism.

Amnesiac writing becomes a way of writing through solitude’s threshold position, because it attends most sympathetically to the notion that thoughts do not require fixity, and that, frequently, moments of change rely on flux, even while they create more. In chapters four and five, I explore this idea through an examination of Lethem’s phrase “nostalgia vu,” which he uses to mean ‘things you remember to have experienced before, but haven’t.’

Solitude

There are competing ideas of solitude worth mentioning here.

Ben Mijuskovic, in his books *Contingent Immaterialism* and *Loneliness in Philosophy*, argues that loneliness is made from and of “self-consciousness” (*Loneliness* 719). Loneliness is both “a meaning and a feeling” (765). In other words, consciousness comes from a ground of loneliness. Consciousness attempts to transcend this primary loneliness in a “groping transcendence beyond the reality of isolation [...] an outward reaching toward (momentary relatedness)” (3204). I don’t agree with the idea that loneliness is the default state of consciousness, because it requires a simplified notion of what constitutes loneliness reliant

on physical proximity or existential connectivity. It makes sense for Mijuskovic, however, because he elsewhere claims that “loneliness, solitude [and] isolation” are synonymous (*Contingent* 181). I reject this claim. As we will see in this thesis, especially in the works of Philip Koch and Henri Lefebvre, the notion that these terms are synonymous is bourgeois and unhelpful. For Lefebvre in particular, to ignore the class element of isolation, or more properly alienation, is to have missed the point entirely. Indeed, Mijuskovic’s solitude relies too heavily on a specific bourgeois notion of being alone. In Mijuskovic’s formulation, solitude, isolation, and loneliness all stem from an originary state of consciousness, and thus they are all the same. Clearly, however, many different things can come from the same place, and even if they function similarly, they are not necessarily identical. To envisage a blank-state, homogeneous consciousness that affects *all human beings* is a project far beyond the scope of this thesis. More importantly, we should examine whether the felt reality of these states is the same—it is the everyday experience of people living solitary, lonely, alienated lives that matter.

Philip Koch paints a remarkably similar portrait of what modern solitude may look like. In *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter*, Koch defines solitude as “simply an experiential world in which other people are absent” (15):

Solitude is a time in which experience is disengaged from other people. All of the other features of solitude that come intuitively to mind, the physical isolation, the reflective cast of the mind, the freedom, the silence, the distinctive feel of space and time—all of these flow from that core feature, the absence of others in one’s experiential world. (27)

Whereas Mijuskovic reduces solitude down to a primal psychological state, Koch boils down the affects to a “simple” statement: solitude is disengagement from people. Additionally, he claims that solitude is “simply” an experiential world. As we’ll see in this thesis, there is absolutely nothing simple about solitude. Nonetheless, Koch’s definition(s) are useful because they delimit some useful parameters for my analysis: physical or mental isolation, absence, loneliness, the effects of time, and the removal of signification.

Transcendentalism is perhaps the most important philosophical movement in our understanding of solitude. Emerson, Thoreau, and Dickinson wrote at length on solitude. Like both Mijuskovic and Koch, Thoreau and Emerson argue that solitude comes from a specific place: society. Where they disagree, however, is that solitude is causally related to how we *define society*. Different conceptualizations of society—that must be tied to specific natural contexts—undergird our understanding of solitude, not simply because it is the negation of society but because a taxonomy of psychosocial states, like loneliness and sociability, that reduces any one state to a fixed position risks the entire project of union with nature.

For example, Emerson says that “society exists by chemical affinity, and not otherwise” (480). Hence, he asks, “Is it society to sit in one of your chairs?” (481). For Emerson, “society and solitude are deceptive names. It is not the circumstance of seeing more or fewer people, but the readiness of sympathy, that imports” (481). Emerson considers society one’s ability to sympathize with an other, and that this does not require proximity, or even empathy. A person’s societalness functions as an extension of a person’s individualism, in allowing the other person full, uninhibited access to what Emerson calls “self-distribution” (480). This concept of self-distribution is the hinge around which society

swings. For Emerson, solitude has absolutely nothing to do with artificial society, nor physical aloneness or removal. Instead, contained in the idea of self-distribution is an essence of *possibility*. Such a possibility is indelibly marked by the quality of homefulness a person is able to experience; this, I assume, is why he opens the essay on self-distribution with a poem that concludes: “That each should in his house abide, / Therefore was the world so wide” (475).

Emerson’s couplet is a beautiful summary of his thinking on solitude. To abide is to accept, but also to be unable to tolerate, and to dwell. Because of this, is the world so wide. Emerson’s house, however, is not a structure inasmuch as a self, distributed organically, intentionally, and consciously through communion with nature and the oneness of some iteration of God. The house contains the possibility of self-distribution, and thus one’s access to solitude: “Whilst he suffered at being seen where he was, he consoled himself with the delicious thought of the inconceivable number of places where he was not” (476). In other words, we are determined both by the quality of where we are and also by the quality of where we are not.

The discussion of Thoreau’s solitude, articulated most forcefully in *Walden*, is at the heart of this thesis, but, for the meantime it suffices to say that Thoreau considers most of society “too cheap” (136), that solitude has nothing to do with space (130, 136, 137, 140, 144), and that true self-distribution is found in oneness with nature (8, 89, 90). In “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau remarks that “it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever” (16). It’s a refrain practiced in *Walden*. It is this bind, this paradox, that drives the insistence of Thoreau’s quest for self-distribution.

Solitude oscillates between a number of related but distant poles: physical space, home-ness, how we define society, how we can access selfhood, one's capacity for being alone, and one's capacity for sympathy. Solitude as praxis, rather than destination, allows for a more open reading of Thoreau, Ellison, and Lethem.

This argument is not developmental or chronological, or engaged by only the contexts as and when the texts were written. This form of historicism is unequal to the task of narrativizing equally, of telling balanced stories. The three authors under discussion were not picked because they follow one another sequentially in time. Jeffrey Insko makes plain, "historicist orthodoxies [can include]: ideas belong to periods, that dates measure those periods, that time moves forward" (190). As I will show, this is not true for everyone. If we want to "return to the past 'as it was,'" we have to acknowledge that we have "the benefit of knowing how things turned out" (184). Which is to say, any allegations of 'presentism'—of ascribing motives backwards in time, being anachronistic—are flawed themselves, because to have some kind of static position from which we can go back, locate, and situate, ignores the textual, textured reality of the everyday histories discussed here. In chapter three, I will quite openly call this kind of historicism racist.

Instead, this argument tries to show the persistence of the solitude complex, and its preternatural ability to linger, all through the period of Thoreau's transcendentalism, Ellison's modernism, and Lethem's postmodernism. I reject the tendency to see solitude's changing character as analogous to the movements from the natural—Rousseau's organic beauty—to the industrial—enlightenment rationalism. Though solitude can be read against these movements, this is not what I am attempting to do. Solitude gives us a vernacular to

address the issues at stake in these periods: industrialism, the black experience in modern America, and white narratives on black experience. Therefore, this argument discusses gentrification, dispossession, and amnesia, and it does so using the vernacular of solitude, because this language can more readily make clear the intersectionality of these issues. This is an argument against what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls the “precipitating chapters” of “the singular action of exceptional individuals” (63). This argument asks, explicitly, whether solitude can help us understand the links between the modern prison state and gentrification, between dispossession and trauma, or between silence and loneliness. It does not pretend that Thoreau was a leading fighter against gentrification, though certainly he would have been; instead, it argues that Thoreau’s apprehensive thinking about solitude can still arm us with ways to think through the complex networks of prison, gentrification, and disembodiment. This argument does not imagine that Ellison was writing back against Thoreau, expanding and challenging his ideas, though in many respects he was; instead, it argues that Ellison’s long and poetic dreams about dispossession can help inform ways we conceive of “disembodiment [as] a kind of terrorism” in the modern system of incarceration (73). This argument does not pretend that Lethem is simply rewriting *Walden* or *Invisible Man* (surprise, he kind of is), but that he uses a lexicon developed by writers like Thoreau and Ellison to talk through issues he sees as of vital importance to the modern condition. A simple comparison helps make this point.

On March 7, 2015, then-President Obama delivered a speech in Selma, Alabama, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday. “There are moments destiny has been decided,” he said, but we should not view those moments “in isolation.” So, he thanked gay rights activists, black activists, anti-war activists, and more, to say that “the single most

powerful word in our democracy is the word ‘we.’” He concluded—and rightly so—“We honour those who walked so we could run. We must run so our children soar.”¹²¹³ But should we accept this? Is this not plainly contradictory, if not damagingly self-congratulatory? Destiny is decided in moments, but nothing can be viewed in isolation.

Compare this with the letter Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son in *Between*:

[Son] you must struggle to truly remember [the] past in all its nuance, error, and humanity. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road [...] and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. (49)

Two competing historical tendencies are on display here: on the one hand, Obama’s ostensibly historicist, contextualized, quite literal onward march of history; on the other, Coates’s pugnacious rejection of this narrativized American dream. Obama’s oratory, that so blatantly washes over the everyday reality of oppressed minorities in contemporary America, is of course typical of political speechmaking, but this *attempt* at historicism is not isolated. Coates rejects wholesale the attempt to sanitize the past, to demonstrate a narrative continuity between the deaths of black slaves and the reality of modern black experience. Obama uses the history of black oppression as a demonstration that *things get better*. Coates says that this is tantamount to believing in fairy tales, ways we can become

¹² The speech can be read in full here: <http://time.com/3736357/barack-obama-selma-speech-transcript/>. It was Obama at his most beautiful, and therefore his most disappointing.

¹³ Obama’s speech has been set to music here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsWzhPevEks>. Strangely, the contrast between the pathos of the music and the unashamed poetry of Obama’s words makes the reality even more depressing.

complacent with our relative security. These are moments where destiny is decided, but they are not decided for a future person. They didn't walk so we can run: they walked so they could walk. The difference in these approaches animates this thesis more than anything else, because destiny is not decided in moments: it accumulates, it seeps through history, running through the cracks left by the bravery and strength of those who went before. History, for these authors, is the absolute rejection of destiny—nothing is determined, nothing irrevocable, nothing destined. These narratives of triumph are in fact the most suspect, and we must articulate strategies that resist the romantic tendencies of our histories.

Throughout this thesis I refer to news reports contemporaneous with my writing. Some have uplifting moments, most do not. Most are about modern slaves, gun violence, and murder. The connection to discussions of solitude is not always plain, but it always waiting to be discovered. The invention of whiteness defined the American Dream, and “The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing” (Coates 36). Each report here goes some way to showing the continuity between the dream and the reality, the incongruity of the dream against the everyday experience of the dreamers. This thesis rejects any attempt to define solitude; instead, it embraces the Thoreauvian idea that definition like this is a rationalization. Solitude's place, its specific consequences for specific individuals, matters far more than its definition. I hope this thesis offers something new to the literature on solitude: not a definition but a practice.

Chapter 1: Threshold

Nothing has been experienced but what has been lived (Camus 5)

“Loneliness: The Cost of the ‘Last Taboo,’” “Loneliness: the second cruel stigma Britain inflicts on disabled people,” “Neoliberalism is creating loneliness. That’s what’s wrenching society apart,” “A Generation in Japan Faces a Lonely Death,” “Opinion: Instead of finding peace in solitude, we’re just getting lonelier,” “Loneliness is the hardest problem to fix,” “Are we in the middle of a loneliness epidemic?” “Table for one.” Five minutes on a search engine, at any time, will reveal results just like this.

“But alone in distant woods or fields, I come to myself [...] cold and solitude are friends of mine” (J 569); “From many a hill I can see civilization and the abodes of man afar” (*Walking* 633); “In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude” (*Walden* 324); “For government is an expedient, by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone” (“Civil Disobedience” 6). Five minutes with any of Thoreau’s writing, picked at random, will reveal results just like this. Why are these ideas so different, in tone and content, when their subject is effectively the same?

“On the Fourth of July, 1854,” Laura Dassow Walls’s magnificent biography of Thoreau tells us, “at one of the era’s largest and angriest antislavery rallies, the professed hermit of Walden Pond stepped onto a high lecture platform under a black-draped American flag, hung upside down” (283). The address was obvious, but “in the blistering heat, before a crowd of some two thousand souls, the retiring philosopher opened his heart. ‘I walk toward one of our ponds’—by then, they all knew which one—‘but what signifies the beauty of

nature when men are base?” (283). This was Thoreau at the twilight of his life; indeed, perhaps he would have called it his personal “Winter, with its *inwardness*” (J 122). The anecdote is telling for so many reasons: on Independence Day, at an antislavery rally, towards the end of his life, and pregnant with natal-natural imagery. But Thoreau’s insistence on bucolic imagery is not an error, nor is it an attempt to denude our harshest realities of their bleakness. Instead, as Thoreau himself says: “Slavery! [...] It exists wherever a man *allows himself to be made a mere thing* or a tool, and surrenders his *inalienable rights of reason and conscience*” (J 809; my emphasis). What Thoreau had discovered at Walden, in that pond, was a new way to signify, what Walls calls, a “new system of value” (184).¹⁴

It was imperative, then, that Thoreau’s address began not as an address to the slaveholders or slaves, or even the anti-slavery activists, but as an address *to nature*. It was here that we could find inspiration, energy, and, more vitally, the stringent ethical code necessary to combat the most entrenched of moral failings. Philip Gura is right when he says that for the transcendentalists, “Nature offers discipline, teaching what is true, beautiful, and good, for the physical laws of the universe are analogous to the great moral laws” (85). There is, for Thoreau, not a correlation but a perfect mirroring between walking towards a pond and what signifies the truest action amongst humankind. To be properly in nature was to be properly attuned to your own self-consciousness. Such a beginning was

¹⁴ In one of Thoreau’s unsuccessful pedagogical adventures, he learned an important lesson: “After Henry had been at work for a couple of weeks, a member of the committee stopped by to check on him and discovered to his horror that Henry refused to use physical punishment. ‘How can they learn without being birched? What kind of teacher are you?’ he asked. Henry’s response was to make a random selection of half a dozen boys and girls, whip them, and then walk out of the school forever” (Schreiner 57).

These anecdotes are not merely illustrations of the *kind* of person Thoreau was, but that his actions were direct consequences of his principles.

necessary for seeing the true evils of the slave trade. What Thoreau found at Cape Cod, he saw in the evils of slavery.

I begin with this anecdote because it is beautiful, but more than that, because it is perfect Thoreau. Thoreau's thought takes Ralph Waldo Emerson's commencement address and makes it real: "How could the graduating students avoid [...] failure? Go alone, Emerson directed them" (Gura 93). Thoreau wanders down to the pond alone, returns alone, and then ascends the platform alone to deliver an address whose contents are a recitative on humanity's greatest failure: its inability to let others alone. Such particular phrasing is important when discussing Thoreau: it is not to *leave* others alone, but to *let them*. If he was to discover a new system of values that displaced commerce as primary, he would do so transcendently, and, necessarily, alone. Thoreau's *aloneness* is indeed illustrative, but its real value lies in its position—Thoreau's solitude is coloured by his anti-slavery, his naturalism, his scientific-religiosity, and his insistence on self-emancipation. Such a solitude is indebted to Emerson's tutelage, to the specific mid-19th Century currents in Boston and Concord, and to the looming crisis of morality that commercialization would augur. While its relevance has constantly diminished, it has never quite receded. Thoreau's thinking on aloneness was grown in a toxic soil—slavery, commercialization, disenfranchisement—that still exists now. To insist so is not to wallow in nostalgia nor advocate for a return to the pastoral, agrarian way of life; instead, such thinking can illuminate the current crisis of American loneliness precisely *because* it relies on a series of interrelated toxicities whose half-lives still tick beneath the soil of modern America.

As early as 1839, Thoreau was aware of this necessity. Writing in his journal on July 25, he remarks that, "All the past is here present to be tried; let it approve itself if it can" (36).

To access this confluence required immersing oneself in Nature, and acknowledging that history is a Medusa of many heads.¹⁵ To begin to understand the way the individual could begin to respond to these conditions was to begin thinking about the threshold, and how it could act as both metaphor and literal place.

The question remains, however, to what extent Thoreau's insistence on self-reliance, so indebted to Emerson, can be tolerated in light of the visceral horror of the slave trade. As Gura suggests throughout *American Transcendentalism*, the transcendentalists avoided dealing with the bodily reality of slavery, tending instead towards ontology. For instance, Gura argues that, "Emerson championed the empowered individual, the self-reliant genius for whom conscience was the highest law. But other Transcendentalists lamented how much such self-regard obscured the Transcendentalists' response to social problems" (188). Emerson would change his mind later when he realized that it is imperative to break unjust laws. Instead of relying on a transcendent subjectivity to refute attacks on bodily autonomy, it was up to the moral thinkers to convince humanity "to be shocked into disgust and action by an encounter with the horror of slavery" (215). So, a nascent question when looking at Thoreau is how to square this circle: Thoreau was agitating for real, concrete change, but he was often scared of real, concrete detail. Thoreau's eulogy for John Brown is an example of this: erudite passages on Brown's moral virtue, but with the horror of slavery totally absent.

¹⁵ Comments like this are why I disagree with Philip Gura's suggestion that to discuss writers like Thoreau is to recognize that they are "not so much extraordinary as exemplary" (181). That is, for Gura, they are substitutable. I disagree, and Gura provides the reason: "On the lecture platform and in the press Emerson provided tools through which Americans could adapt to their novel condition, *neither resisting nor condemning it*" (187; my emphasis). Indeed, this is precisely the problem with Emerson: erudite and majestic as much of his prose is, it doesn't offer any solutions, nor, more importantly, *see any need to*. We cannot simply pass one transcendentalist off for another.

So how did Thoreau justify this? In short, because no true action was possible without ethical thought.

In this chapter, I describe Thoreau's solitude as a moment on the threshold. I borrow this term from both Kate Marshall and Laura Dassow Walls. First, I look at what Thoreau says about society and silence; then, I examine how these concepts relate to solitude.

In the first section, I discuss how Thoreau defined society. To do this, I look at how he conceived of the individual against the social, and I focus on the very specific linguistic turns Thoreau deploys as a means of subverting or undermining conventional notions of what a functioning "society" looked like. I argue that beginning with an analysis of Thoreau's language is imperative, because, as mentioned, no true action was possible without ethical thought.

In the second section, I examine how Thoreau began to establish a moral framework founded on the split between society and the individual. He achieved this through constant movement between one and the other, and the beginning of his thoughts on what I call "self-labour." Self-labour was a means not only of resistance, but as a route to contemplation and correspondence. Only the self-industrious thinker could begin to see the connections between the natural world and our subjective understanding of it; the unlucky ones whose industry was coopted could never gain access.

In the final section, I show that neither self-labour nor society are possible without silence. Thoreau's thoughts on silence would lead him naturally to a discussion of solitude. I argue that silence metaphorizes threshold thinking. This section is especially important for my later arguments in chapters four and five, where I show that for Lethem, solitude manifests as a kind of *waiting*. I rely on Maurice Blanchot's concept of the disaster to

demonstrate how Thoreau uses silence and dislocation as a means to bring about the future. Thoreau's silence has three categories: lack, inscription, and refuge. I map these to Mohagheh and Olsson's violent silences as a means of re-energizing Thoreau's thinking in modern scholarship.

These sections represent the backbone of my argument in chapter two: Thoreau was not interested in defining or conceptualizing solitude; he was interested in *experiencing it*.

When Thoreau arrived at Cape Cod, on what was supposed to be a relaxing retreat with a friend, he discovered the chaotic scene of a massive shipwreck: the St. John had run aground, killing 145 passengers. Thoreau looks out over the beach, sees the multitude of human scavengers picking through the washed up detritus, sees the usually abandoned houses all lit up with survivors, and sees the brutal Nor'easter pounding the drowning struts of the St. John and launches into a deeply poetic meditation on the figure of the *threshold*. It is a symbolic language he would maintain through at least *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, but the galvanic idea of the threshold would remain a powerful piece of symbolism and allegory throughout his career. As he casts his poet's eye over the beach, he finds himself drawn, not to the raw nature of the disaster, but to the way the event symbolizes something more for how we conceive of death: "Take all the graveyards together," he says, "[and] they are always the majority. It is the individual and private that demands our sympathy. A man can attend but one funeral in the course of his life, can behold but one corpse" (466).

As Joan Wry notes, what Thoreau discovered was that nature is not "mere' symbol," but that it contained "concrete images," themselves containing "corresponding

processes” (74). Thoreau’s “concrete re-imaging” of perception allowed him to avoid the traps Emerson had laid for himself and that would cause him to have to renege on his individualism and therefore agitate for an end to slavery (78). It also enabled him to detect in these liminal moments a “literal framing technique” and to draw attention to “transitions in the natural landscape that are mirrored in the human mind” (78). This is a refrain we will see throughout Thoreau’s work: one instance is enough to satisfy the completion of the thing itself. Axiomatic in Thoreau’s early thinking about thresholds is that direct action *must* occur, but that it could only be ethical if it occurred as a *natural consequence* of threshold thinking and thinking of thresholds. Wry reiterates this point when she remarks that Thoreau attempted to product the “‘perfect art’ of language commensurate to one’s experience in the natural world—especially language addressing the significance of that experience” (84). To put this as plainly as possible: language enabled Thoreau to judge the significance of an act, and therefore it must be examined as precursor to any act, even if the significance is judged after the (f)act.

What is telling not just that Thoreau has discovered one of his most poignant metaphors for the way individuality and society exist in a state of constant agitation, like an existential tug-o-war—but that inside of this metaphor he had discovered a route to activity that was predicated *on* thought. The beach is a graveyard, the epitome of the natural. So Thoreau goes to visit a lonely hermit who lives there, instead of tending to mourning or extravagant displays of grief. On one side, we have brutal nature, and on the other, the machinery of society, where individuality goes quite literally to die. To stand on the *bank*—sand, river—is to gaze across the machinery of society onto the savagery of nature, to mingle with the threshold where “all the past is here present to be tried” (f 36). Thoreau has

discovered what Kate Marshall calls the corridor; though, as Wry remarks, these early thoughts represent a failure to “define or enact in language the passage between world and self that integrates experience and consciousness” (81).

Kate Marshall has an extended argument about what she calls *corridority*, or, something that slices up discrete spaces and “points to the infrastructure of the everyday” (11). Corridority reveals spaces that were previously hidden from us. A prosaic example would be plumbing: we are never truly aware of a home’s architecture until something bursts. The metaphors of corridority can be transplanted onto the threshold space Thoreau occupies both in his writing and in the subjects of his writing. David Suchoff argues that “although the river’s own progress is predicated on its lapse in spite of its continuity, as an emblem it shares with Thoreau the project of his language in *A Week*, to obscure the tearing and divisiveness he sees as characteristic of writing” (“A More Conscious Silence” 674). This is a theme Thoreau will return to again and again, and the act of writing as a form of divisiveness ameliorated by the threshold space of the river-bank will become one of Thoreau’s most important imaginative conceits.

Thoreau extends this metaphor in *Merrimack*: “I had often stood on the banks of the Concord, watching the lapse of the current, an emblem of all progress, following the same law with the system, with time, and all that is made” (321). Emerson strikes a similar note:

Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed, does not. The same particle does not rise from the valley to the ridge. Its unity is only phenomenal. The persons who make up a nation to-day, next year die, and their experience with them. And so the reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance. (141)

This is to say, then, that a flowing river or tidal sea acts as synecdoche for the way society governs and functions. While there is ebb and flow, currents and tidal pools, the deposits and the water itself is recycled endlessly: the entire lifecycle of these rivers and seas is testament to the way society itself can advance, evolve, and adapt, but the fabric of society—individuals—remains singular and unchangeable. An encounter with ‘unity’ is *phenomenal*; that is, to be apprehended in a moment of transcendence not as the revelation of some deep truth but as an encounter with a truth of relation that reveals more about the parts than the whole. As Marshall says, “Power is a position, but a managed one. Its outer spaces and access points, and those who control them, are constantly dialectically involved in constituting the power (and power-holder), and this process is both attached to the minutiae of daily life and ongoing” (162). If Thoreau wasn’t attempting to hide from society but to actively confront it through a series of oppositions, then his occupation of the threshold entails managing a set of power structures—society, loneliness, friendship, politics, slavery. Thoreau pits the dialectic of bank and river against one another in an attempt to give voice to the minutiae of daily life.

For Thoreau, the response to the river of society is an inward turn: “I had withdrawn so far within the great ocean of solitude, into which the rivers of society empty, that for the most part, so far as my needs were concerned, only the finest sediment was deposited around me” (W 144). Here, then, the ocean of unchangeable, unmoving particles is a space of solitude into which society inevitably drains. On one side the sea—society—and on the other the bank—solitude. But “what Thoreau was studying at Walden was how to see, in the *wastelands at the margins of commerce*, the *center* of a new system of value” (Walls 184; emphasis mine). Located between the river and the bank, at the margins, was a new center—the

threshold. This threshold was neither the sea nor the bank, but it was always apprehended *from* here. As Wry puts it, “Thoreau here recalls memories and later recollections of his journey within a liminal context, and the attention to boundary lines in nature (and in narrative) provides a basic framing technique within which to observe relational processes” (82). He was, in other words, laying the foundation for an apprehension of solitude that would inform both Ellison and Lethem’s narratives of liminality: the notion that it is the complex admixture of memory, the present, and the physical delimits of our surroundings that structure our encounter with both the world and narrative itself.

What the St. John wreck suggests is a metaphor energizing all of Thoreau’s naturalism: an attempt to delineate the three modes of living by which a human and their individuality is torn: sea, solitude, and the center. For Walls, Walden Pond is literally at the margins of commerce, at the edge of town, but it was a space of centring: “I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately” (*W* 90). For Thoreau, deliberation, or perhaps more accurately deliberateness, meant living *slowly* and *quietly* in an attempt to discover a set of underlying principles by which a human life could be ethically governed: “The nation itself [is] cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense [...] it lives too fast” (92). As he said: “if you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications?” At Walden, then, he would seek to determine those centring principles, free from the multitude of mere *examples*.

For Thoreau, the first thing to do is to establish what precisely *society* is. This was necessary work: to articulate the threshold, he first needed bank and river; he needed to demonstrate the intimate relation between how society and selfhood constructed one

another asynchronously. This relationship was asynchronous because it was *not* determined by geography or proximity, nor was it a logical endpoint for individualism; society, instead, was a product of culture weaning Nature.

Thoreau's gnomic remarks on company are perhaps some of his most famous aphorisms: "I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society" (140); "I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning, when nobody calls" (137); "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (135); "There is commonly sufficient space about us" (130); "I must first see that I do not pursue [my life] sitting upon another man's shoulders" ("CD" 12). What is less remarked is the imperative case: each sentence is itself a declarative summation of a singular principle. That principle is beautifully stated when he recounts being sent to jail for refusing to pay his poll tax because it was being used to fund the Mexican war: "It is true, I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might have run 'amok' against society; but I preferred that society should run 'amok' against me, it being the desperate party" (171). The syntax here is telling: the chiasmus means that the speech is reversed and inverted: I might have run amok against them, but I prefer others to run amok against me. This was a linguistic structure most impressively used by Frederick Douglass in his *Narrative*, and it reveals, as Douglass likewise intended, and explained by Robert O'Meally, a "reverse of the system of power relations: the master as slave [...] the professed Christian as hypocrite, the weak as strong, the slave as free" (*Narrative* 24). Thoreau's sentence follows his behaviour: it runs amok, reversing the system of power relations: society as weakness, the individual as strength.

This is a good example of what Wry cites as Thoreau advocating for “going down in order to ascend: in the descent through liminal layers [...] we find the starting point of our direct perception of things ‘real’” (98). Thoreau frequently relies on such rhetorical strategies. On reading about the death of a runaway slave: “A man of color,’ as if he were discolored. [The obituary] told me, with staring emphasis, when he died; which was but an indirect way of informing me that he ever lived” (*W* 10). On placing ourselves in relation to society: “For the most part, we are not where we are” (327). On friendship: “To say that a man is your Friend means commonly no more than this, that he is not your enemy” (392). On truth: “It takes two to speak the truth—one to speak, and another to hear” (393). Anaphora and chiasmus in their own way detail the way Thoreau lived at least his two years at Walden: unexpectedly. The point here is not merely that these linguistic flourishes make his writing more compelling—though they do—but that they action a transcendentalist principle: “Suppose you should contradict yourself, what then?” (“Self-Reliance” 151); “We should not endeavour coolly to analyze our thoughts, but, keeping the pen even and parallel with the current, make an accurate transcript of them” (*J* 33). For both Emerson and Thoreau, contradictions were a necessary part of Nature, and therefore could not only be tolerated philosophically but actively encouraged. Contradictions were irrelevant because they iterated.

It’s worthwhile citing a lengthy passage from Wall’s biography here just to underscore the complex meditation Thoreau was engaged in:

Walden took shape here, in two key discoveries: First, that the pond had ‘a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake.’

Thoreau’s quest for the “bottom” of the pond was also his quest for a bedrock truth,

that face-to-face confrontation with “actuality” that drove him to the pond to begin with. But once you found that bedrock truth, what should you do about it? This was his second discovery: each person’s answer will depend upon, and will reveal, the exact height, breadth, and depth of their individual moral character. The angle intersections inscribed by our particular daily experiences, the coves and inlets of our lives, will ground the decisions we make, our actions in the world. And the sum total of all our moral actions combined will constitute the ethical character of the society we build together. (189)

What Walls suggests is twofold: first, Thoreau had discovered an intractable truth in nature that could inform and even dictate a moral way to encounter society; second, that these encounters actually constitute society. There’s a paradox at work here—society is made from the individual moral actions that combine into an ethical code, but these moral actions themselves are encounters *with society*. This society both exists and is in a constant state of creation. This is what both Emerson and Thoreau meant when they suggested that while the waves may crash the water remains. Stanley Cavell makes a similar point: “American culture has never really believed in its capacity to produce anything of permanent value — except itself” (*Senses* 33).

Juxtaposed to this littoral symbolism, society is constructed as a piece of complex machinery. If society was to be an assemblage of moral actions, it must originate in disparate persons. The equation is simple, but illusory: society functions as a machine, with individual moral action creating the smooth operation of that machine. But machines, as Thoreau was all too aware, were ambiguous constructs, not evil per se but not beneficent by definition. A primary outcome of mechanification was the “debasement of nature,” (*Thoreau* 390).

Machinery in this sense, then, as contrived, rather than stemming from creation—such as an ecological system, which was arguably a machine itself—was a counterpoint to raw Nature. As he remarked, “I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society” (“CD” 21). It is too simplistic, however, to assume that the transcendentalists were anti-machine or anti-industry; indeed, Thoreau’s inventiveness revolutionized the way graphite pencils were produced and made the family business far more successful (*Thoreau* 9). Thoreau was interested in whether industrialization was an instrumental good, whether it produced innovation simply through existing, or whether this form of labour was work for work’s sake.

Walls argues that industrialization—perhaps the primary context for discussing the transcendentalists—was “as much about communication as much as machinery” (46). This is true, but it is not definitive. What Leo Marx argued in his foundational *Machine in the Garden* is overlooked in more recent scholarship surrounding the transcendentalists, who are often instead portrayed as Luddites or simply as cantankerous old, anti-industrial men.¹⁶ What Marx realized in *Machine* was that “industrialization rests on the assumption that [...] the new engines of product, even the factory system — all embody the same ultimate laws of nature” (162). Thus, “the image of the American machine [had] become a transcendent symbol: a physical object invested with political and metaphysical ideality” (206). This is precisely what Emerson argued could be found in nature, and it is what both Emerson and Thoreau saw as a fundamental fact of nature: that it mirrored, created, and augmented moral codes. For Marx, the conclusion is inherently depressing:

¹⁶ Thoreau accidentally set a few hundred acres of Concord forest on fire after an errant spark escaped his camp; many commentaries remark variations on the idea that “sparks from the [new] locomotives spread as much fire” (Schreiner 120).

The hut beside the pond stands at the center of a symbolic landscape in which the village of Concord appears on one side and a vast reach of unmodified nature on the other [...] Technological power overwhelms the solitary man; the landscape convention calls for his presence to provide scale, but here the traditional figure acquires new meaning: in this mechanized environment he seems forlorn and powerless. (245; 356)

This is indeed the case, but the architecture of machinery parroted the blueprint nature was laying down. As simply as possible, the machinification of the American landscape was providing more evidence for the ‘ultimate laws of nature,’ which in turn enabled the creation of a stringent set of moral codes. Thoreau saw it as his task to straddle this divide, for “liminal positioning between two spheres—his conscious recollection of that positioning [and his actual positioning]—gives him the ability to fuse the world of experience with the world of ideas in charged language” (Wry 104).

What I argue is that when Thoreau articulates a vision of society as a machine, the fear was not of machinery as such but of our desire to see in industrialization a new mode of being. If machinery embodied natural law and therefore could be antecedent to morality, it upended the entire transcendentalist insistence that the individual would precede society. If morality could be sourced in the machinification process, raw, unadulterated Nature would be left denuded both literally and philosophically. It would lose its inspirational immanence.

As both Walls and Marx argue, Thoreau was developing a set of moral codes. These codes would be divorced from the bank and the river, a set of codes built on the threshold. If nature was to be a “new system of value,” (*Thoreau* 184) Thoreau would need to articulate the way in which Nature was irreducibly different from the machine it was becoming.

Where this separation could be located was in *labour*: “the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (31). It cannot be a coincidence that David Blight, in *Race and Reunion*, offers such a similar definition of slavery: “slavery is receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent” (25). Labour, for Thoreau, was such an exchange, and labour *for others* was antithetical to parity or comity in Nature. Labour only becomes acceptable when it is *self-labour*. Compare this thought on industrialization “when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over” (*W* 53), with large swaths of *Walden* where Thoreau tills the soil, plants beans, and fishes. As he remarked later in his journal, “No trade is simple, but artificial and complex. It postpones life and substitutes death. It goes against the grain” (316). We should not overlook these puns, as they are the issue: artificial labour *goes against the grain*, in that it is antithetical to Nature. One pitfall of labour is thus its resistance to Natural simplicity.

Self-labour is a process. First, it entails self-analysis. Second, it required action. Third, it must occupy a threshold space. What it achieves, in the words of Lawrence Buell, is to break “the hold of the work ethic by cultivating nonlinear attentiveness” (100). It is, quite simply, the process of working on oneself, of reserving one’s intellectual labour for self-cultivation.

Self-labour is an engaged, boundless process of analysis and determination. Economic labour by definition is non-consensual and homogenizing; self-labour, by definition, is the ultimate consent:

I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that

there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead. (71)

The standard by which one's self-labour is judged is by its principle of application, not by its replicability, societal purpose, or financial gain. Such self-labour is more correctly termed "self obedience" (323). For Thoreau, Nature encapsulates a moral code by which one can live a *good* life; internally, however, self-obedience is tangential to leading a *good* life: "It is not for a man to put himself in [...] an attitude to society, but to maintain himself in whatever attitude he find himself through obedience to the laws of his being" (323); "I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad" ("CD" 15); "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (*W* 326). An ethical lifestyle—in the Kantian tradition—is a lifestyle in accordance with one's own being, an authentic attempt to live life. Ultimately, Thoreau is "astonished at the singular pertinacity and endurance of [life]. The miracle is, that what is *is*, when it is so difficult, if not impossible, for anything else to be" (417). The correct articulation of self against society, then, becomes a question of ethical living and moral living. Grand moral codes can be derived from Nature, but authenticity is cultivated internally.

Such a complex stance is neatly summarized by Stanley Cavell in his beautiful *Senses of Walden*:

[Thoreau attempted] to alarm his culture by refusing it a voice, i.e., by withholding his consent both from society so called and from what I call 'conspiracies' of despairing silence which prevent that society from being his, or anyone's. This refusal

is not in fact, though it is in depiction, a withdrawal; it is a confrontation, a return, a constant turning upon his neighbours. This means, first, that he has had to establish himself as a neighbour; which next means, to establish himself as a stranger; which in turn means to establish the concept and the recognition of neighbours and strangers.

(xv)

In other words, for Cavell, Thoreau recused himself from society—spatially, existentially, philosophically—in order to confront the absence that society purported to fill. If we accept Cavell's view, it wasn't simply society that needed definition, but all of society's parts as well. This reading is a sympathetic one, because as he says later, *Walden's* motive "is the recovery of the object [...] a recovery of the thing-in-itself" (95). The *thing itself* is society itself: the entire notion of society had first to be defined before Thoreau could begin his attempt to *refuse* culture a voice. To recover the thing-in-itself required a turn to self-labour, because the correspondence between the thing and itself must first be located in the self.

The next step in self-labour, and thus in the creation of a social space sympathetic to the ethical requirements of authentic living, is *action*. As seen earlier, Emerson believed that action was the publication of thought, and therefore that *doing* was a more accurate expression of Unity (or the Over-Soul). Thoreau similarly believed that

Action from principle [...] changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was [...] it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine [...] If one honest man, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership, it would be the abolition of slavery in America [...] For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once done well is done forever. ("CD" 14-16).

This is essentially what we would now call evental logic: Thoreau does not mean that slavery would literally end if someone were to refuse to own a slave, but that the way we conceive of slavery itself would be fundamentally changed. One recantation of slavery would not end slavery, but it would *shift the parameters of how we judge the question*.¹⁷ Such evental logic “changes the entire field within which facts appear” (Žižek *Event* 159). This proposition is pivotal, because true action can spread only from principled self-examination. Such an examination *must precede action*.¹⁸ Such a sentence *must come first*. Abolishing slavery is thus an example of Thoreau’s threshold, of a mediation between the individual and the social: an individual rejection reframes the debate, and the principle of refusal comes from deep self-examination and self-reflection.

This kind of mediation is what I take Thoreau to mean when he says, “Stand outside the wall, and no harm can reach you. The danger is that you be walled in with it” (J 38). Society *enwalls* thought, and only by shifting outside of these imposed barriers can someone reject what was before assumed to be true. Thoreau extended this idea after he was himself imprisoned: “I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was [... Jail] was a closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside of it” (“CD” 20-23). The jail’s location in the very centre of town delimits its power-relation to the rest of town as

¹⁷ A similar discursive interruption takes place in Eugène Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*—a play about a town of people who slowly consent to becoming rhinoceros themselves—wherein the logician attempts to reframe a discussion of whether African or Asiatic rhinos have one horn or two. He proceeds through a series of syllogisms, but first, in response to the question of whether different rhinos are bicorned or unicorned he remarks, “Exactly, that is *not the question*” (34).

¹⁸ In 2012, the U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was glibly asked whether he supported same-sex marriage. “Oh, come on, you’re gonna start there?” one host asks, before Duncan pointedly stares straight down the camera and says, “Yes, I do.” Several weeks later, Obama would publicly endorse same-sex marriage.

centrifugal architecture. Walled in—quite literally—Thoreau was given a new vantage on the walls between himself and his neighbours. But the wall's true purpose is that it points out the “still more difficult” one. Jail metaphorizes (in concrete) how Thoreau already felt about his position within the town. Thoreau had discovered in the threshold, in other words, that “power is a position, but a managed one” (Marshall 162).

Here is an physical, concrete, architectural version of that eventual logic—what Žižek would call the *parallax* view (*End Times* 245)—which says that changes in perspective not only reposition answers but also re-frame questions:

The frame of the painting in front of us is not its true frame; there is another, invisible, frame, implied by the structure of the painting, the frame that enframes our perception of the painting, and these two frames by definition never overlap—there is an invisible gap separating them. The pivotal content of the painting is not rendered in its visible part, but is located in this dis-location, in the gap that separates them. (275)

In much the same way, Thoreau's river-bank-society-selfhood conceit demands that action stems from interaction with this threshold space. The revelation of the second wall that separates Thoreau from his neighbours is a consequence of his *framing*. The first texture is the literal: in jail, in the centre of town, he realizes the wall that separates him from the townsfolk; the second is less concrete: an ideological break. The third is that Thoreau began to use these structural encounters with the real world to dictate his own narratives, to begin the process by which the very structure of his writing would reflect these moments and events. Apocryphal as it almost certainly is, the story goes that Emerson visited Thoreau to ask what he was doing “in there,” to which Thoreau replied, “What are you doing *out there*?”

Thoreau found a series of interconnections that link him to the prison, and to the complex bureaucracy that would attempt to limit his civil disobedience: “Under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison” (“CD” 16). The classic inversion mirrors and narrativizes Thoreau’s encounter with the event; the written sentence stands synecdoche for the lived one. Such acts of enframing take on great importance in chapters four and five.

For Thoreau, the pivotal content of his prison experience is that it proved the act worthwhile. As he said, he would rather the state ran amok against him: a thing once well done is done forever. His act did not abolish slavery but it gave him a new perspective from which he felt vindicated in his anti-slavery. In this sense, then, the visible part of the action is superseded by the ‘dis-location’, here both literal and figurative: “A change had to my eyes come over the scene—the town, and State, and country, greater than any that mere time could effort. I saw more distinctly the State in which I lived” (“CD” 23). Thoreau does not say that he *saw* differently, but that a fundamental change had been visited on *how he sees*. An action that in hindsight seems laughably quaint—refusing to pay your poll tax because of the slave-trade—, an action so infinitesimal, in fact overhauls an entire structure of thought. This fundamental change is both the thought *and* the action: the two are one and the same.

Action is thus contingent on a degree of dislocation: it is in the space opened by removal that Nature becomes immanent, and nature is required before action: “I love Nature partly because she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevail [...] He is constraint, she is freedom to me. He makes me wish for another world. She makes me content with this” (§ 248). Whereas jail represents the summit of institutional control, Nature is freedom.

Nature's counterbalance hinges on direct opposition to Man. So it is that self-labour comes from threshold thinking, from the negotiation between society and the individual. Action requires dislocation, and dislocation is preceded by Nature. Action thus requires Nature.

Cavell's *Senses* gestures towards this point:

Thoreau had the Kantian idea right, that the objects of our knowledge require a transcendental preparation [...] Epistemologically, [*Walden's*] motive is the recovery of the object [...] a recovery of the thing-in-itself [...] Emerson located the [Over-Soul] *within* the self, as a unity, or *the* Unity; and he leaves me the habitual spectator of my world. The impersonality, or impartiality, of *Walden's* double is the spiritual breakthrough from yearning and patience which releases its writer's capacity for action [...] We are to reinterpret our sense of doubleness as a relation between ourselves in the aspect of the indweller, unconsciously building, and in the aspect of the spectator, impartially observing. (Cavell 95; 102; 108).

What is missing from Cavell's analysis is something he himself earlier admits: "A fact has two surfaces because a fact is not merely an event in the world but the assertion of an event, the wording of the world" (44). *Walden* is certainly an attempt to rediscover the thing-in-itself, as a discovery of something *a priori* but fundamental in Nature, but *Walden's* real insight is the recovery of the act that initiates an attempt to recover the thing-it-itself. This is a "poetics of liminality [that] makes possible simultaneous perspectives of correspondence and separateness" (Wry 107).

Such is the framing device Thoreau deploys when his perspective is shifted by contingent nature. For Emerson, the over-soul is the ludic unity at the heart of a self, a first circle in the "subtle chain of countless rings / The next unto the farthest brings" ("Nature"

45). Emerson sees the fact of being human as something toward which you can “stand in various relations [to]” (Cavell 53), whereas Thoreau locates this relationality in the act of attempting to discover unity: “It is axiomatic in *Walden* that its author praises nothing that he has not experienced and calls nothing impossible that he has not tried” (4). The spiritual breakthrough of *Walden* is therefore the revelation that asserting the event is enough to release the capacity for action. Located conterminously between the indweller and spectator, the threshold soul gains access to transcendental preparation and thus to a series of *experiential moments* that result in action. Discovering the object as it is acknowledges that the fact is not merely an event but *an assertion of an event*. Reframed this way, Thoreau’s immanent encounters with Nature become integral to his ability to act: in nature would he discover the things-in-themselves only by navigating the complex boundary between self and society—the threshold.

Thoreau also introduces one other dimension into his discussion of self and society. For Thoreau, to cleave society from the stillness of solitude is a moment of becoming fraught with possibilities; it occurs in the separation between immanent nature and suffocating society, and requires or creates a radical shift in perspective. To help attune himself to nature, and thus away from society, Thoreau also writes at length about silence. This was to be another revelation from Walden Pond: the deep, autumnal quiet of Nature at repose. In thinking on solitude, Thoreau would continue his metaphoric quest to conceptualize nature; his intention was not to *abstract* nature, but to capture its true essence in a sentence that was the “result of a long probation” (*Merrimack* 374). Thoreau encountered these moments of suspense as intervals between day and night, and as moments of new

silence. The shifting of the sun and the sound of silence became avatars through which Thoreau could complete his thinking on society and selfhood.

Before launching into a discussion of silence in earnest, it's useful to spend a moment thinking through this idea of "long probation." To understand Thoreau's thinking on silence requires us to understand what "long probation" might mean in terms of sound-making or silence-rending. Not just a neat phrase, a long probation is one way Thoreau conceptualizes threshold poetics in the slippery dislocated space between man and nature, but it is also part of a broader conceit Thoreau deploys to resist what he sees as faulty binary thinking so prevalent in industrial or utilitarian thinking. In much the same way as we must create from the day and night a new hour in which to exist, silence must figure not simply as a kind of nullity, negation, or blankness, but as an active participant in ceaseless conversation with individual, society, and nature. Strange as the comparison might be, I believe Maurice Blanchot's *Writing the Disaster* affords one of the best ways to understand Thoreau's "long probation." These early thoughts will inform much of the later discussion.

Blanchot's thesis is that meaning-making forestalls death. The argument is relatively simple: we cannot experience death first-hand; we can only experience *someone else dying*. Because death cannot be experienced, it cannot be truly represented. Art, as meaning-making, tries to represent the unrepresentable. If, as Blanchot says, subjectivity is the only continuity guaranteed by existence, death's vicarious representation is achieved through an act of substitution: death must be translated onto an Other, another body, another consciousness. This is not unlike what Camus wrote 38 years earlier in "The Myth of Sisyphus": "in reality there is no experience of death. Properly speaking, nothing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious. Here, it is barely possible to speak

of the experience of others' deaths" (5). When dealing with Thoreau's long probations, it is worthwhile to remember that *nothing has been experienced but what has been lived*.

In Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, we learn of the missile that kills you before you hear it: the missile that breaks out of the laws of human perception and exists only in a high, arcane branch of mathematics. Pynchon's attempts throughout the novel to *write death* are of course preceded (which we don't find out until the last page) by the fact that the events really take place in a film being watched. Representation is superimposed retroactively onto a series of unrepresentable experiences. Ultimately, in *Gravity's*, the split between human perception and quantum physics—defined as the contingency of life—is asymptotic, involved in the creation of *transmarginal zones* between cognition and the unrepresentable. Death is unknowable because it refers to a state beyond the zero, a state beyond even our most conditioned, insectile-brained existence, and it exists thus out of time.

Death's unrepresentability becomes inspiration, for the act of writing is essentially an act of representation that forever aims at the unrepresentable.¹⁹ Writing prolongs death because it locates the 'I' of the author elsewhere: "to write is to know that death has taken place even though it has not been experienced, and to recognize in it the forgetfulness that it leaves" (*Disaster* 66). And to write is to admit that "meaning is limited silence," (52) because it captures "the language of awaiting—perhaps it is silent, but it does not separate speaking and silence; it makes of silence already a kind of speaking; already it says in silence the speaking that silence is. For mortal silence does not keep still" (59). In other words,

¹⁹ Brian McHale's seminal discussion of postmodernism argues this: that postmodernism as a genre is about preparing for death; postmodernism's overt instability attempts to *write* the experience that can not only not be experienced but never repeated.

silence articulates the language of suspension, waiting, or probation, and it does so because silence *exists at the asymptotic point at which sound is no longer audible but silence is not yet silent*.²⁰ Silence is always coded and figured as a respite, a moment between noises—ambience, thought, memory, and reflection constantly work through the gaps, suffusing the possibility of true silence, that Blanchot sees as death, with noise.

Thoreau believes similarly. Between 1839 and 1840, he begins long meditations on writing, framing, and silence: it is in this time that he thinks about standing outside the wall, about the rarity of the “perfectly healthy sentence” (J 41) and that he has been “breaking silence these twenty-three years and have hardly made a rent in it. Silence has no end; speech is but the beginning of it” (44). A sentence resulting from a long probation comes in the same month, and two days earlier on February 18 he says that “What I am I am, and say not. Being is the great explainer” (45). Being takes on the quality of silence, in opposition to the said—the unspoken being explains what the spoken cannot.

“Sound and silence were Thoreau’s grand analogy,” Paul Sherman writes, “silence was a celestial sea of eternity, the general, spiritual and immutable; sound was the particular and momentary bubble on its surface” (513). We can thus see how Thoreau uses silence to metaphorize his own philosophical engagement with the simultaneity of correspondence and separation that Wry finds in *Walden* (107). “Endlessness” was to be found in “the absence of speech and figure” (Suchoff 679), and, as such, was able to incorporate both the very particular way a thing becomes married with its true nature *and* the way that marriage becomes refracted through our own framing of it. Silence as grand analogy enabled Thoreau to conceptualize the threshold as a constant meditation between diametric opposites—

²⁰ Cavell makes this exact argument when he discussed silence as the “untying of the tongue” (44).

silence and noise—without succumbing to the temptation to view them as mutually exclusive.

More than a decade later that he writes that, “Then is night, when the daylight yields to the nightlight. It suggested an interval, a distance not recognized in history” (80). Thoreau does not say that writing—e.g. meaning-making—is a form of delaying death. Instead, he positions the act of meaning as a silent interval, a pause in the noise; this interval or pause is transliterated, characteristically, to natural imagery: “The whole of the day should not be daytime; there should be one hour, if not more, which the day did not bring forth” (*Merrimack* 365). These interstices, the asymptotic points, the thresholds, are moments of prolonging, waiting, delaying, and contemplation. Long probation is constituted by interlinked moments of silent introspection.

The asymptotic points—the threshold thinking—are what Blanchot defines as the *disaster*. This disaster, “experience none can undergo—obliterates (while leaving perfectly intact) our relation to the world as presence or as absence; it does not thereby free us, however, from this obsession with which it burdens us: others” (120). The disaster is that which cannot be experienced, for it relies on an actual encounter with Lacan’s Real, which by its very nature *cannot* be encountered: “If death is the real, and if the real is impossible, then we are approaching the thought of the impossibility of death” (121). This disaster is the representation of death: the impossible. It’s the disaster because it animates and because it cannot be animated.

The language of suspense that characterizes our attempts to write death acts to prevent, or at least delay:

That there is no awaiting the disaster is true to the extent that waiting is considered always to be the awaiting of something waited for, or else unexpected. But awaiting—just as it is not related to the future any more than to an accessible past—is also the awaiting of awaiting, which does not situate us in a present, for ‘I’ have always already waited what I will always wait for: the immemorable, the unknown which has no present, and which I can no more remember than I can know whether I am forgetting the future—the future being my relation with what, in what is coming, does not come and thus does not present, or re-present itself. (117)

Waiting is predicated on the end result: you have to be waiting for *something*. But, in the way of expecting, the wait itself is also an object of fascination. The result is located in the future, but always appears in the present; the future is therefore predicated on the present’s *relation* with it. As Thoreau says, “all the past is here present to be tried” (J 36), and as he repeats, “Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present” (*Walking* 662). Ethical, sympathetic living is thus free of nostalgia and unmoored from *hope*. It is instead a practiced living in the present.

Blanchot argues that *waiting* enables us to witness our own dislocation from the present into “the oscillating, intermediary zone between a consciousness not yet formed and an unconsciousness that *lets itself be seen* and thereby turns vision into fascination” (126; emphasis added). The parabola of *Gravity’s* missile that kills you before you hear it, the film that imposes meaning backwards in time, or the oscillating, intermediary zone between consciousness and unconsciousness are further examples of threshold thinking. The ethical life is lived neither in the river nor on the bank but somewhere else, fixed by our relation to both.

The shifting of night into day works the same way: “I find some advantage in describing the experience of a day on the day following. At this distance it is more ideal” (J 353); “I walk by day, but I am not aware of any crowning advantage to it. I see small objects better, but it does enlighten me any. The day is more trivial” (84). Our relation to the everyday takes place in the daylight hours, whereas at night we can come closer to encountering our *thoughts* and thus ourselves: “Silence is the universal refuge, the sequel to all dull discourses and all foolish acts, a balm to over chagrin, as welcome after satiety as after disappointment” (W 455). Silence is the universal; it enables us to capture an experience from a distance, and it provides refuge, a point of safety in which waiting is not only permissible but encouraged.

The very essence of the disaster is that it is inarticulate, or even that it actively reduces the ability to articulate something else. The disaster is located somewhere between what we can and cannot experience. Blanchot writes at the junction of what *must be known but cannot be known*, and this animated so much of Thoreau’s thinking both in terms of his own self-labour, and his attempts to find inherence in objects, words, and our relation to them. It is perhaps language that suspends the future, and silence that brings it forth, but language can only originate from a long probation in the realm of silence. Silence awaits the future, then brings it forth. Such a fundamental reversal was to be one of Thoreau’s most significant contributions to solitude studies.

George Kateb, writing about individualism in his book *The Inner Ocean*, concludes with an apposite remark for how Thoreau conceives of silence: “Attention and silence,” he says, “are not the final deeds, only the indispensable preliminary to a sane, ameliorative

response” (259). In Kateb’s analysis of the transcendentalists, individualism is not anomic, but relational, forging us together through connections in the so-called inner ocean, the space of internal reverie. What Kateb locates in Whitman is equally true for Thoreau: “[the] final lesson is solitude, not the adventures of human connectedness. [Whitman’s] work encourages us back to a solitary relation with something unconceptualizable—perhaps the sheer fact of existence, of one’s being and the being of anything else” (266). Here, Kateb echoes Blanchot’s thoughts on the unrepresentability of death; what Whitman tries to write is that which cannot be written, *being*. Thoreau, similarly, was intent on writing silence:

It may be that your silence was the finest thing [...] There are some things which a man never speaks of, which are much finer kept silent about. To the highest communications we only lend a silent ear. Our finest relations are not simply kept silent about, but buried under a positive depth of silence, never to be revealed. (W 402)

Such a position demands a new understanding of what *silence* really is. If silence is not the final deed, but is preliminary, it must be *means*: silence is a means—but to what?

In the quotation above, silence makes several noises: (1) as something that can *belong* to someone; (2) as something that is not simply opposed to “things which a man never speaks of”—as otherwise the second clause of the second sentence would not need to exist; (3) as something metaphoric, i.e. a silent ear, that can be *lent* to others, again implying ownership;²¹ (4) as something that can be *done*, i.e. to keep silent about something. Indeed, as this paragraph concludes, Thoreau suggests that the most intimate connections we have

²¹ Wry makes a similar comparison when she notes that Thoreau’s thinking about water shifted depending on the season. In winter, when it froze, it was commercialized, as the broken-up ice could be sold: “In fluid form, these waters are taken for granted; in the winter, they create the context for an animated scene of commerce” (118).

—presumably to nature and ourselves—are not only kept silent, as in not spoken about, but are deliberately hidden under a “positive depth” of silence.

This phrase—positive depth—is remarkably opaque. We normally read positive as in major, or plus, as in, ‘positive charge,’ or ‘positive height’ above ground. Depth is normally considered ‘negative’, as in ‘less than’. As Gaston Bachelard’s poetic reverie on the architecture of intimate space says: “Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (*Poetics* 92). When Thoreau discusses the depth of silence, then, he does not mean it in the same way as Walden Pond is deep. Bachelard asks “where is the root of silence?”: “Is it a distinction of non-being, or a domination of being? It is ‘deep.’ But where is the root of its depth? In the universe where sources about to be born are praying, or in the heart of a man who has suffered?” (215). Depth is gauged not by geometry or topology, but by our relation to it. A deep feeling is as deep as an ocean, depending on the perspective one takes on it. The ‘positive depth’ of silence is thus twofold: *good* and *immense*, towering above man’s relation to the natural order, a form of indispensable preliminary. This is, again, *going down in order to ascend*.

Similarly, as Cavell mentions, Thoreau argued that “the word must stand for silence and permanence; that is to say, for conviction” (34); and, “it is through nature that nature is to be overcome. It is through words that words are to be overcome. (Silence may only be the tying of the tongue, not relinquishing words, but gagging on them. True silence is the untying of the tongue, letting its words go)” (44). If this is the case, where silence is a more melodic harmony between thought and word, then it would be Thoreau’s mission to create a space where words could be properly attuned to their objects, to be properly silent, to be freed. Thoreauvian silence, then, must do a lot of aural work.

Thoreau's silence has three categories: as lack, as inscription, and as refuge. These three categories offer a useful framework for understanding the sometimes contradictory ways Thoreau deploys and discusses silence.²²

The first version of silence is the most obvious: silence as absence, or lack. In this construction, silence functions as a negative, *not-that*, not a thing-in-itself. Ulf Olsson sees silence as a form of resistance to the circulation of language, which is itself involved in a paradox of subjectification: language is "forced upon the individual" so that they might speak (3). Language is a method of subjectification (4), but each iteration of subjectification-through-speech involves an erasure of past subjectivities (24), so that each conversation, even internally, becomes a pyrrhic battle between two subjects competing for ascendancy: "one of the fundamental basics of Western dialogue aims at [...] making the other say more than [they] intended to" (9) so that "the silencing of others [becomes] a constitutive part of becoming a subject" and "the silence of others is a threat to that same subjectification" (173).

In this paradoxical construction, then, are some fundamental insights for Thoreau:

Violence in this context [of language] designates an act of giving form or forcing form upon an object (5);

remaining silent is also a way of acting, which distributes unrest (43);

silence, then, is not, once again, the opposite of speech: silence and speech presuppose each other, produce each other, intermingle with and depend on each other: they belong with each other, they speak in harmony or in rivalry, they form an ongoing dialogue (94);

²² I want to flag the work of Jason Mohaghegh and Ulf Olsson here for their beautiful works on silence: *The Radical Unspoken* (2013) and *Silence and Subject* (2013).

forced silence is not to be mistaken for intentional silence, and neither is speech:

forced speech is not the same as voluntary speech. (164)

Silence can be *active*; silence is not merely speech's opposite; silence and speech coexist in a mutually dependent relationship, positioned by each other's proximity; and speech demanded is not the same as speech freely given. In other words, Olsson sees silence as involved in the creation and dissemination of agency and as a form of relationality, as the *structure* of the relation, rather than as any positive content of the relation. What he means by this is that silence acts as the vehicle or container through which a relation can be articulated; silence does not form any positive content itself: it does not speak with its own voice. Is this not exactly what Cavell meant when he said that silence is the untying of the tongue: it is not *a thing* but a thing that allows the thing to happen?

When Thoreau sees a neighbour wandering through the cornfields nearby, he is launched into a mediation on a journey that metaphorizes silence not as media but as medium: "A *straight old* man he was who took his way in silence through the meadows, having passed the *period* of communication with his fellows" (*W* 330; my emphasis). This straight old man is clothed in silence as he works past both his fellows and out of the "period" of communication. Time elapses in the parabola of the man's flight away from speech. This period should not be read as though speech can only take place in preallocated times or spaces—scheduled speech—but it can be read as gesturing towards the way in which speech becomes ritualized and regulated by societal convention: "in bourgeois society, the individual confesses [their] subject status constantly, and in forms that seem more individualized than ritualized: everyday conversation is one such form" (Olsson 10). Olsson says that these speech-acts are individualized, as opposed to ritualized, but this is only a

seeming: the ritualization of subjectification via everyday conversation leads to silence as refuge, as we'll see later. Instead, then, the *period* of communication can be read in two ways: first, as something to get through, as in an allotment of time, but also as history, as in something that is passed; second, grammatically, as the completion of a thought, as in the end of a sentence. Thoreau's old man is mapped physically onto the linear topology of time: as he moves through space, he moves past speech and into negativity. Note, for example, that we are introduced to him walking into frame, but he never walks out again—the old man's journey is never completed, because it is the recusal from speech that signifies, rather than any specific ending.

This narrative trajectory, without end, brings us back to another of Thoreau's wry remarks, in his journal:

I have been breaking silence these twenty-three years and have hardly made a rent in it. Silence has no end; speech is but the beginning of it. My friend thinks I keep silence, who am only choked with letting it out so fast. Does he forget that new mines of secrecy are constantly opening in me? (44)

Here, silence takes on a new quality—it can now be *broken* but it cannot be rent. This is not ambiguous. Whereas 'rent' suggests tearing, to sever or cut, 'break' lacks this tactile quality. Something can be entirely broken without appearing so. Thoreau says that silence has no end; the formal quality of infinity also implies it cannot start.²³ In this sense, then, speech is an incision into silence; silence does not incur into speech, but speech intercedes with the natural flow of silence. As suggested in the first sentence, however, such an incision is

²³ As discussed in chapter five, this is one of Henri Lefebvre's favourite metaphors of analysis: to break something down into a constituent part requires a first incision, but something is always lost in the cutting. Something is always uncuttable, irreducible.

doomed to failure, because silence cannot be rent. In consequence, Thoreau lands on Cavell's beautiful reading: where Thoreau is 'choked,' Cavell wants the tongue to be 'untied.'

Finally, he concludes with a reference to the "mines of secrecy," to a wealth of depth. Thoreau's chorus on this theme repeats itself: what seem like contradictions in isolation are natural implications of the broader point Thoreau is making about the nullity of silence. Mohaghegh is exactly right when he calls silence "the richest abdication (where one goes to get lost)" (*Silence* 25). Abdication involves a lack of ownership, and this is exactly what Thoreau means when he says that he "keeps" silence. In both of these examples, silence is mapped elsewhere, either onto physical space or onto time. The null-space of silence has a texture of progress. Walls makes the selfsame conclusion about Emerson's view of the universe: the "cosmic organism is directional, progressive, even purposive" (10). Revealed by Thoreau is something taken up by a host of contemporary critics—an acknowledgement that silence has a quality far beyond its absence.

Such a move can be read as a consequence of what Ben Mijuskovic hypothesizes about a person's relation to consciousness: "an existent darkness in which potential structures of light lie dormant" (*Contingent* 141). This relation of a person to possibility means that "although we share in the same experience of public space, our temporal states of awareness *as* feelings are private. Hence we live together in open space but each of us dwells alone in immanent time" (171). Mijuskovic, in other words, argues a proto-transcendentalist view of consciousness wherein there is an object to be discovered, but because it can only be discovered by a subject, subjectively, that object only exists as a relation to the subject. This means that there is a conviction that "the mind can immediately grasp both sides of the relation of knower and known as well as the relation

itself” (143). Each experience happens primarily in the consciousness of the experiencer, and it is the relation between the experiencer and the object that determines the content of the experience. This position, which Mijuskovic describes as a mixture of Hegelian “Becoming” and Heideggerian “being” (154, 162), rehearses the idea that explicit within an experience is a null-space around which relations form. In that precise phrase, *immanent time*, Thoreau’s time-without-start begins to become clearer.

If we accept any of Thoreau’s propositions—that time is personal, subjective, or infinite—it necessitates that time is immanent. On a visit to Walden Pond, Thoreau became aware of this immanent time. He stands on the bank, gazing across the lake towards the horizon. On June 13, 1850, he writes what he experienced:

As I entered [an area of the Pond], I was affected by beholding the first faint reflection of genuine and unmixed moonlight on the eastern sand-bank while the horizon, yet red with day, was tingeing the western side. What an interval between those two lights! The light of the moon,—in what age of the world does that fall upon the earth? The moonlight was as the earliest and dewy morning light, and the daylight tinge reminded me much more of the night. There were the old and new dynasties opposed, contrasted, and an interval between, which *time could not span*. Then is night, when the daylight yields to the nightlight. It suggested an interval, a distance not recognized in history. Nations have flourished in that light. (J 80; my emphasis)

A number of thresholds permeate this image: the sand-bank, the interval, the daylight, the moonlight, the fact he writes after the fact, his own memory. Dawn—or twilight—operates as a form of immanent time, removed from the chronology of day and night; it is

experiential time, time experienced as a series of imaginative leaps translated into something tangible. Of the light is asked *when* it arrives, and of the transition is said that time cannot be accounted for. This is what Bachelard says of the oblique parts of architecture: corners, angles, “secluded space” act as a “symbol of solitude for the imagination” (174). What David Rampton says of Emerson’s ‘Nature’ is equally applicable here: “Emerson escapes to the woods, not a dream world: his feet stay on the ground [...] Human relations drop away along with his sense of identity” (*William Faulkner* 25). Secluded, oblique, relational, but Thoreau’s feet are still firmly planted—and, as he would say, if they weren’t, no such realization would have been possible.

The complex point here is that for Thoreau, the escape is firmly anchored in real space, but what drops away is static, predictable time. When Thoreau says that time does not apply to this liminal moment, he not only means that the transition is experienced immanently but he also refers back to his idea that there is a gulf in life which cannot be spanned by science. There is an inexplicable *beyond* that cannot be enumerated, merely invoked. If, as Emerson says, it is in these woods that “mean egotism vanishes” (qtd. in Rampton 25), it is because the ego exists only in perpetuity when time progresses. Without the linear, purposive journey of time, the ego is severed into an endless figural motion, doubled back on itself as the only object of study. This is what Thoreau calls the *distance*: not spatial, measurable distance, for this is a distance encoded in time, but as an interval; it is a moment of suspense in which the ego is radically turned inward.

Winter acts similarly with its “*inwardness*” (f 122). He clarifies it elsewhere: “We had gone to bed in summer, and we awoke in autumn; for summer passes into autumn in some unimaginable point of time” (*Merrimack* 432). These *unimaginable points* are moments of

waiting, entirely suspended from speech. It is part of his desire to remove the action from the thought of the action, to separate the two so that experience can rotate around “particular instance[s]”: “We seek too soon to ally the perceptions of the mind to the experience of the hand, to prove our gossamer truths practical, to show their connection with our every-day life (better show their distance from our every-day life)” (J 133). One way to achieve such a separation is to dwell in shifting moments, to turn inwards during transitional times. To return to Suchoff’s taut analysis of Thoreau’s metaphors, these shifting moments act as “a perpetual morning, a renewal which hides the debt of its newness” (675). To occupy this perpetual morning is not merely Thoreau’s poetics, but a designation of his entire naturalist project. As he says, “all memorable events transpire in the morning” (J 89) and “morning is when [...] there is a dawn in me” (90). Again, Thoreau insists that ‘morning’ is not simply a signifier of time, but a method of experiential being; cultivating a *morning* in yourself means being able to enjoy the perpetual morning.

Silence is a method for achieving such inwardness. A consequence of silence-as-lack is that it structures our encounters with not-silence. The second form of silence is as inscription. To bastardize one of Jason Mohaghegh’s phrases, silence acts as an *abrupt lack*, and this is how it creates relations. Mohaghegh’s *The Radical Unspoken* has much to offer in understanding Thoreau.

Mohaghegh’s argument is that writing-as-subjectivity is engaged in a constant mode of “becoming-silence” (xiv) in which the subject becomes “post-identitarian” (xii). This new identity—if it can be called such—repurposes silence not as a tool of open-endedness (22) but as the ultimate sublime (65) of play with “the semblance of no outside” (119). In other words, Blanchot’s disaster:

This species cannot endure the open-endedness, the interminable suspension, hanging in mid-air, and thus struggles to ground itself, turning its back on the void, evading its eyes from what it cannot help but see before it at every turn (the cadaverous). And ultimately it flees from what it knows to be the unknowability of existence, flailing out of its chasms and into the solace of the wasteland that is Truth, a barren terrain but one that nevertheless affords the distressed subject the simulacrum of an escape: a mirage called History. (22)

What Mohaghegh seems to be saying here is that our constant thoughts of death put us in a suspended sense, waiting for the inevitable. This animates our writing, as an extension of our thinking. Turning away is not a refuge, as the cadaverous is like lens-flare on a retina. If, as Mohaghegh says, this cadaverous is really “the unknowability of existence” (such as Blanchot says, such as Bachelard says, such as Kateb says) it is to the illusion of history that we must turn.²⁴

What constitutes history, however, is unclear. For Mohaghegh it seems to be the opposite of what he calls the “zero-degree of being” (65). History can be read as synecdoche for an imaginative telos humans require to make sense of the world they encounter: “Silence epitomizes the terrorizing sublimity of a chasm, the severity of its emptiness somehow simulating a zero-degree of being, a flickering corridor of nothingness where the writer’s voice both accentuates and fails itself” (65). Such as it is, Mohaghegh seems to confuse himself here—the chasm of the cadaverous is escaped from by an imaginative turn to history; however, silence is that chasm, but its zero-degree of being is merely *simulated*; in turn, the move to history is itself only a simulacrum or balm, and so the imaginative turn is

²⁴ Such as Blanchot also says, such as Bachelard also says, such as Kateb also says.

performative rather than experiential. As simply as possible: silence is the cadaverous avatar from which we are always trying to escape. *Gravity's* is again instructive: a state of being beyond the zero is beyond our basest conditioning, the “zero-degree of being” is a confrontation with the fact that death exists outside of time, in a transmarginal zone. In the first chapter, “Beyond the Zero,” Pynchon describes a procession of people running from the bomb as “not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting *into*” (9). To turn to the zero-degree is to encounter the cadaverous “at every turn.”

Located thus, silence-as-inscriptive starts to take shape. Mohaghegh uses the prison to further illustrate his point. In designating heterogeneous space such as a prison, we are creating “an immutable locale that lends the institution [the state] its omnipresent and ever-present authority, for there is nothing left to dispute its colonization methods (the semblance of no outside)” (119). The prison’s panoptic gaze colonizes every inch of knowable space, and in doing so self-generates its own authority. It must function precisely as self-labour. There is no *unknowable* because the knowable is determined by the gaze of the state which extends from wall to wall, from yard to cell. The prison, in other words, lacks a frame—it is the frame. But is this not exactly what Mohaghegh says when he discusses silence? “Though silence is the pseudonym of language’s inundation-point, the altitude at which delirium, excess, and nonsense come to pulverize the stadium of words, it also possesses a more sinister quality as the guarantor of secrecy. Secrecy, in turn, is the guarantor of the threat—an existential violence that pre-emptively circulates through dread (the feeling of eventuality)” (154). Silence occupies an ‘inundation’ point, the point at which presumably language becomes flooded with signification. More importantly, silence guarantees secrecy; arguably, it presupposes secrecy. And secrecy, Mohaghegh argues, is the forerunner of the

threat of eventuality, of explosion and destruction. This is the same violence coded into Olsson's thoughts on the circulation of language and how it violently forces a subject to be realized as a subject through dialogue. Where Olsson and Mohaghegh most seriously diverge is in this concept of the inundation point.

For Mohaghegh, silence is the *nom-de-guerre* of this flooded point. For Olsson, language itself is the inundation point: "When words are produced within an economy of inflation, silence might serve as resistance" (163). This linguistic economy is the backbone of Western dialogue patterns (94), and thus silence act as the antithesis, the drought point. Thoreau makes this point: "What sort of companions are they who are presuming always that their silence is more expressive than yours?" (*W* 402-3). The competitive violence of Western speech forms a series of battles and one-upmanship, the remedy for which is a personal silence free from society. As we'll see later, Michelle Alexander makes a forceful case for why this conception of silence is unsustainable in the era of the new Jim Crow. For now, it is worth mentioning that Olsson concludes his thesis by saying that, "Forced silence is not to be mistaken for intentional silence, and neither is speech: forced speech is not the same as voluntary speech [...] The silencing of others is a constitutive part of becoming a subject, but the silence of others is a threat to that same subjectification" (164, 173). What is missing from Mohaghegh is found in Olsson: personhood, rather than agency.

These two articulations of silence, then, as resistance point, or inundation point, provide two views on Thoreauvian silence. Silence lacks, or it inscribes. They also open up the final version of Thoreauvian silence: as refuge. In a letter to Harrison Blake, U.S. Representative for Ohio, Thoreau praised the Concord skyline: "Vast hollow chambers of silence stretched away on every side, and my being expanded in proportion, and filled them"

(qtd. in Sherman 514). In a now classic essay, Paul Sherman discusses the way Thoreau uses the doctrine of correspondence, which means that “one sees or becomes only what one contemplates” (527). Correspondence also describes the attempt to speak *the thing itself*, but Sherman uses it to position Thoreau’s “natural state” as “silence” (514). Sound and silence, Sherman argues, are “poles of the meaningless and the incommunicable, nature-as-fact and nature-as-merger” and thus “Thoreau tried to find the area of controllable insight, the stage in the process of correspondence at which the spiritual and moral in nature could become a lasting, communicable accession of man” (511). Sherman’s gesture at refuge provides a working definition of silence-as-refuge: not merely a place of escape, but an “area of controllable insight.” Such a definition reminds us of Thoreau’s insistence that there should be “one hour, if not more, which the day did not bring forth” but adds a new dimension. Instead of simply operating as a figure of threshold time, Sherman’s controllable insight becomes a bastion against the workings of society. There is a fatal inevitability in the idea of endless daytime, as though the march of onward time cannot be prevented, but must be. If, as we saw earlier, Thoreau actually saw in the daylight as little or less than he saw during his nighttime walks, it follows that an endless daytime must be resisted.

David Suchoff makes a similar point when he says that Thoreau locates “endlessness not in any primary figure radiating between Nature and man, but in silence, the absence of speech and figure” (679). The opening of endlessness, for Suchoff, is not discovered in the relation itself but in the absence of the relation, or in the absence of the *quality* of the relation, such as its memory, or its ersatz feelings. Suchoff argues that “the indebtedness of the act of expression” is juxtaposed to the “river’s free, *unowned* flow” (676) and it is thus that Thoreau sees his borrowed axe in much the same way as the “inheritance of

literature” (676). For our purposes, it is another minimal figure that Suchoff provides that proves so important. Whereas expression is *indebted*—“a man’s whole life is taxed for the least thing well done. It is its net result” (*Merrimack* 374)—the river is *unowned*. Societal life is a series of encounters in which we become more or less indebted through unequal dialogue, economic reality, or depth of experience, while nature provides truly democratic spaces of communal leasing. It is important then that the river is established as a threshold space, because as we saw earlier, action proceeds primarily from these thresholds; it seems now that the thresholds are also beacons of silence, times of silence.

A third analogy helps clarify this. Mohaghegh borrows Žižek’s definition of ideology as “the fundamental level [...] not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself” (97). That is to say, not an instance of illusion but an underlying structure of illusion that *controls* our perceptions, or at least our vantage on our perceptions. What Mohaghegh goes on to argue is that, “The body possesses a dual possibility within itself, and hence often yields entirely antithetical experiences of the world: in one instance, it sustains the injunctions of power, while in another context it aims to subvert those same columns through transgressive distortions of reality. In either case, it does so in silence” (III).

Unsurprisingly, silence viewed this way can be mapped back onto nature, as Suchoff argues Thoreau discovers in his encounter with the fathomable depths of the rivers around Walden:

The attempt to describe nature in language [...] seems to involve a loss, rather than appropriation of meaning; though naming betokens an original sympathy between language and natural truth, this phenomenal appearance of the river itself resists any

such facile correspondence with the human senses. Thus the bottom gives Thoreau knowledge of the heavens and a wide-ranging imagination only at the price of effacing the certainty it represents. To know the bottom is to lose the capacity for ‘reflection.’ (682)

Suchoff walks through the stages of correspondence: a loss of pure meaning, a phenomenal interruption, the realization that the river bottom represents certainty only so far as it is experienced without intuition. In the movement from everyday to phenomenal experience—that is, deep, sensible, reflective—is an encounter with silence. Fundamental to correspondence is this notion of irrecoverable *loss*. That is to say, in recovering the object-as-it-is, you lose that selfsame object. This is the paradox at the heart of correspondence. Suchoff’s stages: loss, interruption, realization are iterations on the stages I’ve identified in Thoreauvian silence: lack, inscription, refuge.

In this absence, then, is Mohaghegh’s claim that silence contains the threat of eventuality. For Thoreau, the threat of silence is not a threat of eventuality, but the threat of an encroaching society. Thoreau argues that silence contains within it a necessity that means all speech will eventuate in silence, in the same way that all societies will tend towards solitude. This is the crucial point: silence and society function precisely the same way, and each have inbuilt terminus points. Speech does not *create* silence, but falls into silence; society does not imagine solitude, but must become solitude. A lengthy quotation is necessary to establish this:

As the truest society approaches always nearer to solitude, so the most excellent speech finally falls into Silence. Silence is audible to all men, at all times, and in all places. She is when we hear inwardly, sound when we hear outwardly. ... Silence is the

universal refuge, the sequel to all dull discourses and all foolish acts, a balm to our every chagrin, as welcome after satiety as after disappointment; that background which the painter may not daub, be he master or bungler, and which, however awkward a figure we may have made in the foreground, remains ever our inviolable asylum, where no indignity can assail, no personality disturb us. The orator puts off his individuality, and is then most eloquent when silent. (*W* 454)

Here we find each arena of silence: absence, inscription, and refuge. In the opening gambit, it seems that silence only occupies the void left by speech; that is, as people reclaim their individuality in the face of society, the ceaseless tendency towards silence itself forms the absence. It is not silence itself, but this onward march *to* silence, as inevitable as that “subtle chain of countless rings” (“Nature” 45). Thoreau repeats his metaphor of the great depth of silence when he says speech “falls” into silence. In trademark fashion, there is a large ambiguity at the heart of this statement: “As..., so.” Are we to believe that the two are analogous, or that excellent speech necessarily falls silent as society approaches solitude? If the former, the sentences are not related at all, and the preceding discussion is on tenuous ground. But if the latter, there is a strategic relation between the four concepts: society, solitude, speech, and silence. Similarly, what are we to make of this word “excellent”? As with much of Thoreau’s gnomic writing, it seems to operate on the level of implicature, speaking about a subject not named. When he says, for example, that silence is always audible, he seems to be asking, “So why is it that we are so loud?” When he says that society tends to solitude, and speech to silence, he seems to ask, “Why is it in this order?” Recall, too, that earlier Thoreau described winter as when we are most inward. Thus another notch

on the complex metaphors between Nature and experience. Winter muffles, as the radical turn inward, as silence.

The next sentence provides further evidence. As Kateb says, silence is not a final deed, and Thoreau remarks that silence is “audible” to “all men” and “at all times.” Silence is not merely the void left by now-absent speech. Silence is instead *ideological*, the firmament upon which speech is built, and to which speech returns. Instead of *just* absence, silence here functions as inscriptive, describing the areas in which sound can operate. Sound, it seems, is experiential—when we hear outwardly—whereas silence is phenomenal—when we hear inwardly. Sound is attuned to the natural world, whereas silence is premised on our relation to the natural world. Olsson makes a similar point when he says that “silence speaks, it seems. Silence speaks too. But in a different way, without me” (93). When Thoreau says that silence is audible at all times, to all men, in all places, it is not contingent on those men to still be silent; it has an ecosystem of its own, irreducibly itself. Mohaghegh has another beautiful sentence for it: “silence is not so much how the extreme converses as where it happens (the border-town through which the inhuman must pass), then the author must become a competent pedestrian (crossing that which is most wasted)” (157). The competent pedestrian is the writer mostly sensitively attuned to the threshold space that silence occupies: not the end of speech, nor its beginning, but present at all times, hidden in fluent shadows.

Silence is explicitly labelled a refuge, the “sequel,” “background,” “asylum,” that “most eloquent” of gestures. The tripartite structure of silence is finally revealed in this sleight of hand: “the orator *puts off* his individuality, and is then most eloquent when silent.” Thoreau’s vision is finally clarified. We must read this passage as chronological, rather than

as an assembly of thoughts. It is the lifecycle of silence that creates the conditions for this eloquence. Society tends towards solitude, speech towards noise, and individuals towards correspondence. The sequel, background, asylum, and eloquence are not iterations, but act simultaneously. Silence is not *either* sequel or background, but *both*. This is precisely what Mohaghegh earlier argued surrounding the dual possibilities of the body and how such a duality yields antithetical or contradictory experiences of the world. It is not that silence itself is sequel and background—these two facts cannot live in harmony—but that our *perception of silence* is in a constant border-town, our thoughts the pedestrians experiencing silence in all its round multiplicities. Silence, as inscription, refuge, and absence, becomes hypnotic, and unknowable. It curates the terrain of the knowable, an inundation point at which language fails and goes to fail: “I feel that with regard to Nature I live a sort of border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only” (*Walking* 659).

Finally, then, is the framework established for Thoreau’s interaction with threshold spaces. These are spaces both physical and thought, contingent on the complicated interaction of silence, society, and self-labour. Solitude will come to inhabit this inundation point where all these various thresholds come to be mixed, where society, self-labour, and silence are thrown together, broken apart, reformed, remade, and reimagined.

Chapter 2: Praxis

In 2007, Ashley Smith killed herself in solitary confinement: “Guards stood outside the Moncton, N.B., woman’s cell and watched as she tied a cloth around her neck, a coroner’s inquest jury heard. Guards had been ordered by senior staff not to intervene as long as Smith was breathing” (Donkin 2017). 11 short years later, on October 16, 2018, Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government announced a new bill that would “end the use of solitary confinement” (Harris 2018). Criticism falls into one of two camps: either the rights of prisoners are being given more importance than the rights of victims, or this new idea merely repackages solitary confinement under a new, sanitized name (Structured Intervention Units). It is clear that the latter view is the more accurate, but either way there is a growing consensus that solitary confinement is inhumane, cruel, and unusual. There is growing consensus that, maybe, locking someone up alone, for 24 hours a day, months at a time, with no exercise, sunlight, conversation, recreation material, or privacy doesn’t really work to rehabilitate a person back into society.²⁵

In the previous chapter, I argued that Thoreau articulates a concept of threshold space that is real and natural—the river bank, the shore, twilight—and imagined—the pause before speech, the endless train of thought, a deep silence. I identified the motivating factors that contribute to the creation of threshold space as the individual’s place in society, self-labour, and silence. What is implied but so far unspoken about these concepts is the primacy Thoreau places on *the body*. In this chapter, I use these categories to probe

²⁵ I begin with this distressing story because it is too easy to forget the real victims of solitary confinement, and whilst I believe there is great value in using a literary framework to untangle the complex history of solitude and solitary confinement, it must do so in service of the very real, urgent bodily concerns of those enmeshed in these broken systems.

Thoreau's thinking on solitude, and the way it manifests in or as a result of threshold space and thought.

This chapter is split into three sections, with two major parts and one major theme. The first part explores solitude outside of prison; the second explores it within prison. The theme I wish to emphasize here is the intersection between solitude and the body, and the ways Thoreau rejected epistemological or solipsistic definitions of selfhood that would enable solitude to be coopted into a political parlance of industrial progress and societal betterment. The body becomes a site of rejection: a rejection of totalizing, historical narratives, a rejection of linearity, a rejection of universality. Whereas in chapter 1, I demonstrated the way Thoreau began to use language itself to manifest his thinking on the threshold, here I emphasize how the body becomes a focal site of resistance and rejection, itself a framework for an ethical discussion of what solitary practice might look like.

In the first section, I discuss various kinds of solitude that can be found in Thoreau's work: individualized solitude, democratized or industrialized solitude, and universal solitude versus exclusive solitude. These solitudes grow organically from my discussion of society, silence, and selfhood. I use the same method of analysis as in the first section of chapter one: close-reading. This approach enables me to distinguish Thoreau's thinking from Emerson's, which can often seem challenging.²⁶

The second section is split in two. First, I continue my discussion of labour from chapter one. Labour remains an integral context for understanding Thoreau. Then, I take a close look at some of Caleb Smith's conclusions about Thoreau, particularly the way Smith

²⁶ Joan Wry's *The Art of the Threshold: A Poetics of Liminality in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman* does an extraordinarily good job at disentangling the two friends's philosophies. For my purposes, Wry's contention that Thoreau "rejects the abstractions generated by Emerson's transitional cipher in favour of an 'active engagement with the palpable world'" is the most germane (73-4).

accuses Thoreau's philosophy of replicating the oppressive structures he was attempting to reject.

In the third section, I briefly examine the differences between solitude and solitary confinement. This is necessary because for so many critics, the two are often conflated—with Smith, to the point that Thoreau's entire project is called into question. The differences are also useful in enabling me to demonstrate that some kinds of historicism are unhelpful in analyzing Thoreau. I use two very specific prisons—Cherry Hill and Walnut Street—as examples of how solitary confinement diverges from solitude. Section three is not easily separated from section two.

In the final section, I use Adorno and Horkheimer's wonderfully dismissive and violent phrase "absolute solitude" as justification for rejecting Mijuskovic, Smith, and Koch's definitions of solitude. Absolute solitude, I argue, is what these critics find in Thoreau, and in solitude studies generally, and whilst it provides useful ammunition for a discussion, it's decidedly *not* what Thoreau was attempting to create.

Solitude is perhaps what Thoreau is best known for. The gnarled, bearded hermit has entered our collective consciousness as a pioneer for living alone, for self-dependency, and for what now often seems like libertarianism. The legacy of self-sufficiency he left behind was hugely influential on literary movements of the early twentieth century, but his most lasting contributions have been in the field of (then) nascent naturalism and as a leading proponent of thought that leads to direct action. His experimental time living by Walden

Pond resonates still today; a quick search online is more than enough evidence for this. After his premature death, however, he was plagued by accusations of hypocrisy. Thoreau's plan, it was said, was to remove himself from society entirely. It must be hypocritical, therefore, that he routinely went into town, and entertained friends. As Laura Walls points out, "No other male American writer has been so discredited for enjoying a meal with loved ones or for not doing his own laundry. But from the very beginning, such charges have been used to silence Thoreau" (179). For a lengthy rebuttal to these claims, Wall's biography of Thoreau, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*, is a good place to start.

I mention this context here not merely because it is interesting, but because it begins to set the scene for the kind of solitude Thoreau attempted to discover. His was not a prosaic solitude, a *getting away from it all*, a *retreat*, or a *finding oneself*. Modern solitudes are indebted to him, but these solitudes look absolutely nothing like Thoreau's vision.²⁷ Indeed, much of modern journalistic writing on solitude it seems is *against* the anti-Thoreau camp, with articles such as "The Benefits of Solitude: Our society rewards social behaviour while ignoring the positive effects of time spent alone" and "The Virtues of Isolation: Under the right circumstances, choosing to spend time alone can be a huge psychological boon." If a pattern exists, it's that solitude is always seen as *being alone*. The more nuanced views are beginning to acknowledge that solitude is inextricable from the right to access, and that solitude must be reclaimed: "increasingly scientists are approaching solitude as something that, when pursued by choice, can prove therapeutic" (Crane para 2). Or, even more engagingly, "the compulsion [to be alone]" can be traced back to the theory of "loose parts,"

²⁷ "10 Underrated Self-Discovery Trip Ideas," "9 Introvert-Friendly Travel Destinations," "Solo Vacations: 12 Best Vacations to Take Alone," "Splendid Isolation: 50 Amazing Holidays to Escape the Modern World." An especial credit to the introvert's guide which begins, "Be a flâneur in France."

which suggests that nature's infinite variety creates a stimulating environment, whereas artificial constructs make us crave the looseness of our ancestors (Harris para 26). This is to say, then, that clearly something that animated Thoreau still animates cultural studies, over 150 years later.

It is telling that most studies on solitude have appeared in the last thirty years.²⁸ It is telling that most of these studies are psychological or sociological. It is telling that many of these studies are autobiographies. It is telling that Thoreau's greatest biography emerged in 2017, his republished journals in 2009. Clearly, this topic still deserves attention; and clearly, Thoreau's place in it deserves more thought. David Riesman, Rufus Anneli, Thomas Dumm, Caleb Smith, Norbert Elias, Anthony Storr, Ben Mijuskovic, and Philip Koch are the widest read and most insightful on the topic of solitude, but almost none of them agree. This is itself telling. Finally, it is clear that many of these studies take shape under the title "Loneliness." There is something at play here that requires interrogation, and it is my contention that Thoreau can provide the most nuanced interpretation of what truly differentiates solitude from its brethren: loneliness, isolation, alienation. At this stage, the only thing we can truly say about these concepts's differences is that we know intuitively that they *are* different.²⁹

Thoreau's journal is perhaps the finest source of his thinking on solitude. As Walls argues, "solitude and journal-keeping work together: solitude is not for empty reverie but for the productive habit of exploring, pen in hand" (*Thoreau* 85). If Thoreau's solitude was to be self-productive, it was to be written. If Thoreau's solitude was to be, it was to be practised.

²⁸ A slate of new studies are set for publication in 2019.

²⁹ Philip Koch, for example: "Loneliness, isolation, alienation, and schizophrenia are modalities of aloneness, yet none are solitude" (3).

As I argued, writing must provide a framework for thought and action if it was to be effective writing. It was thus in his diary, on October 22, in the first year of his journaling, that he wrote, “To be alone I find it necessary to escape the present,—I avoid myself” (30). No more succinct version of Thoreau’s project is available. Here is contained the seeds of all of Thoreau’s major ideas: aloneness, the texture of time, self-knowledge, and self-labour. The present, as a deeply subjective experience, is inimical to true aloneness, and in occluding the present one must also hide from oneself.

As we saw earlier, Thoreau favours chiasmus when attempting to tease out difference between two inimical but similar ideas. This technique enables him to fulfil what he sees as the requirement for action: that it comes from a long probation. To begin his discussion of solitude, then, required him to find the splits in how an individual situates themselves against the homogenizing or generalizing tendencies of society: “To say that a man is your Friend, means commonly no more than this, that he is not your enemy” (*Merrimack* 392), and, “It takes two to speak the truth—one to speak, and another to hear” (393). This *two* is almost never two separate people. As he says, “My shadow has the distinctness of a second person” (*J* 78), and as Olsson testifies, “Monologue is dialogue [...] a monologue reducing its addressees to an audience, rather than interlocutors” (103). Society interferes with solitude because it insists on the “faint possibility of intercourse” (*Merrimack* 390). Solitude, however, relies on the idea that “What I am I am, and say not. Being is the great explainer” (*J* 45). On one side stands the atomic individual, whose purpose is to see that he does not “pursue [his life] sitting upon another man’s shoulders” (“CD” 12); on the other side, you have society, with its “machinery,” that forces us together “to form marriage connections” (*J* 126-7). In this machinery, Thoreau asks, “What is the use of going to see people whom yet you never

see, and who never see you? I begin to suspect that it is not necessary that we should see one another" (127).

Here, Thoreau alights on the first major quality of solitude-in-society: it is not *necessarily related* to company. The first bell is struck for choice. It is a note all scholars on solitude will strike. What is important, Thoreau says, is that a separation is possible. This separation is imperative, because he finds "advantage in describing the experience of a day on the day following. At this distance, it is more ideal, like the landscape seen with the head inverted, or reflections in water" (353). We should take the simile literally. Company precludes the idealization achieved in memory because it has to be experienced in the moment, as it is. Given the complex way the present collects what Thoreau thinks of as the textures of the past (36), and his insistence that events written down after they have happened take on new and more distinct qualities, it is clear both that experience is *in essence* amnesiac, and that this amnesia is required in order to act. As he says, "We seek too soon to ally the perceptions of the mind to the experience of the hand, to prove our gossamer truths practical, to show their connection with our every-day life (better show their distance from our every-day life)" (J 133). With a degree of selective amnesia built into the very notion of writing and remembrance, Thoreau is able to conclude that we should not "seek expressions [but] thoughts to be expressed. By perseverance you get two views of the same rare truth" (133).

This is why we never truly see people and are never truly seen, because the main elements of kinship are created after the fact, in memory, nostalgia, and shared mental experience:

‘You must ascend a mountain to learn your relation to matter, and so to your own body, for *it* is at home there, though *you* are not.’ Here was the paradox: without matter, soul is without life; but to be a soul, embodied, means that only through a mortal body can soul ‘contact’ the world. This experience should be the source of your writing [...] return to it again and again, until your essay contains all that is important, nothing that is not. This can be done only afterward, at home—for what do we do when we actually reach the mountaintop? We sit down and eat our lunches. (Thoreau 252)

Our social experiences operate the same way. The paradox at the heart of the social interaction is that *we* are social creatures, and thus are at home, but *I* am not. Agitating the boundaries of this problem would involve Thoreau “concentrating on seeing the landscape through layers of memory, as if to look around were to look back into time” (274). The echoes of the social performance infiltrate our memories of them, so that they are at once idealized *and* removed from direct experience. If, as Walls says, the landscape can only be truly encountered either through memory or through seeing time as memory, the act of being in society becomes an act of radical democratization: the actual experience of the event is communalized even when it is experience by only one person.

By starting his journal, Thoreau signalled his openness to the idea of reframing his own experiences through a lens of reiteration, repetition, and recreation: “Is the voice of that gentle folk / Or else the horizon that spoke?” (*Merrimack* 343). The voice is ambiguous, and cannot be properly located. Thoreau explicitly says that we must disrupt our intuitive or commonsensical approaches to time. To remember is to think of the past from the present, and so to adequately understand the past we must do so later. The simple chronology of

event, consequence, future is interrupted by a looping back, a constant attempt to re-inhabit a no-longer-present.

In the fracture between experience, memory, and writing, a new communal consciousness is found: “misery loves company and is relieved by the consciousness that is shared by many, and therefore is not so insignificant and trivial, after all” (J 196). Ostensibly, a contradiction in terms: on the one hand, as “[his] desire for society is infinitely increased; [his] fitness for any actual society is diminished” (195). On the other hand, in communal experience we find sympathy—Emerson’s predicate for society—and solidarity. That solidarity, presumably, would make one *more* ready for society. However, this omits the key word: *actual*. The desire for society is correlated to the fitness for *real* society. As he was at pains to stress, “I must cultivate privacy. It is very dissipating to be with people too much” (370); “I thrive best in solitude” (568); “There is nothing so sanative [than] when I meet none abroad for pleasure” (569), and so on, seemingly endlessly.³⁰ So while Emerson’s “I” against society is rooted firmly at a fixed point (Wry 75), Thoreau’s exists at a “linking point” (75). In this first vision, then, he tried to align the un-necessity of company with our need for shared, communal experience, whilst re-emphasizing the networked or interlinked ways we experience things.

A second way to think about this is in the negative: in the divorcing of solitude from any quality of geography or physicality. Thoreau was famously obsessed with Concord, and considered travelling elsewhere at best redundant and at worst utterly toxic: “It matters not where or how far you travel,—the farther commonly the worse” (353). This wasn’t simply stubbornness (though it may be in part due to the number of palliative ‘holiday’ cures

³⁰ Conducive to well-being, physical or otherwise.

Thoreau was subjected to for his litany of ailments); instead, as Walls notes, “Concord launched America’s Manifest Destiny; it was, quite literally, America’s first West” (*Thoreau* 26). There was a sense in Concord circles that it was geographically unique, that something was happening in Concord that either was not or could not occur elsewhere.

In addition to this manifest, Concordian destiny, Thoreau repeatedly stressed that society was not based on the closeness of bodies. Examples abound in *Walden*: “Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellow” (135); “Individuals, like nations, must have suitable broad and natural boundaries, even a considerable neutral ground, between them” (141); “We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander” (318). Similar refrains are plucked in “Walking”: “From many a hill I can see civilization and the abodes of men afar” (633); “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (627). Whatever space is, society does not require it.

In his poetic *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter*, Philip Koch argues for three modalities of solitude: “Physical isolation, social disengagement, reflectiveness” (13) but also gestures at four more epistemological categories that might be useful for narrowing our search: “What is solitude? What compound of space and self and silence and time?” (1). In Koch’s articulation, space is constituent *of* but not necessary *for* solitude. It is, “ultimately, simply an experiential world in which other people are absent” (15). With Koch’s formulation then, it is the negation that proves the positive; solitude has no actual properties for itself, but epitomizes things that are not: society, sociality, and preoccupation. Interestingly, the

spatial optics of solitude are formed psychologically: “the forming and bounding of solitary experience by social relations is most forcefully brought to attention when the containing web is broken” (70). Koch’s formulation is useful for a number of reasons: it expresses the variety of elements that go together to form solitude; it is sensitive to the fact that space, time, and thought are involved in the process of solitude building; and it discusses the *containing web*. Koch echoes what I argue is foundational to Thoreau’s solitary practice: threshold space and thought. In the complicated web of modalities, in the “compound” of space, time, self, and silence, we discover a constant movement between states sympathetic and predicated on an awareness and inhabitation of the threshold. However, this reliance on the word “simply” is misleading—there is nothing simple about an experiential world in which other people are absent, because, for Thoreau at least, it is not their absence but our *detachment from their presence* that defines the contours a solitary experience.

We should therefore read into Koch’s definition what Wry calls “generative liminality” (112). For Wry,

generative liminality can accommodate contrasting states of synthesis and separation, and the language of paradox often marks a recognition made from a liminal positioning. Liminal spaces are charged with potential, but they are also characterized by degrees of doubt and indeterminacy, oppositions that remain confusing rather than harmonious, as well as more affirming recognitions of human separateness from the more ominous elements of the natural world. (112)

Unlike the simple experiential world of being alone, Wry is able to map Thoreau’s equivocation onto threshold space itself. This mapping allows us to see threshold spaces and states as inherently ambi-valent, containing a host of potentialities that are neither

ameliorative or negative, but can act as vassals for the creation of doubt and indeterminacy—characteristics required for ethical thought. Additionally, Wry inverts the causal chain, positioning the paradoxical thinking that undergirds so much of Thoreau's writing as *resultant* of his existence in these generatively liminal spaces.

More accurately, we can read Koch's definition as a pivot to a kind of solitude where spaces act as a container for a series of relations that are formed and unformed socially. This reading is more sympathetic to Thoreau's ideas because it suggests that solitary experience presupposes social relationality. There is a negative blank state of solitary experience around which social relations ebb and flow, in much the same way as silence is an endless sea into which drops of noise fall. It's important to divorce our ideas of what solitude is from any sense of proximity or geography. Where I believe Thoreau diverges most from these existential or epistemological definitions of solitude is in the primacy he placed on the body. Transcendentalism assumes a body because a body is required for the daily subjective experience of encounter. If we read solitude as a complex mix of communalized experience and individual subjective remembrance, *it must begin in the body*. Without the body, no body politic, no society. I will return to this idea at length in chapters three and five. For the meantime, suffice it to say that we simply cannot forget the body when writing our solitary experiences.

Towards the end of his journal (and thus his life), Thoreau begins a lengthy meditation on how to navigate the demands of society and the desires of the soul. I quote here at length:

In the street and in society I am almost invariably cheap and dissipated, my life is unspeakably mean [...] But alone in distant woods or fields, I come to myself, I once

more feel myself grandly related, and that cold and solitude are friends of mine... I thus dispose of the superfluous and see things as they are, grand and beautiful.... I wish to know something; I wish to be made better. I wish to forget, a considerable part of every day, all mean, narrow, trivial men (and this requires usually to forego and forget all personal relations so long), and therefore I come out to these solitudes, where the problem of existence is simplified. (569-70)

And later, the conceit recurs, as though he picks up the same thought again:

When I get far away, my thoughts return to them. That is the way I can visit them. Thus I am taught that my friend is not an actual person. When I have withdrawn and am alone, I forget the actual person and remember only my ideal. Then I have a friend again. I am not so ready to perceive the illusion that is in Nature. I certainly come nearer, to say the least, to an actual and joyful intercourse with her. Every day I have more or less communication with her. At least, I do not feel as if I must withdraw out of nature. I feel like a welcome guest. Yet, strictly speaking, the same must be true of nature and of man; our ideal is the only real. It is not the finite and temporal that satisfies or concerns us in either case. (652)

There is a lot going on here, but it's vital to understanding the way Thoreau rounds out his thinking on the individual's place in society, and how to approach solitude.

In the first quotation, he plays with this idea of dissipation, contrasting it to "related[ness]." Dissipation is involved in relation, so we should presumably read it more in the sense of depleted, or spread out, involuntarily. Society forces a thinness of being. When he rejects society and goes out alone, he "disposes" of the "superfluous"—which we must take as society itself. Mean, narrow, trivial men are next, in the excision of personal relation,

and in the ground of solitude the *problem of existence* is thus simplified. Linguistically, the problem of existence is thus the preceding section: how to balance the desire for society with its thinness, and how to balance our need for solitude with its lack of social relationality. The remedy, discovered one hundred pages later, squeezes Emerson's recursive, Platonic Ideal into a new, subjective shape. When Thoreau withdraws from society, he is better able to fully appreciate the humanness of his friends. In the process of memorialization and idealization, society is reclaimed from meanness, thinness, and superfluity. But Thoreau realizes that what he says of Nature—that its illusion must be constantly interrogated, that we are always welcome in it—is equally true of man: “our ideal is *the only real*.” Finally, he concludes, again, that it is neither the “temporal” nor the “finite” that agitates us here. Solitude requires a balance between withdrawal and memorialization in which ideals emerge from bodies. Here again we see proof of the way Thoreau's writing creates the conditions under which action is possible: writing affords a framework for thought, and thoughts are worked out through writing; nature provides alternate blueprints through which ethical judgements can be refined and mapped; and it is in the constant movement and oscillation between these states that a solitary practice emerges. Solitude is a threshold poetics grounded firmly in bodies.

The second vision of solitude interrogates how the process of democratization can distort or undermine our encounters with solitude. If the individual's relation to society forms the basis of solitude, government and democracy should allow for this experience to be communalized or at least universalized—that is, made available and accessible to all. David Riesman, the sociologist, offers an interesting perspective in his book *The Lonely Crowd*. He argues that loneliness is a problem that “arise[s] when a society becomes

psychologically postindustrial long before the economic infrastructure is sound enough to bear the weight of steadily rising expectations” (341). In other words, the lifecycle of an industrial state moves from agrarian, to mechanical, to postindustrial far more rapidly in form than it does in the lives of its population. The disjunction between what people expect of society and what is achievable causes an alienation or disenfranchisement akin to loneliness and solitude. Dumm argues similarly, saying that although “isolated subjects [can] be joined together by the machinery of republican government,” (111) the “men and women who inhabit this state are constantly threatened by contradictory demands that, in the never-ending quest for normalization, break up coherent identities” (147). As such, “the modern subject is blown toward the future, never once able to gather up the debris of a self-identity through which [they] might find rest or consolation” (147). For Dumm, the modern subject is the result of the same mechanisms Riesman identifies in pre-industrial profiles. The action of remembrance, earlier positioned as a site of resistance, can be coopted as a means of control: a person’s inability to exist in the present threatens the very essence of a coherent identity.

This formulation is useful for reading Thoreau’s most obviously political essay: “Civil Disobedience.” He argues that solitude is the idealized state, and that blocks to this are the cankerous sores that government spreads through an otherwise hypothetically healthy society: “government is an expedient, by which men would fain succeed in letting another alone [...] I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward” (6-7). Thus, Thoreau is able to say of slavery, “If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, *at least*, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man’s shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too” (12; my emphasis). The “at least” is

imperative: the bare minimum for society requires me to leave you alone. Government is an expedient by which you cannot be left alone. Instead, Thoreau refuses “allegiance to the State,” he “withdraw[s] and stand[s] aloof from it effectually” (24). In doing so, he is able to see that “there will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly” (29). The individual must precede the social, the singular, the collective. The physical recusal follows the same structure as the thought, replicating exactly the logics Thoreau sees in memory and in the process of writing. When we identify in government a collective movement we are mistaken unless people are first established as autonomous. If a society fails to recognize the supremacy of the individual, it is not a society—we are simply calling it one.

As Walls remarks, “Thoreau was a haunted man. He and everyone he knew were all implicated: the evil of slavery, the damnation of the Indian, the global traffic in animal parts, the debasement of nature, the enclosure of the ancient commons—the threads of the modern global economy were spinning him and everyone around him into a dehumanizing web of destruction” (*Thoreau* 390). If “Civil Disobedience” was written in response to the poison of slavery, and directly as a rebuttal to US practice in the annexation of Mexico, then it was a consequent of his views on solitude that articulated his vision of the emancipated person’s duty.³¹ As Gura says, “In relying too much on others, a person becomes a fraction of himself” (185). But more than this, a person demands another be less than they are. This

³¹ See Philip Gura, *American Transcendentalists* for instance: “whether they acknowledged it or not, [slavery was] the reason for which the [Mexican] war was fought. Slavery hindered commerce, manufacture, and agriculture” (194). Or see Howard Zinn: “Such a national government would never accept an end to slavery by rebellion. It would end slavery only under conditions controlled by whites, and only when required by the political and economic needs of the business elite of the North” (*People’s History* 149).

relationship of reliance makes fractions of both parties. As such, “only after an individual experiences the paradise within can he join with others, similarly enlightened, to restore the outer paradise. Only then would institutions, comprised as they were of discrete individuals, change” (185). It was inevitable, then, that Thoreau’s views on democracy and democratic institutions would follow from his views on the individual and society; they had to, because the former is simply a continuation, extension, or suppression of the latter. “‘Resistance’ means not just self-defence, defense of one’s fellow citizens, or even of one’s own nation, but defense of all those lives entangled with our own” (*Thoreau* 230).

Thoreau’s question therefore asks us what happens to solitude when it undergoes industrialization:

Exposing his body to violence (in the form of forced incarceration), in plain view of his neighbours, revealed a hidden violence exercised by the State, making everyone’s secret fear visible and hence actionable. Thoreau told his neighbors that their revulsion, directed at him, was misdirected; their target should not be the jailed, but the jailer. But in their very revulsion, rightly directed, Thoreau found hope: this force was not brute, but human, and humans could make moral choices. Humans could, as [Frederick] Douglass did, resist. (229)

If ethical actions stem from reflective principles, forged in the relation between self and world, the moral, human force would come from individual action alone. “It is not for a man to put himself in such an attitude to society,” he says, “but to maintain himself in whatever attitude he find himself through obedience to the laws of his being, which will never be one of opposition to a just government, if he should chance to meet with such” (*W* 323). The democratization of individuals was not inherently a bad thing, but ran up against unjust,

unfair, and ill-conceived governmental structures. To combat this, individuals must take ethical actions that come exclusively from periods of self-reflection that mirror the moral laws of nature.

This was a position not free of criticism: “many Transcendentalists questioned the efficacy of self-reliance in light of the magnitude of the Mexican War, European revolutionary upheavals, or the horrors of slavery, causes that pitted communities and great aggregates of interests against one another” (Gura 184). But it is a position which has some historical justification, and it aligns with socialist historian Howard Zinn’s diagnosis of what is troubling in most moments of resistance:

Most histories understate revolt, overemphasize statesmanship, and thus encourage impotency among citizens. When we look closely at resistance movements, or even at isolated forms of rebellion, we discover that class consciousness, or any other awareness of injustice, has multiple levels. It has many ways of express, many ways of revealing itself—open, subtle, direct, distorted. In a system of intimidation and control, people do not show how much they know, how deeply they feel, until their practical sense informs them they can do so without being destroyed. (686)

In this view, the *opening up* of the field is an act of revolutionary bravery, because it exposes the very existence of the field that enables these thoughts to exist.³²

The execution of John Brown provides a perfect example of this. Thoreau arranged to speak after Brown’s indictment, to speak on Brown’s behalf:

³² Climate change is the modern example *par excellence* of this question: if 100 companies are responsible for 75% of our environmental issues, what can an individual do? Should people be expected to lead from the front, even without power? Should the least well-off have to give up their cars because our economy demands surplus value from oil? Should everyone be vegan when companies have privatized water? Should we simply accept the imminent slow death of people because, very simply, there is nothing a single person can do? Or, are our smallest actions actually a means of resistance?

That morning he walked the town, spreading word he would speak that evening on John Brown. His family was divided; his friends counseled silence. [Franklin Benjamin] Sanborn—who had helped orchestrate the raid, though Thoreau did not know this—had fled to Canada in a panic, forcing himself to return days later and face events. He in particular begged Thoreau to be silent. Thoreau, unmoved, replied: ‘I did not send to you for advice but to announce that I am to speak.’” (*Thoreau* 684)

It was at this time that Thoreau would deliver some of his most beautiful oration, which I cite at length:

It galls me to listen to the remarks of craven-hearted neighbours who speak disparagingly of John Brown because he resorted to violence, resisted the government, threw his life away!—what way have they thrown their lives, pray?—neighbours who would praise a man for attacking singly an ordinary band of thieves or murderers. Such minds are not equal to the occasion. They preserve the so-called peace of their community by deeds of petty violence every day [...] Our foes are in our midst and all about us. Hardly a house but is divided against itself. For our foe is the all but universal woodenness (both of head and heart) [...] Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perhaps, John Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which I rejoice to know is not without its links. (J 728-729)

In these lengthy passages, a clear pattern emerges. The crux of revolution begins at the individual level, and becomes diffuse as it metastasizes through the body politic. As Zinn says, safety must precede action; but as Thoreau says, petty violence is an everyday

occurrence. For him, and later for Emerson, inaction is a most heinous violence. The chain (of countless rings?) is forged of individuals committing radical acts. We can see this in the scornful way he ventriloquizes his neighbours' comments about Brown. Thoreau counters: "what way have they thrown their lives, pray?" This thinking is decidedly of its time; our modern versions of resistance demand intersectionality that would at least ask: "Is it for those who never experience true violence to dictate acceptable levels of violence?"

Either way, this is not solitude. In both "John Brown" and "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau seems to argue that solitude cannot be democratized. The simplest explanation for this is that institutionalization requires universalization. Universality is absolutely *not* how a radical person should encounter either politics or nature: "You must live within yourself, and depend upon yourself always" ("CD" 19). The shadows of Emerson are undeniable: "Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. The conditions are met if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy" ("Solitude" 481). For Emerson, the balance was possible only through a re-articulation of what society and solitude meant. He introduces a vision of society contingent upon democracy: "That each should in his house abide, / Therefore was the world so wide" (475). This word, *abide*, is imperative—to accept, to continue without fading.³³ Here, it is clear that the house is not an architectural thing; that is a home. The house resounds with a poetics of all that is encircled by one's life. The house circumscribes the borders of one's selfhood as it navigates competing neighbourhoods. As he goes on to say later, "A man must be clothed with society, or we shall feel a certain bareness and poverty, as of a displaced and unfurnished member" (479). Society takes on the look of the temporary, discardable, and the fashionable. For Emerson, then, solitude is possible at the

³³ The informal, to be unable to tolerate, would not have been standard English in Emerson's time.

democratic level because it will necessarily follow the constitution of the individual. If it fails to do so, it is not a proper democracy. Thoreau is less convinced of this wordplay—even if solitude can be democratized, it is useless without the individual.

The important point here is not simply that democracy acts to limit solitude, but that in attempting to create spaces for society, democracy eliminates threshold spaces of solitude. This is most clear in *Walking*:

At present, in this vicinity, the best part of the land is not private property; the landscape is not owned, and the walker enjoys comparative freedom. But possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so-called pleasure grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure only,—when fences shall be multiplied, and man-traps and other engines invented to confine men to the *public* road, and walking over the surface of God's earth shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman's grounds. To enjoy a thing *exclusively is commonly to exclude yourself from the true enjoyment of it.* (636-7; my emphasis)

Thoreau's conclusion is pretty compelling, and seems to undermine the previous argument about universality. However, this is to somewhat misread the concept of exclusivity. Here, Thoreau says that partitioning to create exclusivity means exclusion from true enjoyment. In other words, experience should be universal—as opposed to exclusive—to enable the full enjoyment of it. But this is not quite the distinction Thoreau is trying to draw: “I know not how significant it is, or how far it is an evidence of singularity, that an individual should consent in his pettiest walk with the general movement of the race” (639). This position is complicated and ambiguous, but it seems that Thoreau is using the act of walking to metaphorize the progressive tendencies of a society: not to demonstrate that it will

invariably advance but that it will at least *keep moving*. So it was that Thoreau repeatedly insisted the best walks did not have a purpose—indeed, at the level of narrative, this is a demand: resisting the totality of the progressive narrative meant the introduction of purposelessness.

Earlier, he says that “I had often stood on the banks of the Concord, watching the lapse of the current, an emblem of all progress, following the same law with the system, with time, and all that is made” (*Merrimack* 321). Notice here the disjunction between what appears to be a positive comparison—the river as an emblem of all progress—completely undermined by the word “lapse.” The intuitive reading of lapse as “time” doesn’t hold up, as later in the sentence he speaks quite openly about time. Instead, the current is lapsing, diminishing, being interrupted from its desired course by the physical constraints imposed by the river. This relationship is an emblem of all progress, reflected at the level of narrative.

An analogy with friendship clarifies this point. Thoreau says that “a base Friendship,” never defined, “is of a narrowing and exclusive tendency, but a noble one is not exclusive; its very superfluity and dispersed love is the humanity which sweetens society, and sympathizes with foreign nations; for though its foundations are private, it is in effect a public affair and a public advantage” (401-2). The noble friendship is superfluous and dispersed, but its privacy is a foundation for the public. This is the opposition that Thoreau threatens, then: not universal versus singular, but public versus private. If democracy inhibits solitude, it does so by procreating and replicating foundational myths of progress, by erasing the ability to remember or dwell in the present. A similar disruption occurs when we conceive of the public being consequent of the private. As Thoreau opines at the beginning of *Walking*: “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a

freedom and culture merely civil” (627). This freedom is truly democratic, in that it is indelibly public. The democratization of solitude is a process of elimination: the individual, singular, experiences nature as an intimate friend, a private experience whose foundations are *in effect* public, and democracy, in the guise of society, attempts to inscribe, limit, or erode those public foundations through privatization. Thoreau efficiently puns on the idea of *privatization* as that which seeks to destroy the public. That public, however, starts privately.

One of the only agreements between writers on solitude is that without *choice*, solitude is an unbearable prison. This is a theme that will be further developed in the last section. However, it’s worth mentioning that any system that structurally requires a series of limits be set is fundamentally opposed to the concept of freedom-in-solitude that self-consciousness demands, requires, and strives towards. Opposed to the earlier concept of self-labour, in which a body prepares itself for action by recusing itself from otherwise daily pursuits of cultivating capital for other people, labour functions as an extended metaphor on the lifecycle of the diurnal movements of nature. The laborer’s day ends at sunset, and millions are awake to physical labour, and thus, “The network or medium of economic terms serves the writer as an imitation of the horizon and strength both of our assessments of our position and of our connections with one another; in particular of our eternal activity in these assessments and connections, and our blindness to them, to the fact that they are ours” (Cavell 89). What I take Cavell to mean here is that economic praxis is a paradox that both replicates the limits of our personal horizons *and* prevents us from seeing these limits. If our relationships with nature enable us to occupy a double position of both “indweller” and “spectator,” labour precludes the former, and renders each man at work simply a

spectator “impartially observing” the flow of his own life (108). In other words, economic praxis acts to limit access to threshold space.

Thoreau calls these limits “downward”:

How trivial and uninteresting and wearisome and unsatisfactory are all employments for which men will pay you money! The ways by which you may get money all lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money merely is to have been truly idle. If the laborer gets no more than the wages his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself. Those services which the world will most readily pay for, it is most disagreeable to render. You are paid for being something less than a man. The state will pay a genius only for some service which it is offensive to him to render. Even the poet-laureate would rather not have to celebrate the accidents of royalty. Dangle-berries have begun. (305)

Dangle-berries have begun. It is hard to imagine a more scathing or more Thoreauvian dismissal of labour. Boring, tiring, and unfulfilling, labour for others invariably leads a man downwards into true idleness. We have here so many of Thoreau’s trademarks: the insistence that in being cheated you have cheated yourself, the idea that working makes you less, the sudden appearance of berries.

But these berries are not idle or sudden. They are one manifestation of a broader project to redraw the lines of labour as those of the rhythms of life. If Thoreau could demonstrate the ways labour interrupts the smooth ticking of time, it would be self-evident that those who can should stand aside and practice only self-labour. And the dangle-berry? A North-England varietal of the huckleberry, the latter denoting not merely a fruit but “a small amount, degree, or extent,” and even more tellingly, “A person, *spec. (derogatory)* a

person of little consequence” (“Huckleberry”). For any author other than Thoreau, this would be a fortunate coincidence, but for someone dedicated to the craft of botany, one of America’s most famous, pioneering naturalists, it was surely deliberate. The huckleberry season coincides precisely with that which makes a man “something less than a man.” Whereas “artificial and complex” trade “postpones life and substitutes death,” “it goes against the grain (316), self-labour can be truly regenerative: “sitting beside the inert mass of my works, I take up my pen to-night to record what thought or experience I may have had, with as much satisfaction as ever. Indeed, I believe that this result is more inspiring and better for me than if a thousand had bought my wares. It affects my privacy less and leaves me freer” (321). This is a reiteration of “writing as a form of artistry [that] can mirror the balance of downward and upward trajectories in nature, at least in the way that Thoreau sees descending, submerging processes in the natural world leading to counterbalancing ascents” (Wry 111). Only self-labour forged at the threshold—with its radical turn inwards, and thus a *counterbalanced turn outwards*—can provide a path to some kind of solitude.

I have argued that a solitary practice can be located in the tension between a number of related Thoreauvian concerns: the individual and society, government and democracy, and labour. In this closing section, I will turn to the final case: prison. Prison represents both the perfect illustration of the logics previously discussed *and* a continuation of their themes. In this section, I spend a significant amount of time asking one simple question: if solitude does replicate the logics of imprisonment, *does it matter?*

The two prisons of interest here are the Cherry Hill Prison, now known as Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), and its predecessor the Walnut Street Prison (WSP). Both receive

excellent treatment in Thomas Dumm's *Democracy and Punishment*: what these prisons represented was liberal democracy's counterstrike to a wave of moral revulsion with public and capital punishment. Dumm, and to a lesser extent, Caleb Smith, argue that these prisons were developed as "constitutive of liberal democracy," (6) a response to widespread criticism of public punishment.³⁴ These harshly penal prisons, which became for a time the standard-bearers for modern justice, were ironically a consequence of reformist movements arguing that capital punishment was inhumane (*The Prison* 207). What the new prison model did was to "privatize punishment, to make it intimate and anonymous" (*Democracy* 80), but what they failed to achieve was "revolution in punishment. The penitentiaries had not abolished torture. They had hidden it behind stone walls" (*Haunted Convict* 732). Walnut Street, from 1773-1838, and ESP, from 1829-1971, crucial times in the development of Thoreau's writing, represented, in short, the realization of solitary confinement as a means of punishment rather than rehabilitation. Punishment was anonymized, hidden, and tucked away out of sight; prisoners were left alone, in solitary confinement.

New punishments made sense. Public punishment was expensive, inefficient, and widely condemned by newly energized liberal democrats. The result was a punishment based on isolation, solitariness, and alienation. The paradox is here articulated by Dumm, who argues that "the function of the prison is to constrain those who reject the conditions of freedom imposed by the capitalist order. The true conditions of freedom under such circumstances are conditions of alienation" (3-4). In other words, freedoms imposed by an economic system are only ostensible freedoms; the illusion of freedom is actually a 'condition of alienation.' Outside the prison, a series of alienations, and inside the prison, a

³⁴ See also Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, or Craig Haney's *Reforming Punishment* for similar histories.

level of deep abjection where the body and soul are entirely removed from any possibility of unification. The oscillation between these two states created a deeply abject experience for inmates of the new prisons:

A prisoner who entered the prison at Cherry Hill was immediately placed in the strictest of solitary confinement, with no relief in the form of contact with anyone. This initial period of *introspection* was designed to break the prisoner from [their] immediate past in as clear and radical way as possible. *In isolation, the prisoner would be forced to do nothing but think* [...] The inmate, completely cut off from the past, [their] future in suspension, would live only in the immediate time of his penitentiary sentence. (108; my emphasis)

The result of immediate solitary confinement was a severing of the prisoner from their past, and a cryostasis of subjective time. Prisoners cut off from both past and future become unable to project a stable selfhood because time becomes moot, and life no longer has trajectory. This is the logic that we see implicit in Thoreau's concept of threshold space, and the first logic that needs to be reclaimed if Thoreau's project is to be saved.

Such a point is well made by Austin Reed, in his prison memoir *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict*:

Hard to tell, yet it is true, the way in which the convict *kills* time. Those long and *lonesome* hours in summer, and during the long Sabbath days, when he is consign all day long in his *lonesome* cell, he sits down and pulls an old jack knife from his pocket, and he begins to whittle out a cane and carve it, or tinker at a tooth pick, or perhaps to finish an old jack knife which he has been to work on for more than two months, which after he gets it done he trades it off for a plug of tobacco or a finger ring. Thus

does he sit in his *lonely* cell, a tinkering and *killing* time, until the bell rings for him to get ready for church. (208; my emphasis)

What comes through in Reed's biography is simple: a deep, unending tedium. Inmates in Reed's prison, or in his juvenile delinquent home, were subjected to prolonged periods of complete isolation spliced with periods of intense manual labour: "the 'congregate' system, featuring solitary confinement by night and group labour by day" (*Haunted* 688). Even on a basic textual level, "kill" and "lonesome" or "lonely" recur two and three times respectively. And what is Reed making? A jack knife. The violent language of imprisonment structures the discourse of those trapped inside.

Solitary confinement represented a "concrete sign of civil death" (*The Prison* 83), wherein a prisoner was subjected to "absolute solitude":

the violent turning inward of the self, whose whole being consists in the mastery of material and in the monotonous rhythm of work, the specter which outlines the existence of man in the modern world. Radical isolation and radical reduction to the same hopeless nothingness are identical. Man in prison is the virtual image of the bourgeois type which he still has to become in reality. (115)³⁵

Solitary confinement was not simply bodily—though it was *based on the body*. It was also a psychological removal from the daily ongoings of the prison ecosystem, itself metonymous with daily life outside of prison: work, sleep, eat. In such conditions, prisoners were invariably threatened with the total dissolution of their selfhood into a series of discrete modes of being. Prisoners are first removed from civil life, and then they are removed from the daily life of the prison. Civil death is enacted on two levels.

³⁵ I conclude this chapter with a lengthy discussion of this citation.

At this stage, then, it should be clear that the prison system of the nineteenth century features, prolongs, and extends all of the logics of solitude discussed previously. Labour, alienation, new societies, and solitude are all intermixed in a chaotic blend of punishment, surveillance, and narrative.

Famously, Thoreau went to jail (very briefly). This experience taught him a lot, and galvanized a lot of his punchiest writing in “CD.” Jail for Thoreau symbolized so many of the networks he was trying to disrupt: “I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up” (“CD” 20). Instead of proving the strength of the state, it epitomized its impotence and provided another instance of threshold space, but made artificial. Rather than the organic limits imposed by river bank, beach, and the rhythms of time, jail imposed a manmade limit. As I mentioned earlier, in one sense, the jail’s architecture is a parallax space that shifts a prisoner’s perspective both physically and mentally. But there is another, less apparent read of Thoreau’s short stint in jail. As he says of language, he says of societies: “our sentences wanted room to unfold and form their columns in the interval. Individuals, like nations, must have suitable broad and natural boundaries, even a considerable neutral ground, between them” (W 141). Individuals require *broad and natural boundaries*, and a neutral ground, to be able to properly flourish.

On this basis, Smith makes a large claim that throws a wrench into the machinery of Thoreau’s argument. Thoreau, he says, in “Civil Disobedience,” “arrives at a paradoxical position: [he] wished to liberate the private self from tyranny, but his idealization of the individual self, the inner conscience, risks reproducing the ideological assumptions—about solitary reflection and the relation between the body and soul—that were becoming the

foundations of the modern prison system” (*The Prison* 121). This quotation deserves some unpacking; as I mentioned, it’s not only whether it’s true, but whether its truth is relevant or not.

First, Smith mentions this idea of the “private self” being freed from “tyranny.” Thoreau was notoriously loose with his taxonomy, but we could maybe call his general project an attempt to define the private self. However, the establishment of the private self was to enable the grounds for a *shared* experience open to all people. The private self was forged in communion between self and nature, and whilst each experience was irreducibly subjective, the experience was *universally* available. Thoreau understood universality and exclusivity more as private and public. The “private” self is an oxymoron and misrepresents what Thoreau was actually attempting to do: “The drift of *Walden* is not that we should go off and be alone; the drift was that we *are* alone, *and* that we are never alone” (Cavell 80). Shared experience is crucial to Thoreau’s project—not least because this sharing is enacted between the dimensions of selfhood that occupy one consciousness, e.g. by one person alone.

Secondly, there is a sleight of hand glissade between “individual self” and “inner conscience.” These two are not synonymous in Thoreau; nor is it clear what “idealization” might mean in this context. Indeed, Thoreau lionized selfhood, and the personal self was *an ideal*, but an ideal is not necessarily idealized. The ideal self for Thoreau was far more about its iterability and stubbornness, rather than about its ideal content—it was a transcendental principle, not a goal.

Thirdly, there is nothing inherently risky about reproducing ideological assumptions for different results. This is Smith’s main critique of Thoreau, and it is not clear why there is

a danger here. Indeed, the modern prison state was premised on solitary confinement, and the forced tension between bodies and consciousnesses, but if we accept Smith's early proclamation, Thoreau was attempting to *liberate* the self, not entrap it. If we reject Smith's assertion, it is because Thoreau was not interested in ideological assumptions, because ideology politicized nature. There was no grand network of illusions undergirding our interactions with the world; there was simply nature, and a political latticework that could be superimposed onto it. In the simplest terms: the same evidence can have antithetical conclusions, and that does not mean the evidence should be discounted. This is the premise of empirical data, and the entire scientific method of Thoreau's observational, experiential style.

Finally, this is not a paradox.

This matters, because if we accept Smith's interpretation of Thoreau's project, his thoughts on prison take on an entirely different cast. When in "Civil Disobedience" he says, "It is easier to deal with the real possessor of a thing than with the temporary guardian of it" (11), he does not replicate the ideological structures that produced slavery—the logics that would be absorbed into the modern prison-industrial system—but divests the state's claims to guardianship over the moral trajectory of history. If Thoreau is not only reproducing but actively propagating the ideological assumptions that structured the modern prison state, his entire project is doomed. *Walden* seeks emancipation, not confinement. But if the two are the same, even solitary emancipation has at its root a poisonous penal ideology.

As I argue in chapters four and five, however, these logics developed conterminously but not because of each other. As Kathleen Burgess says, "In nineteenth-century America, questions about individualization and solitude were taken up in a peculiarly literal and

concrete way, in the building and rebuilding of prisons whose architects struggled for ways to signify the solitary self/subject” (3). Burgess articulates a view in which romantic conceptions of the self are reliant on penal discourse (3-8), but although she finds in the transcendentalists a core of carceral language, her thesis is mostly concerned with Nathaniel Hawthorne. I do not disagree with Smith or Burgess: there is in transcendent discourse a dangerous replication of prison logics. But Thoreau was not interested in a static discourse—a transcendence properly conceived was one that could not be fixed.

We must, as Austin Reed reminds us, leave “those lonesome solitudes of the dead,” (178) and focus on the shared solitudes of the bodies of the living. The real difference between Smith’s reading and Thoreau’s project should thus be seen as the difference between solitary confinement and solitude. Demonstrating the differences in these two situations should dispel the idea that Thoreau’s ideas were contributory or at least salutary to the modern prison system. While I do not wish to define Thoreau’s solitude, it is possible to tease out some patterns in his thinking, using these to argue against Smith’s conclusion(s). The differences are first, the idea of an experiential world; second, the idea of the threshold; and third, *absolute* solitude.

Philip Koch’s *Solitude* is again instructive. What Koch calls the “intuitive features of solitude,” the “physical isolation, social disengagement, [and] reflectiveness” are found in solitary confinement” (13). Similarly, Koch says, “the physical isolation, the reflective cast of the mind, the freedom, the silence, the distinctive feel of space and time—all of these flow from that core feature, the absence of others in one’s experiential world” (27). This sentence could function as a definition of solitary confinement, especially in light of the Reed passage cited above. Cells are “concrete sign[s] of civil death,” a “tomb of abjection and the

birthplace of a new humanity” (Smith 83; *ix*). The experience of solitary confinement is an experience of a constantly delayed death, or deaths. The reborn prisoner emerging from the “theater of society’s founding political myths” would be greeted by confirmation of the power of those same myths: the failure of the rehabilitative project, and its abandonment. Qualities of Koch’s solitude are easily transferred to the solitary cell. Additionally, the phrase “experiential world” has issues: as many have argued, there is nothing but experience. The world is experiential by definition, and so solitude is not remarkable or unique in this sense.

Another problem is spelled out by Blanchot, and reiterated by critics of loneliness like Norbert Elias, who say that, “It is not actually death, but the knowledge of death, that creates problems for human beings” (5). The confinement cell as an ultimately unknowable space “designed to break the prisoner from [their] immediate past” was an encounter with the knowledge of death, with the promise of rebirth at an indeterminate point in an unseeable future (*Democracy* 108). The solitary cell, in other words, is not experienced insofar as it is endured. Alternative readings, such as Mohaghegh’s idea that the state owns all knowable space in prison, or Blanchot’s suggestion that only that which *can* be experienced can be known, suggest that any *knowledge* of death—predicated on the knowability of time and self—precludes an *experience* of it in the cell. There is, in other words, no experience, because there are no unknowns except death, and death cannot be experienced, and therefore it cannot be known, even if it can be lived.

The first difference is thus that the solitary cell is not the first step towards the emancipation of the soul. While it occupies a similar psychological profile, it is only experienced after the fact in journals or memoirs. What we should be careful of assuming, however, is that we can simply discount these differences as a matter of *agency*. Koch, Elias,

Mijuskovic, and Thoreau all to some extent imply that freedom is a precondition for solitude, rather than the other way around—freedom precedes solitude, even while freedom can be discovered in solitude.

Solitary confinement as an ideological or ontological construction, as put forward by the Fields, is supported by props both literal and subjective, such as Smith's theatre of the political mythos. It is also bounded by prisonization, like when solitary confinement is used to *protect* a prisoner. Confinement is not dependent on these ideas for its power, but it is manifested this way. Vitally, solitary confinement “ends the possibility of meaningful experience by translating the inner dialogue of solitude into a monologue of desolation” (Dumm *Loneliness* 40). It does this by forcing prisoners “to do nothing but think” (*Democracy* 108). This is not thus simply a removal of agency—important as agency is—but even more insidiously it is a rewriting of the limits in which agency can be developed, a reframing of the optics of a person's ability to encounter themselves as individuals in a network of social relations. As Koch says, “the difference between solitary and social freedom inheres in the objects with which each freedom works” (138). But in solitary confinement, the object of the freedom is the ontology of the prisoner—the object in which freedom inheres is the body, but this body's condition for freedom is negated by its existence as an object.

Therefore, when leading critics of solitude say things like “self-discovery is above all the realization that we are alone: it is the opening of an impalpable, transparent wall—that of our consciousness” (Koch 157) they are not wrong but they miss the point entirely: “Every house is a hospital. A night and a forenoon is as much confinement to those wards as I can stand” (§ 568). If our experiential world is bracketed by two oppressive spaces—our own

consciousness and the wall of the prison—questions of agency are less imperative. The transparent wall of consciousness is superseded by the brick wall of the cell, self-discovery is interrupted. A world is not experiential when the body has no experiences.

A second problem arises here, and it is a problem identified by Smith: “the prison condemns offenders to a kind of living death as a precondition for their resurrection into the community of the living” (*ix*). The cell functions *exactly* the same way as Laura Walls says the mountain Katahdin does for Thoreau: “He brought nothing off the mountain but his own body, which he now knew was just as material to this planet—this ‘star’s surface’—as rocks, trees, and wind. On Katahdin, Thoreau found his truth. It was deep, even bottomless, yet deeply intimate and familiar—and utterly, unutterably wild” (207). An emancipatory experience for Thoreau indeed, but as seen in chapter one, an experience that could only be written in hindsight, at at least one day’s remove. Without this temporary delay, the experience was untranslatable, and thus would not bring Thoreau any closer to the object itself, in this instance his own body. The problem with the prison cell is that mediation doesn’t exist. Although the prisoner is engaged in the exact same discussion as Thoreau was with Katahdin, there is no possibility of memorialization, translation, or respite—this is not a long probation, but an endless probation, one in which time and space become null to the degree that any kind of recollection lacks granularity or specificity.

This leads into the second difference between solitude and solitary confinement: the threshold. Michelle Alexander’s instructive work on the New Jim Crow is a useful text for understanding nineteenth-century currents in prison reform and their impact on modern penitentiaries. The parallels are not slight: “more African Americans are under correctional control today than were enslaved in 1850” (151). For Alexander, “the biggest problem the

black community may face today is not ‘shamelessness’ but rather the severe isolation, distrust, and alienation created by mass incarceration” (137). Such incarceration “creates a deep silence in communities of color, one rooted in shame” (139). The legacy of this shame is “more than interpersonal. The silence—driven by stigma and fear of shame—results in a repression of public thought, a collective denial of lived experience” (142). It is true the patterns Alexander notices are replicable into Thoreau’s solitude. But what Alexander is saying here is that there is no ‘rebirth’ into the community of living, because incarceration creates a culture of silence which amounts to a *collective denial of lived experience*. Whereas Blight can justifiably say that the reminiscence industry became a lynchpin of white memorialization, no such memorialization is available to people of colour released from prison.

When, therefore, Dumm remarks that “the subjects of the penitentiary were confronted with another truth—that loneliness was to be a shared condition,” (112) he misses the point that its condition is only shared while it remains ongoing. The shared experience of incarceration is contingent on its presentness, in its experience of the now. But as Thoreau says, presentness is not *sui generis*. It is created out of memories, it is made of the past. In Dumm’s view, the sharing of loneliness only occurs during imprisonment because imprisonment can only be experienced *in the now*. This is his overarching argument, that time is encountered only in the present for the prisoner. But it is not Thoreau’s argument, nor Alexander’s, because true experience requires distance, and when that distance is forestalled by a pervasive culture of silence and shame, the experience cannot be shared nor even experienced. Dumm says that a prisoner is cut off from his immediate past, and that experiences must therefore take place in only the present. But the present cannot

exist without the immediate past; if prison can only be experienced in the now, that *now* lacks any ontological quality, any ethical soundness, for Thoreau, because it can neither be shared nor remembered.

In its simplest terms: solitary confinement fails to act as a transitional space because it is not a space of solitude: “I had withdrawn so far within the great ocean of solitude, into which the rivers of society empty, that for the most part, so far as my needs were concerned, only the finest sediment was deposited around me” (W 144). Thoreau could not possibly have known how prescient this metaphor would be—indeed, prison has become a great ocean into which the rivers of marginalized society empty, but it has not become a space into which you can withdraw. It is a space which draws around you. This metaphor has a second use as well: whereas the river-bank, cabin, and mountain all act as transitional spaces, solitude is an *ocean*. In littoral metaphors, nothing could be less transitional than an ocean. Tautologous as this construction is—solitary confinement is not solitude because it is not a space of solitude—this does align with Thoreau’s *solitude as practice* view.

That the threshold exists in solitude but not solitary confinement reverses the transition that critics of prison identify. As Smith is at pains to make clear in his introduction to Austin Reed’s prison memoir, with the democratization of the prison system—and with its industrialization—“home is only a way station, a place to rest for a little while, between the Refuge and the prison” (621). He goes on to say that “the New York system did not just reorganize prison discipline. It changed the status of convicts in the eyes of the authorities. They weren’t lost souls to be reclaimed. They were usable bodies, stripped of legal rights, condemned to work without the prospect of gain—bound laborers under state control” (697). Smith comes close to breaking the euphemism here: the New York

prison system was slavery under a new name. If labour was the only respite from solitary confinement, it is indeed “hard to tell the way in which the convict kills time” (Reed 208). Whereas threshold spaces in Thoreau are steps to pure transcendental encounters with oceanic feelings, threshold spaces in prison are external to the prison: the prison is the only site. These spaces are not thresholds—they are holds: on voice, on movement, on emancipation.

What is becoming clear is that while solitary confinement replicates the logics of solitude, it is Janus-faced, distorting the ideological assumptions of self-correspondence into a method of surveillance and control. Whereas voluntary solitude, even with its invisible ontologies of agency, *could* be palliative, involuntary servitude was not and never could be solitude. Solitary confinement was a euphemism for the mechanization of a prisoner’s body, a new disciplinarian control over the limits of an inmate’s being.

To close this chapter on solitude and prison, I return to the citation from Horkheimer and Adorno discussed earlier and thus to my third difference between solitude and solitary confinement. In this citation, we can see how the shift from the atomic individualism of the enlightenment was coopted by industrialization to become the standard-bearer for a new caste of economic oppression, turning prisons into factory farms in which inmates would replicate, ironically, the very logics that had entombed them in the first place:

Absolute solitude, the violent turning inward on the self, whose whole being consists in the mastery of material and in the monotonous rhythm of work, is the specter which outlines the existence of man in the modern world. Radical isolation and radical reduction to the same hopeless nothingness are identical. Man in prison is

the virtual image of the bourgeois type which he still has to become in reality. (qtd. in *The Prison* 115).

Such an excoriating commentary deserves a lengthy interpretation.

Adorno and Horkheimer introduce a wonderfully concise phrase here: absolute solitude. Its definition seems relatively simple: the *violent* turning inward *on* the self. This, however, is perhaps less clear than it seems. Ellipsis dictates that we expect the sentence to run “the violent turning inward *of* the self,” but it is actually a violent turning *on* the self. With this simple modifier, they furnish us a far more articulate and nuanced version of ‘agency’ as it applies to solitude. The clause provides further context: the violent turning inward on the self occurs when being consists exclusively of the mastery of material and in the monotony of work as the defining trait of a person’s being. Compare this with what Thoreau says of winter: “Winter, with its *inwardness*, is upon us. A man is constrained to sit down, and to think” (*W* 122). The sameness is illuminating. In both definitions, a person is constrained, but in Thoreau’s, they are constrained by nature, whereas for Adorno and Horkheimer, they are constrained by the mechanization of the soul. Thoreau agreed: you can find the phrase “the machinery of modern society” throughout his writings. In Thoreau, inwardness comes upon a person; in Adorno, it comes parthenogenetically, from within the person, in a recursive gesture where the self turns upon itself.

The assonance of the second clause establishes a linguistic pattern we also see in Thoreau: “the machinery of modern society, that young people may be brought together to form marriage connections” (*J* 126). This pattern is contrasted to the dissonance of the other turns in the sentence: absolute solitude has a trace of sibilance, but it is buried under clipped diphthongs which force a violence onto the words; the distorted assonance of “man

in the modern world,” the echo interrupted by the ghostly “spectre”; and the chiasmus of isolation to reduction. Such techniques are not simply good rhetoric; books must be read, after all, “as deliberately as they were written” (W 101). Instead, these constructions are autologous to the message they convey: where the self turns inward in a violent gesture, language also turns violently against itself with a seemingly redundant repetition in “absolute solitude.” Surely solitude is already absolute? But is this not a perfect example of Thoreau’s “most attractive sentences,” which are “the surest and roundest” (373)? But more than this, is it not also a condemnation of the euphemistic way we speak of psychological prison architectures and their imposition of absolute solitude onto being? The turn to a poetic register is intentional and instructive.

Adorno and Horkheimer recommission the language of the *spectre* but they do so in an interesting way. Although the turn to prison at the end of this citation is abrupt, it is telegraphed by this spectre. Absolute solitude, they say, *outlines existence*. Prison is the space that draws around being, as absolute solitude delimits the horizons of being. The two are synonymous, it seems. One of the causes for this is communism’s notion of work, but a second cause is that self-labour becomes impossible because work occupies too much time and space. If self-labour is impossible, prison becomes entirely incommensurate with any notion of acceptable solitude.

This theme is continued when they say that isolation and reduction are identical; the reason they are identical is because they terminate in the same “hopeless nothingness.” One reading of this substantiates Smith’s view of Thoreau’s ideological project. Whatever Thoreau’s emancipatory motivations, it goes, if the end result is the same, the journey is irrelevant. In another light, however, it testifies to Thoreau’s insight, as the oceanic feeling

was directly counterposed to this idea of hopeless nothingness. There is no *nothingness* in Thoreau—the terminus to the encounter with radical reduction was, and remains, a radical encounter with *everything*. Thoreau would likely counter Adorno and Horkheimer’s assertion by suggesting that reduction has nothing to do with isolation, and that most reduction is in fact enlargement in the face of a sublime beyond.

Finally, Adorno and Horkheimer conclude that a man in prison is the “virtual image of the bourgeois type which he still has to become in reality.” This is interesting, because it reveals a few underlying logics at play in their work. The bourgeois type is an unfulfilled end-point which, while inclined towards completion, is incomplete. While mechanization certainly tends towards this realization, it is not inevitable.³⁶ Secondly, with this logic at play, man becomes an avatar of the bourgeois type, rather than a completion of it. Prison becomes an experimental petri dish in which bourgeois politics are tested and stressed.

In the simplest way possible: prison and related negative areas replicate the logics that create solitude. But in doing so, they do not produce the same result. Whereas solitude is the turning inward *of* the self, absolute solitude is the turning inward *on* the self. In my reading, Smith’s turn to Adorno and Horkheimer actually undermines his case against Thoreau, but in doing so he provides an absolutely vital framework for understanding the difference between solitude and absolute solitude. This distinction appears slight, but it can help clarify why these apparently identical situations can cause such different results. It also shifts the caricature of solitary confinement away from the deep meditative reality of

³⁶ Frederick Jameson has some interesting thoughts here. See for instance his essay in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg’s *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* where Jameson discusses the modern subject as torn between spaces of “infinite equivalence” and the realization that subjects have become enmeshed in a “set of radically discontinuous realities” (349-351).

solitude, and allows us to reframe the concept of access not as a question of agency but of result.

This distinction reiterates Walls's grand point about Thoreau's goal: to identify, "in the wastelands at the margins of commerce, the center of a new system of value" (184). These *white spaces*, as she calls them, "were not of the map, but in the mind" (209). Thoreau used spatial cues to augment his mental acrobatics, with "objects as mindprints" (390). In his solitude, encounters with these objects became more possible, more viable, and more realistic. In the depths of absolute solitude, this would not be possible—the natural triggers that inspired so much of Thoreau's introspection are all absent. This means that while the object of study remains selfhood, the only learning material is the self, and the prisoners of absolute solitude are thus caught in a recursive gesture doubled back on themselves.

Henri Lefebvre has a nice phrase for this, and one that continues Adorno and Horkheimer's Marxist imperative. He says that the "pathological state," the state which exists like a pathogen, replicating secretly and insidiously until it kills the hosts, creates conditions whereby "instead of participating fully and consciously in social praxis, the individual constructs himself on the basis of a particular form and a representation of that form. In his effort to rediscover the hidden relation he strays even farther from it and loses his powers (his possibilities). He becomes imprisoned within himself" (*Critique* 1301). What Lefebvre says here is simply another ideological or invisible ontology: a material existence to the pathological state takes the form of society, and every individuals' existence within that society is performative, masking real social praxis. In this performativity, individuals become imprisoned within themselves. This is precisely the point Adorno and Horkheimer make

when they say that man in prison is the virtual image of the bourgeois type, as the bourgeois type is the terminal end to the performance of a limited identity.

With this reading, then, absolute solitude's most noxious consequence is that it entombs a person within themselves. Absolute solitude is found not only in prison—there is a whole other study to do on ageing populations and people with degenerative mental conditions—but it is only imposed by men there.

Unnamed but not absent so far, a brief explanation of time's relation to solitude rounds off this discussion nicely and sets the scene for chapter three and Ellison's *IM*. *Time* is deeply embedded in discourses that surround narrativity and historicity, so it's worth just making this connection explicit. One central tenet of Thoreau's solitude is in the way it interrupts and disrupts chronological telos by situating a person in an endless horizon of present, reactive against the past. Thoreau's journal, and subsequently his writing in *Walden*, became a catalogue of fractal experiences. Experience in hindsight was not just the only way to truly experience an event, but it opened new perspectives invisible during the event's present. Between the journal and this reliance on 'hindsight,' time is a crucial site of resistance for Thoreau, particularly in his attempts to disrupt linear, industrialized narratives of manifest destiny. Thoreau's mission was to reassess nature, and the landscapes he knew so intimately, through "layers of memory, as if to look around were to look back in time" (*Thoreau* 274). In doing so, he began to translate landscape into material memory; he became nature's amanuensis: "Thoreau's [journal] made the very act of writing visible on the page" (274). The journal actualized not just the content of the thoughts, but the actual process of writing itself. So it was earlier that I regarded Thoreau's specific style as

autologous, and not just simply wordplay. So it is now that this very act of writing makes time visible on the page. The way he achieved this was in the two discoveries identified by Walls: first, there are material truths to be found in nature; second, these facts will “depend upon, and will reveal, the exact height, breadth, and depth of individual moral character” (189). In other words, whilst there is a material reality *beyond* what we see, our experience of these realities is impossibly subjective, and therefore the moral laws of the universe constitute the ethical contents of the spectator only insofar as the spectator is engaged in a network of memory and listening.

The quality of absolute solitude is this exactly: it enframes the person’s ability to apprehend clearly the object of its subjective enquiry. Whereas solitude liberates a person to be able to experience nature as an object anew through a patina of memory, absolute solitude imprisons a person in a chain of experiences which demands resolution but cannot be resolved. Subjective time *does not exist in solitary confinement*. It *does not exist in absolute solitude*.

In this chapter, I have shown how Thoreau’s thinking on solitude is enmeshed in his thinking on society, silence, prison, and self-labour. A concatenation of these thoughts resolves in the distinction between solitude and absolute solitude. There are traces of Koch’s experiential world, Mijuskovic’s singular consciousness, and Walls’s infinite memorialization, but so far, the majority of Thoreau’s thinking seems to be in negation rather than affirmation. These chapters on solitude have primarily been a series of *it’s nots* rather than *it is’s*. There is utility in this approach, as it opens the ground for a more versatile understanding of solitude’s consequences. At the moment, our definition of solitude is redolent of Cormac McCarthy’s “rough likenesses thrown up at hearsay after the things

themselves had faded in men's minds" (*Blood Meridian* 91). This is intentional. As I will continue to argue, defining solitude is not something Thoreau ever attempted to do—it was an experience, not simply an idea, a practice, rather than a definition.

Throughout chapters one and two, I have also gestured at the way Thoreau rejected an industrial historicism that sought to impose linearity and progress onto a society cleaved between individual needs and societal obligations. This rejection undergirds the notion of the threshold in the way it carefully attempts to balance a personal, subjective time with an objective, imposed time. Similarly, I said that when Thoreau uses silence to bring about the future, he was only able to do so because threshold space enabled him to refuse society's voice, to refuse the onward march of nostalgia, history, and progress. Time and progress are relevant to both the discussion of absolute solitude and solitary confinement: in the abandonment of time, and the imposition of timelessness. Histories were stripped from prisoners, and narratives of progress denied.³⁷ I have also attempted to keep my discussion placed firmly in the body: instead of redefining humanism, as Smith recommends, or reconfiguring our discussion in terms of nihilistic epistemologies, as Mijuskovic favours, I have argued that it is imperative not to forget that solitude is primarily a quality of the body, an ontological experience.

In chapter three's discussion of *Invisible Man*, our understanding of how time intercedes with solitude becomes tense. So far, I have mostly discussed a very specific brand of solitude: natural, white, and amorphous. In the next chapter, I compare these stylizations to Ellison's urban, artificial, urgent "dispossession" and how it can help clarify some of the

³⁷ The Leonard Cohen exhibit, *une brèche en toute chose*, at Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain, features a work by Jon Rafman which makes this point beautifully. Rafman's installation is a meditation on how consciousness can gain access to itself through a poetic inquiry into our *placeness* in the world. The work is available under the title "LEGENDARY REALITY": <http://jonrafman.com/>

lingering contradictions that Smith identifies in Thoreau's work. Rather than limiting my discussion to prisonhood, to the strict confines of actual prison, I broaden my discussion to the following questions: what happens when the logics of the prison spill out onto the streets? What happens to the most marginalized, to those without access, to the Ashley Smiths, to those for whom even the idea of a transmarginal zone is a fanciful thought experiment at best? What happens, ultimately, to *solitary bodies*?

Chapter 3: Dispossession

“The appearance of adherence, rather than substantive change, was paramount” (Theoharis 103)

On February 14, 2018, Nikolas Cruz walked into a high-school in Florida and murdered 17 people with an AR-15 rifle. Depending on which statistic you favour, it was the seventh or fifteenth school shooting of 2018. Fifteen shootings in forty five days. A school shooting every fifteen days.³⁸³⁹ On Wednesday, February 21, 2018, thousands of students across America walked out of their schools to protest America’s criminal inaction against gun crime. As one of the students remarked: “If you can’t get elected without taking money from child murderers, why are you running?” Necessary and poignant as this protest is, it offers strange evidence for a phenomenon unique to gun violence in the United States. And, strangely, it speaks to issues raised in chapters one and two, specifically in how we create uplifting narratives of social progress.⁴⁰

In this chapter, I’ll show how Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* rejects narratives of social progress. Ellison’s novel is a meta-commentary against writing, both for and against its own pronouncement that “hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action” (13). It is thus that I begin this chapter with citations from the Parkland protests, and Jeanne Theoharis’s important *A More Beautiful and Terrible History* (2018).

³⁸ Maybe six months after I wrote this originally, the non-profit group “Everytown for Gun Safety” announced that up to October 4, there had been 65 school shootings in 2018. There were 65 in 2017. There have been *more than 300 mass shootings in America in 2018*. A full list of school shootings can be accessed here: <https://www.the74million.org/series/2018-school-gun-violence/>.

³⁹ In 2018, some sources claim, there was on average *one school shooting per week for the entire year*.

⁴⁰ Other examples abound. Everyone has read stories of the man who walks 12 miles to work every day. At the end of these allegedly awe-inspiring, uplifting stories, the employee is normally given a car. No one asks why someone working full-time cannot afford a car.

A brief discussion of Theoharis's argument, and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between* sets the stage for this chapter. Theoharis argues against certain kinds of historicism that erase or obscure the way racist ontologies structure our encounter with events of the past. The more entrenched a sumptuary code, the more it *appears* shocking when it explodes. She recounts the story of a student involved in a sit-in protest against segregated schools. The student says: "I myself desegregated a lunch counter, not somebody else, not some big man, some powerful man, but little me. I walked the picket line and I sat in and the walls of segregation toppled. Now all people can eat there" (153). It is no coincidence that the language of walls reoccurs—this metaphor resonates with activists because it embodies the way invisible ontologies can have material impacts on those left outside the sweep of progressive history.

This vignette is redolent of Thoreau's idea that precedent can affect change so large that all subsequent versions are changed. The student says that she—alone—through a singular action—sitting down—ended segregation in a specific place. Evidence this good could not be fabricated. But Theoharis's overall argument is a constant riposte to this kind of historical sacralization. Theoharis argues that "movements do not result from the first or second outrage but from an accumulation of injustice that brings people to a breaking point" (198). This is in no way to demean the student's achievement. She did, quite simply, end desegregation at her school. But her action did not exist in a vacuum, and it is a historical injustice to pretend it did. Theoharis cites, as examples to the contrary, the students arrested before Rosa Parks for violating the bus laws; the euphemistic "busing" crisis in New York and Detroit surrounding desegregation in the wake of the Supreme Courts' *Brown* decision that found educational segregation unconstitutional; she also cites Coretta Scott King and a host of other forgotten women to prove that contemporary

mythologies of “history as natural progress” are weapons of oppression themselves (7). Individuals are lionized, events like the Watts Riots in LA are seen as *sui generis*, and history is seen as indelibly progressive. But what these histories miss are the “collective struggle[s]” and the often decades-long battles that effected change (36).

Ta-Nehisi Coates tells a similar story. He took his son to see Studio Ghibli’s masterpiece *Howl’s Moving Castle*; on the way out, a white woman pushed his son because he wasn’t moving fast enough, no worry that he was a child (61-63). Coates challenged the woman, and other people got involved. For Coates, the story is a pregnant reminder that “a society begins every success story with the chapter that most advantages itself, and in America, these precipitating chapters are almost always rendered as the singular action of exceptional individuals” (63). But, he says, “this is a myth” (63). Both Coates and Theoharis are aware that only narrative complicity enables us to imagine one person changing the course of history, but perhaps this story tells us more about the reality of contemporary America than the girl who changes the lunch-hall policy through one inspiring courageous action: in Coates’s America, nothing changes except him.

But Theoharis’s point is also revealing in light of the Parkland protests. Coverage of school shootings is always referential: it is the deadliest *since*, larger than Sandy Hook, worse than Columbine. Historical continuity is superimposed on events that *are* continuous, but paradoxically, this continuity is used as evidence that nothing can change, not that something has to. Theoharis suggests that accumulative pressure causes material change, rather than unique, explosive protest; but, the landscape of discourse around gun control reform shifts slowly, by increments, so slowly it often appears not to move. Pro-gun activists, meanwhile, seem immune to any sense of complicity. Narratives that seek to limit gun

violence are singularly resistant to change: it is always assumed that something has to give, but almost nothing has yet. In no way am I suggesting that protest is not worthwhile, or that the children should not seek to protect their own lives; that is antithetical to everything this project argues. Instead, I use this example because it is depressingly illuminating in the context of *historical narratives of progress*, because it's a bloody illustration of the myth that, at least in America, *things will always get better*.⁴¹

When we are discussing these issues—accumulative versus progressive histories, civil rights silences, writing *against* writing—we are circling some of the ideas discussed in chapters one and two. The argument in this chapter, then, seeks to examine how *Invisible Man* complicates Thoreau's idea of solitude and threshold space, which I will mostly demonstrate through a lengthy discussion of what robert j. butler calls “process-space.” I will look at two things: invisible ontologies and dispossession. I will map them against solitude and threshold space. I will examine these ideas through two lenses: first, how they resist totalizing narratives, and second, how *bodies* react to solitary practice. Ellison's work is not the subtlest, but it is one of the most instructive. *Invisible Man* is a book about border territories, and it is a book about the intersection of visibility, noise, and possession. Ultimately, it is a book that, like the Parkland shooting, reminds us that real bodies are on the line.

It is first useful to refresh what we mean by invisible ontologies. For the Fields, racecraft functions through actions which are “imagined, acted upon, and re-imagined” (14).

⁴¹ In mid March, 2019, a man murdered 50 worshippers at a New Zealand mosque using a military-style semi-automatic weapon. *One week later*, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, formally announced her country's ban on these weapons.

These actions are propped up by sumptuary codes which furnish constant “circumstantial evidence” that prove the imagined action is justified (29). As this evidence becomes “uncontroversial everyday reality,” it morphs into an ideology (90). These ideologies don’t require any actual content to work, because they rely on “props, without which they are unavailable to sense; but they are not creatures of those props and, therefore, not dependent on any particular one” (144). In this way, the original imagined action becomes an invisible ontology. Invisible ontologies are a form of ideology that are the product of certain triggers and signifiers. However, because these ideologies cannot be confined to any one signifier, they are irreducible. In this instance, it is a question of bodies: how do bodies become entwined with sumptuary codes of ideological practice that form new, protean invisibilized modes of being? The *ontological* content consists of ideology’s invisibilizing power, in its ability to render unseen peoples and bodies most at risk (see for example page 110 of *Racecraft*). Parkland students, for example, are accused of being “crisis actors” who tour school shootings to appear on television and give interviews.⁴² The evidence is redundant, as crisis actors are simply viewed as another manifestation of the deep state conspiracy, or a false flag (“Code Words”). The accumulation of protests has failed to significantly change the debate, *and*, with each new iteration of violence, the conspiracy theory becomes more complex in order to find a new signifier which can allegedly prove it.⁴³⁴⁴ Importantly,

⁴² Important as it is, I am not looking at the overt anti-semitism that promotes these views. That George Soros is called the “puppet-master” of these children is hateful racism, but it is not the study here. See this piece by Matthew Yglesias for more: <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/2/22/17036018/parkland-conspiracy-theories>

⁴³ The astonishing rise of “QAnon” in the States is further proof of this baffling trend: no matter how ludicrous a claim, as long as its narrative is cryptic enough, *nothing* can refute it.

⁴⁴ The current run of Democratic hopefuls for the 2020 Presidential election offer some nice alternatives to this view. Gun reform does seem to be gaining traction.

although protests do effect a degree of change, they haven't shifted the underlying discussion—the discourse still asks *whether* some guns should be outlawed, not the extent to which guns should be outlawed.

The narratives of progress that Coates and Theoharis warn again are narratives of erasure, not simply a myth or modern folklore, but damaging stories built on the backs of the invisible: an ontology of racecraft so deeply embedded in narrative discourse that even this idea of “the backs of the invisible” does nothing but perpetuate the notion that those who went before us were props for a better future. Erasure is ensured through a complex patterning of invisible ontologies that masquerade as simple, everyday *things that exist*.

In the unreliable prologue of *IM*, we see this exact logic:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is *as though* I have been surrounded by *mirrors of hard, distorting glass*. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination — indeed, everything and anything except me [...] That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a *peculiar disposition* of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (5; my emphasis)

He's not invisible, people just *refuse to see him*. The signifiers of the narrator's invisibility are the environment, the people, or the imaginative content of what they see. These signifiers are adaptable because they are “as though.” The signifiers aren't real, but the signification they produce is. The peculiar disposition of the internal eyes functions as an ideology through which vision generates. The onus of invisibility is thus on those who look, rather

than those who are invisible. The narrator's identity is *perceived* to be invisible by a series of imaginative acts distorted through the mirrors of hard glass; these distortions become the lens through which perception acts; the lens is therefore not reducible to any one environmental signifier. It is, as we saw in chapters one and two, an *enframing* device. Significantly, the content inside the frame is not simply the narrator's invisibility, but his access to a concept of self-narrative: "the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead" (7). The narrative structure of *IM* reflects the invisible man's life: an ideological narrative of movement is imposed on an otherwise interruptive or disruptive lived experience. The narrative is ultimately therefore about re- and dis-possession; an attempt to repossess the telos of his own narrative, and his fight against the dispossessive forces both of narrative complicity and the people around him.

This is a tough point, but the ambiguities of the prologue need some unpacking. The narrator is sat in his basement—which may or may not be Harlem (7)—getting stoned, covering the walls, ceiling, and floor in bright lights, and listening to jazz. At the climax of the novel, however, he is returned to his basement apartment, via the manhole that Ras's men chase him down. Given the available readings—that the narrator dies, escapes, or returns to his basement—the structural narrative of *IM* is twofold: it looks forward, from a position in the future, but it is also an act of memorialization. "The joke," he tells us, "is that I don't live in Harlem but in a border area" (7). Such a border area is the concrete manifestation of the invisible ontology that dictates both the narrative's content (the story) *and* the way the narrative is told (the vehicle). The narrative is autologous for the message it seeks to argue: that ideologies of invisibility have effects beyond dematerialization;

consequent to certain ideologies is *derealization*. The narrator's body is erased, his access to narrative foreclosed to the point that his own subjectivity is precluded.

I return, then, to the citation that begins this chapter. It is to the appearance of adherence that Ellison targets his scorn. The ideology of narrative simplicity is exactly what Theoharis is attempting to disrupt in *Terrible*: the idea that singular events can happen to overturn the course of narrative history. Ellison positions his narrator as an avatar for a literary tradition that saw telos as progressive rather than fractal or circular. He closes the novel by repeating the introduction's refrain: "Here, at least [underground], I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning" (447). One word here that tips his hand: *would*. A sentence that should read, "I have taken up..." instead reads, "I will." Ellison rejects the tidy complicity of narrativity.

The introduction's insistence that the end is the beginning—and thus that the narrator must be located in the place where he began, for this is where he ends—is disputed by this modified version:

History as natural progress naturalized the civil rights movement as an almost inevitable aspect of American democracy rather than as the outcome of Black organization and intrepid witness [...] The recounting of national histories is never separate from present-day politics. What of the past is remembered, celebrated, and mourned is at the core of national identity—and the process of what is told and not told is often a function of power [...] Racial injustice is America's original sin and deepest silence. (*Terrible* 7-8)

I am especially taken with Theoharis's phrase here: intrepid witness. For Ellison's invisible protagonist, *IM* is a recounting of a national history communicated through the present-day politics of his basement position. As such, the narrator's main task is as *intrepid witness*: "I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me" (450). But this task is not merely voluntary; it is a necessity forced upon him first by his own contexts, and then later by the Brotherhood.

Ellison thus writes against two things: narrative simplicity, where history moves progressively forwards in an onward march; and intrepid witness, where history is written by those whose agitation enabled them to witness the fractures and inconsistencies of civil rights history. In the words of Coates: "not doubly conscious, just conscious. That is the third road that black America is walking" (*8 years* 57). Not necessarily rejecting W. E. B Du Bois's double consciousness, Coates positions modern black ontology as a fight to reclaim *just conscious*. Additionally, Ellison calls into question the implication that the oppressed should be forced to witness their own oppression. While Theoharis does not advocate for this, the idea of *intrepid witness* implicitly assumes that the witnesses are viewing crimes against themselves, circulating the notions that "talking about racism through the history of the civil rights movement [...] rendered the fight against it in the past," (34) and the idea "many civil rights memorials refigured civil rights history through a language of personal responsibility" (39). Intrepid witnesses to a history of personal abuse are coopted into narratives of personal responsibility by a language that assumes bystander culpability.

Ellison deftly navigates two competing tendencies identified by Browne and Coates. On the one hand, Ellison maintains that "boundary maintenance is intricately tied to

knowing the black body, subjecting some to a high visibility [...] by way of technologies of seeing that sought to render the subject outside of the category of the human, *un-visible*" (Browne 68). On the other hand, "there is a bias toward the happy ending, toward the notion that human resilience and intellect will be a match for any problem. This holds especially true for the problem of white supremacy" (*8 years* 131). In his position of unsurveilled, "un-visible," the narrator is able to reject the white supremacist modality that the narrative of humanity trends towards the happy ending. By juxtaposing the radical darkness of the underground with the radiant luminosity of the basement, Ellison exposes the superimposition of boundaries as symbolized through light, dark, retreat, and fight. Missing from Browne's analysis is the conclusion to this manipulation: the ultimate act of un-visibility is staged at the level of narrative.

Invisible Man begins and ends in a prison cell, removed from prison. This prison cell operates as refuge, preface, and site of resistance. This prison is not simply removed from space or time; it is also the site of an invisible ontology. In "patterns of movement in Ellison's invisible man," Robert J. Butler makes the case that "the central and most distinctive value in American culture is a desire for pure motion" (5). For Ellison,

'home' is most often used [...] as the kind of mythic symbol used in the spirituals, representing freedom, Black awareness, and peace. Thus, when the narrator describes his underground refuge as a 'home,' he sees it more as a process than an actual place — a liberating state of mind nourishing the kind of complex awareness needed to solve the riddle of his Afro-American identity. (Butler 8)

If the underground bunker is 'home,' its function is to provide an anchor-point for a soul otherwise stuck in endless oscillation between "stasis and purposeless movement" (10). And

it is indeed a soul, for as Robert Bone reminds us, “Ellison’s ontology derives from transcendentalism” (45). Transcendental movement between stasis and purposelessness motivates the invisible man’s desire for a threshold space no longer defined by these parameters. This is, in Wry’s words, “[an] aesthetic perspective that gave rise to a poetics of liminality [...] the art of the threshold: an art generated by the power (but also the indeterminacy) of continual regeneration and renewal” (200).

The bunker is not literally a prison cell, but it replicates its logics. As we saw in the previous chapter, this means that the bunker cannot function as a threshold space, as it contains an absolute solitude, rather than a solitary practice. It functions the same way, and with the same spatial constraints. The narrator is forced unwillingly into the space—though he makes good use of the space—and begins and ends his narrative in this heterotopia. For butler, in this space, the narrator is able to dwell on the different types of movement available to a people whose movements have historically been *from* and never *towards*. The narrator thinks between “a random drifting [movement] and greatly accelerated activity which eventually goes out of control” (“patterns” 10). The difference from Theoharis’s accumulative action is that the narrator’s actions lack the communal element. For butler, accelerated activity ends in chaos because it reacts to purposeless movement; for Theoharis, chaos is a possibly beneficent consequence of accelerated communal activity.

For butler, this retreat is “strategic,” a temporary respite that will “allow [the narrator] to gain the kind of awareness which is a precondition to meaningful action” (14). This awareness takes two forms: first, the narrator realizes that his future is “a succession of open possibilities rather than a rigid sequence of events” (16). In doing so, he is “consciously assimilating his past rather than crudely rejecting it or sentimentally idealizing it” and

therefore he “may move in new directions” (17). Instead of the bleak reading I offered above, then, butler offers a palliative wherein the circular sequences “define the hero’s life prior to his movement underground as an iron circle of necessity which can be broken only if he becomes sufficiently aware of his situation” (13).⁴⁵

I don’t disagree with butler or Bone’s readings; indeed, I find butler’s work compelling. However, I believe it misses the body-dimension of invisibility, perhaps because the work focuses so strongly on material invisibility that the ontological invisibility becomes, ironically, hidden. For the Fields, invisible ontologies work around race because racecraft is not focussed on the “outward” marks of race, but on the “presumed inward, invisible content” of a person’s soul (*Racecraft* 145). Racecraft is not simply a hatred of a race, but a hatred that follows a specific pattern: because they are black or yellow, *therefore* (145). The problem arises because, “Once the existence of an invisible this or that is obvious, and everydayness makes rational defense irrelevant, evidence is everywhere at hand, available for miscellaneous, ad hoc use” (146). When butler argues about open possibilities, or awareness, then, he gestures towards, but does not reach, this invisible content. butler rightly refers to the underground as *process*; this process, I argue, is the invisible content of the narrator’s ontology.

This process colours his interactions with other formative or transitional moments in the narrative. After he is kicked out of school for subjecting Mr. Norton to the Golden Dawn and the incestuous narrative of the former slaves, he takes the bus to New York, where he meets a former Golden Dawn patient. Upon learning of the narrator’s intentions,

⁴⁵ A comparison with Walter Mosley’s *The Man in my Basement* would here be fruitful, but a lengthier discussion is staged in chapter four, showing continuities between Ellison’s narrative and Lethem’s. See Devika Sharma’s “The Colour of Prison” for a nuanced discussion of the intersections between Mosley and Ellison’s novels.

the patient says of New York: “That’s not a place, it’s a dream” (127).⁴⁶ After securing work at a paint factory, the narrator is again thrown into one of these process-spaces. During the paint factory explosion, he sees himself as a distended subjectivity thrown into a “vast whiteness” where he loses his prior identity and is re-formed as a newly palimpsestic vassal: “It was a fall into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension. Then a great weight landed upon me and I seemed to sprawl into an interval of clarity beneath a pile of broken machinery, my head pressed back against a huge wheel, my body splattered with a stinking goo” (190). The imagery of the machine is no coincidence, as we learned previously that the workers in the paint factory see themselves as “the machines inside the machine” (180).

Later, process begins to take on a teleological quality, moving away from the merely spatial. The narrator joins the brotherhood and realizes that, “sometimes a man has to plunge outside of history” (294). Then, however, he has an encounter with a female patron of the brotherhood who asks the narrator to rape her; he gets her drunk and fakes the assault:

And in the mirrored instant I say myself standing between her eager form and a huge white bed, myself caught in a guilty stance, my face taut, tie dangling; and behind the bed another mirror which now like a surge of the sea tossed our images back and forth, back and forth, furiously multiplying the time and the place and the circumstance. (325)

This oceanic mirroring, where the narrator’s identity is ceaselessly and *dynamically* refracted against itself, produces a feeling of existential vertigo and, it seems, contributes to the sense of dispossession and hypocrisy that takes over the narrative after Clifton’s betrayal: “Why

⁴⁶ That the narrator is taken to a Mr. Emerson, who turns out to be a figure more of myth than reality, introduced by a letter from the man who just expelled him, is another interesting example of Ellison’s ambivalent relationship with literary and genealogical inheritance.

had he turned away? Why had he chosen to step off the platform and fall beneath the train? Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, *lying outside history?*" (342-3). The replication of images includes lying, as on the bed, the soundless voices, as of his conscience, the nothingness, as of the empty ocean.

These moments are imperative, because they offer a far more complex picture of process-space. Something occurs between the voluntary plunge and Clifton's betrayal that changes how the narrator perceives of history: in the first instance, voluntarily leaving history is seen as a temporary requirement; in the second, Clifton is asked why he chose this route. Is this not exactly what Robert Bone says: "As a [black] writer, Ellison inherits a *double obligation* to the past. He must become familiar with a folk tradition which is his alone, and with a wider literary culture which he shares. Moreover, he must strive in both dimensions for a proper blend of past and present, given and improvised" (41)? Bone concludes that "Ellison is fascinated by the distinction between one's given and achieved identity" (47). What Butler calls process-space, Bone calls *double obligation*, and I call *invisible ontology*. The invisible content of process-space, therefore, is this double obligation, wherein Ellison and the narrator negotiate a complex position between an inherited historical tradition—a given identity—and a future of possibilities—an achieved identity. Whereas the double obligation sometimes calls for an ahistoricism, Clifton too thoroughly embraces the historical identity and becomes a caricature that has no access to the possibility of a doubled identity. Not a doubled consciousness, but a double identity with a single conscience. As Coates has it, these are "the preeminent outlaws of the American imagination" (199), people who have fallen out of consciousness, out of the taxonomy of what constitutes a viable humanity.

On the simplest level, then, Ellison's double obligation to the past, the invisible man's invisible ontology, borrows the logics of threshold space so lauded by Thoreau and distorts them into process-space. Thoreau's obligation to the past is only in the sense that it questions the present; the invisible man, meanwhile, has to constantly interrogate both the present and the ways history has informed it. Additionally, he has to attempt to use the present as a means of forging the future, because, at many points of the narrative, that future is in no way guaranteed. Supplement to this the fact that the invisible man is often *forced* into these spaces, and process-spaces seem closer to the prison cells described by Alexander, Smith, and Dumm. We see this complicated negotiation staged both within the events of the narrative *and in the narrative itself*.

Ellison is therefore acutely aware of the challenges of reconstruction that David Blight identifies as characteristic of the twentieth century. Theoharis makes a similar case for modernism's negotiation with desegregation and its revelation of Northern hypocrisy. I quote Blight here at length, because his summary of this complicated position does great justice to the tension of process-space that Ellison tries to navigate. Several

attitudes toward the past emerg[e] in American culture: the slave past as a dark void, a lost epoch, even as paralytic burden; a celebratory-accommodationist mode of memory, rooted in [an evolutionist, industrialist, scientific rhetoric] an African American patriotic memory, characterized by the insistence that the black soldier, the Civil War Constitutional Amendments, and the story of emancipation ought to be at the center of the nation's remembrance; and a tragic vision of the war as the nation's fated but unfinished passage through a catastrophic transformation from an

old order to a new one [...] Remembering slavery was, thus, a paradoxical memory.
(300; 311)

For Blight, these dissonant attitudes meant that while “the future beckoned,” the “past remained a heavy weight to carry” (319). This is exactly what occurs in *Invisible Man* in the imaginary content of the slave shackles.

We first encounter the tools of enslavement in Dr. Bledsoe’s office, where Bledsoe threatens to beat the narrator with the iron clasp, calling it a “symbol of our progress” (118). Later, Brother Tarp gifts his shackle to the narrator, saying “it’s got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we’re really fighting against. I don’t think of it in terms of but two words, yes and no; but it signifies a heap more” (303). Brother Tarp is appreciative of the historical resonances here: he sees the shackle as a binary acceptance or rejection of the past, but he is acutely aware that the iron band also signifies the possibilities of emancipation in a way that moves far beyond acceptance or rejection. The position the narrator occupies is then immediately challenged by Brother Wrestrum, who considers the chain representative of an emotionality anathema to the Brotherhood’s philosophical mission (324-7). The dialectic of the chain therefore represents a compromise surrounding science and emotionality; the chain signifies a series of attitudes towards the past which both jeopardize the narrator’s authority *and* enable him to lead the sermon for Brother Clifton, without Brotherhood support.⁴⁷ Tellingly, he concludes the funeral march with, “Now he’s part of history, and he has received his true freedom” (357). Clifton had indeed plunged outside of history—but in doing so he had been received by a history of

⁴⁷ The narrator of Mosley’s *Basement* is similarly historically conscious. Discarding the tribal masks of his forebears, he remarks “at least if you threw away the spirit of your heritage, you wouldn’t make it into merchandise” (64).

exclusion, caricature, and catastrophic transformation that embraced fully the paradoxical position of the emancipated.

butler's idea can thus be extended to include a number of exchanges in the novel which signify the way process-space takes on history as its invisible content. Process-space becomes ontological through this constant mediation with historical signification, through the way bodies are positioned in historical space, in historical narrative. Thoreau was equally aware of this when he discussed the sweep of history: "I would not have one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead" (W 71). Thoreau is aware of the need for a balance between imaginative historical work and the necessity for individuality.

Ellison is therefore required to offer a new articulation of preparatory threshold space. Otherwise, the bunker, the Brotherhood's office, and the manhole are resigned to be suffused and suffocated under the weight of contradictory historical demands; they are destined, in other words, to remain merely process-spaces. Towards the end of the prologue, the narrator concludes that, "A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (13). The indefinite article "a" modifies the finality of the hibernation to the point where overt action does not *have* to follow hibernation, but *can*. That is to say, action is not predicated on thought. Hibernation is simply *a* preparation for *an* action. Ellison complicates Thoreau's long probation, indeed Thoreau's entire thesis that all ethical action requires long thought.

Caleb Smith tells of how the warden of Auburn prison took one-hundred prisoners and made them build a new prison, Sing Sing. Sing Sing would be based on the Auburn model: prisoners would be kept in absolute silence except when they were engaged in periods of intense physical labour. Sing Sing was such a ‘success’ that the rest of America soon followed suit, and Auburn’s systems propagated throughout the continental United States; a perilous silence was spreading through the penal system, and prisoners were being asked to *build their own prisons* (107-108). As Smith notes, “Citizens divested of human rights, exposed to the violence of the lash and the unfettered authority of a violent warden, condemned to work in a profound alienation—the Auburn ideal is a dismal world, similar in many ways [...] to the plantation” (108). Prisoners had to build their own tombs; their prison was thus “a zone of exclusion and exploitation, [that] symbolized a model of political organization. It might even be seen as a kind of democratic *polis* in miniature, where the governing ideals of a new age were *manifest in concrete*” (109). Whether or not you accept Smith’s idea that punishment miniaturized or literalized liberal democracy, the fact that prisoners were forced to build their own prisons is undeniable, and harrowing.

The narrator’s basement is similar. The basement is a “hole in the ground,” (7). Although he does not build it himself, it is populated with the detritus of the narrator’s personality and needs: “My hole is warm and full of light [...] Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five” (7-8). The narrator rationalizes his basement-existence as a form of hibernation, “Call me Jack-the-Bear,” (7), but ultimately this retreat is a forced exile, a democratic *diaspora* in miniature.⁴⁸ The narrator uses the basement to prepare for action, but in his invisibility, he also becomes aware of time’s warping: “Invisibility gives one a

⁴⁸ Dormancy in animals—torpor/hibernation—is associated with a far lower incidence of mortality than any other period of the year. That is, animals are far less likely to die when they do not participate at all.

slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead" (9). The basement is undeniably a site of profound alienation: divorced from time, separated from space, and divested of ambient noise but for a Louis Armstrong soundtrack; a site in which the narrator can discover "unrecognized compulsions of [his] being" (13). Whereas Smith's pronouncement about Sing Sing might be a little overstated, the narrator's basement is quite literally a democratic *polis* in miniature, a space where the governing ideals of his selfhood are made in concrete, not simply as manifestations of his being but as extensions of them; the basement is a space of subjective time, in spite of its status as prison-lite. The basement, in other words, is converted into a threshold space: a hibernation in the *imaginative content* of process-space, rather than a retreat into physical, concrete space.

Ta-Nehisi Coates describes one of the consequences of segregation that we can read back into this profound alienation, from the perspective of basement or process-space: "with segregation, with the isolation of the injured and the robbed, comes the concentration of disadvantage" (149). But why does isolation necessitate a concentration of disadvantage? Henri Lefebvre argues that space is never neutral, and that it is unique—each space is constituted by, a product of, and assimilated to, a series of social encounters which produce and *are produced* by space. Space contains global and local ideas which are in constant competition (86), where individuality goes either to "recognize itself" or "lose itself" (61). Social interactions are bracketed by space's boundaries—this can be seen, for instance, in how families are organized physically in a house; but space also mandates *how* these social interactions are perceived. In other words, space dictates both "the social relations of

production” *and* “the relations of production” (32). Space is socially produced by a consciousness divested of neutrality: no “I” can stage an encounter with space without modifying, controlling, or adapting it (35). In turn, the “I” is modified, controlled, and adapted *by* space.

I find Lefebvre’s readings of space compelling because they follow a transcendentalist tradition in their rejection of mechanized space. Lefebvre’s formulation reads like a form of Marxist correspondence: “Space is neither a mere ‘frame’ nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it. Space is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure” (94). That is to say, space is dialectically formed through the junction of form and structure. This conception of space, as a morphological unit, allows Lefebvre to conclude that “time has vanished from social space [...] Disillusion leaves space empty [...] Spaces are devastated — and devastating; incomprehensibly so [...] Spaces are strange: homogeneous, rationalized, and as such constraining; yet at the same time *utterly dislocated*” (97). Dislocation is served as antithetical to constraint—there is no implicit emancipation in dislocated space, but there is a freedom from constraint. Lefebvre, in other words, argues that freedom *from* something is not an essential freedom, but rather a new position against prior constraint. These positions are realized concretely: “In an apartment building comprising stack after stack of ‘boxes for living in’ [...] the spectators-*cum*-tenants grasp the relationship between part and whole directly; furthermore, they recognize themselves in that relationship [...] ultimately it takes on the aspect of pure logic — and hence of tautology: space contains space, the visible

contains the visible — and boxes fit into boxes” (98; original emphasis).⁴⁹ Tenants in compressed apartments, Lefebvre argues, become unconsciously aware of the foundational logic that undergirds the buildings: they become aware of their relationship to the unity of social living, and to the way in which their *position* is integral to the structural integrity of the social. Basement-dwellers metaphorically make up society’s firmament, but they also quite literally prop up the houses in which we dwell. They quite literally concentrate disadvantage.

This inherent stratification must lead to a privileging of sight: “It is very important from the outset to stress the destructive (because reductive) efforts of the predominance of the readable and visible, of the absolute priority accorded to the visual realm” (146). The visible is plenipotentary because space has been translated into a series of “iconological” metaphors, whereby materials, colours, and geographies are given significations beyond their materiality (147). Marble, for example, signifies wealth as you apprehend it. Furthermore, such iconography means that “within and without have melted into transparency, becoming indistinguishable or interchangeable” (147). Sociality out of sight becomes a “bare minimum” whereby entire cities are constructed as close as possible to the “lowest possible threshold of sociability [...] Internal and invisible boundaries began to divide a space” (316). Invisible boundaries are a form of circumscribing the bare minimum.

Finally,

These boundaries did not merely separate levels [...] they also separated zones where people were supposed to be reduced to their ‘simplest expression,’ to their ‘lowest common denominator,’ from zones where people could spread out in comfort and

⁴⁹ This is the premise of *High Rise*, J.G. Ballard’s most scathing criticism of modernism’s homogeneity.

enjoy those essential luxuries, time and space, to the full. As a matter of fact, 'boundaries' is too weak a word here, and it obscures the essential point; it would be more accurate to speak of *fracture lines revealing the true* — invisible yet highly irregular — contours of 'real' social space lying beneath its homogeneous surface. (317)

The logic is a straight line: socially produced space is not material, but is signified by materials. Therefore, its production privileges the visible. In doing so, it occludes the invisible or hidden. Construction compounds this privilege, literally hiding 'common' tenants to basements, or basements in the sky, as props for tower blocks and society in general. The dwellers of this space occupy a position of the bare minimum: their continued existence is an invisible boundary, which, however hidden, *remains*. These lines are fractures in the homogeneous, they are the means by which the true structure of social society is revealed. Occupants of threshold space testify to the existence of a Real, obscured by space saturated with significance. It is not unreasonable to conclude that residents of the Real live in *insignificant* space. Lefebvre's argument then is that encoded within material space is a series of invisible ontologies which are both products of *and* producers of sociality. Residents of the boundaries are invisible ontologies, but their continued existence perpetuates the ontological divisions between the visible and the hidden. These boundaries are the underbelly of Ellison's modernist sociality. Even if Butler's reading is preferred, process-space, spaces of movement, still privilege the visible, and omit, elide, or erase the invisible superstructural ontologies that prop up these privileges, that constitute process. While I acknowledge that in so many ways Lefebvre's critique, and my use of it, falls victim to Bell hooks's idea of the white saviour criticism, its insight into how Ellison constructs and disrupts process-space is simply too clear to overlook. Lefebvre's poetics of the everyday

focuses on the intersection between the marginal and the oppressed in ways that still inform our movements about the modern city.

One main consequence of the concrete stratification that Lefebvre sees as codified in space itself is that *solitude* is primary. Following the same logic that so animated Adorno and Horkheimer in chapter two, Lefebvre articulates an exclusionary view of solitude that is singularly available to the bourgeoisie. Calling it “the myth of human solitude,” Lefebvre notes that the desire for being alone is universal, but that for the lower classes “there is no solitude in the ‘deep’ and ‘metaphysical’ meaning of the word” (*Critique* 517). Instead, and I cite at length here:

Peasants and workers can be alone: by accident or by chance [...] but they are not truly solitary. [They] rarely experience the joys of solitude. For [them] the need to be alone is already progress, something gained. It is the most ‘private’ individuals [...] who have invented solitude. Instead of seeing it as the time and the chance to develop a *deeper awareness of human relations*, they have transformed it — into an *absolute*. And then they have used their poetry, their novels or their philosophy to moan and to wallow in self-pity. At the limits of the ‘private’ consciousness and in the human nothingness of their ‘existence’, they have rebelled against the metaphysical alienation which their own attitude towards life helps to maintain [...] For them, the fiction of solitude becomes reality. For them ‘alone’! (517-519; my emphasis)

Clearly, there is a lot going on here.

Lefebvre’s argument is in three stages: first, solitariness must precede solitude, and solitude is defined as the cultivation of awareness surrounding human relations; second, this

solitude is sought by all labourers; third, the bourgeoisie have redefined solitude into an absolute condition, like Adorno and Horkheimer's, through which they commiserate the paucity of their own lives. Absolute solitude, here called metaphysical alienation, thereby becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that bourgeois art both reproduces and feigns to argue against.

Lefebvre judges that "the need to be alone" is not solitude—the need to be alone is what drives invisible residents, primarily because it is mostly unachievable. There is, in other words, a deep-rooted ambivalence at the heart of solitude: "Every human need, conceived of as the relation between a human being and the 'world' can become a power, in other words a freedom, a source of joy or happiness. But needs have to be rescued from the realm of blind necessity, or at least its ascendancy must be progressively reduced" (459). I find the logic compelling: needs are relations, and needs can become powers; power, in turn, is freedom, but must not be seen as the peak of human achievement. It is a modified version of how Blanchot understands solitude: "The absoluteness of an 'I am' that wants to affirm itself without reference to others. This is what is generally called solitude" (*Space* 251). In both of these formulas, solitude is conceived as a position on human relationality. Recall, then, that Blanchot remarks that "solitude excludes the complacent isolation of individualism; it has nothing to do with the quest for singularity" (20). Instead, it functions as a medium of *possibility*: "the exceptional moment [that] becomes power" (87).

These Continental philosophers thus argue that solitude is a vision of burgeoning possibility, and that this possibility revolves around our ability to experience the joy of human relation *or* its absence. Insignificant space deprives invisible residents of choice.

With this turn, we are brought back to Ellison: for it is not merely dislocation, for Lefebvre, or possibility, for Blanchot, but *dispossession*.

Variations on this word appear around forty times in *IM*. The word has many resonances in Ellison's work: "to strip of possessions," "to deprive," "to expel, banish," "to cast out (the evil spirit by which one is possessed); to exorcize," "to free from demoniacal possession," "to dislodge, oust, drive out" ("dispossess"). We see each of these in *IM*, and the etymology alone seems to substantiate Bone's remark that Ellison negotiated a folkloric past and a modernist present, much as in Morrison's *Beloved*.

Possession first appears when the narrator is at college: "Here within the quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it" (84). A proleptic remark, as possession is the scientific clarion call through which the Brotherhood argues. Tellingly, the narrator's identity is tied to his academic (quite literal last man) standing, the scholarship achieved through the battle royal in which he is nearly killed. He is dispossessed by Dr. Bledsoe as punishment for his handling of Mr. Norton. Interestingly, then, the first instance of possession contains an elliptical *dis*—the narrator is actually being dispossessed, but the sentence is constructed as an inversion. The school's lands act as a firm barrier against outside encroachment, and it is the narrator's *leaving* that leads to his dispossession. Rich in historical irony, the narrator's escape from the strictly dogmatic schoolyard expels him into a process-space of endless but unachievable possibility.⁵⁰ The narrator's emancipation even comes with paperwork that proves to be illusory. The expulsion from the school acts as a microcosm of freedom from the slave life of the plantation. As Marc Singer explains in his article "Palimpsestic Time," "*Invisible Man*

⁵⁰ As Thoreau reminds us, "Nations are possessed with an insane ambition to perpetuate the memory of themselves by the amount of hammered stone they leave" (*Walden* 57).

portrays a journey through a telescoped and allegorized African-American history” (388). Such a telescope spies that “time is palimpsestic, as the novel constantly provides echoes of past eras within the narrative present” (390). Or, as Colson Whitehead puts it in *The Underground Railroad*: “To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence” (11). Mosley’s merchandised heritage remark has never been more apt when the narrator’s escape is weighed against the Brotherhood’s arch rationalism.

The first dispossession is thus a strange one: palimpsestic and interrogative of the fluid telos of the narrator’s relative position in time. But it is also a formative experience. As the narrator remarks during his first official Brotherhood speech about dispossession: “Do you know what makes us so uncommon? [...] We let them do it” (283). We let them dispossess us. Thoreau’s voice echoes resoundingly through the halls: how a man *allows himself* to be a slave. This is what Jim Neighbors defines as the paradox of *IM*:

Individuals who would become, as it were, the ‘CITIZENS OF TOMORROW’S WORLD,’ must complete two tasks: (1) transcend—step outside of—History to identify a name, and (2) write a History for—name—the name. The possession of History would then be structurally homologous to the possession of Self: Both presume a transcendentality to History and an instrumentality to writing. (231)

That is to say, the process of allowing oneself to be ejected from a historical narrative is both to transcend *and* to be engaged in the process of naming this transcendence. Owning the telos of one’s history becomes tantamount to possessing a selfhood contingent but not dependent on both history and writing, arguably two of the most important structures in *IM*. It returns, as well, to Singer’s idea that while it is the underground lair that “initially

dislocates him from time,” it is the narrator’s decision that “performs the final dislocation” when he burns the contents of his briefcase (412). It is in this moment that the narrator is able to convert the residual process-space of the underground bunker into a threshold space, into a space in which he can both think before acting and act before thinking.

To borrow Paul Gilroy’s astonishing phrase, what Ellison promotes here is an “emancipatory assault” on possession (*Black Atlantic* 66). Such an assault takes place in the non-synchronous time of dislocation and dispossession; such an assault results in a version of consciousness that emerged from “the unhappy symbiosis between three modes of thinking, being, and seeing” (127).⁵¹ Such an assault contains the tense contradictions implicit in a violent emancipation, admitting to a sense of futility or the absence of narrative closure: “the Invisible Man discovers that circularity can be just as fatalistic as linearity, just as much an instrument for maintaining the status quo and a weapon for continuing the dispossession of those who are already dispossessed” (Singer 392). It is on this ground, then, that Ellison’s narrator begins his interrogation of dis/possession.

The second time the narrator encounters dispossession is more literal. After arriving in New York, he stops at a street stall to buy two yams. If we accept Singer’s claim that the yams are evocative of a folkloric history made most manifest in the firmly traditional character of Mary, we can read the second yam’s unpleasant taste as a metaphor for the narrator’s realization that nostalgia and the elongation of childhood idealism are not routes to fulfilling identity. After consuming the yams, he finds a family being evicted, the material contents of their lives strewn on their stoop. At work in this scene is a complex chronology

⁵¹ See Simone Browne’s *Sousveillance* for a lengthy discussion of sight as a modality of blackness, specifically Chapter 2.

of layered time, a palimpsestic and recursive vision of some “unarticulated model of time and history” (Singer 398).

The yams, the evicted family, and the narrator’s own sudden dispossession all culminate in a rousing speech delivered to the police, the crowd, and to the family. Discarding the imposed conservative history in which it makes perfect sense for a family in arrears to be dispossessed of their home, the narrator addresses the deep injustice at the heart of the event:

Something had been working fiercely inside me, and for a moment I had forgotten the rest of the crowd. Now I recognized a selfconsciousness about them, as though they, we, were ashamed to witness the eviction, as though we were all unwilling intruders upon some shameful event; and thus we were careful not to touch or stare too hard at the effects that lined the curb; for we were witnesses of what we did not wish to see, though curious, fascinated, despite our shame, and through it all the old female, mind-plunging crying [...]

As the crowd pushed me I looked down to see looking out of an oval frame a portrait of the old couple when young, seeing the sad, stiff dignity of the faces there; feeling strange memories awakening that began an echoing in my head like that of a hysterical voice stuttering in a dark street. Seeing them look back at me as though even then in that nineteenth-century day they had expected little, and this with a grim, unillusionsed pride that suddenly seemed to me both a reproach and a warning. (225-6)

The deep-rooted contradictions between tradition and modernity enact a fierce work. The material accoutrements of a life are concrete memories scattered onto the street, as though

thrown to progress, discarded as relics. The word *plunge* here reoccurs, as when Clifton and the narrator *plunge* outside of history: a space “describable but not knowable” (Neighbors 236). Tellingly, the only object the narrator dwells on at length is the portrait of the neighbours when young: these two faces evoke an “echoing [...] hysterical voice” in the narrator’s mind, and stage the conflict between past and present that defines the narrator’s engagement with the dispossession. The long sentences have a staccato cadence, gesturing at the onward march of time and its promise of unbroken narrative. Even the word *selfconsciousness* is deprived of a hyphen or space, as though the narrator lacks even the time to breathe, as though he’s aware that dividing self from consciousness is a white man’s game.

Testifying to Lefebvre’s idea, the narrator asks: “Dispossessed?” I cried, holding up my hand and allowing the word to whistle from my throat. ‘That’s a good word, “Dispossessed”! “Dispossessed,” eighty-seven years and dispossessed of what? They ain’t *got* nothing, they caint *get* nothing, they never *had* noting. So who was dispossessed?’” (231). This is the myth of human dispossession: a bourgeois concept to occlude the deeper crime that takes place during an eviction: the revelation that the tenants don’t have, never can, and never had anything to be dispossessed of. This is what Lefebvre means when he speaks of “fracture lines revealing the true contours of ‘real’ social space”—an event which distracts from the underlying logic that is itself more insidious. This is what I meant when I said that butler missed the invisible ontology at the heart of transitory space: *they never had noting*.

There are, in other words, four things occurring in this scene: (1) a mediation between a folkloric tradition represented by first the yams and second the painting of the couple; (2) a material dispossession of the couple’s lives that will act as a foundational argument the narrator will use throughout his speeches; (3) the revelation that, in the act of

dispossession, a deeper fracture comes to the surface, indicating the “highly irregular” contours of the real; and (4), a realization that this revelation is itself a changing of the social structure of the scene—that the opening up of these fracture lines dictates the ground of the true and the real.

“Yes,” the narrator says, “these old folks had a dream book, but the pages were blank and it failed to give them the number. It was called the Seeing Eye, the Great Constitutional Dream Book, The Secrets of Africa, The Wisdom of Egypt — but the eye was blind, it lost its luster. It’s all cataracted” (232). This is, as Gilroy reminds us, a “double consciousness” emerging from thinking, being, and seeing. The narrator plays quite literally on this triumvirate: the eye for seeing, the wisdom for thinking, the secrets for being. In the words of Richard Wright, “Oppression oppresses, and this is the consciousness [...] oppressed for so long that oppression has become a tradition, in fact a kind of culture” (qtd. in Gilroy 160). The narrator’s speech to the residents of the tenement tries to engage the past by rejecting it, but in doing so, sees oppression as a tradition itself.

The first two visions of dispossession therefore play with a difficult sense of time, attempting to mediate, reject, and live a historically oppressive past whilst providing notes on how to engage with the racism of modernity. Bone’s double obligation finds consciousness in Ellison’s invisible narrator. Thoreau’s poetic engagement with liminality is autologic—it actually structures the way Thoreau writes. Likewise, Ellison’s engagement with the double obligation of history, his double consciousness, manifests in the recursive moments wherein the narrative loops and arcs back on itself.

The theme continues as the narrator gives his first speech to the labour union movement on behalf of the Brotherhood:

Dispossession! Dis-possession is the word! They've tried to dispossess us of our manhood and our womanhood! Of our childhood and adolescence — You heard the sister's statistics on our infant mortality rate. Don't you know you're lucky to be uncommonly born? Why, they even tried to dispossess us of our dislike of being dispossessed! And I'll tell you something else — if we don't resist, pretty soon they'll succeed! These are the days of dispossession, the season of homelessness, the time of evictions. We'll be dispossessed of the very brains in our head! [...] They think we're blind — uncommonly blind. And I don't wonder. Think about it, they've dispossessed us each of one eye from the day we're born. So now we can only see in straight white lines. We're a nation of one-eyed mice — Did you ever see such a sight in your life? Such an uncommon sight. (284)

Compare the m-dashes, the rhetorical questions, and the elliptical repetitions of this speech to the free-flowing stream of (self)consciousness the narrator uses for his own monologue. As Thoreau noted, there is always something lost between the idea and its articulation, and the narrator's attempt to voice the *idea* of dispossession falls victim to the very nature of dispossession as spoken violence. Dispossession starts in the body—in the bodies of women, men, children, and teenagers. It moves to homelessness and evictions, and eventually even the notion of dispossession becomes dispossessed. Eventually, new constructions of the inner-eye, dispossessed by ideology, enframe new ways of seeing. This ontology is quite literally in the visible qualities of existence. Ellison's formulation here returns us to the evental logic seen in chapters one and two: moments of dispossession become possible fractures in the alienating and transitory symbolic, which can be swept aside by sudden eruptions of the Real.

These sudden movements are what we have elsewhere called events. For Lefebvre, they're "moments," or attempts "to achieve the total realization of a possibility" (*Critique* 1493). Contained in these moments are the "bursts and spurts, the moments when a bundle of possibilities suddenly arises" (1948). That is to say, nothing is necessarily enacted in the moment. Possibility is not augured or created by the opening up of the event, but the moment enables extant possibilities to come into the realm of the perceptible. There is at the heart of the moment an unresolved paradox: it is only after the moment's realization that the possibilities opened up by that moment can have been realized. A moment occurs in the present, but possibility (normally thought of as a gesture to the future) happens in the past. When then the invisible man speaks of the forms of dispossession that occur in moments—childhood (historical), racialized, gendered—we see possession mapped against a bumpy, non-linear time. In this complex web, the young narrator's wry remark about driving, has never been truer: "half-consciously I followed the white line as I drove" (40). If dispossession is voiced in moments, but its possibility is visible only in hindsight, the straight white line is less a road marking than it is a chalked frame around the space where a body used to lie. So it is that Ellison is able to code material space in the narrative with the same potentialities as the spoken words of the invisible man. Process-space, and its evolution into threshold space, finds oracular equivalent in a speech which "changes the entire field within which facts appear." Just as the basement exists at the intersection of past, present, future, and memory, the speech adopts the folkloric tradition of emotionality, mixes it with the scientific philosophical rationality of the Brotherhood, and tempers it with overt calls to a regressive historical moment.

The Brotherhood's objection to this speech, then, that it was "the antithesis of the scientific approach" (290), is as invalid as it is patrician, patronizing, and racist. As the narrator himself says, "It was unbelievable, yet strangely exciting and I had the sense of being present at the creation of important events, as though a curtain had been parted and I was being allowed to glimpse how the country operated" (254). What the narrator learns is fundamental: the Brotherhood exists in a moment of transition, a process-space between two vague historical moments, one of the diaspora and one of the future. The Brotherhood believes in a negation of the past in order to access the present, whereas the narrator believes the emotionality of the past can enliven the present. The difference is stark: "Ours," the Brotherhood says, "is a reasonable point of view. We are champions of a scientific approach to society [...] The audience isn't thinking, it's yelling its head off" (290). Meanwhile, the narrator sees in the portrait of the old people the core to his political speeches: "They're living, but dead. Dead-in-living [...] a unity of opposites" (241). The narrator is aware of the moment in a way the Brotherhood is not: they exist only in the opening up of the field of the possible and this speech exists within one of those possibilities. The curtains are parted only because *in this moment can they be apprehended as curtains*.

A moment from the prologue further clarifies this distinction. Postulating on the need for light, the narrator remarks, "Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; *and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death*" (8; my emphasis). What the narrator realizes, first in college, then later on the streets, and finally on the podium is that dispossession is the operative language around which modern oppression fractures. Dispossession is both the weapon and medium of the oppression, and revealing this through

emotionality, rather than science, is a legitimate means of resistance. Being unaware of this form of oppression—as the Brotherhood’s dogmatic insistence on science would result in—signifies a form of death. As he says, they will strive to even remove the knowledge of dispossession, to hide the form within a greater current. This is the precise logic that creates invisible ontologies.

Clearly, then, dispossession is one of the most important themes in *IM*, yet discussion around it is curiously absent from the scholarship. Texts on time, race, violence, and politics abound, but dispossession, and the way it functions invisibly as a structural dimension for discussions of history, race, and violence, are missing. I first conceptualized dispossession as a form of invisible ontology, as conterminous with how we speak of race, and class, particularly in modernist sociological terms. A second way of conceptualizing dispossession is with Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence*.

Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). Slow violence avoids the usual scrutiny of more obvious forms of violence because “such invisible, mutagenic theatre is slow paced and open ended, eluding the tidy closure, the containment, imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat” (6). Narratively speaking, then, episodes of slow violence lack clearly defined boundaries (we can justifiably describe *IM* as having the structure of slow violence). The lifecycle of modern news cannot facilitate the kind of reportage that would clearly explain how these catastrophes have generational, everyday affects. These are “attritional catastrophes that overspill clear boundaries in time and space

[and] are marked above all by displacements—temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and technological” (7).

It is fair, however, to argue that *all* violence functions this way: Pearl Harbour’s narrative closure did nothing to stem the tide of racism against Asian-Americans; the end of the British Empire did nothing to stop the destruction of indigenous lands and peoples; the end of the Holocaust has done nothing to end anti-Semitism. Violence’s consequences are always generational; to imagine that the modern racisms endemic to America are not continuations of slavery, of Japanese internment, or of the Mexican war, and to imagine that shifting rhetoric does not *always* follow these displacements is a grave oversight. He is right, however, when he says that we live in a world that privileges the visible (15). The challenge, then, is how to “make slow violence visible” without making it ascendent. And, it seems to me, the examples Nixon includes later are far more compelling examples of slow violence: “A locked door can be a weapon. Doors for women are often long-term, nonlethal weapons that leave no telltale bloody trail; doors don’t bear witness to a single, decisive blow” (16).

Nixon articulates three versions of slow violence: (1) violence that defies narrative closure, because it spans generations and has no clear victor; (2) violence that is invisible; (3) and violence that is structural. Remedial action to any of these violences is found in literature: “In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses” (15). These narratives “may offer a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen” (15). As intrepid witness, writing against, or alongside at times, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, Nixon argues that “within the dynamics of invisibility and hypervisibility, the myths of emptiness generate

unimagined—or at the very least, underimagined—communities” (182). This is a repetition of Lefebvre’s argument around invisible ontologies, and how they are embedded within dynamics of visibility. Here, the myth is not of human solitude, but of *emptiness*.

One of Nixon’s examples is particularly germane:

The direct violence of physical eviction becomes coupled to an indirect bureaucratic and media violence that creates and sustains the conditions for administered invisibility. The result is what I have called spatial amnesia, as communities, under the banner of development, are physically unsettled and imaginatively removed, evacuated from place and time and thus uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory. (168)

As I have argued, such an uncoupling occurs during the eviction scene in *Invisible Man*. What resonates most about that scene is not the abject terror of the old couple, but the bureaucratic indifference of “Mr. Law” (230): “This is legal and I’ll shoot if I have to” (231). Complicity by inaction becomes the defining movement of the eviction. The narrator’s challenge is thus to direct this violence-specific anger—at the eviction—into the structural problem of administrative slow violence. Similarly, what Nixon calls “spatial amnesia” can easily be applied to the Brotherhood’s clinical rationality, because it openly attempts to uncouple a person’s present from their national memory.

Nixon’s concept, however, does not go far enough. He fails to adequately address what I would call *superstructural* slow violence, the invisible or ontological content that I earlier argued was absent from Butler’s analysis. The specific slow violence underplayed here is explicitly mentioned, but then discarded: “Who counts as a witness?” (16). For Nixon, this is a reasonable question, but it does not form a significant part of the argument around

architectures of slow violence, instead acting as a prologue to a discussion of imaginative writing that can help us conceptualize more intersectional versions of violence. It is in the very taxonomies—of invited or uninvited, seeing or blinded, enunciated or silenced—that we find the most virulent and hidden violences, the slowest violences. Perhaps most importantly, Nixon insists that slow violence defies narrative closure but does not recognize that *narrative closure is violence*. As I have been at pains to make clear, for the authors in this thesis, the very notion of ‘closure’ is a deeply problematic, oftentimes violent, dismissal of the counter-, revolutionary-, or anti-narratives of the oppressed, marginalized, dispossessed. Nixon is totally right that slow violence has no closure, and that this is why it’s so hard for us to act upon—look at the Brotherhood’s response to the narrator’s speech, or, more pressingly, the world’s laughably pathetic response to climate change—but the very nature of closure acts to curtail narrative. For many, narratives do not end, and to impose narrative tidiness onto them propagates and prolongs the violence implicit in the structure of the narrative itself: closure is “someone else’s dream” (*Between* 40).

However, when Nixon says that a locked door can be a weapon, he gestures towards what Kate Marshall calls “ubiquity” (8). Marshall argues that the corridor’s recognizability makes it hidden: a “necessary yet invisible structure” (8), that, importantly, “was imposed on interiors to regulate the movement of people in and out of rooms [...] The corridor presents a spectre of a continuously replicating throughway, of uninterrupted flow [...] Corridority points to the infrastructure of the everyday” (10–11). Nixon’s door, in this model, represents a blockage in the flow of the everyday. It is, in Theoharis’s words, a “coded language” (109). A blockage in the flow of the everyday is a declension of the possible, a foreclosure of tomorrow.

IM is a novel ultimately about the interruption of the everyday, a man's inability to engage on an everyday level with the world around him because of structural blockages in the flow of communication (thus it is that the novel has such a strange and impenetrable telos). Communication, as a series of visual and auditory signifiers, is contingent on both visibility and access.

The narrator's invisible silence is metaphorized by the operation of the door:

What did they ever think of us transitory ones? Ones such as I had been before I found Brotherhood — birds of passage who were too obscure for learned classifications, too silent for the most sensitive recorders of sound; of natures too ambiguous for the most ambiguous words, and too distant from the centers of historical decision to sign or even to applaud the signers of historical documents?

We who wrote no novels, histories or other books. (343)

What Nixon's slow violence requires is offered by Theoharis: "intrepid witness" (9). Who counts as a witness? Only the intrepid. The imaginative biography of *IM* has the dual function of giving voice to the coded language of silent blockages and acting as its own block to the mythic march of historical progress. What comes through in passages like the one above is the necessity of witness—each characteristic of the marginalized revolves around their ability to be seen or heard by other people. The ubiquity of their struggle points to the infrastructure of our everyday understanding of the civil rights movement as portrayed by Ellison.

Intrepid witness becomes a weapon in the narrator's mission to unmask the unseen everyday violence he sees as articulated through a series of coded silences. Clifton's funeral is the catalyst for the novel's violent denouement, and it is here, during the narrator's eulogy,

that he realizes it is not the instances of violence which can be weaponized, but the underlying facts themselves—the superstructural slow violence at the very heart of narrative itself. He vacillates between the Brotherhood’s dialectic, scientific approach to memorializing Clifton as part of a historical movement, and the crowd’s desire for the routine detail: “Here are the facts. He was standing and he fell. He fell and he kneeled. He kneeled and he bled. He bled and he died. Now he’s part of history, and he has received his true freedom” (356-7). The anadiplosis gives a forward cadence to the sermon: fell/kneeled/bled/died. The simple, short structure resonates with the crowd on a poetic level, galvanizing their hatred, in a way the metaphysics of the Brotherhood cannot do: “only the plunge was recorded, and that was the important thing” (349). Bearing witness to the event of Brother Clifton’s murder was vital, but a sudden explosive knowledge of the underlying power structure reveals far more: “He was shot because he was black and because he resisted. Mainly because he was black” (366). Equally, the ambiguous, “Here are the facts,” implies that the Brotherhood’s epistemological version of events is *not* the facts.

It is telling, then, that in the angry dialogue that follows the funeral, Brother Jack removes his eye in order to question the narrator’s revolutionary credentials (389-90). Jack refutes the notion of intrepid witness by positioning a voluntary blindness, the result of *real violence*, as a means of resistance, as a means of pushing back against the narrator’s wilful blindness (as Jack sees it). It is equally telling, then, that following this scene, the narrator begins his masquerade as Rinehart by putting on a pair of sunglasses (377). Clifton’s death repositions the narrator’s view as a direct challenge to the visible through a series of visual metaphors that revolve around blindness or occluded vision. The narrator’s position—as both writer and actor—helps destabilize any sense of narrative historicity, and his refusal to

see constitutes one of the most aggressive forms of resistance. If we accept the narrator's dual-position, as both inheritor (of tradition) and progenitor (of resistance), his refusal to commit to the present interrupts the flow of communication both in the novel-as-text and in the story itself.

A comparison to the way Emerson conceives the eye in "Self-Reliance" and "Circles" is useful. In "Self-Reliance," he says "the eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray" (125). In "Circles," the eye becomes "the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end" (258). And, as we read later, "Every general law [is] only a particular fact of some more general law presently to disclose itself. There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us" (260). Vision is characterized as metaphor, as both a means of understanding and a structural position against the world. Vision as metaphor has several functions for Ellison. "Only the plunge was recorded," testifies to the narrator's single-ray-view from which he extrapolates a series of oppressions curtailing the Brotherhood's ability to properly resist both Ras and white society. Brother Jack's eye, meanwhile, offers the absolute inverse:

I stared at the glass, seeing how the light shone through, throwing a transparent, precisely fluted shadow against the dark grain of the table, and there on the bottom of the glass lay an eye. A glass eye. A buttermilk white eye distorted by the light rays.

An eye staring fixedly at me as from the dark waters of a well. (390)

The layers of transparency here add up to an occlusion: the light shining through the glass eye, through the glass, throws a "precise" shadow against the "grain" of the table. The Brotherhood's opprobrium is scientific and thrown against the narrator's act, which runs

against the grain. As Thoreau says, pursuits must be conducive to life, they must not “go against the grain” either of “will or imagination” (J 258). It is, after all, the postponing of life and substitution of death enacted by trade that “goes against the grain” (316). The narrator’s position within the Brotherhood becomes a kind of trade, or labour, against which a natural self-labour is opposed.

Whereas the narrator is able to extract from his single ray a series of concentric circles which themselves function as horizons, Jack’s eye is trapped by an enclosing wall, an outside, a circumference. Emerson says that Spirit is “a perpetual effect. It is a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us” (“Nature” 34), but Jack’s eye is a *temporary* effect, a *precise* shadow pointing not to the sun but back against the grain. Whereas Spirit is retrospective, Jack is nostalgic. If, as Matthiessen argues, “all knowledge comes from the divinity within,” (194) Jack’s eye externalizes his relation with himself and his Brothers, becoming an interruption in a coherent and cohesive narrative of progress. The glass eye itself does not signify, but Jack’s use of it as a weapon of blocked sight turns the scene into an act of “disembowelment” (IM 390).

The narrator’s fundamental split with the Brotherhood occurs therefore not at the moment of Clifton’s death, but at Jack’s response to events. It is not Jack’s literal blindness, but the “peculiar disposition of [his] eyes. A matter of construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality” (5). The narrator is aware of the transcendentalist warning. Emerson: “Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it. *An action is the perfection and publication of thought*” (“Nature” 66; emphasis added). Thoreau: “What is once done well is done forever” (“CD” 16). Ellison: “A hibernation is a covert

preparation for a more overt action” (13). The Brotherhood seeks words, finite words, and words alone; the narrator seeks to enlist words to action.

We are thus able to finally return to solitude. Recall that solitude in chapters one and two is performed, a practice or praxis that resists labour, unnecessary science, and industrialization for industrialization’s sake, modernity for modernism’s sake. In this chapter, we have seen the resemblance between dispossession and both slow violence and invisible ontologies. In these taxonomies, dispossession is irretrievably negative, an action done *against* a body which does not consent. Thoreau offers a number of palliatives to this situation, and they can be classified simply: words, perception, and silence. These are modes of resistance, and blueprints for the reconstruction of a unified soul fractured by the violent act of dispossession.

So far, our discussion of transcendentalist language has been fixated on the idea of correspondence and on the crafting of precise language—techniques to bring us closer to the ‘thing’, the object-in-itself, and thus to the ability to act. The deft marrying of word to object was a main motivator for Thoreau. However, as mentioned, Ellison is sceptical of this, believing that hibernation is useful but should not *have* to precede action. Not least because as the narrator identifies, these words are often valences of oppression themselves. Identifying in the loss of nature a reduction in clarity, Thoreau tried to develop means of resistance so that we could reclaim both nature and a language to describe it. Yet words serve a secondary but highly-related purpose in Thoreau’s work: as a narrative vehicle. Thoreau believed that nature was a grand storyteller, and that we could read great moral lessons from the fluctuations of life’s ecosystems *and* the rhythms of seasonal time (a

narrative, at least until our lifetimes, that was without closure). To convene a soul between these movements was to live exactly in the present, and to pursue a rigorous naturalist philosophy that would reveal the deep architecture that supports nature. As he says early in *Walden*, “I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line” (17). The insight is easy to miss, and commonly is, but this idea of *eternity* (that present *moment*) provides the first resistance to a narrative of dispossession that artificially curtails the contours of a person.

For Thoreau, both future *and* past contain eternity. Our relation to these eternities is anchored in the sea of the present, which itself drifts incessantly into the past, whilst propelling us into the future. Gaston Bachelard, in his dreamy *Poetics of Space*, explores the ontological limits of such a relation. For Bachelard, the present affords a degree of illusory fixity; our existence in the present is an ontological trick to give us belief in the continuity of Being: “At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being’s stability [...] In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time” (57). When we dream or remember we engage in “autovalorization” (55), where the act itself is the reason for the act’s existence. We experience memories as “motionless” because action takes place in space, and space contains time (58). Memories are autovalorized because consciousness is a patina of memories—our experience of the everyday present is an enactment of our selfhood refracted through our memories. Bachelard’s *round* ontology is thus a meditation on the idea of fixity in the present. For him, the present acts as “the *threshold* of our space, before the era of our own time,” and our encounter with the present is “between awareness of being and loss of being” (103; my

emphasis). To exist in the present, phenomenologically speaking, means negotiating between the nascent awareness of and conterminous loss of being. Paradoxically, the awareness of it is what causes it to flee, as when we try to look at our own shadows.

Bachelard explains how this instability changes the imaginative content of what he calls solitude. For Bachelard, solitude is not an experiential state so much as an adverbial one; solitude is always presaged or delimited by another action: “the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so” (58). Solitude is the net through which experience slips. Solitude acts as a “concentration of intimacy,” (83) and nowhere is this clearer than in a hut or cabin: “There radiates about this *centralized* solitude a universe of meditation and prayer, a universe outside the universe [...] This valorization of a center of *concentrated solitude* is so strong, so primitive, and so unquestioned that the image of [a] distant light serves as a reference for less clearly localized images” (79). Solitude is intimate, enjoyed, desired, compromised, centralized, and concentrated—it almost never stands alone, for itself, in what Bachelard would presumably enjoy as an act of autovalorization. Like alienation, solitude is *concentrated* by its limits.

If space contains solitude, then “every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a *symbol* of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, the germ of a room, or of a house” (174). Bachelard’s language here is vital: “that is to say” means a repetition of the previous clause in new words. So the symbol of solitude for the imagination is a representation of the home (as Emerson puts it)—our primary engagement with solitude is how we conceptualize ourselves as fixed in space and time. The home, with its fixity, its stability, its intransigence, indicates

an intimate, centralized, concentrated solitude. “It would seem,” then, he tells us, “that these two kinds of space—the space of intimacy and world space—blend. When human solitude deepens, then the two immensities touch and become identical” (236). That is to say, solitude is contingent on our ability to conceive of ourselves as anchored in fixed space and time; as solitude grows, develops, flourishes, and becomes more immense, this fixation becomes indistinguishable from “world” space, which I read as “lived,” or “physical” space, and which Lefebvre would call “Real” space.

Solitude is thus deeply entrenched in the present, as it requires the constant agitation of the present’s structure to become “immense.” Solitude flourishes in the present, but is memorialized in the space of the past. Each encounter with solitude is a negotiation between these memories and the universe outside of our universe: the future. Bachelard offers a way of reading Thoreau into Ellison with this question: to what extent is Ellison conscious of this dialectic between past, present, and solitude?

In the latter half of the novel, the narrator experiences a burgeoning knowledge of the intersectionality of his struggle. He becomes aware of the way class, context, race, and wealth intersect in a history of dispossession. Brother Tarp dwells on a poster the narrator has had made and that resides on his office wall:

It was a symbolic poster of a group of heroic figures: An American Indian couple, representing the dispossessed past; a blond brother (in overalls) and a leading Irish sister, representing the dispossessed present; and Brother Tod Clifton and a young white couple (it had been felt unwise simply to show Clifton and the girl) surrounded by a group of children of mixed races, representing the future, a color photograph of bright skin texture and smooth contrast. (318-319)

The chyron stamps out the vision: “The Rainbow of America’s Future” (319). Most of the poster focuses on the *not*-future, but the subject is still America’s future—the texture of the present, absorbing the motions of the past, cultivates the rainbow of America’s future. The poster refers back to the narrator’s earlier speech where he angrily declaims that “WE ARE THE TRUE PATRIOTS! THE CITIZENS OF TOMORROW’S WORLD! WE’LL BE DISPOSSESSED NO MORE!” (286). The content of these statements is the same, but the register is starkly different. In the poster, a passivity washes out the vitriol—“it had been felt unwise”—whereas in the latter, an active universality maintains an angry cadence—“we are.” This is an example of the split between the narrator and the Brotherhood; whereas the Brothers prefer the passive, rational approach, the narrator urges emotionality and passion. Derald Wing Sue calls this the “invisible whiteness of being” (158), a “master narrative” that protects the secret of white invisibility (23, 158). The poster repeats the master narrative, insisting on a colorblindness that contains a perilous silence: for to be racially colour-blind is to *not be able to speak* about race.

It is, however, the words that decorate the poster that are the main issue. The poster quite literally memorializes the black struggle as not intersectional but inter-generational, as a case of bootstrapping hierarchies of oppression. But, as we saw, “the enslaved were not bricks in your road.” First, the indigenous; second, the Irish; third, people of colour. “How is it,” Thoreau asks, “that what is actually present is perceived [...] without halo or blue enamel of intervening air?” (J 732). For Thoreau, “Let it be past or to come, and it is at once idealized. It is not simply understanding now, but the imagination, that takes cognizance of it. The imagination requires a long range. It is the faculty of the poet to see present things as if, in this sense, also past and future, as if distant or universally significant” (732). A

beautiful sentiment, but a revealing one in light of the poster's significance. The present, he argues, is experienced without idealization, without distance, without remove; the past, and the future, are immediately idealized as soon as they are thought of. The imagination supersedes cognition in our interference with the non-present. The poet, which is anyone possessed of an active imagination in pursuit of truth, must experience the present as "if distant or universally significant." When the narrator remarks, then, that "we are [...] the citizens of tomorrow's world," he views the present struggle not as the master narrative of historical progress—where oppressions vie for ascendance in the hierarchy of misery—but as universally significant *on its own merit*. The narrator's two worlds, the intimate struggle of his subjectivity and his explosive awareness of world space, intertwine and "blend," becoming identical. There is, then, a trace of resistance in the narrator's otherwise depressing remark mentioned earlier: that black voices are "too distant from the centres" of historical decisions. Indeed, they are, but they are equally distant from the resonance of the present, and their dispossession can be weaponized as distance.

It seems then that in terms of resistances to dispossession, words and perception are found together. Our perceptions are framed by the language we appoint; we have seen that this is the entire function of *dispossession* as a word, a kind of catch-all for various oppressions, both a voluntary label and a forced evacuation, both a slow violence and a sudden explosion. Thoreau explains this in typical prose:

How hard one must work in order to acquire his language,—words by which to express himself! I have known a particular rush, for instance, for at least twenty years, but have ever been prevented from describing some of its peculiarities, because I did not know its name nor any one in the neighbourhood who could tell

me it. With the knowledge of the name comes a distincter recognition and knowledge of the thing. The shore is now more describable, and poetic even. My knowledge was cramped and confined before, and grew rusty because not used,—for it could not be used. My knowledge now becomes communicable and grows by communication. I can now learn what others know about the same thing. (¶ 642)

The narrator experiences this twice.

First, with his own name. After the explosion at the paint factory, the narrator's identity is reset: "I realized I no longer knew my own name [...] Here was the first warm attempt to communicate with me and I was failing. I tried again, plunging into the blackness of my mind" (199).⁵² The hospital incident becomes a defining feature of the narrator's subjectivity: "The obsession with my identity which I had developed in the factory hospital returned with a vengeance. Who was I, how had I come to be?" (215). The narrator's personality is re-reset later when he joins the Brotherhood, becoming essentially palimpsestic, an ontological metaphor for the negotiation between past, present, future, rationalism and emotionality: "Start thinking of yourself by that [given] name from this moment. [...] Very soon you shall be known by it all over the country. You are to answer to no other, understand?" (257). The narrator is acutely aware of the way names and subjectivity are tightly bound; when he gives his first official speech he realizes that as soon as he begins speaking he will "be someone else. Not just a nobody with a manufactured name which might have belonged to anyone, or to no one. But another personality" (278). This personality is at least able to resist the autovalorizing historical narratives.

⁵² Note that again this idea of "plunging" is reiteration, this time with a completely different connotation.

The narrative parabola folds back on itself: it begins with naming and invisibility, a “fall into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension” (190), and ends with a suspension and invisibility:

Well, I was and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction. I was and yet I was unseen. It was frightening and as I sat there I sensed another world of possibilities [...] Incidents of my past, both recognized and ignored, sprang together in my mind in an ironic leap of consciousness that was like looking around a corner [...] I leaped aside, into the street, and there was a sudden and brilliant suspension of time, like the interval between the last ax stroke and the felling of a tall tree, in which they had been a loud noise followed by a loud silence. (397; 402; 419)

The world of possibilities, argued by Butler, unfolds in process-space that is at first historical and imaginative, but becomes literalized. The leap of consciousness becomes an actual leap around a corner; the act suspends time, and the loud silence of the narrator’s basement rushes out onto the streets like the smoke from a burning tenement. These moments occur when thing and name blend, when the narrator speaks of the resilience of his present and his presence, he becomes “conscious.” In doing so, he is propelled out of time, and into an interval of “the beautiful absurdity of American identity” (438). His blossoming awareness of the true structure of the ‘things’ out there give him, in Singer’s words, a reminder that “some modes of temporality operate outside [the Brotherhood’s] dynamics” (406). This rejection is the ultimate break, a severance with a mode of historical consciousness that is intimately blended with the present; it is a severance with this patina of time, as a telos of historical progress; it is a violent rejection of the master narrative enshrined in the poster.

The narrator's *leap* is a "pure event, raw reality, unprocessed by story, narrative or anything that could bridge the gap between reality and understanding" (Klein 503).

Such a palimpsestic identity is opposed to the surety with which the narrator lands on the word 'dispossession.' It is redolent of Sethe's experience in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Both novels turn around a pre- and post-event: in *Beloved*, it is the exorcism; in *Invisible Man*, it is the eviction. When Beloved returns, Sethe remarks that "all of [history] is now it is always now there will never be a time" (210). But when Beloved is banished, history is compressed into a permanent suspension in the present; Sethe's relationship with the present is altered by her re-memory of Beloved. Sethe remarks that "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop" (210). The unawareness of bodily autonomy is not a site of multiple horizons of possibility—as Butler argues for Ellison—nor is it a site of emancipation or transgression—like the underground. Sethe exists in the double-anonymity of a white panopticon: she is now required to inhabit a temporality of self-surveillance (a legacy of the fugitive slave law that killed her daughter) *and* to acknowledge that no black identity can be found in any place *other than the past*, a place causally linked to the slavery which originally disavowed her black body. Sethe essentially exists in a shadowless present: "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95).

Rebecka Fisher has another name for these moments, "ontological metaphors": in these metaphors, Fisher argues, a "racialization" occurs that "produces a white world where black being is distorted and dislocated (disarticulated, unsaid, and therefore cast as non-being)" (184). For Fisher, dislocated spaces, while a product of this racialized oppression, are "horizons of multiple existential possibilities" (217). The invisible man's take on these metaphors is indebted to Du Bois's famous comments about the veil. As he ascends

to the platform to deliver his first speech, he remarks that, “The light was so strong it was as though a semi-transparent curtain had dropped between us, but through which they could see me without themselves being seen” (379). The dialogue of surveillance here is one in which the narrator can always be seen, but can never see; ironically, the curtain foreshadows Jack’s later blindness. Earlier, when he exposes Mr. Norton to the ex-slaves, he says, “although I had not intended it, any act that threatened the continuity of the dream was an act of treason” (152). The narrator engages in more treason when he realizes that the *light* is so bright; here, his realization threatens the continuity of the dream—the master narrative of the Brotherhood—as he forces himself to remain visible in the luminous blinding light of the spotlight. Outside of the Brotherhood’s dynamics, but not yet his own Being, the narrator occupies a dislocated space he must articulate in order to escape.

Dispossession, like Beloved’s exorcism, explodes in a moment:

And it was as though I myself was being dispossessed of some painful yet precious thing which I could not bear to lose; something confounding, like a rotted tooth that one would rather suffer indefinitely than endure the short, violent eruption of pain that would mark its removal. And with this sense of dispossession came a pang of vague recognition: this junk, these shabby chairs, these heavy, old-fashioned pressing irons, zinc wash tubs with dented bottoms — all throbbed within me with more meaning than there should have been. (226)

It is worth dwelling on the metaphor here. At first, it seems straightforward: the narrator has something that is being stolen, something he holds dear, even though it causes him pain, much like grief for Emerson. He realizes it is better to suffer the minor violence of its presence than the explosion of pain caused by its absence. So far so simple. But the second

half of this quote makes it less clear: “with this sense” means that the “pang” follows the dispossession in time; it comes afterwards. But the last line, the recognition that the prosaic trash all has more significance than expected, is a form of the dispossession first discussed. That is to say, “with this sense” actually implies simultaneity: the pang is a product of the dispossession, but the feeling of dispossession replicates the pang that is a product of the original feeling. That sense of odd temporality is gestured at in “rotted”: the tooth is not *rotten*, but in the process of rotting—it is rotted. That sense of odd temporality is also found in “indefinitely”: without limit and without definition. In Ellison’s organic metaphors, then, black escape is not dislocated but *disruptive*.

Ellison’s discussion of dispossession is a defining event. As I mentioned earlier, Lefebvre would call this a “moment,” as it is an attempt to “achieve the total realization of a possibility” (*Critique* 1493). These moments are important to Ellison for two reasons. First, they impose structure on a narrative that seeks to undermine historical simplicity; secondly, the moment “is a higher form of repetition, renewal, and reappearance, and of the recognition of certain determinable relations with otherness and with the self” (1483). Within Lefebvre’s reading, the moment can restructure relations that already existed. The narrator had, of course, already encountered dented bottoms and shabby chairs, but his relation to those objects becomes re-constructed as he views them through the lens of dispossession. Dispossession as a form of moment “can be characterized in the following ways: it is perceived, situated, and distanced. And this just as much in relation to another moment as in relation to the everyday” (1498). The logic of moments helps explain how dispossession occurs at the same time as the consequence of it; the logic of moments also helps explain how engagement with perception can itself be a distancing technique. An

awareness of the *momental* structure of present events, then, is a way of maintaining distance from the present, and this is precisely what Thoreau was attempting to argue as a necessity for poetic thinking.

If we accept the logic of moments, then we accept the fact that “the moment reorganizes surrounding space: affective space — a space inhabited by symbols which have been retained and changed into adopted themes (by love, by play, by knowledge). The space of the moment, like time, is closed off” (1503). In this way, there is no coincidence in the scene. The narrator’s arrival at the eviction is an encounter with a series of objects that inhabit an affective space as symbols—with more meaning than they should have—and *this* sudden knowledge enables him to see dispossession clearly, for the first time. The echolalia of “removal” and “pang” remind us that this knowledge comes courtesy of a lineage of trauma. As Lloyd Pratt puts it in *The Strangers Book*, “the phenomenological circumstances that constitute the past include events in the present that assign meaning in retrospect to that subject’s actions and agency in life” (95).

Indeed, Pratt’s argument—that we are all strangers to ourselves and each other—revolves around the idea that the “greatest coherence of self” occurs when our fantasized other comes closest to our authentic subjectivity (89). He argues that,

When even the fantasized subject is made absent, the primary voice is left with nothing other than a relatively faithful echo that nevertheless seems to be slowly diminishing in its capacity to provide an organizing container for the original speaker. As the voice returns to itself it is no longer itself, and in this sense the original voice is revealed to be a stranger to itself. The madness that accompanies

the returning voice suggests that absent stranger-with-ness, which remedies what is otherwise mere isolation, an unhinging dissolution of the self ensues. (89-90)

The stranger is an affective moment: a damaging return of a suppressed otherness whose echo destabilizes the original soul's ability to cohere as an identity. The stranger is a distancer, a vestigial, historical remnant that disrupts the present-day-subject from articulating a coherent selfhood. The returned subject, such as Beloved, unhinges the self in a perfect metaphor of corridoricity.

Each of these ideas, then, of naming, of stranger-ness, of moments, of the palimpsest, represents a narrative strategy of resistance. Each is contained, constituted of and by, and pronounced through the interplay of words and perception. Or, in other words, the intersection of silence, and not-silence. I finish this discussion with a word about silence.

In chapters one and two, we saw silence as a mediative force, an arbitration between modes of consciousness, or as a site of return, a space that we begin and end in. Ihab Hassan, however, in his wonderfully strange "Silence, Revolution, and Consciousness," offers a novel reading of silence, and one that is remarkably germane to our reading of Ellison's invisible ontology. It is equally useful for arguing back against the perilous silence of Theoharis. Hassan begins with an anecdote: you witness someone across a street about to beat someone else with a club. You are forced to intervene *because* of the terror you feel: "you realize that nothing can prevent the blow, nothing but your own flesh. You must interpose your body. This is the terror of all intervention. Yet you have no choice, for the alternative to terror is the void" (463). For Hassan, to dispel terror from acts of violence is to be conscious of a history of survival, upon which consciousness depends. This pattern,

however, is an “idea of precedence,” itself “a symptom of an old consciousness” (464). Hassan argues that a revolutionary gesture against this antecedence is silence, for silence

is never soundless. It is not death, the void, or primeval night. It is rather a *condition* [a pathology] that permits us to hear the heart beating and the nerves scratching [...] Silence dissolves the categories, the patterns. Its syntax is change; its diction is option [...] The language of silence is neither the beginning nor the end of consciousness; it is simply the current means of altering it. (474-477)⁵³

This turn—the idea that silence is *en media res*, a structure of alteration rather than the product of alteration—enables Hassan’s serendipitous conclusion: “radical thought must focus on the first and last things, on the alpha and omega. It must push the critical question as far back and as far forward as it will go *until both movements meet*. In short, radical thought understand the archetypal statement: *in the end is the beginning*” (469; my emphasis).

Compare this, indeed, with Ellison’s own prologue: “the end is in the beginning” (7). For Hassan, silence is neither preface nor coda, but a revolutionary space in which absence can be conceptualized; silence is a structure of thinking, and a means to alter consciousness. Silence is in effect a threshold space. And Ellison: “the silence of sound. I had discovered unrecognized compulsions of my being” (13). For Hassan, silence is a pathological disavowal of the categories of self-knowledge that maintain a hegemony of terror. And for Ellison, “Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death” (8). Both Hassan and Ellison articulate an idea of silence that interposes in the gaps between times and movements. Silence is that “hibernation” required for “a more overt action.”

⁵³ Hassan reiterates Blanchot’s claim that *silence is never silent*.

I wish to offer an alternate reading to the silence that suffocates the invisible man. There is a distinct peril here; the silence of the Brotherhood on questions of emotion and revolution is dangerous, but the function of silence is not merely to mark danger zones. When David Copenhafer says that silence is impossible in *Invisible Man* because of “the narrative voice,” he is almost right—he says that voice is “an irreducible acoustic remainder in the text” (178). For me, and for Hassan, *silence* is the irreducible acoustic remainder in *IM*.

Silence inheres in the recesses of both the narrator’s mind, and in the physical spaces of his invisibility. Silence appears 91 times in *Invisible Man*. It happens to bodies, to minds, to objects, and to emotions; it is done to someone, by someone, and against someone; it is adjectival and verbal, emotional and scientific. Silence is the terror of all intervention. During his opening speech, when he is possessed of dispossession, he argues that the crowd of black faces has allowed dispossession to be done against them through their inaction and timidity. Closing his speech, he says, “Silence is consent” (285). Silence here is synonymous with inactivity, with an acceptance of oppression; it is, in other words, a container for other things. Later, however, the narrator undermines this: “I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet” (447). Silence here is not conterminous with peace; silence has nothing to do with peace. Peace therefore cannot be synonymous with acceptance: contentment, under this model, is merely an acceptance of oppression. Silence is one way to resist this contentment, for it works as “a ‘logic’ of the cut or sudden jump into a new key or register” (Copenhafer 179).

The diction of silence—as Hassan says, “options”—comes to a head in the final rush of the narrative. As events culminate, the speed of the narrative increases rapidly; from what began as a slow, meditative discussion on the nature of black consciousness and its ability to

resist centuries of oppression, the narrative aims towards concrete, direct action. In many ways, the first two-thirds of the narrative are a hibernation; the last third is the overt action. The diction manifests in a series of strange ocular and verbal juxtapositions: “green glass so dark it appeared black” (377), “I was and yet I was invisible” (397), “Incidents both recognized and ignored” (402), “Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice” (454). What occurs to the narrator in these moments is a texture of the present, a final acknowledgement of the recursive silence that manifests in both hibernation and action. “There was a sudden and brilliant suspension of time [...] in which there had been a loud noise followed by a loud silence” he tells us (419). The suspension of time *follows* the declension of silence; silence precedes time’s suspension. If we accept Hassan’s idea, silence is antecedent to time’s suspension, and therefore redolent of an old consciousness. In a complex moment, then, otherness, stranger-ness and antecedent all crashes together in endless suspense:

In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals. Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge. (454)

Far removed from the “frightening world of possibilities” that “the fundamental contradiction” of invisibility inspires, the narrator’s ultimate act of disrobing leaves him in touch only with a poetic silence which allows him to forge patterns from chaos. In the silent underground, the narrator dissolves the categories that had previously defined the trajectory of his life: folkloric but modernist, indebted to his forefathers but emancipated. The logic

he enacts is precisely what Hassan says silence achieves: first, a chaos; second, a dissolution of that chaos; third, a necessary interposition of the body. The narrator retreats from chaos; his plan then recognizes the fact it was a product of that chaos; and then he *must* come out, he *must* emerge. As Ta-Nehisi Coates says, incidentally summarizing the end of *Invisible*, “The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, of confrontation with the brutality of [America], is that it has freed me from ghosts and girded me against the sheer terror of *disembodiment*” (*Between* 13; emphasis added). The interposed body evoked so clearly by Coates in *Between the World and Me*, is a body Ellison both welcomes and rejects, a silent nudity unmoored from the dressings of the white world and freed into the *embodying* darkness.⁵⁴

Our narrative becomes a negotiation, therefore, between these myriad competing strains of silence. First, Copenhafer’s argument that narrative voice as a textural object means sound is irreducible. Second, Mohaghegh’s claim that “silence can only execute its vitality in writing by forsaking the concept of the author, and thus opening the doors to a post-subjective orbit” (*xiv*). Third, Hassan’s idea that silence demands bodily interposition. For Copenhafer, silence oscillates between propulsion and interruption (183); for Mohaghegh, silence is an absolute abdication (25); for Hassan, silence is pathological (466). And for Blanchot, silence is meaning (52), and for Bachelard silence is *deep* (215).

It is hopefully clear by now, however, that Ellison’s silence is not quite any of these—it is, in fact, dispossession. Dispossession’s violence articulates a slow silence that disrupts, returns, and violates epistemological continuity. Dispossession as silence is an imaginative prohibition on narrative itself. One small line points to the whole mystery, and it is easy to

⁵⁴ For a lengthier discussion of black nakedness, see Coates, *Between the World and Me*, specifically pages 14-16.

overlook. Towards the end of the narrative, the narrator tells us that, “I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me” (450). The narrator tried to externalize his sickness—blackness? invisibility? self-loathing?—*but instead* he wrote it down. A series of complicated, totally contradictory movements between outside and inside mark this sentence: he carried it (voluntarily?), in order to try to place it in the outside world (put it down?), but now he writes it (the opposite of carrying? the opposite of placing it in the world) and learns that it was inside of him (it carried him? it was his selfhood?).⁵⁵

I find Singer’s reading plausible: “he performs the final dislocation himself by burning the contents of his briefcase and pockets: all the papers, diplomas, and dancing Sambo dolls that others have used to circumscribe his identity” (412). In my reading, however, these papers do not represent the *circumscription-by-others* but the entire narrative authenticity of the invisible man’s character. First, he burns his diploma, losing for a second time “the only identity [he] had ever known” (84); second, the Sambo doll, and thus his connection with Mary and the folkloric, saviour-narrative of black folksiness; third, the anonymous note which chastised him; fourth, the paper scrap giving him his Brotherhood name (learning that both notes were from Jack). In other words, he burns down, quite literally, the entirety of the previous narrative. And it is still not enough, the basement is still in pitch darkness (469). Silence in *Invisible Man* is just this: the burning down of the narrative, the conflagration of narrative form as a medium for self-knowledge. Scofield burns down his

⁵⁵ I am reminded of the Reverend Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, a man whose death drive can be traced entirely to his need to disavow his own body. There’s certainly an argument to be made here that the narrator’s conflict revolves around his displaced masculinity, his deferred maleness. For more, see perhaps Lauren Berlant’s *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, or Elaine Scarry’s beautiful *The Body in Pain*.

home: “You call this living? It’s the only way to git rid of it, man” (427) and the narrator burns down his narrative.

Once aware of this reading, it becomes possible to rewrite formlessness not simply as a loss of bodily autonomy or as a commentary on modernist blackness. In a turn Ellison would likely approve of, insight gained at novel’s end can be read back into the prologue. Ellison’s deeply paradoxical prologue offers a blueprint for the narrative’s progression, it is a microcosm for the story’s arc. Earlier, I argued that New York is a dreamscape, and the narrator remarks that “there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers” (6). Throwing forward to the climax, where the Brotherhood daydreams its way into a revolution it did not create, Ellison begins a tripartite conceit that will dominate his narrative. First, the figure of liminality is introduced—Harlem is a border-town, sleepwalkers are dangerous. Then, in speaking of the Empire State Building and Broadway, he says that “Those two spots are among the darkest of our whole civilization — pardon me, our whole culture [...] — which might sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves” (7). Parenthetically (he says) contradiction underwrites the way we conceive of the world. It is thus that Harlem is a border-town *and* a real place, that New York is a dream, *and* a real place. A second reading offers itself here: “by contradiction, I mean.” In the diction of options created by silence, the invisible man says quite explicitly that it is through contradiction that he makes meaning. The conceit is completed with a pivot to form: “to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death” (8). Here, then, is a simple structure that dominates, structures, and oversees the narrative: liminality, breeding contradiction, destroying form. An invisible ontology is encoded into the very fabric of the story—if formlessness is a living-death, the destruction of the paperwork that constitutes

the entire narrative is a voluntary de-forming. As Jonathan Lethem says, “Not to call yourself a zombie. But you did stalk an unreal city” (621).⁵⁶

At the beginning of this section, I said that dispossession is inflicted on bodies, and that Thoreau offers three strategies of resistance: words, perception, and silence. I explored these strategies through a close reading of some key moments in *IM*, and concluded that these resistances are inflections on the same thing. Silence, words, and perception function together, forming an invisible ontology that structures, delineates, and eventually destroys any sense of narrative closure. In doing so, we returned to Nixon’s slow violence, and the way it destabilizes beginnings and endings. Through this chapter, Thoreau’s shadow has loomed large, but not explicitly. I have tried to position Ellison not as inheritor of the transcendentalist project—and certainly not chronologically or historically, as much as the character of Emerson would surely like us to. It is imperative we do not read Ellison as a *bridging* figure, a simple prop in both this thesis and modernist literature generally, spanning generations by resisting their tropes. To do so is both to grossly oversimplify Ellison *and* to undermine the overall argument here. Ellison’s *dispossession* functions not as an inheritor of solitude, but as a new inflection: if we see Thoreau as literary forebear, well, this is itself a symptom of an old consciousness. Instead, I have argued that Ellison takes up the discussion of threshold space through his introduction of process-space, further complicating the already difficult way that space, time, and selfhood mixes together in the liminal spaces of the narratives.

Dispossession renders lineage inauthentic by destabilizing access to clear historical antecedent. The authenticity of history is a meta-narrative for Ellison’s narrator, the very

⁵⁶ Žižek has written extensively on the question of zombies. A novel reading of Ellison’s narrator as a zombie could perhaps tease some additional meaning from these early contradictions.

subject of the novel that is burned down for light. If the present is torn between a series of violent ontologies that destabilize to the point where no coherent identity can be formed, the past cannot be viewed, and the present becomes a one-eyed mouse. Such ontological instability is axiomatic of the ways history seeks to assignate subjectivities, or in the words of Judith Butler, “normative conditions for the production of the subject produce an historically contingent ontology, such that our very capacity to discern and name the ‘being’ of the subject is dependent on norms that facilitate that recognition” (*Frames* 4). In other words, the tool of historical recognition is also the tool of historical disavowal.

Ellison’s *Invisible Man* inhabits a basement wasteland, a base-land of historical inaccessibility, buffeted by invisible ontologies coded into his being and into the optics of his life. He inhabits the basement with thousands of lights, attempting to illuminate an invisibility that requires another person, for as W.S. Merwin reminds us, “You are the second person. You look around for someone else to be the second person. But there is no one else. Even if there were someone else there they could not be you.” It is a basement haunted by ghosts, but these ghosts are formless, inchoate, and contradictory. He is demanded, rejected, a man entirely alone, outcast even in the most intimate circles of his life. He is divorced from the texture of the present, sundered from the past, and blocked from the future. His resistances all feed back into the homologies of modernity which inspire a racecraft that will reinforce the original oppressions. Dispossession is the theme, a practice of solitude complex and emancipatory.

In the final chapters, we will invert the invisible man, turn him upside down. We will look at Jonathan Lethem’s *Fortress of Solitude*, a novel with a character who lives, permanently, in an attic, a prison of his own creation, painting a scene-by-scene film strip,

one-by-one, as his son navigates the racial politics of disenfranchisement, invisibility, and alienation. Chapters one and two established solitude as a practice, but chapter three argued that dispossession can be one consequence of solitary practice, particularly if threshold space is appropriated, controlled, or dominated by a blind pursuance of historical fidelity or accuracy. Importantly, this chapter offered a counterweight to what has otherwise been a singularly white solitude. In chapter four, it is useful to turn to a white narrative *about* black subjectivities.

Chapter 4: Parabola

America is “the first genuine prison society in history” (Wacquant 60)

“The Americanist context, its grand themes of Manifest Destiny and Manifest Disappointment” (Lethem 420)

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall be duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction” (US Const. Amend. XIII)

There is a howling, yawning abyss in Jonathan Lethem’s work; at the centre, and at the periphery, and everywhere else. This phantasm, this spectre, is the absent mother. And Lethem deploys her in ways that threaten to undermine the very idea of narrativity. Lethem uses this absent mother like a parabasis—the Greek chorus that stands alone on the stage and addresses the audience directly as a mouthpiece for the author. But Lethem’s parabasis is not there, it is always there: it is quite literally parabasis, aside from the premise.⁵⁷

This mother has nothing to reveal. She is not a prop. She is not a simple caretaker, sweeping up the detritus left by ruined men (although to some extent, at least in Lethem’s earlier fiction, women, and more generally *non-men*, are central only in the theatrical sense, as the treasure chest that contains Ninius’s letter in *Semiramide* can be said to be central). Perhaps more insidiously, the mother functions as a metaphor for Lethem’s broader project of attempting to capture what narrative is: “Everything is so much more overwhelming [...] than anyone can cope with, and the brain is frantically [...] sorting and organizing and

⁵⁷ As Rivka Galchen notes: “Perhaps we can say that evil sneaks into the space made by theatricalizing when the story becomes too believed in, by too many people. And when the doubting chorus gets cut from the script” (178). Perhaps, indeed, the mother is there to remind us of unreality. Her absence—the absence of her absence—would wrap us in a conspiracy, a believable truism, a silent, sudden agreement that narrative selfhood can be achieved, or is even desirable.

narrativizing, *just to be able to cross the room*” (qtd. in Kelleghan 240). The mother figures a poetics of the everyday, and her absence structures the way we narrativize bodies.

Lethem, as we can read from any interview with him, would likely resist the idea that the mother acts as a deconstructionist placeholder, an absent-presence. Her existence is not parthenogenetic, she is not dialectical—she is not the inevitable result of *other things*, but the creator and origin of those things. She is not simply misogynist procreator, an invisible womb birthing out unstable narratives across a visceral and eviscerated landscape of nightmares, a chaotic series of broken-down toys, interrupted ejaculatory fantasies, and cocaine-sweat guitarists. Instead, she is operative, a subcutaneous presence beneath each narrative dermis; Lethem’s stories weave like skeins, like skins, ontological in their ambiguity and body, and the sanguine heart, the bloody staccato rhythm of the dee-bop, the jazz, the attic-dwellers, the table-climbers, the five-fuckers, the kangaroo cops, the invisible homeless, the invented relics, the roaming tigers, the chaos of the night, the billboards, the advertising men, the audacity of traffic, the promise of closure—they all rotate, arc, fall back and revolve into Her:

My books all have this giant, howling missing centre—language has disappeared, or someone has vanished, or memory has gone. I’m for ever writing around a void — I guess I don’t have to explain why that is [...] I find myself speaking about my mother’s death everywhere I go. (“Brooklyn dodger”)

Taken from two separate interviews, but cited in the same one, the journalist nearly makes the leap: these sentences complete one another. Lethem’s mother’s death represents a void, a disappeared language, a vanished someone, a forgotten memory. And it is this obsessive

paradox that fixes and orients all of Lethem's fiction. So—the question is: where the hell does she go?

To ignore the presence of Lethem's mother is both to fundamentally misunderstand Lethem's work *and*, more importantly, to do a disservice to his mother. To relegate this detail to an interesting aside, a parenthetical note, is to miss entirely the way absences recur and fragment, smashing up against the monolithically self-aware narratives Lethem creates. The mother is archetypal for Lethem: it is a language that *speaks itself into silence*, a *memory that can only be remembered by its absence*, and a *person who voluntarily disappears from themselves*.

Lethem represents not only a logical and chronological conclusion to an argument about the parabola of solitude. Lethem, who references so obviously Ellison and Thoreau, typifies, crystallizes, and disrupts three vital constructs that have driven my thesis: the threshold, solitude, and storytelling. In this chapter, I examine what happens when the narrator cannot be identified, when narrative voice completely breaks down. The early portion of my thesis explored a white solitude; the middle section examines black subjectivities as modalities of solitude; and the final section will use unstable, assumed-white perspectives on black ontologies. As with previous chapters, I do not here wish to define solitude. Instead, I call for further research into how we understand solitude.⁵⁸

Lethem is a prolific and genre-bending writer: ten novels, with an eleventh just released at the end of 2018, the first released in 1994; five short story collections; one novella; scores of essays and screenplays, comics, and criticism. While these chapters will

⁵⁸ In this chapter, I focus almost exclusively on the question of racialized peoples as either black or white. I do not spend time detailing Dylan's complex relationship with the Puerto Rican population, or his strange, glib asides about Chinese immigrants. Given the overarching argument of this thesis, such a position makes sense, but I want to acknowledge that such an argument can erase or marginalize issues that are *always already* marginalized.

focus primarily on his two best works—*Fortress of Solitude* (2003) and *Chronic City* (2009)—my objective is to articulate the way Lethem treats *loss*. I will thus also talk about his other works that we can term “loss works”: *Amnesia Moon* (1995), *As She Climbed Across the Table* (1997), *Girl In Landscape* (1998), *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), *you don’t love me yet* (2008), *Dissident Gardens* (2013), *How We Got Insipid* (2006), *The Wall of the Sky, the Wall of the Eye* (1996), *Lucky Alan and Other Stories* (2015), and *A Gambler’s Anatomy* (2016). This wide-ranging view is the approach taken in the only two book-length studies of Lethem’s work: James Peacock’s *Jonathan Lethem* and Matthew Luter’s *Understanding Jonathan Lethem*. I will touch on Lethem’s openly autobiographic works: *Conversations* (2011) and *The Ecstasy of Influence* (2011). I have also not focused on his work around comic books, which is an oversight, but a necessary one: Lethem is obsessed—as we will see—with white space, with gutters and borders, with splash pages, and coloration, with transitions and speech patterns. The day to be made by reading Lethem’s novels as comic books will have to wait for the next sunny day. I am also avoiding his screenplays, and the upcoming movie of *Motherless Brooklyn*. Here, I follow Lethem’s own argument: adaptations, especially of comic books, are almost-never successful: they cannot be. Lethem’s work is not always good—his bibliography is inconsistent, but his work is always critically relevant, and, as of yet, mostly overlooked in scholarship.

In this chapter I will examine three things: absence, gentrification, and narrative instability. Threshold space manifests in the “collapsing middle” left and sought by Rachel; it grows naturally from the process of gentrification; and it is coded into the very way Dylan’s narrative functions. I am interested in how Dylan’s narrative fetishizes or appropriates black identity, specifically in the way it coopts Ellison’s use of narrative fragmentation. I will focus

mostly on *Fortress of Solitude*; in the final chapter, I will discuss Lethem more broadly. I argue that what we can learn from the narrative is superseded by what we can learn from the narrative voice, particularly in reference to Ellison's text, and the tortured relationship between the omniscient narrator, Dylan, and Mingus.

Walter Mosley's *The Man in my Basement* is a fascinating novel. In it, Charles Blakey, a black man, is offered \$50,000 by Anniston Bennet, a white man, simply for allowing Bennet to stay a few weeks in Blakey's basement. Bennet sends along the materials for his imprisonment: struts for a cage, books for entertainment, clothing and everyday essentials. Blakey constructs Bennet's cage in his basement, which more closely resembles a bomb shelter. In the process of hollowing out the jail space, Blakey discovers relics and endowments from his past—African masks, paintings, a slave collar.⁵⁹ Though he will later turn these objects into a museum exhibit, he begins by selling them to pay off his mortgage. We discover, as the novel progresses, that Bennet was a fixer, a man drafted in to prepare the way for economic imperialism, the theft of resources, or to agitate for political upheaval. Thus, the novel functions on two levels of conquest: first, the narrative of Bennet's imprisonment for his crimes against (black) humanity; second, Blakey's abandonment of his past in favour of white wealth.

Blakey's narrative is one of psychological infamy: he moves from afraid, timorous, and sheepish to dictatorial, vindictive, and violent. Blakey begins to inhabit his role of 'jailer', much as the college students of Zimbardo's famous Stanford Prison Experiment. Bennet eventually kills himself by ingesting poison. It is revealed that he had planned this

⁵⁹ Echoes of *Invisible Man* are loud.

act of redemption all along. The months of imprisonment, then, were merely a suspension of inevitable death—Bennet is, for all intents and purposes, on death row.

Mosley's narrative speaks to the way we can begin to read Ellison into Lethem. As Bennet says, "you are a black man. You come from over there. I need a black face to look in on me. No white man has the right" (174). Mosley's narrative inverts perspective, casting white men down to the depths of the earth, and locates the proximal gaze in the black narrator. Devika Sharma summarizes this complexity quite nicely:

Bennet's prison is a basement prison, or private prison [...] because the crimes atoned here are themselves publicly invisible and subterranean [...] The basement prison is a prison within the United States and thus an American prison. However, it is an expanded and amplified version of the American prison, since the novel interprets the subterranean quality of the prison to be a function of stitching together new and old forms of slavery. In this sense, the basement prison is a displacement of the US prison system onto a phantasmatic terrain, in which an *otherwise disavowed quality of this system* is made available for reflection. (665-7)

In other words, Sharma argues, the prison articulates the logics of contemporary American prisons: privatized, invisible, and displaced. What Sharma sees in this prison scenario is precisely what Dumm, Smith, and Haney saw in the development of the American prison system at large. It is also precisely what I argued in the previous chapter by describing the invisible man's basement as a prison cell that is not quite a prison cell. The invisible man's cell is such a displacement onto phantasmatic terrain—the terrain of narrative revolt.

The prison narrative is a metanarrative, articulating a vision of the "neo-slave narrative concerned with isolation and confinement as racialized experiences in

contemporary American society” (662). Given what we learned in the previous chapters about the makeup of modern American prisons, for Sharma, absolute solitude in contemporary America is a uniquely black experience. Sharma rightly identifies this “disavowed quality”—slavery by another name—as the superstructural edifice upon which prison discourse rests.

It is fitting, then, that Sharma’s argument is not simply about Mosley’s *Basement*. It is called “The Color of Prison. Shared Legacies in Walter Mosley’s *The Man in my Basement* and Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude*.” For Sharma, in spite of the fact that Lethem’s narrative is primarily about a white boy, there is a “shared experience of unfreedom” (664). For Lethem and Mosley’s narratives are *not* about deprivation—the loss of Bennet’s freedom, the gentrification of Dylan’s home. They are about the grounded experiences of unfreedom of Mingus and Blakey. Sharma rightly identifies gentrification as a primary motivator of black unfreedom, and I will return to this later. What Sharma misses, however, is that a basement prison exists in *Fortress of Solitude* (*Fortress*). Additionally, it is the way that both Mosley and Lethem use embedded or enframed narratives that makes them uniquely positioned to interrogate the way prisonization interferes with narrativization. Prisons within prisons within a prison state; stories in stories in stories.

Lethem’s *Fortress* is a novel in three main parts. It tells the story of Dylan Ebdus and Mingus Rude, two boys, one white, one black, growing up in a gentrifying neighbourhood of Brooklyn. Dylan will eventually become a writer (the entire narrative is, arguably, written by Dylan), Mingus will eventually become a prisoner. The boys discover a ring that will allow them to fly and turn invisible. Parts one and two are nominally third-person, whereas part three is first-person. However, narratorial ownership is never clear—much of the omniscient

narrative is written in Dylan's style, looking at events he couldn't have seen. The question of narratorial ownership hangs heavy. Mingus's father (Barrett) is an ex-soul or R&B musician turned cocaine addict; Dylan's father (Abraham) is a painter, whose lifework is a film-in-miniature, a painted movie, drawn and coloured frame-by-frame in an attic room he never leaves. Mingus's mother is absent; Dylan's (Rachel) leaves. Dylan's father's work is about the "dynamics of space and sound, the quality of privacy and access, for a whole series of subtle aesthetical distinctions" (29-30). What he doesn't realize is something that Dylan has already acknowledged as he teases and prods at his favoured childhood game, skully, a ballgame whose rules don't exist: "Maybe skully sucked. Maybe to perfect a thing was to destroy it" (32). In many respects, we can and should read the narrative as an interrogation of the nostalgia or bildungsroman genre: maybe it sucks, and maybe it's supposed to.

If *Basement* is constructed as a metanarrative, following the logics articulated in our chapter on *IM*, *Fortress* is constructed like a collection of short stories, a series of narratives bracketed by white space. Dylan's father never leaves his attic; he is imprisoned by his own creative process, but his quest for perfection cannot succeed because he lacks Dylan's perspective. Dylan's knowledge is founded on the streets—in taciturn interactions with racialized peoples and streetgames—whereas Abraham's is sanitized, academic, and static. Dylan remarks that "days were full of gaps, probably because they were too alike. And when something big happened it was impossible to hold it clear. The gaps rushed in even there" (40-41). Dylan's father, however, sees "the stillness of the film [as] part of the project. Each frame bore the weight of this cumulative discretion [...] As in the newer frames of his film, the painted glass flattened distance into proximity" (42-43). It is never clear from where

Dylan gains his precocious insights, but there's a case to make that it comes from the atmosphere of the pre-gentrified Dean Street.⁶⁰

It is worth stepping back, then. Dylan's family moves into Dean Street as one of the first white families to migrate to a predominantly black and hispanic neighbourhood. Isabel Vendle, an old white woman, "like an apostrophe inside her brownstone," (6) is the driving force behind the gentrification of Dean Street: she *contracts* the neighbourhood, splices it together, but in doing so, shortens it, desacralizes it by making it casual, performed. Vendle-gentrification is a process of dehistoricism—taking something out, replacing it with a nullity that occupies space but cannot signify. That Dylan is a child and his father an adult, common as this sounds, is why Dylan is more attuned to the granular destruction of gentrification, and thus more able to rightly identify the malaise of Dean Street.

Dylan is "synecdoche": a new presence in a new neighbourhood, not requiring a process of de-creation before recreation. As Matt Godbey suggests,

Dylan is a synecdoche for a class of urban dwellers that expresses its authentic identity through the consumption of lifestyles associated with a geographic locale that has been symbolically configured as authentic [...] The anomie that is an essential component of gentrification and that is directly related to the presence of a new class no longer defined by traditional associations. (138)

Godbey's definition of gentrification is precise: "collecting is more than the preservation of memories [...] Central to such a construction is a process of decontextualization that separates objects (memories) from the circumstances of their creation" (144). Gentrification is the rewriting of urban narrative using objects that no longer hold their symbolic power; it

⁶⁰ Dylan's precocity is extremely reminiscent of some of DeLillo's more insufferable children, particularly in *White Noise*, for example.

is a palimpsestic approach to architecture entirely unaware that there is “no mute architecture” (Rakatansky, qtd. in Shalev, 96).

Dylan’s diagnosis of childhood can be extrapolated to a view of the neighbourhood:

If the Etch A Sketch and the Spirograph had really worked they would probably be machines, not toys, they would be part of the way the adult universe operated, and be mounted onto the instrument panels of cars or worn on the belts of policemen.

Dylan understood and accepted this. *These things were broken because they were toys*, and vice versa. (13-14)

Dylan is aware that the neighbourhood is broken, because if it had really worked, it would not be for people like him and Mingus. Such is the extension of ostensible urban renewal—these neighbourhoods are broken because they were gentrified. Dylan’s father cannot see this distinction because, as suggested, his film bears the weight of “cumulative discretion,” wherein each new painting attempts to contain the entirety of the previous frames. Abraham—Dylan’s father—is thus painting the neighbourhood’s gentrification, where outsiders attempt to paint over but retain the historical weight of previous symbols, stoops and brown liquor and childhood ball games.

Gentrification read into narrative means we should interrogate who this omniscient narrator is. Early on, for example, it seems that the narrator must be Dylan: “other kids sat blank-eyed in invisible cages [...] fingers up their noses. Some might be learning the alphabet [...] Some were from the projects [...] What had the first graders done all day in class? Nobody could really say [...] The kids in your first-grade class might be in your second-grade or you might never see them again. It might not matter” (36-7). The narrator is ostensibly not Dylan, but the narrative occupies Dylan’s position: it tries to articulate a childhood

memory of school, fractured and anemic. The early narrative is essentially a long monologue on the learning of object permanence. Whether we view the narrator as avatar of Dylan, or Dylan as narrative stand-in, what is clear is that there is nothing particularly stable about a nominally omniscient perspective.

This gentrification is the context in which Dylan matures, and Abraham slowly dies. However, there is a more primary context—that of Dylan’s mother. As mentioned, the absent mother is a Lethem trope found throughout his fiction. Surprisingly, Rachel Ebdus is actually *in* this novel, if temporarily. She begins the narrative as a political constituent of Isabel Vendle, as one of the main figures of gentrification. We first encounter Rachel in a series of childhood tapestries. Dylan has killed a kitten, but Rachel assumes that “Dylan was too young to understand what he had done, except he wasn’t [...] He’d later pretend to forget, protecting the adults from what he was sure they couldn’t handle: his remembering entirely” (7). Rachel is positioned as a buffer against the outside world, as a protective membrane between Dylan and Dean Street. Extending the Oedipal logic, “Dylan’s solitude which his father had left unbruised his mother burst like a grape” (16). Note the infantile cadence here—the rhythm of Dylan’s solitude is childlike, bouncing like a skully ball, without punctuation, a proleptic beat that reflects our encounter with jazz throughout the rest of the novel. Again, the narrator is coopting Dylan’s voice; given what we learn in part three, is it plausible that the early narrative is a consciously detached self-memorialization? Dylan’s own narrative memory and re-memory?

Rachel then disappears from the narrative, to return only in postcard form, a cartographic presence renamed Running Crab, a narrative funnelled through her new boyfriend, the postcards, and her ex-husband Abraham. With Dylan’s position as a writer,

it's also possible this narrative comes siphoned through his own memories, and then through the layers of his narrative (a story within the larger story, also possibly authored at least partially through him). Running Crab's absence from the novel creates a tension within Dylan best expressed by the protagonist of *Motherless Brooklyn*, "We were all four of us an arrangement around a missing centerpiece, as incoherent as a verbless sentence" (117). Lionel Essrog's awkward syntax is redolent of young Dylan's—an innate passivity distorts simple reading. "We were all four of us," with its passive tone, the "verbless sentence," although here not verbless—*were*—still entirely bereft of meaning, without a centerpiece. Dylan's future, after Rachel's departure, functions this exact way, as though it misses a centerpiece, has become verbless. We find these sentiments across Lethem's fictions, for instance in *Dissident Gardens* where Rose remarks that "if anything alarmed the seven-year-old girl, it would have been the absence of her mother's voice" (9). Formative moments for Lethem's protagonists always involve the sudden and unexpected disappearance of mother-figures. It occurs in *As She Climbed Across The Table*, transposed to a literal black-hole: "I had lived inside the circle of Alice's silence, before. Now I stood utterly outside" (43). Dylan is catapulted into his silence—into the outside, burst like a grape—and becomes like "the wanderer [who] inaugurates a writing-act through which the rejection of homeland is its own unfailing precept of immortality" (45). As we shall see, Dylan's unfailing desire to keep Gowanus, then Boerum Hill, and Dean Street alive will leave him constantly at odds with lack and absence.

These, then, are the three contexts in which *Fortress* unfolds: first, an absent motherhood, the creation of a threshold space encircled by the "collapsing middle"; second, gentrification, and the way it functions as synecdoche for how the narrative is written; and third, the consequences of this fractured, inauthentic, unstable narrative.

Crabs can't run

The story of Dylan's mother is a story of absences. She vanishes halfway through part one, in chapter six, reappearing only as a series of postcards, cryptic hints from Running Crab's travels across the world. "Rachel" appears 134 times in the novel; Running Crab appears 17 times. Fewer than one quarter of these appearances are in the *present*, but almost all mentions of her come in Dylan's memories, themselves written within Dylan's own narrative; every occurrence of Rachel is thus imaginative. Rachel, in one form or another, appears every three pages.

Rachel occupies an interesting position, at once both topological and linguistic—she circumscribes both Dylan's language, and his space. Rachel blurs the boundaries between language and space, projecting her words into physical objects that inhabit their home and the neighbourhood. "She was too full for the house," Dylan tells us, "and too full for Dylan who instead worked Rachel's margins [...] Dylan tiptoed close under the cover of Rachel's monologue" (16). We see this when Lethem puns on "mummy." The children, trying to find a likely space for a game of wall-ball, chose an abandoned house that wears "cinderblock bandages over the windows and doorway like a mummy with blanked eyes and stilled howling mouth [...] The mummy house was a flat surface with no windows" (18). The discontinuity between Rachel's "fullness" and the mummy house's "flatness" evokes both the way the child Dylan encounters the world primarily through its tactile shapes and the way Rachel herself occupies a corridor position between the inhabitation of home and the outside world. The infant narrative quite literally needs both to touch and relate back to the

mother in order to make sense of the world; Rachel, filtered through Dylan's memories, therefore becomes a liminal figure who straddles this divide.

In chapters one and two, I claimed that Thoreau not *only* argued for parity between outside and inside; rather, he was engaged in a battle to redraw and extend those boundaries *internally*. Thoreau's commons were self-portraits of a soul occupying both itself and a transcendental reality simultaneously. I argued that he achieved this through the idea of self-labour and how it produces threshold space. In the words of Lawrence Buell: "the importance of breaking the hold of the work ethic by cultivating nonlinear attentiveness: to retone psychic existence so as to experience each moment in its fullness" (100). These phrases—"nonlinear attentiveness" and "retone"—are useful conceptual frameworks for understanding Rachel's position, or nonposition, in this narrative. Buell makes a compelling argument that environmental consciousness involves an awareness that "the outer and inner landscapes are never entirely synchronous or continuous, not only because of asymptotic limits of perception and articulacy but also from propensity for reinventing the worlds we see and the linguistic and structural tools we employ" (26). The shifting tides of our relative position, our words, and our perceptions create asynchrony in consciousness.

Coded or 'retoned' into the nature of spatial consciousness is an instability that affects the way we perceive and talk about the limits of self and outer-world. Rachel's syntax articulates this tension precisely. It's worth citing at length Dylan's first narrative monologue about his visit to the apostrophic Isabel Vendle:

Vendlemachine, Vendlemachine, Dylan sang in his head, though he'd never said it aloud *once beyond his own doorstep*, not even whispered it alone in Isabel Vendle's house [...] *Vendlemachine* was Rachel's word. Rachel Ebdus awarded secret nicknames to her

visitors and to people who lived on Dean Street and Dylan understood they couldn't be leaked from the house, from Rachel's kitchen. His mother had *instilled this doubleness*: there were things that Rachel and Dylan could say to one another and then there was the official language of the world, which, though narrowed and artificial, had to be mastered in the cause of the world's manipulation. Rachel made Dylan know that the world shouldn't know everything he thought about it. And it certainly shouldn't know her words— *asshole, pothead, gay, pretentious, sexy, grass* —nor the bearers of nicknames known the nicknames: *Mr. Memory, Pepe le Peu, Susie Cube, Captain Vague, Vendlemachine*. (40)

Nicknames function as a secret language between Dylan and Rachel, but these nicknames are tied to a specific geography: Dylan's house. Such circumscription is not simply for civility and manners. Instead, this coded speech is an organic doubling that takes language away from the artificial and the narrowed. The language of Vendlemachine broadens the linguistic horizon in which subjectivity can form, creating in Dylan a doubleness where language is both created and destroyed by the home space. If we accept Lloyd Pratt's idea that when the "state, society, and private life" become inseparable, the "regulatory" nature of the public cannot operate (130), then Rachel's insistence on a private, home-based language that leaks out into the neighbourhood becomes a virus that Dylan uses to undo or remake his existence: "Dylan determined now to reread the whole sequence of postcards stoned, to start at the beginning again and with the assistance of the drug decode Rachel's vanishing" (232). Temporally, Dylan "now" will look to the beginning from the future, to try to discover something that cannot be discovered. Shadows of the invisible man's stoned return to his basement loom large over this monologue.

Fortress is a liminal novel. And, in Rivka Galchen's words, "When you can skate gracefully on this maddening surface, you are at the heart of things" (167).⁶¹ Lethem initially tries to establish Rachel as a presence both topological, as existing concrete in the narrative coherence of the suburb's architecture, and as a signifier, around which Dylan forms a cohesive identity. Rachel: "she'd eject him from the first of his two worlds, the house, into the second. The outside, the block. Dean Street" (19). The punctuation is telling—the fragment of the "outside" functions as a "block" on the flow of language; Dean Street, the proper name for the street, comes last, following slowly on the footsteps of the house. Dylan will later characterize this neighbourhood accurately as a position of "halfway": "The halfway house. It was all halfway, you walked out of your halfway school and tried to chart a course through your halfway neighbourhood to make it back to your own halfway house, your half-empty house" (106). Dean Street will thus come to signify Rachel's liminal permanence, even after her departure. Rachel, as the guardian of inside/outside, of language/silence, and of private/public, is a halfway character. Like "fugitive melodies [that] lurked in the space between syllables" (140), Rachel "went omitted, unnamed, but both knew to speak of this place was to speak of her. Possibly Dylan and Abraham only remained in Gowanus for Rachel, holding down her spot" (164). Rachel returns us to the phantasmatic terrain, where disavowed qualities *return* both to the self, and to the transcendental reality beyond.

Rachel is a corridor figure. Marshall, as we saw earlier, argues that corridors are transitional spaces that over-signify their presence as *formal* inventions. Corridors are irreducibly corridors, through which topological meaning is created. Rachel, irrupted through both speech and space, occupies a formal moment of *between*—Dean Street is being

⁶¹ Or as Lethem says, you can't be deep without a surface.

gentrified, and Dylan is maturing. Marshall's examples of self-aware corridority—the broken down furnace in *Native Son*, the flu in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, public transit in *Call It Sleep* interrupt the daily flow of uninterrupted communication, self-consciously pointing out their own form.

But this is precisely the role Rachel takes in *Fortress*. After her sudden, unexplained disappearance, her postcards interrupt the daily flow of communication to point out their own artifice. That is to say, quite simply, that even before Rachel has articulated the notion of the “collapsing middle,” she designs and writes of a corridority that ensures Dylan's occupation of threshold space—between authenticity and inauthenticity, between childhood and adolescence, between his parents, between whiteness and blackness. Later, we find out that it was in fact her boyfriend, Croft, who wrote most of the postcards, and that Rachel's involvement was either unwilling or minimal. Dylan's own memorialized narrative, itself embedded at least partly in sections of omniscient narrator: the irreducibly absent Rachel is bracketed even from her own absence.

To cite a few postcards:

this crab runs sideways west
 out of the pot
 but not out of potluck
 pacific ocean mermaid dreams
 be good d and you'll see one. (102)

don't let hank fool you d

a brooklyn street kid never quits

dreaming of stickball triples

egg creams and the funnies

in his mind he's dick tracy

she's brenda starr

not venus on the half shell

love beachcomber crab. (120)

if the mets had to trade sever

for a red

they should have shipped him

to cuba for this guy

better fit for che stadium

so saith commissioner crab. (193)

Redolent of Bukowski, Williams, cummings, and Charles Olson, Rachel's poems glissade noiselessly between the ecocritical or humanist—with our crab-mother figure headed west to escape the 'pot', we assume symbolizing her marriage, as Abraham is nicknamed "the collector" (40)—and the nostalgic. The crab runs sideways, as nature demands, but can never escape the luck of the pot, e.g. the luck that got it caught in the first place.⁶² As Olson tells us in *Call me Ishmael*, "I take SPACE to be the central fact. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy. It is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning" (11). Rachel takes SPACE as emergent "when it is seen" (Marshall 166). Rendering space visible allows her to dismantle it: "the collapsing middle was what Running

⁶² It's perhaps pointless at this stage to mention the fact that crabs can't run forwards, anyway.

Crab had fled out of” (574). The “crab run” also brings to mind the salmon run, where salmon return from the ocean, swimming upstream, to spawn. The child that Rachel ran from, in this view, is that collapsing middle. Or, perhaps, is it middle-age that Running Crab flees from? Either way, “be good d,” and perhaps you’ll see something: a crab, a mermaid, the pacific ocean, it is never clear.

The postcards, all forty of them, (232) accumulate a wealth of nonsense-knowledge, invoking what Marshall sees as the hallmark of narratives about contagion: “speechless blankness becomes the [...] preferred description of communication: spaces and persons transfer into each other rather than conducting information” (138). In other words, the breakdown of communication points to its own form, transcoding bodies and spaces, intermingling them until they become insuperable. That “*brooklyn kid never quits*” but he also never “*quits dreaming*.” d, Dylan, is Dick Tracy—the detective—and Rachel is Brenda Starr, the journalist. Rachel’s (Croft’s?) ostensibly accurate reportage forces Dylan into the role of detective, involuntarily. Rachel’s pivot to *venus on the half shell*, a reference both to Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (1482), and Philip José Farmer’s joke novel *Venus on the Half-Shell* (1975) undermines the reporter’s truthful reporting. Botticelli’s Venus stands impossibly bent, entirely lopsided, counterposed against her wistful expression gazing away from the direction of her lean, as if her emergent birth is already seeded with conflict. But, perhaps more in keeping with Lethem, Farmer’s novel was based on a scene from a Kurt Vonnegut book *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and Farmer’s novel originally appeared under the name Kilgore Trout. A narrative assembled through narrative, Dylan, Croft, Rachel, a postcard, Abraham, Vonnegut, and a pseudonymous original text. The plagiarism of culture, its gentrification, destabilizes clear ownership. It’s also impossible to avoid the aphrodisiac

implications of the *half-shell*, a reference to oysters, which, eventually, gives us Dylan's only firsthand sexual experience, with Mingus, "sputtering into one another's fists" (241). As the narrative progresses, these postcards disappear into the background, no longer transcribed for the reader: "Last postcard came you-can't-remember-when, anyhow" (311). Dylan decides that the postcards represent nothing but the "romance of poverty," which can "go fuck" itself (311). Nonetheless, the postcard's enduring materiality—their bodies—are referential in a way that cannot *not* point out Rachel's transitional presence.

Rachel, then, mapped against the space of Dean Street and addressed to her son's language, represents the ideological shift that characterized early movements of American exceptionalism.⁶³ David Noble's *Death of a Nation* argues that American exceptionalism is maintained through a series of Westward movement: first, flight from England; second, flight from New English industrialization (xliii, 14). Noble laconically dismisses the hubris of exceptionalism, saying that "the myth was not true, beautiful, or good" (43). But it is Noble's conceptualization of the constant dispersion that most clearly articulates both Rachel's motive *and* her achievement. We can see this in the way Noble reuses key words like "flux" and "meaningless history":

Change was celebrated when it had a forward direction away from the meaningless flux of traditional societies and their generational cycles. But from the moment a middle class believed that it had become dominant within its home, a national landscape, it experienced a crisis of cultural identity. (xliii)

⁶³ A general discussion of contemporary exceptionalism is available in Godfrey Hodgson's *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. Hodgson argues that American exceptionalism is not "intrinsically corrupting" but that it has become toxic recently (175).

This national landscape had lost its plenitude and had become *entropic*. As it withered and lost its redemptive power. (14; emphasis added)

A usable past was always associated with a landscape, national or international. Meaningful history was an exodus from meaningless history, time as flux. (49)

These citations are put together not to imply a narrative continuity that doesn't exist in the original text, but to demonstrate the way Noble iterates on this idea of "direction." It's apparent that exceptionalism is an essentially transitive idea—if, as Noble argues, exceptionalism is a reaction against meaningless history, and the flux of time, it is an attempt to create a static vision, one characterized by stability, meaning, and fixity. In other words, the imposition of narrative progression on a fractured mix of small stories.

According to Noble, there are three levels of displacement involved in the formation of the exceptionalist identity: first, a displacement from England, towards the mythic American shores; second, a displacement West, away from industrialization, and into democratization; and third, daily displacements, from homes, landscapes, and myths. If, then, Running Crab embarks on a Westward journey from a fleeing centre, it is surely indicative of these displacements—as soon as Rachel has dominated Dean Street, she moves on; as soon as Dylan is self-sufficient, she moves on; as soon as Abraham can no longer be redeemed, she moves on; as soon as Dean Street no longer signifies, she moves on.

Such randomness and loss of potentiality is articulated in the way Rachel disappears from the narrative. Robert Woolfolk, the neighbourhood bully, realizes Rachel is "no longer around to *kick his ass*" on Dylan's behalf (81). Although Robert is mistaken—he thinks he saw Rachel carried out by police, but it is implied that these were nude paintings made by Abraham and sold—he knows the result. A strange moment in the narrative: Dylan's bully

confuses Rachel and a representation of her body. The representation *in absentia* of Rachel is enough to indicate to Robert that Rachel is now actually absent. Dylan likewise struggles with what constitutes reality, and is especially conscious of how memory impacts our understanding of the present. It is telling that Rachel's body—figured both in naked representations and real-life absence—is foregrounded in a discussion of her disappearance. Rachel's ontological limits are quite explicitly articulated as parameters of her absence, figured through her body. Again, *moments* are sifted through multiplying perspectives that delimit our understanding of any event's verisimilitude.

So, Dylan gets bullied, before retreating to the relative safety of Mingus's house. Here, he remarks that “none of this was tellable [...] Dylan couldn't ask Mingus whether he'd also seen the art handlers or whether he'd instead somehow witnessed Robert Woolfolk's imaginary police. It was outside speech” (82-83). Outside speech: the implication that there is both a language of the outdoors that cannot be articulated indoors, but also implying that there is a language beyond expression, as in, this is outside the realm of human knowledge. But the underlying reason for its incommunicability is that “Rachel's disappearance didn't want to be given a name, a form to etch it in Dean Street history” (83). Her disappearance is viewed through paintings, so it is unsurprising that here the verb “etch” is used—she is quite literally being erased in both pictorial and literal forms. Additionally, “etch” reminds us of the “etch-a-sketch,” a thing broken by definition, something obsolete by its very nature. The alacrity of Rachel's flight returns us to the scene of the disaster Blanchot articulated throughout chapters one and two, as a stage of primary solitude: “the disaster is unknown; it is the unknown name for that in thought itself which dissuades us from thinking of it, leaving us, but its proximity, alone. Alone, and thus exposed to the thought of the disaster

which disrupts solitude and overflows every variety of thought, as the intense, silent and disastrous affirmation of the outside” (5).⁶⁴

To put it as simply as possible, Rachel’s disappearance is a microcosm of the way communities spread Westward across America. It also evokes and inverts the road trip novel, a stereotypically male genre, but then undermines it: it was Croft writing the postcards, and the nonsense-information was filtered through Rachel, Croft, the postcards, and then, on occasion, Abraham. Information, even when it’s barely intelligible, is embedded in a series of micronarratives that reflect the novel’s ambivalent relationship with storytelling.⁶⁵ Rachel’s disappearance inaugurates in Dylan a sudden speechlessness, an inability to communicate, and the unknowability of the disappearance forecloses Dylan’s view of his own potential. Rendered mute, beyond speech, the event functions as a kind of miniature disaster that can only be spoken around, structuring the thought itself. Likewise, the sudden loss of Rachel gives the narrative itself an entropic feel, that her absence has dismantled potential energies that might have animated the story itself, told as it is with child-like phrases and emotions. Unable to redeem Dean Street, or herself, Running Crab scuttles out of the narrative and leaves behind a disastrous architecture which demands retelling as strongly as it resists speech. Rachel’s diaspora represents a flight from the dying centre, into a series of outsides, rehearsing, or reliving, the flights of the original colonizers

⁶⁴ Rachel also evokes the detective fictions of Cornell Woolrich (1903-1968). Woolrich, perhaps only remembered because Hitchcock turned one of his stories into *Rear Window*, is acknowledged by Lethem himself as an influence (Kelleghan 232). For Lethem, Woolrich represents a “paranoiac, identity-shattering reality,” so that however a narrative ends, the reader is “in some ways intrinsically betrayed, fundamentally betrayed, by any kind of ending at all” (232). This is a generous portrait of Woolrich, but Woolrich was possessed by the idea of urban architecture, and the ways our surroundings distort and amend our subjectivities. In “It Had to be Murder,” for example, a woman is killed and then cemented into the floor as the building undergoes renovations. In the Great Depression, she is quite literally entombed by ‘progress.’

⁶⁵ A comparison with *Lolita* could prove fruitful.

who, once satiated with one neighbourhood's effacement, moved on to replace the next. The disaster of Rachel is the disaster of gentrification.

I have positioned Rachel as a duplicitous figure, at once transitory and fleeting, materially, but permanent in the lingering consequences of her existence and her departure. This enacts what Lethem himself describes as a concern with ghosts: "Those who speak to the invisible, the remote, those not present, while disfavoring the visible, the proximate, the present. Those concerning themselves with ghosts" (*Ecstasy* 253-4). The ease with which Lethem slips the "present" into the mix makes it easy to miss; it is not clear if these are synonyms, consequences, or non-sequiturs. For Dylan, they are consequences. Toni Morrison has Sethe say it well: "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place stays [...] out there, in the world" (35). Rememory indeed, the echoes of Rachel fracture and distort Dylan's recollection of his *place*: "Isabel Vendle's nephew wasn't the mother I never had, any more than a rotting typewriter was. He wasn't the father I never had, either. Abraham was the father I never had, and Rachel was the mother I never had, and Gowanus or Boerum Hill was the home I never had, everything was only itself however many names it carried" (572). Dylan quite literally glissades—that is, moves to join—from person to place, amalgamating his memories of Gowanus with his memories of Abraham and Rachel. The inversion, from "wasn't" to "was" moves us into an unexpected space where *that which was not present is revealed to be the most present*. Rachel was "the mother I never had." She was duplicitous, at once and once not. Those *mermaid dreams* of the *pacific ocean* then are dreams of hybridity. The mermaid, half-and-half, illustrates Rachel's corridoricity, synthesizing the

paradoxical states of detachment, attachment, and reattachment through a series of, as we've seen, deeply chromatic, asymptotic, and coded messages that spatter and spit fitfully through the narrative.

Marshall argues that "the corridor to the soul begins with the rough equivalent of window and door for eye and mouth, and looks back at the observer, blocking and reincorporating the observation as part of the same operation [...] they also reveal that architecture and personhood are bound to each other in loops of self-observation" (167). With the "mummy house," the description of Rachel as "too Brooklyn," (11) and the way Rachel's monologues become animate (16), she articulates the precise relation that Marshall observes, where observed and observer get caught in an ocular relationship of mutual reinforcement and dependence. Marshall is being quite literal, and while the logic is more figurative here, the idea of "self-observation" does align with Dylan's kleptomaniac narrative, his hoarding of the postcards, his storing of them next to *Stranger in a Strange Land* (232), his calling himself Running Crab (461), and his inheritance of the same typewriter Rachel had used (568). If the corridor points at its own materiality (*Corridor* 176), then Dylan's relationship with Rachel is codified through a series of self-other-observations which look back, block, and reincorporate this exact relationship.

If the mets had to trade sever / for a red / they should have shipped him / to cuba for this guy / better fit for che stadium. "Sever" occupies a double position of both reiterating "trade," but positioned as "cut" or "end the relationship," and referencing Tom Seaver, the Mets's most successful pitcher. "Che" performs a similar function, punning both on the previous line—the "red" of Communism—*and* Shea stadium. The indefinite article is

marked by its double absence; ironically, it no longer introduces but *points to its own absence*.⁶⁶ Running Crab and Dylan: indefinite articles forever proposing but never fulfilling the uninterrupted flow of communication.

Rachel introduces into the novel the first interrogation of aesthetic liminality, or the threshold. This interrogation is extremely complex, because it relies on so many counterbalancing tendencies: Dylan is synecdoche for his neighbourhood's gentrification; Rachel's flight metaphorizes an American exceptionalist tendency that seeks to flee the "collapsing middle"; Rachel's postcards undermine narrative authenticity; Dylan's theft of the signifiers of Rachel's presence, such as her nickname, her typewriter, complicates the telos of the narrative; and Rachel's absence testifies to Marshall's notion that proper corridoricity interrupts the flow of everyday communication, both in how she prescribes and dictates Dylan's language, and then in the ways her postcards interrupt it. Rachel escapes from a threshold, indeed, but her escape *is* a threshold gesture.

No wonder, then, that we later learn that Rachel did not even pen the last few postcards (569). For it wasn't Rachel, but the idea of Rachel, that animated the endless mermaid dream.

Gentrification/plagiarism

"Why are we so traumatized by the neighbour's over-proximity?" Slavoj Žižek asks us. "Habit and custom are the predominant ways in which we maintain a distance towards the 'inhuman' neighbour's intrusive proximity, and we are today effectively witnessing a decline of habits: in our culture of self-exposure and 'sincerity,' they no longer provide a

⁶⁶ Lethem's *a* in many ways replicates the logic of the scarlet letter, but rendered invisible, and therefore even more insidious.

screen ensuring our distance from the neighbour” (*End Times* 121). For Žižek, habit and custom are functionally opposite to self-exposure and sincerity. The contemporaneous neighbourhood is a codification of exposure. In other words, something is lost in the movement from habit and custom to self-exposure and sincerity, especially so when that sincerity is disingenuous.

Žižek, however, is not interested in the cause of this effacement and replacement; with a symptomal reading, he instead takes “habit and custom” as axioms for ways we maintain distance from one another. Obviously, this reading is fundamentally and singularly Western, and especially North American, as customs of proximity can be found in most other cultures. Nonetheless, Žižek’s ultimately argues that the neighbourhood offers a microcosm of broader movements in class politics:

History is the gradual process of the separation of subjective activity from its objective conditions, that is from its immersion in the substantial totality; this process reaches its culmination in modern capitalism with the emergence of the proletariat, the substance-less subjectivity of workers totally separated from their objective conditions. (219)

Notice the way Žižek employs his notoriously slippery inversion—that he would call dialectic—to move from de/subjective to substance-less subjectivity. But, even so, the conclusion is a useful one. Substance-less subjectivity would entail a situation in which a person’s selfhood is divorced irrevocably from their objective conditions. This is a subjectivity made of nothings, read through the gaze of labour relations, so that when a worker no longer has material investment in the production of their labour, their ability to

form a cogent selfhood is forestalled, and thrown into an endless system of defeat and repeat.

Žižek articulates a Marxist view of history, wherein narratives of continuity become weapons of oppression: history is a way of segmenting and feigning narrative. History removes us from the ‘totality’, the perfecting of labour relations with power decentralized into the hands of workers, who *own their own labour*. Thus, to fight is to step outside of history. Ironically, a rejection of history is an embrace of the real totality—that is, material conditions—and thus substance-less subjectivity is the perfection of history’s fragmentary logic. Self-labour perfected as a response to totalizing narratives of historical continuity is precisely what Thoreau argued for; the fight against substance-less subjectivity, in which a person is merely an assemblage of various historical tendencies, is exactly what the invisible man wanted to avoid.

Such is the Marxist definition of alienation: the “inability in all areas of life to grasp and to think the other” (*Critique* 33). Disenfranchised from their own labour, the proletariat is analogous to the nominal revitalization of cities and towns: “dwelling [...] fades in the face of housing. The ‘home’ vanishes. Confronted with functional housing, constructed according to technological dictates, inhabited by users in homogeneous, shatter space, it sinks and fades into the past” (1773). As Lefebvre elsewhere argues, the “replacement of residence by housing” enables the “ruling classes [to] seize hold of abstract space” and define “the lowest possible *threshold of tolerability*” (*Production* 314; 316). In other words, the Marxist argument demonstrates the way labour relations and the production of space replicate a logic of alienation and distantiation in which narrative totalities are overwritten by purely nominal historical trajectories. History coopts progress, but this illusory sense of progress is

weaponized, leading to “a sundering of the street, [a] *disarticulation of external space*” (303). As simply as possible: history’s narrative pretends to be progressive, but really it displaces man’s ability to control the output of his own labour. Simultaneously, architectures of the city replicate this logic. In other words: gentrification.

Matt Godbey, in his article, “Gentrification, Authenticity, and White Middle-Class Identity in Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude*,” offers a nuanced and compassionate reading of how gentrification operates for Lethem. Godbey contends that

one important change is the movement of inner-city neighbourhoods from slums to centers of wealth and affluence. Delineating how the process converts these sites into powerful symbols of authenticity upon which affluent whites trade for their own identarian concerns points to the dangers inherent in urban renewal efforts directed at residents for whom an individualism centred on the search for authenticity supplants a more traditional focus on social welfare and the rights of the oppressed. (134)

Gentrification involves a triple-erasure that mimics Lefebvre’s logics of production. First, traditional or historical sites, symbols, and locations are overwritten by homogeneous, expensive, and inauthentic housing. Second, original residents are pushed out, as the influx of capital, concentrated wealth, and projects of revitalization create increasingly high costs of living. Finally, the newly created, illusory space is marketed as *authentic*, so that newcomers can feel solidarity rather than colonialism. This is an “*anomie* that is an essential component of gentrification [...] directly related to the presence of a new class no longer defined by traditional associations” (138). A new class of people, authentically middle-class, inauthentically identarian, expressing a rootlessness and restlessness that ignores the rights

of original residents. This is the “collapsing middle” that Rachel both flees from *and* represents.

Gentrification puts Dylan in an awkward position. His family is one of the first to attempt gentrification in Dean Street. After Isabel Vendle, Rachel, Abraham, and Dylan are the only *narrativized* whites in the suburb. This isn’t to say that there are no other whites; Dylan’s cryptic comment about the makeup of his school, “One girl was Chinese, which was strange if you thought about it,” (30) presumably implies that there is at least one other white family close by. But these characters are unspoken, unannounced, not granted narrative exposure. Vendle’s understanding of their position in the neighbourhood is exclusively economic, entirely causal: she “wished she could slather money over Dean Street entirely” (35). Dylan, however, is interested in the consequences of their whiteness: “ownership depended on mostly not letting anyone see anything” (56). The unowned narratives of other minorities—such as the Chinese family or the Puerto Rican stoop-dwellers—are written out in phrases such as these, left to a self-determination Dylan is apparently unable to access.

Childlike, he misses the implication of this, even though he elsewhere gestures at the politics of visibility. Indeed, Dylan can only own things on the street as long as they are kept hidden from the other children, but, equally, if you cannot be seen, ownership is precluded. These stoop-lurkers, the authentic residents of the halfway house, are “fugitive melodies [lurking] in the space between symbols, niggers themselves crouching in the dark” (140). Later, Dylan will realize the “suburban obliviousness of these white children to the intricate boundaries of race and music which were [his] inheritance and obsession” (504). Dylan

constructs race and music as the ground upon which the battle of gentrification plays out. The staccato rhythms of authenticity in Dean Street exist under “a spell, a pall,” for

the white families appear continuously these days, now too many to count, but collectively they’re still a dream, a projection conjured up by Isabel’s will. The renovators—that’s a politer word for them—they’re a set of ghosts from the future haunting this ghetto present. They’re a proposition, a sketch. Blink and they might be gone. (180)

Like etch, “sketch” recurs. In Dylan’s upended formulation, invisibility ensures ownership. Much like the invisible man—who retreats to sanctify his own boundaries—Dylan is aware that gentrification inaugurates a complicated series of reveals and disappearances. It’s possible that Lethem gestures at his own narrative’s complicity in this process of invisibilizing: Dylan’s recursive narrative is a process of revelation and effacement, a white-to-black history, an essential gentrification of his own past in which black voices are not afforded their own space or time, but are made to inhabit the bodies of the narrative-owning whites. Dylan makes a formal equivalence between ghettoization and temporality. This is a “ghetto” present, and the inauthentic whites are a dream.

We are returned to Wacquant’s definition of the ghetto as a specific space, with a homogeneous population, that has to replicate the logics of its oppression in order to continue functioning (50). Wacquant argues that as the “walls of the ghetto shook and threatened to crumble, the walls of the prison were correspondingly extended, enlarged and fortified” (52). That is, when the ghetto was no longer politically viable, it was replaced by the prison.⁶⁷ Dean Street, after all, is “the grid of zones, the huddled brownstone streets

⁶⁷ The 13th amendment, after all: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States.”

between prison and projects” (92). We should read this both ways, as both spatially separating the prison and the projects and temporally, as a waystation or halfway house between the ghetto and the jail.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in “The Hardened Criminals,” (THC) Lethem’s short story from *The Wall of the Sky, The Wall of the Eye*. THC relies on a gothic, macabre premise: criminals sentenced to life imprisonment are hardened into brick-like shapes and then used to construct the prison in which they will reside. Literally, the walls are made of men. Sing Sing lives again. The wall size is infinite—new prisoners, new bricks. The son of one of the bricks is sentenced to live in the prison—not as a brick—and is tasked by the warden with getting incriminating information from his now-bricked-in-father.

The day we went to paint our names on the prison built of hardened criminals was the first time I had ever been there. I’d seen pictures, mostly video footage shot from a helicopter. The huge building was still as a mountain, but the camera was always in motion, as though a single angle was insufficient to convey the truth about the prison. The overhead footage created two contradictory impressions. The prison was an accomplishment, a monument to human ingenuity, like a dam or an aircraft carrier. At the same time the prison was a disaster, something imposed by nature on the helpless city, a pit gouged by a meteorite, or a forest-flare scar. (2243)

The parallax view of the prison, its doubleness, marks it as a contested site. Such a prison literally encapsulates the idea of ghettos as holding-pens for prisons, as a kind of pre-probation.

Compare the speculative-fictional attitude of THC with its earthier counterpart in *Fortress*. The same event—graffiti on the prison wall—but this time encountered with

different mediating figures (cameras, helicopters, aircraft carriers replaced by embedded narratives and ontological limits). En route to deposit his paycheck, Dylan sees that

on the vast glass-brick and concrete face, maybe ten stories above the street and three stories tall, was a brazen impossibility, the biggest tag in the history of tagging. The lines were broken and wobbling as they'd have to be, spray-painted from the open window of a hovering helicopter, which was the only way the tag could have got there in the first place, right? Right? Still, however ragged, the thing was a masterpiece, dwarfing Mono's and Lee's old bridge stunt, and meant to shock the viewer's brain with the obvious question: How the fuck DID it get up there? (372)

Dylan discovers this cartography not through a series of removals but as a sudden fracture, a rip in the commonsensical everyday of depositing his pay. Ostensibly a third-person narrative section, the rhetorical questions—"right? Right?"—at least heavily suggest that this is in fact Dylan's own voice. Unlike the technological mediation of THC, this graffiti is occluded through narrative instability, mediated through both history and voice. There is no duality of impression here; instead, Dylan's approach characterizes the prison as a monument, and his vantage, staring up at DOSE's massive letters, creates the impression of Mingus looming over the town, and, more importantly, over Dylan, casting a large, syntactic shadow over Dylan's world. The graffiti, superimposed on the liminal space of the prison, interrupts the everyday flow of communication, pointing to its own artifice.

Thrown into sharp relief, the jail itself absorbs the properties of the tag: "a cry, a claim, an undeniable thing" (372). And Dylan struggles to understand it: "Puzzling the message in the four letters. Puzzling where it *was* a message. Or just a tag. Someone's betrayed you but you can't say who. Someone's flying and it isn't you" (372-3). In THC, the

camera is always in motion, creating an impression of vehicularity, to borrow James Peacock's word: there is an impression that the human-prison is not static, not fixed. Here, the tag affixes the prison in a sudden present. Dylan does not misread the tag by asking if it is a message; in fact, he gets close to the kernel or novum of the tag's spontaneous creation of meaning.

The tag's position, high up the walls, leaves two possibilities: an inside job, or an impossibility. Its message thus metaphorizes the difficulty of black mobility in the gentrified city: the only ladder rung Mingus is able to ascend is the microcosmic mafiosa of prison hierarchies. It also testifies to the inherent instability of language that so fascinates Lethem. Finally, the tag's "undeniability" expresses its authenticity. In the iterative, inauthentic attempts of granite gentrification, authenticity is the out-of-reach, the constantly off-the-page. The tag, on the other hand, dominates the page. Nowhere is this clearer than in the tag's erasure: "In fact it would be ten days before it was gone. Who knew how to clean the exterior of a twenty-six-story jail? And after, a phantom DOSE remained etched in scrubbed concrete" (372). Mingus's undeniable statement is now a permanent, ersatz feature of Brooklyn's geography. So, Dylan will never have his own, but Mingus's tag is always mediated; Dylan's access to this process of spray-painted memorialization will also be mediated through this encounter, told in the third-person, etiolated by the fact the novel is written from within the first-person narrative of adult Dylan, wrapped by the novel's own existence as genre and form. Whereas THC's vision is "overhead," Dylan's is distinctly in-head—and DOSE's? Somewhere in Dylan's head.

This moment of ekphrasis signifies the rupture between Dylan and Mingus. As Peacock points out, it is following this moment that Mingus yokes Dylan, and Dylan's

kleptomaniacal fetishization of Mingus finally falls apart as he is forcefully reminded of his whiteness (Peacock 127-8). It is this moment, too, that signifies Mingus's criminal predestination: Mingus will, after all, be imprisoned for shooting his grandfather.

Godbey argues that an insidious consequence of gentrification is the way it disrupts memorialization. Dylan preserves a lineage of black funk and jazz music through his career as a writer, reviewer, and producer. As Godbey says, Dylan's "collecting is more than the preservation of memories and is a conscious attempt to shape experiences in a manner that suits personal goals [...] Central to such a construction is a process of decontextualization that separates objects (memories) from the circumstances of their creation" (144). In other words, the preservation of erased cultural signifiers in gentrified neighbourhoods functions as another form of substance-less subjectivity, wherein the original, authentic experience is divorced entirely from its objective conditions but still required to function as a cultural signifier. We can often see this in the way graffiti artists in the story, for instance, aim to mark the expropriated territory of the prison(ers's) wall.

Godbey's argument is also useful for understanding the shifting and often contradictory narrative voices that dictate the first part of the novel. Gentrification replaces authentic symbols with simulacra, creating a historical truthiness that doesn't exist. In much the same way, *Fortress's* narrative uses Dylan as the vehicle for assuming truthiness and authenticity. The possibility that the entire story is written by Dylan further complicates ideas of authenticity: "people tend to see the relationships in their lives from an individual perspective and as raw materials for constructing an authentic identity" (135).

The process of decontextualization marks Dylan's personal relationships too. His girlfriend Abby, for example, feels like "a featured exhibit in the Ebdus collection of *sad black*

folks [...] I said to myself, Abby, this man is collecting you for the color of your skin. That was okay, I was willing to be collected. I like being your nigger, Dylan” (440-444). Dylan’s tortured relationship with Arthur Lomb is another example. Later, when Dylan returns to Dean Street in part three, he sees Arthur and is taken aback by the fact that Arthur appears more ‘authentically black’ (575). To take Dylan’s words out of context, Arthur practices “that easy appropriation of [...] the suburban obliviousness of white children” (504). It is, of course, Dylan’s own arrogance, his own myopic view of what constitutes authenticity that precludes him from ever actually achieving any kind of visceral *Brooklyn*. Arthur, whose speech “bore like a small puckered scar a characteristic hitch of intaken breath in that place where he’d omitted the word *black*” (170). Arthur, whose “hitch of breath was Arthur in a nutshell” (171). But it is Dylan’s own “autism, [his] failure at social mimicry” that had “made Arthur more Brooklyn, in the end” (564). It is not that Arthur is any more a chameleon, any more attuned to authenticity: it is Dylan’s failure.

And what marks Arthur’s authentic Brooklyn blackness? “Arthur wore a Yankees cap” (575). Because for Dylan, cultural signification maps the contours of identity, leaving no space uncolonized: “I still hadn’t forgiven [Arthur’s] flip-flop from Mets fandom when we were twelve. That betrayal stood for Arthur’s easy adaptation to black style, his glomming onto Mingus Rude” (575). The movement from one team to another signifies the movement from white to black, “the same inhibition that stuck me to the losing Mets had barred me from the *minstrelry* which would have allowed me to follow Mingus where he was going” (575; emphasis added). Summarized in one word, Dylan’s lazy nostalgic racism is centred. Arthur can change race as easily as he can a favoured sports team, because Brooklyn blackness accepts “minstrelry,” a parade of white-guys-in-black-face. Mingus never

comments so directly on Dylan's race, and nor does Arthur, so it's only in Dylan's mind that masquerade can so easily grant access to different cultures or spaces. Given the plausibility of reading Arthur as Dylan's double, the hypocrisy is even more pronounced when Dylan earlier codes his first kiss as the completion of a silent sentence, the "groping for a relation between speech and the passage of breath in two mouths, the miasmic world created at the junction of two faces" (237). Arthur's hitched breath, the elision or omission of *black*, is the groping for a relation between both Arthur the Mets fan and Arthur the Yankees fan, and Dylan-as-Arthur and Arthur-as-Dylan.

Godbey's view is that Dylan's anxiety stems from his negotiation between native Brooklynite, pre-gentrification, Boerum's "prehistory," and his own family's role in the gentrification (140). Dylan essentializes this conflict through his use of "the other," as a "symbol of authenticity" that "commodifies this status [of otherness] by promoting it as a means to an end" (145). His black-kleptomania, his hoarding of the work of racialized peoples, his relationship with Arthur, is a cooption of black labour that rehearses bell hooks's argument that white America is keen to separate itself from the nothingness of white culture (146). In short, Dylan's career as cartographer of black music—throughout the *Prisonaires* section—shamelessly situates his complex but ultimately *white* context as a form of racial negotiation and outreach: "The voices of Barrett Rude Jr. and the Subtle Distinctions lead nowhere, though, if not back to your own neighborhood. To the street where you live. To things you left behind" (339). Dylan converts Mingus's dad's musical career into a proxy for his own stilted childhood, precluded by the sudden absence of Rachel. Nowhere is this clearer than when Dylan is directly confronted: "You don't hate black people, then?" (553). This reading is mostly correct, but it is Arthur's "self-

reformatting” that really drives Dylan’s view on authenticity (252). Not an other, but another (Dylan).

Godbey limits Dylan’s collections to physical items—music CDs, liner notes, photographs—but Dylan’s mania also extends to memories and *ideas*, and, indeed, Godbey mentions this in his conclusion:

When Dylan returns to his neighbourhood in search of authenticity, he realizes it exists only in a utopian ‘middle space’ where the past is forever preserved as a series of cherished memories shielding his authentic self from real-world dangers like gentrification. Dylan’s middle-space, his search for a fortress to cloak him in the past, symbolizes the solipsistic construction of an authentic self that drives the gentrification of America’s inner-cities. (146)⁶⁸

Godbey’s language reiterates Rachel’s escape from the middle, gesturing at the process of memorialization which characterizes Dylan’s racial/Rachel nostalgia. Gentrification is staged at the level of the city, its people, its signifiers, *and the narrative*.

It’s only after Dylan leaves the neighbourhood that he’s able to reflect on gentrification’s effects. In much the same way the invisible man had to retreat underground to begin writing his narrative, Dylan’s perspective is shaped in a Thoreauvian move of *looking back* on events already lived: “The block was like an open-air museum of their former days, the slate cracked and skewed in all the usual places, the abandoned house still theirs any time they want to reclaim it” (212). Dylan is aware that while Vendle had tried to paste money over the surfaces, Dean Street remains fundamentally a cracked and skewed space. The use of “open-air museum” is also telling, evocative of a colonialist reading of the

⁶⁸ A poetic coincidence that Dylan searches back home for authenticity.

neighbourhood's gentrification. This museum is a collection of diasporic people, suspended in the gaps of Dean Street, more a mausoleum of empty possibilities than a museum of the past. When first Dylan said that the gentrifiers were a "sketch," he loops back to his realization that the etch-a-sketch is broken because it is a toy. The neighbourhood, then, is broken *because it is a black neighbourhood*. In stark contrast is Croft Vendle's huge acreage, a plot of land so large it features abandoned houses that don't need to be razed because they are already superfluous (568).

Dylan's middle-space is an *entente* between a white-black past, a black-nostalgic present, and a more general Americanist manifest yearning. In the third section—which mostly takes place in California, Indiana, and New York—Dylan visits Vendle's large estates and discovers a kind of serenity mapped to a nature free of gentrification. Discovering a rundown, abandoned cottage, he remarks that "the scene was Walden-pretty, but a little desolate, regarded on civilization's terms [...] The woods were an engine of silence, pumping it to the sky" (656-658). Dylan here capitulates to a feeling Thoreau had earlier identified at Walden Pond: "America renews her youth here" (7 663). It is only here—here alone—that he is able to articulate Rachel's flight and his own attitude towards it: "I'd been pushed out like a blind finger, to probe a nonexistent space, a white boy integrating public schools which were just then being abandoned, which were becoming only rehearsals for prison" (665). It is only here—in hindsight *layered within the narrative's already extant hindsight*—that he is able to gain a perspective on events.

The observations are keen. The clan Ebdus is the blind finger, attempting to gentrify a neighbourhood which neither wanted nor asked for revitalization, finding itself situated in a nonexistent space. The contraction of "white" and "boy" implies a breathlessness, a

rhythm which cannot be forestalled, the smashing together of his childhood with his innate whiteness, an Arthur Lomb style hitching. Most importantly, whereas the “de-contextualized and de-historicized space [of Dean Street] is a conscious attempt to preserve a specific version of Gowanus that speaks most clearly to his needs,” (Godbey 144) his view of the performatively inauthentic cabin in the woods enables him to disclose the inherent artifice of his conception of his home.

It's worth briefly discussing the prison episode to further clarify this idea. Mingus is jailed because of a discovered gun. This empty signifier attached itself to Mingus because he was “an individual bearing a manslaughter rap” (630). It did not matter whether the gun was his, much like in “Light and the Sufferer.” Dylan hatches a plan to free Mingus, using the magic ring that makes them both invisible and able to fly. The prison is constructed as another halfway house, a transitional zone reminiscent of the refugee camps in DeLillo's *White Noise*: “Each place we encountered in this visitor's gauntlet felt provisional, refitted for temporary use [...] This was a place of canceled time: it had no value [...] Daynight, the hour of the changing of the guards” (575; 585). There are few spaces more aggressively decontextualized or de-historicized than the prison: it is a space designed to be alien. Alien spaces are spaces “without alienation” (*Corridor* 180), and, as such, are free of the normal referents through which a person might construct an identity. The irony here is that both Rachel and Dylan have spent time trying to locate middle-spaces, or escape from them, whereas Mingus has been shuttled between a series of middling to null-spaces; thus, Mingus is able to realize that you have to “read between the comic-book panels, where Dylan failed” to realize that they are “only extras in this urban scene” (602).

Mingus's life exists in disarticulated space, and thus completes the imposed historical trajectory for Dean Street's neighbours: the halfway house between childhood and prison. Thoreau's idea that jail gives a "closer view" of native town is nowhere more true than in Mingus's imprisonment, for Mingus fulfills the logic of the gentrified neighbourhood, literally ejected into a non-space. As I discussed at length in chapters one, two, and three, the modern prison is designed as a site of alienation: "the inmate, completely cut off from the past, his future in suspension, would live only in the immediate time of his sentence" (Dumm 108). If we accept Godbey's definition of gentrification as a force that materializes identity as an expression of inauthenticity that feigns authenticity, Mingus's occupation of a space that deliberately blockades the past and precludes the future perfects that logic. It is thus vital that Dylan's plan to free Mingus occurs *before* his encounter with the woods, with the Walden-pretty but desolate civilization. Dylan's awareness of gentrification's toxicity can only occur after his encounter with the stopgap time of the prison. Though Mingus is ejected from history, he is not emancipated from history's totalizing force. Though both Žižek and Lefebvre would have us believe that rejecting history is the first step towards liberation from oppressive power dynamics, the prison is *not* a space outside of history. Instead, it enacts the logics spelled out by Ellison's references to plunging outside of history: the circularity of gentrification's logics locates Mingus between two extremes—of purposeless mobility and extreme stasis, to use butler's words. Mingus *retunes* the logics of gentrification.

The itinerant flyer, Aaron X. Doily, is the terminus point of this logic. Should we take this name to be the Hebrew for "mountain" juxtaposed against the gaudy, low "doily"? More plausibly, the X. appropriates Malcolm's—Doily's lineage, even his homelessness, is

unremarked, unknown, perhaps undiscoverable, existing as he does outside of gentrified space and time. The “X” symbolizes only that *something* is being referred to. Doily’s ring—also of unknown origin—bestows its wearer with a seemingly random power, usually flight or invisibility, but it seems to depend on both the context of the action and the wearer’s needs or background. Dylan first notices Doily flying through the sky, but it’s not until later that Mingus and Dylan *tag* him while he sleeps under a bridge. Discovered by Abraham, Dylan and Doily are removed to hospital, where Doily bequeaths the ring to Dylan in an act of pure visibility: Dylan “seen me” (203). Doily, the flying black man, gives Dylan, the “little white boy,” his ring (138). Though the ring changes hands, literally, quite often, it usually lives in Mingus’s room, until the novel’s end, where Dylan sneaks into prison to free Mingus. Mingus instructs Dylan to give Robert the ring. It takes this final act to teach Dylan what he’d always known: “I’d wakened Aeroman to kill Robert Woolfolk. It was a collaboration that had taken Mingus and the ring and my half-conscious hatred years to devise, though the seed of inspiration had been unmistakable, in Aaron X. Doily’s plunge into the Pacific Street vest-pocket park—what goes up comes down” (665-666). As it was decades earlier, the complex interleaving of social networks in Dylan’s life form a “mutual[ly] assured deniability” (222). However we interpret this complicated subplot, Doily’s lack of fixed position, the way he later forgets how he “lost” the ring, the way the ring kills Robert, it demonstrates the degree to which movement and stasis are axes through which Lethem guides his fractured narratives.

Lethem’s famous essay “The Ecstasy of Influence,” a few thousand words almost entirely made up of other people’s words, an homage to Walter Benjamin’s never-finished book of quotes, helps clarify the way Lethem positions narrative authenticity. Lethem

argues that culture is referential, an “eternal intertextuality of participation,” (137) but that there are modes of plagiarism which delimit its degree of appropriation, reuse, and recycling. There are, for instance, moments of “imperial plagiarism, the free use of third-world artworks by more privileged (and better-paid) artists” (119), but there are also texts that have “infiltrated the common mind” and have moved beyond control (125). Plagiarism can thus be defined either as “enclosed” or “commonwealth” (119). Commonwealth plagiarism, such as it is, makes us realize that

the citations that go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*; they are quotations without inverted commas. The kernel, the soul—let us go further and say the substance, the bulk, the actual and valuable material of all human utterances—is plagiarism. (126)

In other words, to articulate is to plagiarize, and it thus only matters what the intention is.

It is (perhaps un-) remarkable the extent to which Thoreau’s language resurfaces in Lethem’s essay. A few examples should suffice: “industries of cultural capital, who profit not from creating but from distributing, see the sale of culture as a zero-sum game” reminds us forcefully of Thoreau’s concept of self-labour (122). “Thinking clearly sometimes requires unbraiding our language” is almost verbatim Thoreau’s remarks on language (122). “Active reading is an impertinent raid on the literary preserve. Readers are like nomads, poaching their way across fields they do not own” is derivative of both Thoreau’s remarks that books should be read as deliberately as they were written *and* his idea that walking is only emancipatory when the land is *public* (123). It is also lifted wholesale from de Certeau’s *Practice of Everyday Life*. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Laura Walls’s definition of Thoreau’s naturalism as a poetry of the *commons* also occurs here: “The silence in a movie

theatre is a transitory *commons*, impossibly fragile, treasured by those who crave it and constructed as a mutual gift by those who compose it” (122).⁶⁹

The argument has four parts. First, there is a form of unenclosed, commonwealth plagiarism which does not appropriate or artificially constrict culture. We call this the *commons*. Second, the commons can be mapped onto the visible world, through both art and praxis. Third, authentic existence is therefore an axis of plagiarism. Fourth, the physical, material, architectural world is revealed as plagiarized both in the way we articulate its affects *and* in its innate construction. We find ourselves then in a position where authentic originality is impossible but also undesirable. Self-knowledge is something we already always had, and were simply awaiting the “synapses to parse it for what it was” (220).

It is not until the end of the collection that Lethem finally draws us back to *Fortress*. I cite at length:

Memory honours no point of origin, has no interest in or indeed any capacity for making a pure return to the site of its inception [...] Human consciousness may be time’s attempt to remember itself. It is possible we are only things to remember. The enumerated lives, the names of those gone, our letters and maps and charts, a mnemonic device for otherwise uncountable eons, a way to give a hint of flavour to the void. Yet time most likely found it unbearable to remember itself entirely. A glance in that direction was all that was needed. (444-446)

The sheer beauty of this prose aside, Lethem gives us a way to articulate Dylan’s precise relation to gentrification: gentrification as a genre of plagiarism.

⁶⁹ “The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it” (*Walden* 31); a sentence is “the result of a long probation” (*Merrimack* 374); “the best part of the land is not private” (“Walking” 636); “Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written” (*Walden* 101) to note but a few.

John Coltrane once told Miles Davis that his solos were getting unreasonably long and that he didn't know how to stop them. Allegedly, Davis replied, "Try taking the fucking horn out of your mouth" (203).⁷⁰ If gentrification coopts authentic symbols, repackaging them to people for whom their authenticity can never be authentic, it is by definition imperialist. If plagiarism "honours no point of origin," it is an act of gentrification. That is to say, if Dylan's gentrification is racialized through his collection of memories of Mingus, the sudden change in narrative voice indicates that Dylan may have realized at last that his narrative could only ever be a glance in Mingus's direction. If gentrification is an act of imperialist plagiarism, and it seems clear that it is, Dylan's story, especially in its movement from third- to first-person narration, becomes an act of *taking the fucking horn out*.

It remains ambiguous to what extent Lethem's view of plagiarism can redeem the Ebdus family from its imperialist gentrification. It does, however, offer a rebuttal to Godbey's claims that gentrification inherently de-contextualizes and de-historicizes. The counter is not simply feckless postmodernism—where the simulated, performed, iterative, and endlessly derivative is pastiched into a swamp of unintelligible nothingness—but it does claim that originality is a poor metric by which to judge. Instead, Lethem takes aim at the commodification of authenticity and the way gentrification views neighbourhoods as palimpsests, ready and waiting to be overwritten by progress. The triple-erasure with which we began this chapter is a clarion call for Dylan's narrative; while his appropriation of black music, and indeed of Mingus's entire being, is problematic to say the least, he is aware that gentrification must be resisted by those who wield its power. Dylan is, after all, "the garbage

⁷⁰ Sources disagree on the exact wording; others say "the damn horn." I personally prefer the more forceful. It's worth browsing some of Davis's other aphorisms, true or not: https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Miles_Davis.

man of youth” (374), a man who allegedly refuses to “speculate, only encounter. Only understand” (473).

I began the chapter with a discussion of the collapsing middle signified by Rachel; I then went on to show how narratives around gentrification and plagiarism complicate our ideas of narrative authenticity. In the last section of this chapter, I show what happens when these two mix: when threshold space meets inauthenticity.

Invisible, silent

As She Climbed Across the Table, Lethem’s third novel, is the story of the relationship between Philip Engstrand and Alice Coombs. Dr. Soft, a scientist at Coombs and Engstrand’s university, creates a kind of static black hole under lab conditions. This, the team calls “Lack.” Lack is a portal to another realm; it accepts certain things pushed into it, rejecting others. Lack occupies the level at which meaning fails, a horizontality of possibility defined only by the observer. Dr. Soft, for instance, sees it as a physicist; Alice sees it as a future lover; Georges de Tooth, the deconstructionist, sees it as a text to be read. Ultimately, Lack is nothing but a dematerialization of Alice. The first person to encounter Lack was Alice, and Lack therefore imprinted on Alice: what it accepts is what she likes. Philip sees Lack thus as an opportunity to discover once and for all whether Alice loves him: will it accept *him*? In one scene, a group of grad students create an assemblage of elements Lack has previously accepted; a hideous, lurching, robotic-organic monster. A machine that was “a reply to Lack, a presence to equal the absence, a Frankenstein’s Monster to master the Invisible Man” (94). A fascinating idea: that Lack rejects the pastiche indicates the way Lethem was already preparing to reject the gestalt, the attempt to *totalize*. It makes sense

that Lack would reject both this machine and Dr. Tooth's postmodernist manifesto: they are, after all, identical. Frankenstein's Monster is the ultimate postmodernist, a ragtag assemblage of parts made into an overtly artificial, endlessly superficial parody of consciousness. The Invisible Man, likewise, is a triumph of science over morality, science without humanity. Griffin, from H.G. Wells's story, is a "self-unmade man" (117), whereas the Monster is an "other-made man."

This example is not alone. In Lethem's "The Spray," the police have invented an aerosol that creates a memorial miasma, revealing objects no longer there; it "makes lost things visible" (545). In *Ecstasy*, Lethem remarks on "those who speak to the invisible, the remote, those not present" (253), and in "Planet Big Zero," he mentions that "so much of what we do is automatic, so much of life becomes invisible" (1046). Similarly, *Chronic City* and its obsession with language, uses visibility as an axis of architectural reality: "their home was invisible to the street. It had nothing to enunciate" (34). In *Motherless Brooklyn*, Lionel realizes that his Tourette's makes him "The Invisible Man" (65). In *you don't love me yet*, invisibility takes on the qualities of music, where "he was invisible, yet everywhere at once. He purred through the room, intoned in their bodies like a bass line" (166). *Girl in Landscape* is ultimately about one teenager's invisibility; here, silence and invisibility go hand in hand (103-4). Even in the otherwise spectacularly pointless "The Dreaming Jaw, The Salivating Ear," Lethem positions invisibility as a medium of coexistence (127). Finally, in *Dissident Gardens*, invisibility is a form of chiaroscuro, an architectural manifestation of the city's pure indifference (160). This is obviously not a complete list, but it is clear that Lethem is fascinated with the idea of invisibility, and how it interferes, coexists, and fills up silence.

Lethem, as early as 1997, then, seems to be interested in both postmodernism's totalizing, interruptive qualities, and ideas of invisibility and silence. The blind characters who map the world by vocalizing as a form of sonar, for example, or the endless silence of Lack. These are "The Physics of Silence" (43). Lethem establishes a number of tropes that will reappear in *Fortress*, though under less obvious circumstances. Aside from demonstrating Lethem's increasing maturity as a writer, these tropes are developed into a more stringent critique of urban life, and Lethem moves away from a merely conceptual, academic polemic against the overly-theoretical. The question animating this section is thus: what happens to invisibility and silence?

"Invisible" or "invisibility" appear 52 times in the novel. Visibility, in *Fortress*, is a question of *appropriation* and it appears in three different ways, corresponding to the maturity of the narrative. In section one, it is primarily a reference to comic books and parent-child relationships; in section two, it becomes openly political; and in section three, it is literary. We can map these phases exactly onto the stages of Dylan's ageing, via a model of visibility put forward by Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence*.⁷¹

Visibility as weaponized appropriation is Exocet: it explodes into the narrative as soon as Dylan becomes aware of the intersection between race, gentrification, and politics. As with most of Dylan's realizations, it follows a pattern established by Ellison's invisible man: knowledge comes last, and is then retconned into the narrative. For example, what Dylan learns of Doily's ring in the prison at the end of part 3 informs his earlier meditations on this intersection in parts one and two. The prison is "provisional, refitted for [...] temporary use," a "place of cancelled time" (587). On the very next page a CO asks Dylan to

⁷¹ Though I will focus on sections two and three of my taxonomy, a discussion of invisibility and comic books would make an interesting read.

“scoop” everything out of his pockets to be inspected. A ridiculous exchange follows: “‘What’s this ring?’ ‘Wedding ring.’ ‘Why ain’t you wearing it?’ ‘Uh, it’s my mother’s wedding ring. I just carry it around” (588-589). Four separate moments of absence crystallize in the “Uh”:

1. The complicated ownership of the ring.
2. The question of Rachel’s absence.
3. The fact that Dylan is bringing the ring to Mingus in order to allow him to escape, but ends up using the ring to break *into* the prison.
4. The mirroring of the prison and the ring.

The ring was originally inherited from Aaron X. Doily, and then communalized between Mingus and Dylan, but now it’s evoked as a stand-in (fly-in?) for Rachel’s absence. The prison’s provisionality, its *temporariness*, mirrors the ring’s own lack of permanence or fixity. A place that only *seems* temporary had in fact been that way for years (587).

This multivalent structure of absence can be read back into how we conceptualize gentrification. I defined gentrification for Lethem as not simply decontextualization and dehistoricization but as the process by which these totems are interrogated as useful arbiters of authenticity. Borrowing from chapters one through three, Lethem’s “propensity for writing metafictionally about genre” should be seen as an enframing device (Kelleghan 227). The ring functions as one icon of this framing: “The frame that seeks to contain, convey, and determine *what is seen* [...] depends upon *the conditions of reproducibility* in order to succeed” (Butler *Frames* 10; emphasis added). Frames that operate on axes of visibility—what can be seen, what can’t, what is seen, what isn’t—require replication to function; replication, in turn, requires the conditions that enabled the thing to happen the first time. When the

ring changes hands, the conditions of reproducibility are altered, and the register of the seen shifts. “As the frame constantly breaks from its context,” as the ring does, “this self-breaking becomes part of the very definition” (10). That is to say, eventually the *very nature of decontextualization becomes the context that defines the frame*. The frame incorporates its own intransigence; it’s moot whether the ring is Dylan or Mingus’s, whether it belongs to Rachel or the prison—it belongs to both and neither. Whereas the invisible man externalized his identity into narrative in order to disrupt narrative taxonomies that occlude black voices, Dylan’s *ideal* identity is externalized into the ring, a Dylan that simply does not exist. This is a Dylan dehistoricized, decontextualized, a chameleon able to inhabit different frames, a Dylan who could achieve what Arthur does (*minstrelry*), a Dylan who can achieve what Dylan cannot (killing Robert). What Lacan calls the extimate, or the radical externalization of that which is most intimate, is literalized in the ring.⁷² It was, after all, a black man’s ring, retrieved in a moment of weakness, handed off to others, and then used to manifest Dylan’s deepest desires (to be accepted like Mingus, to kill Robert).

Graffiti artists are a more obvious avatar of invisibility, because their traces are omnipresent but they themselves are essentially never seen. Dylan says that “tags and their invisible authors were the next skully, the hidden lore [...] Under oblivious eyes, the invisible autographed the world” (91; 107). These marginal artists affirm their presence through gestures *in absentia*. As tags proliferate, the city becomes more and more palimpsestic, more and more intertextual, demanding to be read. As an invisible narrative strategy, graffiti thus becomes a way of mapping ideological battles onto the physical environment, materializing the struggles of marginality. Such a move is redolent of the invisible man’s decision to

⁷² I owe these thoughts to the probing questions of Professor Thomas Allen.

biography his life—as a way to externalize his selfhood as a narrative constructed and constricted by others. Similarly, the artists in *Fortress* agitate the in/visible boundary to reinforce their existences. DOSE marks the prison: “the tag was a cry, a claim, an undeniable thing. The looming jail which no one mentioned or looked at and the trail of dripping paint that covered the city’s every public surface and which no one mentioned or looked at: two invisible things had *rendered one another visible*, at least for one day” (314). As a gesture of territoriality, the mixing of invisibilia temporarily renders stark the appearance of the condemned in the heart of the city. Dylan’s first solo flight with the ring establishes the way visibility will be treated as an axis of class. Questioning the ring’s efficacy, he says that “maybe the ring has made him invisible. Maybe the ring has made him black” (193). Estimate indeed.

As a reminder, Nixon described slow violence as a mode of violence that is hidden, dispersed, and difficult to identify (2). Narratively, “such invisible, mutagenic theater is slow paced and open ended, eluding the tidy closure imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat.” Thus, “to intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with urgency” (10). In other words, slow violence spreads like an undetected cancer, metastasizing throughout—in this case—the body politic, and our main defence against this viral infestation is a form of chemotherapy that is openly representational. Representational writing should render the invisible visible (15) and thus create an ecopolitics capable of resisting neoliberalism’s policy of “out of sight, out of mind” (20). Is this not precisely what DOSE represents? And the ring? A representational intervention, an interruption in the flow

of the everyday, that upends both our expectations of what a superhero plot should be and a literal invisibilizer.

Dose—a definite quantity, a form of radiation, an unpleasant experience, an occurrence of venereal disease, to *administer*, but also a tab of LSD, acid, or to take a hit of acid—replicates biomedical language. The proliferation of DOSE as an iconography of the city fulfills both of Nixon’s criteria for representation: it is at once the embodiment of catastrophe—marginality, alienation, disaster, class warfare—and its own form of narrative, an interruptive genre of apostrophes written by hidden hands. Additionally, as James Peacock says, “Dylan never has his own tag” (124). Dose’s ironic proliferation—the definite quantity of infinity—is a constant declaration of Dylan’s placelessness. Dylan only has Mingus’s tag, but he can never fulfil its “exploding bomb of possibilities” (*Fortress* 76), because, as we have seen, Dylan occupies neither an authentic black world nor an articulate white, coming-of-age narrative. In a constant state of mimetic trauma, Dylan’s cooption of Dose is as much non-sobriquet as non-sequitur.

Nixon’s first major example, the wall, is “read in terms of neoliberalism and environmental slow violence, [it] materializes temporal as well as spatial denial through a literal concretizing of out of sight out of mind” (20). Tempting as this reading is, it is problematic for two reasons: non-literary walls are infrequently used to *hide* things, but to remind us that there *is* something out there. Zombie films alone are evidence of this; Jerusalem’s perimeter, Trump’s border wall, the Berlin Wall all furnish more realistic examples of walls used to signify absence, rather than disguise it. However, the larger issue with readings like this is that they tend to poeticize tragedy, making the very real existence of slow violence into a literary-only exercise of interpretation that, ironically, walls off

history. Nixon mostly avoids this, but his comment, for example, that “the theatre of the tree has accrued a host of potent valences at different points in human history” is a risible euphemism that essentially turns two hundred years of American lynching history into a form of yellow journalism (135). I argue, then, that Lethem uses walls as manifestations of slow violence, and of neoliberalism—for nothing can be more gentrified—but that they are being used not to hide a textual point, but make plain a very real thread and threat of racism.

I will return to Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* at length in chapter five; it is worth noting, however, something fairly obvious that Scarry happens to mention about walls. Scarry tells the story of the Brahmin religion in urban India, which outgrew the religious necessity of human sacrifice. However, occasionally, a volunteer was needed to reassert some piece of dogma or make material an element of Brahmin tradition in the city itself: the sacrifices were literally turned into walls, a real-world THC. Scarry remarks that this act of sacrifice translates “the material fact of the body into a disembodied cultural fiction,” but that “so does the building of the city itself” (126). The city’s articulation is itself a substantiation—or transliteration, depending on whether we prefer Nixon or Lethem’s metaphors—of culture, a way to materialize certain cultural traits. More importantly, however, “the construction is literally brought into being by the body’s outward translation of itself into artifact through labour” (126). Overly-poeticized, but Scarry’s point can be brought to bear against Nixon’s: walls built with no regard for humane labour practices, if such can exist, are the tombstones of those who built it. The Great Wall of China was defence, monument, curtain, but more importantly, it was the gravesite of the scores of labourers who died during its construction. Materialized through labour, the wall is a site of

class warfare. To see these architectures as manifestations of “out of sight, out of mind,” therefore undermines even as it reinforces Nixon’s own undefined premise. Nixon’s argument maps through vectors of visibility, and the main point here is that state-imposed invisibility articulates a hidden violence we have no vernacular for. While the politics of violence thus has a language of its own, our discursive ability to speak the violence itself is limited. *This*, though Nixon never explicitly says it, is the logic underneath slow violence. If the architecture of walls is built to occlude, the *language* of walls hides a deeper sin: the conscription of labour into hiding its own site of death. The extent to which we should accept this claim will be addressed further in chapter five.

When Scarry refers to the “body’s outward translation of itself into artifact through labour,” she does so within the context of the way pain and injury manifest through human bodies and human speech. Mingus’s polemic is to translate his own identity onto the material face of the prison. But “DOSE” is already a translation, an avatar through which Mingus is able to make visible his invisibility. As in “THC,” Lethem’s prisons are not only manmade but often made of men, and therefore are themselves material codifications of cultural mores or social deviance, the translation of what constitutes a crime onto the material face of the city. The inscription therefore serves a triple purpose: it retranslates an already once-removed identity of Mingus’s; it appropriates a site of invisibility, translating it into a space of hyper-visibility; and it draws attention to the materiality of the wall itself. Such an action reiterates the boys’ earlier Doily-tagging: not just drawing attention to the oppressed but foregrounding its marginality, *making the fact of its invisibility its most visible characteristic*.⁷³ Under Nixon’s logic, then, Mingus himself becomes the articulation of slow

⁷³ Obviously, this sure as hell wasn’t their purpose.

violence. This one-word tag is an entire argot through which we can begin to discuss state-imposed slow violence. This is, in other words, the speaking of violence.

Such a proposition, however, is undermined by narratorial authenticity. Chapter 12 of part 3 is, in part, Dylan reading Mingus's rap sheet as narrative. Chapters 13 and 14 are even more problematic: they read as a biography, but include details Dylan surely could not know. To some extent, then, we must accept Dylan's biography of Mingus as part-fiction, so when we're told that Mingus was "invisible in a throng of invisible men," we should be sceptical. Especially when Dylan concludes that Mingus "had to step out to get what he needed" (538). This is not only a diagnosis of Mingus's condition but an imputation of motive. Ellison's influence is again marked, because in many respects the invisible man steps back in order to get what's needed. The invisible man pushes against totalizing, pat narratives that are hypnotized either by closure or simplicity. The omniscient narrator from part one returns, and we are told that Dose begged "for recapture: *God's sake, throw me in Riker's before I die!*" (634). But this narrator is unmistakably Dylan, seen in the emulated patois of pages 634 and 635, "fuck the graffiti go?" and the fact the narrative cannot resist ending a section on the harrowing malnourishment of the intermittently criminalized with the farcical idea of "not to call yourself a zombie. But you did stalk an unreal city" (635). The sentence fragment (not to call yourself a zombie) is quite literally an example of the fragmented way Dylan attempts to convey Dose's story with a sense of verisimilitude. Even more tellingly, the narrative voice also includes little asides such as "solicit an undercover, work a routine, the same spot every day, a marathon in the alley behind Tower Records" (634): Dylan's hangouts, Dylan's narrative, Dylan's manifesto.

So it is, at the very end of Dylan's narrative, he concludes that

gentrification was the scar left by a dream, Utopia the show which always closed on opening night. And it wasn't so different from the space Abraham raged not to find opening to welcome his film, a space the width of a dwindled summer, a place where Mingus Rude always grooved fat spaldeen pitches, born home runs. (678)

A space that, in other words, doesn't exist. A "collapsing middle" that closes on opening night, a zombie stalking a city made from dreams, a utopia that is more realistically an "atopia" (Fisher 336), a space that DOSE inhabited only in myth. This is not the invisible man's diary of externalization, but an externalization that masquerades as an internal narrative, and it is a narrative of appropriation to which the invisible man would likely ask, "you must be practically a Negro yourself. Was it by immersion or injection?" (366). Whereas Ellison's narrator is able to give Clifton his eulogy as a vector of generalized oppression—he was shot because he was black—Dylan can only narrate Dose's eulogy as the hyperspecifics of what he could never have known. Whereas the invisible man is able to "consciously assimilat[e] his past," Dylan relies on a "crude" rejection that works through "sentimentally idealizing" a past he cannot have known (butler 17).

Dose's tag is so important, then, because this is how the iconography of the prison works in ghettoized neighbourhoods: a concrete literalization of the state's infiniteness—the same way Mohaghegh views prison, and the same way Thoreau views bureaucracy. When we look, for example, at Loïc Wacquant's definition of how a wall can be read metaphorically, the difference between Nixon and Lethem becomes clear:

As the walls of the ghetto shook and threatened to crumble, the walls of the prison were correspondingly extended [...] The prison and the criminal justice system more broadly contribute to the ongoing reconstruction of the 'imagined community' of

Americans around the polar opposition between praiseworthy ‘working families’—implicitly white, suburban, and deserving—and the despicable ‘underclass’ of criminals, loafers, and leeches, a two-headed antisocial hydra personified by the dissolute teenage ‘welfare mother’ on the female side and the dangerous street ‘gang banger’ on the male side—by definition dark-skinned, urban and undeserving. (52; 59-60)

Dose’s gesture is radically political; if, as Wacquant argues, the tendrils of prison create a “triple exclusion,” (59) then Dose’s tag is an attempt to make visible these otherwise hidden tendrils. As we saw with Michelle Alexander’s earlier argument, one of prison’s most harmful characteristics is the way it creates a blanket of silencing shame around the imprisoned (142). Prisoners are ostracized in a “repression of public thought, a collective denial of lived experience” (142). It is quite blatant, then, that walls, at least in terms of prison, cannot ever possibly signify a sense of *out of sight, out of mind*. Additionally, Dose’s tag is so high up the wall, it would be impossible to have written it without flying. Such a position metaphorizes the impossibility of white-defined black-achievement in ghettoized neighbourhoods—e.g. the reaching of a new height, pulling oneself up—and articulates quite literally this sense of interpersonal stigma. Coates’s American Dream is concretized in this act of radical impossibility. The prison tagging incident not only deliberately draws attention to the prison, but also foreshadows Dose’s eventual internment, as though he was marking his name on a future seat. We never see the tagging take place, but presumably Mingus was both flying *and* invisible when he inscribed his selfhood onto the wall.

A second issue with Nixon’s slow violence can be remedied by a reading of *Fortress*. In discussing evictions, Nixon rightly identifies the deliberate cruelty of artificial complexity as

the main way the state continues to enforce invisibility on subjecthoods it deems less worthy (168). Nixon reminds us that those *most* vulnerable are those least equipped to deal with bureaucratic obfuscation. However, he says that “the result is called spatial amnesia” (168). Here, “communities, under the banner of development, are physically unsettled and imaginatively removed, evacuated from place and time and thus uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory” (168). Spatial amnesia is a nice phrase, but it articulates far less plainly than “holocaust” or “diaspora.” As we discussed in the previous section, gentrification functions under the banner of development; but gentrification’s insidious power is the way it coopts and reincorporates the traditional imaginative communities into a homogeneous dead-zone. For Nixon, spatial amnesia speaks to the “dynamics of invisibility and hypervisibility.” These become “myths of emptiness [that] generate unimagined—or at the very least, underimagined—communities” (182). In other words, spatial amnesia is a tool which the powerful can use to administer and propagate invisibility through complex displacement. The consequence of this is the creation of unimaginable or underimagined communities. This, however, is not how either micro- or macro-level gentrification occurs. It is also unclear what exactly “myths of emptiness” might be.

As we see in *Fortress*, Dean Street is a neighbourhood of pasted cash, not of open erasure. Isabel Vendle and Rachel Ebdus are attempting to modify the symbols of previous inhabitants, creating new, friendlier spaces that are authentically historical. Dylan is poignantly aware of this: “Destroy the traces. I’d never tried to do that. Instead I’d lived in their midst for thirty years” (413). Dylan finds it hard to “envision how an invisible man would halt a drive-by shooting. He’d need an invisible car” (468), and puns on the idea of

invisibility: “I walked in visible [to a diner], fingering the ring in my pocket” (469). Gentrification, in other words, creates *reimagined* communities, people repurposed as symbols of earlier systems of control. Under the banner of progress, the white citizens of Dean Street stage a version of Theoharis’s “polite racism—silence, coded language, and the demonization of dissent; the leveraging of bureaucracy” (109). Whereas Nixon argues that the myth of progress requires “unimagined communities internal to the space of the nation-state,” on the city-scale, these displaced communities are actually centred. Gentrification “make[s] lost things visible” (“The Spray” 545), it does not hide them. First, it erases them; then it builds monuments to their disappearance.

Nixon argues that monuments are designed both to encapsulate specific historical moments or achievements but also to symbolize a non-specific future threat (174). This is the argument Lefebvre was making. For Lefebvre, “monumentality transcends death [...] As both appearance and reality, this transcendence embeds itself in the monument as its *irreducible foundation*” (*Production* 221; emphasis added). Dose’s “cry” is a monument that transcends death, irreducible because ersatz—it signifies a constituency that simply is not there, nor could be. “The lineaments of atemporality,” Lefebvre continues, “overwhelm anxiety [...] A *ne plus ultra* of art — form so thoroughly denying meaning that death itself is submerged” (221). Lefebvre’s phrase is both a beautiful and useful one: *Fortress*, form so thoroughly denying meaning that death itself is submerged.⁷⁴

An instance of civil death further makes this point. Barrett Rude Sr. (Mingus’s grandfather) is on parole for some vague crime—drugs, we assume, given that the novel spans Nixon and Reagan’s “war on drugs,” one of the least successful and most damaging

⁷⁴ “Submerged” would appear a strange word to have used, but Lefebvre was a peer and follower of Gaston Bachelard, who often wrote of space as “deep” and “round.”

wars imaginable, George Bush Sr.'s openly racist militarization of the police, and Bill Clinton's devastating, transparently race-baiting "Omnibus Crime Bill." Each week, Rude Sr. visits a parole officer to give a urine sample and update the state on his community service: "In lieu of employment a parolee needed some clock to punch" (246). Sr. expresses a desire to leave his son's house—a condition of parole, a reversal of parenthood, a further humiliation—because Jr. spends most of his time smoking crack and entertaining sex workers.

Patronizingly quizzed by the parole officer as to why he'd want to move to a hotel, Sr. only returned a look of unshrouded disdain. In his glare he summoned for one moment the mummified eloquence of a legacy of chanting men in cotton fields, sweat-bathed parishioners, masked riders, galley ships from Africa, all the parole officer with his Dion and the Belmonts Bronx accent couldn't pretend to fathom. For one moment it was as if Senior had ridden into this meeting on a mule, as if the baying of beagles as they crashed through swampland had leaked into the room. (247)

Sr.'s *life* has taken form utterly denying meaning. In a compellingly strange moment, the narrative mentions chattel slavery, and we are forced again to ask: who is telling this story? Dylan could not have known about this, but the poetic register, the tone, and the detail is again a Dylan trademark. Assuming the narrative is still Dylan's, this reads more like "the manufactured story that was told to ennoble and sanctify [...] enslavement" than a rejection of that narrative (8 years 99). As Gilroy remarks, "the memory of the slave experience is [often] recalled and used as an additional, supplementary instrument with which to construct a distinct interpretation of modernity" (71). Given Gilroy's argument that

modernism required and dictated a mode of aesthetic engagement based on “non-synchronous communities” (57; 174; 180), it is fair to read this passage as Dylan, masked as the omniscient narrator, parroting Sr.’s voice through an invented history. This is how I earlier positioned Buell’s reading of Thoreau’s environmentalism as straddling the divide between immanence and self. Such enframing enables Dylan-as-narrator to subsume the voices of both white and black characters, for as we remarked earlier, “boundary maintenance is intricately tied to knowing the black body” (Browne 68). Reading Dylan’s narrative as one of black *sousveillance* enables us to locate in Mingus (or Sr.) the “nonnameable matter that matters the racialized disciplinary society” (9). In other words: the black body.

The routinization of Sr.’s everyday life, and the post-imprisonment conditions of continued servitude are placed alongside the history of slavery, as though for Sr. the two are essentially analogous. Sr.’s disposition says his meeting with the parole officer is exactly the same as if he was in flight from the plantation. It is true, after all, as Alexander says, that “Today’s lynching is a felony charge. Today’s lynching is incarceration” (136). Gilroy makes the exact same point: “patterns of internal repression, guilt, misery, and desperation established under slavery endure” (159). Death is thus submerged into Sr.’s history *and* his everyday life: non-synchronous narratives placed side by side to give the illusion of simultaneity. Whereas Nixon’s monuments inscribe the possibility of future apocalypse, Lethem’s monuments are testaments to a formless present. To somewhat bastardize de Certeau: if limits are required, the boundaries are the thing itself. In other words, there is no meaning to this weekly visitation. Sr.’s nostalgia stands in direct contrast to the moment

Mingus tags the prison: backward instead of forward, memorial instead of predestined, spoken instead of written.

Ideas of formlessness return us to questions of visibility. As we have seen, invisibility takes three forms: racial, gentrified, and literal. Each form of visibility results from what Gilroy calls “the capacity of racial groups to live side by side yet non-synchronously and with antagonistic conceptions of what constitutes social reality” (180). Though different vectors, then, they all spin from the politics of racially charged gentrification: this non-synchronicity is precisely the asynchronous urban revitalization that displaces, erases, and reincorporates traditional authentic identities into a highly plastic, adaptable inauthenticity. It makes sense, then, that Dylan finishes the narrative as an invisible man himself. From his youthful enjoyment of super-powers (deciding that invisibility is a useless superpower), to his adolescent, often sexual, worshipping of Mingus (possibly through a non-visible or repressed homosexuality), to his adult appropriation of Ellison’s nameless man (invisible, itself a legacy of unshrouded disdain). Dylan appropriates the iconography of Ellison’s Invisible Man. Dylan does not argue that his whiteness makes him a reverse invisible man, and, ultimately, his invisibility is *literal*—the ring makes him unseeable. But, functionally, this invisibility also springs from a complex racial politics.

As argued previously, Ellison’s narrator externalizes his identity into narrative form in order to disrupt privileged narrative methodologies that occlude black voices. He also engages in lengthy discussions on the intersection of silence, agency, and solitude. The Invisible Man’s journey is *against* progress, but it is not nostalgic, historical, or shortsighted. Instead, to borrow Saldivar’s language, Ellison’s is a *postrace* aesthetic, a neoslave narrative. As Saldivar explains, *post* here does not refer to ‘after,’ but ‘beyond,’ ‘consequent’; a new

“conceptual frame that refers to the logic of something having been ‘shaped as a consequence of’ imperialism and racism” (575). When I say that Ellison’s narrative is *against* progress, then, I mean that he is against the totalizing sweep of history, the Marxist form of resistance discussed earlier through Lefebvre and Žižek, the narrative construction of humanity as forever moving forwards, progressive and emancipatory. For Ellison, there is absolutely nothing *after* about his race: it is simply reframed. This is the point black scholars are making when they dispute the progressive history model.

Dylan, on the other hand, discovers in his invisibility a recursive and nostalgic mode of being. Two events earlier in the narrative establish this. First, Dylan is flying home one night when he spots an unescorted woman walking through a dangerous part of town. Thinking he will protect her, he lands, follows her, and sets himself to guarding. As the woman’s speed increases, so does Dylan’s, until she breaks into a full run. Dylan searches around for the source of her fear, sure there must be footsteps indicating an imminent attack. Eventually, he realizes that “he was chasing her down the block. It was his footsteps she fled” (257). Although narrated as a throwaway event for Dylan, it proves to be formative: “I’d become a skilled invisible man ten years before” (405).

The second event is more complex and deserves significant attention. Dylan and Arthur Lomb, another childhood friend, receive preparatory exam results that determine which local high-school they will attend. Mingus has already abandoned school by this point, and although Dylan gets into the best local school, Arthur is relegated to the worst. Talking to his teacher about his intentions to go to the worse school, Mr. Winegar says, “I’d hate to see you neglect an opportunity—’ *You’re white!*’ Winegar wanted to scream. *Man can fly!* Dylan wanted to scream” (231). The scene then moves without transition to Mingus’s

bedroom, where Dylan is high for the first time in his life, suddenly thinking of Rachel: “Marijuana was Rachel Ebdus’ totem fume. To inhale it was communion, a forgiving and being embraced by her smoke form” (232). Either the drugs or listening to Mingus’s funk and soul music evokes the ghost of Rachel; Dylan starts daydreaming of rereading “the whole sequence of postcards stoned, to start at the beginning again and with the assistance of the drug decode Rachel’s vanishing” (232). Stoned, dreaming of Rachel, Dylan notices that Mingus “always wore his stained army jacket indoors. He was always just passing through, ready for action even when he never stirred from the room for hours” (233). The boys then discuss Dylan’s fictional Vermont girlfriend, and the lie he told Arthur (that he’d lost his virginity to a girl in a swim suit (235)). The narrative then abruptly switches to describe Mingus’s graduation to another school—“Like a sundial shadow he’d crept into the next time zone, the next phase” (235)—and the fact that Mingus has, irrevocably, become a man. The vaseline and dopamine smell in Mingus’s room, the pornographic magazines, the sultry, hot funk, the discussion of virginity, and the repressed libidinal desires Rachel’s enigmatic and inexplicable departure inspire create in Dylan a sudden voracious awareness of Mingus’s body.

Describing fictional breasts obviously works for the boys, as Mingus “pushed himself up and put Sly’s Fresh on the stereo, cranked the volume. Then he slumped back on his bed, fingers spread wide on thighs. Between thighs and spread fingers, tenting his corduroys, a boner [...] *Something moving in the brain of a doer* sang Sly in a lubricious, dozy drawl” (236). Mimicking the massage Dylan (didn’t) give Heather, the narrative becomes intensely sexualized in a way it never will again; the only other moments of sex in the narrative are

Dylan's inability to maintain an erection with his girlfriend, and his intended rape of a prison guard. Thus,

The world was unnamed, you wore disguises, were Inhumans. Mingus's room was another Negative Zone, under water, under the house, detached from Dean Street and whirling away to another place. It had been from the day Mingus stood in his Scout uniform and ran his fingers over merit badges, passport stamps from distant realms. You built fires, marked bridges and trains, jerked into tissues and socks. A hand molding Mingus's ass through his pants didn't need explaining, it wasn't a faggot thing, just a story you were telling: the pile of *Playboy's* under the bed, the massing thunderhead of tits everywhere, of wanting women's bodies in your life, the horizon breaking into shared view. Anyway, if you caressed Mingus after all this time you'd only want to take a pick to his *nappy-ass 'Fro*. (237)

Masturbating together, Dylan offers Mingus oral sex. Suddenly, Barrett Jr. bursts in, commands Mingus to turn the music down, and informs them that if they want to be gay, that's fine by him, as long as they "keep it down, man" (240). Finally, "Ten minutes later, sputtering into one another's fists while Sly's whole band groaned *Que sera, sera, the future's not ours to see*, Dylan was flushed with new understanding: he and Mingus were restored" (241).

I have cited at length here, but this passage's complexity neatly summarizes that fundamental misunderstanding Dylan later has of the invisible man's anti-progress. First, Mr. Winegar's plaintive, gentrified racism: a condescending and exclusionary form of congratulation that speaks to the strange space Dylan occupies as a white kid inculcated and mostly accepted by a black fraternity. Winegar's sumptuary codes articulate his ideological

white supremacy—the white kid is too good for the black school—through an everyday “language of consciousness” (*Racecraft* 92). Disappointment here is strictly ideological.

Dylan then moves into memories of Rachel, presaged or catalyzed by Mingus’s drugs or Mingus’s music. It is hard not to see in this the truth of Toni Morrison’s remark that “individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation [are] responses to a dark, abiding, singing Africanist presence” (*Playing* 5). *Fortress* is indeed a contender for Morrison’s book about “the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery in literature not written by them” (viii). More broadly, Dylan channels an Africanist legacy of dreamers, a smoky inheritance redolent of Haitian *zombii* rituals or the “fabrication of an Africanist persona,” as Morrison identifies as another hallmark of white-on-black literature (17). The scene becomes transitive—Rachel’s slipperiness, Mingus’s transience, the way both seem to echo each other. The invocation of this black tradition is marked by a sudden, but unremarked, awareness that Dylan’s presence in the neighbourhood makes ghosts of the original black inhabitants. Mingus is always ready for action, almost feral, like a sundial—allusions to the *organic* and *natural* as other hallmarks of coded, racecraft-oriented language.

Third, Dylan’s latent homosexuality explodes (quite literally) into being. This moment is not innocent. It is explicitly fetishized, reinforcing the previous reference to totemic Rachel and ghostly Mingus: “Fetishization is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery” (*Playing* 68). A lighter read gives this scene a childhood innocence. References to boy scouts, disguises, Playboy—this is a universal moment of becoming a man, a blip of errant queerness. However, this is “just a story you were telling.” Mingus’s position, disguised, “inhuman,” in “another negative zone,” is a fabricated *fetishized* Mingus, crafted for Dylan’s sudden carnal desire. Mingus’s room is a

negative space, in so many ways recreating the looming disaster of DeLillo's *White Noise* or *Zero K* or *Point Omega*: the chemical event that shatters the horizon of meaning, the endless blankness of the outdoors. So it makes sense that Dylan moves from *his* narrative, to Mingus's ass, to his "*nappy-ass Fro*."

These vignettes are all intercut with snatches of music that remind us of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. As Gilroy notes, Du Bois used these brief claps of music to retell "the narrative of western civilization in systematic ways that emphasized its African origins" (113). The reference here is to *Fresh*, an album by Sly and the Family Stone, often considered one of the most important albums of all time. *Que Sera, Que Sera* is on this album, a cover of Dolly Parton's original, as is "In Time," the song including the lines Dylan cites: "Something moving in the brain of a doer."

An unlikely reading reveals itself when we see the lyrics surrounding the cited ones. The full verse runs: "There's a mickey in the tasting of disaster / In time (in time) you get faster / Harry Hippie is a waste as if he has ta / Procrastinatin' / Something moving in the brain of a doer / In time (in time) feel a little newer / I switched from coke to pep and I'm a connoisseur." The first line is allusory: a Mickey is a psychoactive drug that induces hallucination or sleep. It's either a date-rape drug, or the gateway to an expanded mind. To taste the disaster is to be controlled by someone else, without your consent or awareness. Given the song's release in 1973, in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of the war on drugs, this language is not especially subtle. Sly clearly illustrates a medium of black victimhood. This experience changes you, he says, but you can "get faster." The implication here is that discovery can be found in even the worst circumstances. The next lines refer to another folk artist, referencing the song "Harry Hippie," itself about someone wanting to

drop out of mainstream society. Subsequent lines then reinforce the previous, somewhat hopeful message: in spite of this disenfranchisement, there's the possibility of getting faster, of something "moving" in the brain of a doer. This doer, it seems, can be an *undoer*, as in Harry's case. Finally, reborn as someone who no longer plays by the rules—after the Mickey—you switch from Coke to Pepsi, or, cocaine to amphetamines. As the song ends, "If you don't mind please why give slack to a deserter," Sly reminds us that it is society that draws the boundaries that create the deserters. Dylan's use of Mingus follows the same pattern: an oppressive, fetishizing lack of consent that "restores" Dylan, enabling him to return from his brief flirtation with Coke back to the safety of Pepsi.

These short scenes, covering only ten pages, are some of the most important in the narrative. Formative for Dylan's character, and revelatory. Thus it is that when he breaks into the prison, Dylan repeats his movement from invisibility to memory to a sudden toxic queerness:

I fell in close behind him [a guard], matching my invisible footfalls to his own crunching steps. I staggered slightly, and recalled the special nature of invisible clumsiness, the inner-ear panic that seemed to go with appearancelessness [...] I battled an urge to spin the last papers from the floor in imaginary gusts, to cavort with their files and cause merry chaos in this dead zone, to show them the invisible-man's mania I felt throbbing inside [...] I imagined whispering Be still, Sweeney [another guard], don't scream, and let the invisible hands of the invisible man invade your mannish uniform. (507-511)

Dylan embraces the predatory aesthetic he accidentally practiced before, gaining clarity on this idea of "appearancelessness," a term we could also apply to Rachel. The vertiginous

feeling he gets here, the disorientation, is certainly related to his invisibility, but it is also tied to the way he iterates on formative moments from his childhood. The “negative zone” reappears as the “dead zone,” Mingus’s boner reappears as “the invisible-man’s mania I felt throbbing inside,” and the sputtering hands cavorts its way on stage, via the Mickey, as an overwhelming desire to sexually assault the female but “mannish” Sweeney. Whereas Ellison’s invisible man ultimately rejects a historicizing or evaluative mode of narrative, dismissing them as hypnotic but controlling, Dylan embraces this recrudescence. Indeed, gentrifications *disruption* of history contributes to this absent-nostalgia. Dylan relives his previous forms precisely because he is performing gentrification’s ultimate logics of inauthenticity. Dylan’s “rootlessness as an adult, his search for identity and a true self, and final retreat to what he defines as a quasi-mystical middle space, is a result of gentrification” (Godbey 140).

Gentrification’s final legacy is the occlusion of history. The invisible man rejects history, but a *de*-historicized space still demands history. Dylan is forced to inhabit his appearancelessness as an expression of his rootlessness and his inauthenticity. The development of his invisibility is conterminous with the stages of his life: as a child, his whiteness makes him hyper-visible yet impossible to remember; as a teenager, his invisibility leads him to question his relationship to Rachel and to Mingus; as an adult, it makes him nostalgic. We realize, finally, that it is not only Gowanus that has been gentrified, but Dylan himself. The severance of Rachel, the adoption of multiple, inauthentic identities, his inability to escape the past: Dylan himself is the ultimate avatar of gentrification, a living inauthenticity. And from this fertile, complex ground, grows a narrative so fractured, so pregnantly aware of its own contours and limits, so consciously self-aware, so arch and

postured that it tells us significantly, exponentially more about Dylan's interpretation of blackness than it does about Dylan himself. In turn, what we see in Lethem's masterwork is less a narrative of white childhood, but a white nostalgia for a childhood, innocent blackness that not only never existed, but could never exist under those conditions. In other words, in *Fortress*, we learn little about the objects in the painting, but a lot about the frame in which they live.

Chapter 5: de/solitude

“The world is fucked: yes. Paranoia is frequently justified: yes” (Conversations 35)

Critics of *The Fortress of Solitude* suggest that the novel struggles after Part I. The short part II, liner notes, and the lengthier part III, Prisonaires, with its different, direct, first-person narrative voice are seen as jarring, sterile, and free of the vivacity of part I. In many respects, this is entirely true. Parts II and III lack personality; Dylan is unsympathetic, a shitheel. I agree, however, with Matthew Luter, Samuel Cohen, and James Peacock: this is intentional. Lethem uses the novel itself as a means of communicating the vast disappointment that occurs in the transition to adulthood. In chapter 3, we saw Ellison use a similar tactic. In a refutation to narratives of progress, what Cohen describes as “randomness and vulnerability [...] not assuming an ever better future,” (157) the structure of the novel itself rejects the romantic, fetishized bildungsroman aesthetic of part I. It reveals and revels in, instead, the anxiety of trauma; the anxiety of trauma being, of course, the prospect that it may never leave. Dylan’s reforged relationship with his father, his acceptance of his mother’s absence, and his attempted liberation of Mingus do not afford any kind of healing. If we read *Fortress* as a narrativized life—childhood, adolescence, adulthood—the colourful anxiety of childhood *must* be replaced by a sanitized and pathologized adulthood, one entirely aware of its own failure to shake loose of childhood trauma.

In the context of Lethem’s own remarks about the loss of his mother, this makes perfect sense. The great big hole at the centre of Lethem’s own biography forms the lack at

the centre of *Fortress*, and it is a lack that stilts Dylan. As Cohen points out (178), Lethem himself is aware of this. In an interview in *The New Yorker*, he says that

I always felt it was the big risk the book had to take, that I knew was dictated by the material. They had to grow up, and it was in some ways an expulsion from the garden of childhood. The book had to change radically to reflect the way in which, however difficult it may be, childhood experience is this magical zone, and then adulthood is much more paltry in a lot of ways. It feels risky to me, because I know that Dylan is a bit of a shit in the second half of the book. He's not really that fun to get to know when you first meet that new voice, and it feels like a loss. It felt like one to me as the writer. But I knew that I wasn't going to have said everything I knew about the story unless I got inside Dylan's rather blinkered and uptight adult head. ("Out of Brooklyn")

The novel's sudden switching in many respects is an aesthetic failure. The novel itself does not succeed as a traditional narrative; it resists any sense of closure, relying instead on a recrudescence, infantile ambiguity. And look at the way Lethem phrases this: we have to get inside Dylan's head, as if we hadn't already been there. I agree with critics on both sides: the novel is not a 'success,' but its critical failure is vital to its existence as narrative.

Fortress establishes a precedent of traumatic loss that is foundational to an understanding of Lethem's later works. In what feels like an Oedipal move, but is more likely just a response to the acute trauma of writing in the 2000s, the mother-as-engine-of-loss trope falls aside in the wake of 9/11. In novels like *Chronic City* and *Amnesia Moon*, as well as in short stories like "The Spray," "Access Fantasy," and "The Empty Room," Lethem explores a new and "different kind of terror—the terror caused by the recognition of

contingency” (Cohen 157). A lengthy citation from Cohen helps bridge the gap between *Fortress* and this later work that moves ostensibly from portraits of nostalgia and childhood to fantastical glosses on a forever-war America:

The trauma of 9/11 provoked repression, vengefulness, and self-recrimination; most reactions save the last were eager to move past it or use it as motivation for military action. The closure such thinking provides is far more comforting than the alternatives. The attempt to deny the anxiety of contingency that is central to triumphalist narratives—as well as to a traumatic narrative too keen on healing—enables reconstructions of the past that lead to rosy futures, right past uncertain presents. (170-1)

For Cohen, then, *Fortress* admits the uncertain present through an optic of anxiety characterized by its resistance to narrative finality. In much the same way we saw Nixon argue that slow violence rejects neat and tidy closure, Cohen positions Lethem’s subject as the firm present, mediated by an endlessly interruptible past. These triumphalist narratives are precisely what Thoreau and Ellison argued against. For Lethem, the totalizing force of history is interrupted by sudden, explosive terror, the immediate contingency of trauma.

Emancipation from narrative neatness enables Lethem to challenge our encounter with post-9/11 stories. For Luter, this challenge is achieved through a series of borrowings—a fictional enactment of the plagiarism established in *Ecstasy of Influence*. For Cohen, it is achieved through an embrace of an uneasy present, an acceptance of containment anxiety. And for Peacock, the challenge rests on the idea of *amnesia*. Luter and Peacock’s books represent the only substantive engagements with Lethem’s canon. Cohen has a chapter, and Zara Dinnen writes on Lethem in her article on *Ecstasy* and then later features a chapter on

him in her collection of essays, *The Digital Banal*. I am sympathetic to all of these studies, but I believe Peacock gets closest in *Jonathan Lethem* to the best understanding of how Lethem's contemporary fiction embroils us in a narrative complicity that is founded—whether we call it amnesia, anxiety, or the digital banal—on the deep loneliness inaugurated by traumatic loss.

But none of these words is quite right. Lethem's writing, especially after 9/11, is about solitude. And, to be even more precise, what I am going to call de/solitude.

Lethem describes his writing process as

again and again I take things as apparently limited as an embedded or invisible pun in an everyday phrase, like a hardened criminal, and I take it autistically. I take it as though it were a non-metaphorical phrase. And I build a fictional world. Often every subsequent tool, every subsequent addition I make is pushing it closer and closer to realism. But it's founded on this misunderstood or autistically grasped metaphor.

(*Conversations* 29)

Such a premise—writing as a form of autism—is most clearly evoked in *Motherless Brooklyn*, but each of Lethem's characters is in some way “touching the world [and] covering it with confirming language” (*Motherless* 307). Language is used to paint over the gaps left by traumatic loss, even if that loss is itself a formality; that is, the loss itself is the thing about which loss is felt, for example in *As she climbed*. As Peacock says: “The lack at the heart of events [...] is impossible adequately to verbalize. Even if you give the void itself a voice, it can only produce words, approximations of itself, in a vain attempt to describe, know and possess its own being, to become identical with itself” (68). That is to say, trauma's lack is not an epistemological category, it does not contain nor provide knowledge, and its formal

properties—enunciated or otherwise—can only ever be recursive, and inadequate. Lethem is thus filling up the gaps with “autistic” or “tourettic” language. Language is being used to cauterize the wound left by trauma, even while it fails to accurately translate trauma’s presence. Lethem calls 9/11 “the *unimaginable fact*” (*Ecstasy* 372; emphasis original), a “fresh category of phenomena.”⁷⁵ And 9/11 represents the clearest example we have of a trauma that touches both the national and the personal.

In this chapter, then, I follow Peacock, Cohen, and Luter by examining a wide range of Lethem’s texts. Borrowing this format from the book-length studies, I use my argument(s) from chapter four to further examine narrative breakdown, specifically as it relates to bodies and subjectivities. I read narrative breakdown specifically against what I described as Thoreau’s practice of solitude, and I do this, as with every other chapter, in three ways. First, I examine the impact of *trauma* on Lethem’s work, particularly through a close reading of Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*. I relate trauma back to the collapsing middle, discussed in section one of chapter four. Second, I look at James Peacock’s concept of amnesia, and see how it relates to ideas of gentrification discussed in section two of chapter four. I also show how amnesia can be used to further the discussion of trauma and traumatic loss. Third, I turn to examine what Lethem calls “the unimaginable fact.” This useful concept, I read back against narrative invisibility from section three of chapter four, and chapter three. Unlike in previous chapters, the sections of chapter five are not so easily separated. Seeing the way these ideas speak, intermingle, and agitate against one another is vital for understanding the complicated breakdown Lethem stages at the level of narrative.

⁷⁵ Bachelard: “An empty drawer is *unimaginable*. It can only be *thought of*” (49-50). Notice here that Bachelard differentiates between thinking and imagining. These two processes are not normally distinguished like this, because thinking usually requires imagination.

For the sake of convenience and readability, however, the chapter is split roughly in half. In the first half, I look at each trauma, amnesia, and unimaginability through the lens of “nostalgia vu,” or Lethem’s phrase for ways we often romanticize and fetishize the present, even when we struggle to access it. In the second half, I turn to de/solitude, or solitary practice, and show how it grows from the discussion in the first half.

Trauma

Trauma is the subject of Elaine Scarry’s towering *The Body in Pain*. Though I mentioned Scarry’s work briefly in the last chapter, it is worth quickly situating Lethem against Scarry’s argument. For Scarry, pain, trauma, and loss are concepts that require vocalization, that demand enunciation, but are impossible to speak or adequately share.⁷⁶ Trauma’s schema is based on its unutterability. As “pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed” so trauma “either [...] remains inarticulate or else the moment it first becomes articulate it silences all else” (4; 61). It is essentially identical to the unimaginable: it cannot be imagined but only *thought of*, which is to say: thought around. Scarry argues that pain is singular because it cannot be denied by the person suffering, but it also cannot be felt by anyone else, and thus cannot be corroborated. Therefore, “in order to express pain one must *both* objectify its felt-characteristics *and* hold steadily visible the referent for those characteristics” (17). In other words, to speak pain is to place it in the world as a tangible “feeling” that can be described in

⁷⁶ It is hopefully clear why I find Scarry such a useful critic here, but to speak plainly: Scarry’s explanation of trauma follows the same logic as Ellison’s reaction against history, and adds a colourful new way of understanding Dylan’s complicated and inauthentic narrative from chapter 4. Additionally, Scarry offers a novel way of further substantiating Blanchot’s usefulness as a critic of Thoreau’s long probation, because she reiterates that the subjects we find most fascinating—the subjects *we must speak about*—are those that absolutely cannot be spoken about under any circumstance. Pain—like death—cannot be *experienced* as such.

a sensible context accessible to others. For example, if a person has been subjected to the kind of torture that Solzhenitsyn describes, where guards would use the slamming of a door (or its silence) as presage (or closure) to moments of intense pain, “the room is converted into a weapon [and] made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners” (40-41). A slammed door, for most people, does not evoke memories of torture, nor does it *have* any visible referents, and thus this form of torture becomes inarticulate or unspeakable unless translated.⁷⁷

Scarry contends that pain’s power is a double-bind. Pain is “invisible in part because of its resistance to language,” but, importantly, it is “also invisible because its own powerfulness ensures its isolation, ensures that it will not be seen in the context of other events, that it will fall back from its new arrival in language and remain devastating” (61). To put it another way: pain’s “absolute claim for acknowledgement contributes to its being ultimately unacknowledged” (61). Pain’s overwhelming presence coupled with its lack of corroboration means it itself is isolated—that is, experienced as a singular force—and isolating. Taking the sanguine sight of an injured soldier as *par excellence*, Scarry says that “the wound is empty of reference, *though its intended referent can be inferred by the uniform over which the blood now falls*, or by some other cultural insignia, a symbol and fragment of disembodied national identification” (118). Dose’s tag is empty of reference, but we can infer its significance from both the prison walls and the slowly leaking paint.

Pain’s physicalization, the wound, is acutely and actually meaningless, without referent or reference. It has no connection to the violent act—a tiny bullet can utterly

⁷⁷ Though she is not mentioned, Nixon’s slow violence is indebted to Scarry’s work: the insistence on the visible, the analogy of weaponized architecture, or the overall idea that much of violence is hidden, undiscoverable, and inexpressible.

destroy a person's insides—and no connection to the contexts in which the person exists—a scar from a fall has no material bearing on that person's everyday life, nor can it be understood by anyone else without explanation. The wound literalizes trauma.

Shirley Jackson, interviewing Lethem, describes the world of *Motherless Brooklyn* as “the runaway patterning of stuff [... it] exposes the autonomous, recombinant, impersonal side of language, it exposes that an active patterned chaos lies very close under the surface of what we think of as transparent self-expression” (*Conversations* 42). I agree. I want to ask, then, if what Scarry says is true, what can be made of Lethem's statement that trauma is an *unimaginable fact*? How can we begin to understand an event that is both unimaginable *and* real? If Lethem's characters use patterns to expose the absolute chaos underneath the placid surface of the everyday, how do they encounter trauma?

Amnesia

Lethem writes frequently about memory (loss), nostalgia, and déjà vu. He writes of the monumentality of trauma, using amnesia as a kind of postmodern avatar for the engulfing loneliness caused by unreliable memories. Lethem's narratives show the deep solitude that results from traumatic loss. But Lethem's amnesia is not clinical or medicinal, not even really psychological. Instead, amnesia is deployed as a literary trope in response to traumas national or personal. Amnesia is a metaphor for unstable narratives, and Lethem uses conceits of amnesia to destabilize, unhinge, or complicate his already complexly interwoven and embedded narratives. Amnesia allows Lethem to write back against genre.

James Peacock's *Jonathan Lethem* defines non-medical amnesia in three ways. First, through psychoanalysis; second, through political immobility; third, as a method of writing,

and a means of literary resistance. The first definition Peacock offers is psychoanalytic: “amnesia [is] the wilful forgetting or ignorance of other people’s experiences” (17). Here, the subject elided is an *other*, and amnesia is voluntary or willed. In Lethem, we can read this definition as a conservative *techne*, in which tradition, history, and lineage motivate a blinkered view of context. For example, in “Always Crashing in the Same Car (a mash-up),” Lethem’s most obvious nod to the modernist, shattered fiction of J.G. Ballard, the narrator drives west at night, and hypothesizes that “the entire zone that defined the landscape of my life was now bounded by a continuous artificial horizon” of both highway material and the curvature of the earth (224). This is the “visual poetry of ruin; a syntax scientifically precise yet surreally oversaturated [...] Yet Ballard never seems to load the dice. He merely rolls them [...] the eternal intertextuality of cultural participation” (*Ecstasy* 101; 137). He concludes, then, that “maybe it was only the pressure of our dead traditions that kept people glued to their westward course” (229). Dinnen makes the same point when she speaks of the “digital banal” as “a slow-down present moment; the mode of waiting becomes a way of attending to the machinations of everyday life” (121). This form of amnesia relies, then, on deliberate omissions, and selective memories that form a recognizable pattern by which someone can navigate the present. In other words, “the eternal intertextuality of cultural participation.”

This mode of amnesia is redolent of Samuel Cohen’s idea that Lethem’s work is underpinned by a fundamental contingency: “The beautiful American mistake of trying to claim the future—to integrate or to gentrify, to leave things behind, to remake oneself into some final version—is a mistake because it tries to deny contingency” (184). This contingency is most pronounced in moments of shocking collective trauma, such as 9/11, or

in prolonged or delayed trauma, such as the Cold War. Gentrification attempts to co-opt decontextualized narratives of alterity into a patina of recognizability, integration attempts to simply elide those differences, but contingency demonstrates that “things change, in unforeseen ways, and they always will” (181). If amnesia is defined by deliberate omissions and absences, it is by definition contingent, responding to fractures and interruptions in the fabric of the present.

The simplest example of this form of amnesia is therefore *Fortress of Solitude*, because Dylan’s kleptomaniacal narrative relies on a perspective that only exists by erasing other views. The neighbourhood’s traditions, its historical significance, is absorbed into a gentrified and plagiarized form of narrative authenticity.

We can map contingency back to Peacock’s second use of amnesia, this time political: “Amnesia is a kind of immobility. To obliterate connections between past and present is to preclude the possibility of movement or change in the future, to condemn oneself to the anaesthetized drudgery of the endless present” (37). As with wilful blindness, this version of amnesia reaffirms the importance of tradition or conservatism, because the endless present relies on a set of not-present referents that have been forgotten, discarded, or obliterated. In this view of amnesiac modernity, reacting to contingent events requires an established but invisible framework through which bodies can un/sub-consciously respond. This is the premise of Lethem’s *Amnesia Moon*: an undetermined catastrophe has left the world in a fugue state. Citizens of America are bivouacked in various parts of the country, and these city-states are controlled soporifically by a series of Dreamers, whose thoughts are profound and strong enough to transmit to surrounding persons. Citizens live, therefore, in the dreams of others. The protagonist, Chaos, calls these places FSRs: finite subjective

realities (a joke, presumably, as this is what every reality is). But as Peacock says, “memory is not conterminous with past events; it is a representation of events, mutable over time in light of circumstances in the present” (52). FSRs are a *contingent* amnesia: a selective view of the past modulated by contexts of the present.⁷⁸

If we accept that amnesia is a kind of immobility, “the government exercises power by enforcing excessive mobility to bring about amnesia. Mobility in this form is the opposite of freedom: the road is reduced to a local function of the authorities’ desire to suppress a local identity rooted in an individual and shared sense of belonging and of community” (49). A neat definition of gentrification aside, Peacock agrees with Lethem’s driving protagonist and Running Crab: the westward march is merely a tradition, but tradition is transacted through a governmental lens. The FSRs are a means to “transcend the past” (*Amnesia* 20). Chaos’s power as a dreamer is conscripted into the battle to “create a broader coherence, a sort of viral coherence that would roll outward from here, reclaiming other territories, other realities” (145). As Chaos notes, “living under the regime of an eccentric dreamer may be better than suffering through [the] disjointed, amnesiac period” (147).

Six years later, of course, in 2001, Lethem would recant this broad new coherence in light of the permanent war on terror: “I’d reenact this denial again and again in the next hours [after the towers fell]: the mind’s raw disinclination to grant this new actuality, cognitive dissonance run riot. I’d entered—we’d all entered—a world containing a fresh category of phenomena: the unimaginable fact” (*Ecstasy* 234). Six years earlier, *Amnesia* tells us that after “the weirdness came out [...] things got all broken up, *localized*” (57). Thus, Peacock says, “immersion in tiny memorial details can trigger a kind of blindness, excessive

⁷⁸ This is the plot of Chris Nolan’s *Inception* (2010).

localism or amnesia" (30). Later, however, he concludes that "amnesiac [...] it works hard to reduce the world to a tiny zone of activity, a mini-utopia which excludes contiguous groupings" (106). There is a problem of chronology here: does amnesia precede or result from excessive localization? Did amnesia colour the representational response to 9/11, or did it result from it? How blind is this vague *kind of blindness*? How is it represented?

In "Lucky Alan," Lethem summarizes the unbearable complexity of the relationship between contingency and amnesia. This story, one of chance encounter, ends on a haunting, elegiac note: "Here was the full horror of a relationship that both relied on chance meetings and was subject to utter estrangement: what you could miss in an interval. In this case, *the whole end*" (18). Lethem articulates what Mohaghegh earlier called language's "inundation-point, the altitude at which delirium, excess, and nonsense come to pulverize the stadium of words" (154). This inundation-point is translated into an act of memorialization, because Alan can only realize the chance encounter's importance after it has already passed. Examples abound throughout Lethem, for instance in "The Dreaming Jaw, The Salivating Ear": "Let anyone imagine I gaze at the horizon. It is a kind of horizon a which I gaze, an inner-made-outer vanishing point, a place where feeling ventures out to make a meeting with language and finds itself savaged" (123). The point here is that for Lethem, negotiating contingency and amnesia is the hallmark of contemporary living—a new way to view, approach, and critique representational modernity. And, usefully, Lethem is able to map this notion of excessive localism, contingency, and the inundation point back to his view on the fractured, gentrified city. Think, for instance, of the nude portraits of Rachel being quite literally carried out of the narrative, to make way for Dylan's adolescence, Robert's misidentification of the still-life portraits as the real, tangible Rachel.

Thus, Peacock's final definition of amnesia, a definition fundamentally about language, genre, and writing:

Ekphrasis often instantiates a remediation of childhood or traumatic experience [...] it is tempting to view it as both a treatment for and a symptom of amnesia: as both an attempt to recognize alterity (specifically, alternatives to novelistic discourse) and a reaffirmation and fetishization of the novelist's rhetorical power and hence of his supreme ability to capture, in various modes, the myriad fragments of pre-traumatic experience. (10)

As Mohaghegh says, "the hostile underside of alterity and futurity: to want the future where one has no future, to summon the other who eradicates all others" (185). The novelization of pre-traumatic experience, for Peacock, is a form of resistance to amnesia, even while it admits to amnesiac modes of remembrance. Such an amnesiac mode of remembrance ushers in the inundation-point, beyond which language is obliterated.

All of this is to say that Lethem seems acutely aware of amnesiac modes of writing. I believe, however, that Peacock misses a trick in his identification of amnesia's paradoxes. Although he seems aware that amnesia is both cause and symptom, he neglects to mention that Lethem has a phrase for this, and it's one we can trace through three of his novels: *Gun*, *With Occasional Music* (1994), *Amnesia Moon* (1995), and *You don't love me yet* (2007). Lethem starts with memory, moves onto nostalgia, and terminates finally with *nostalgia vu*.

Gun, Lethem's first novel, a neo-noir, Chandler-esque tale of evolved talking animals, is ostensibly about a murder, as all good detective stories are, but is ultimately a discussion of the power of memory.⁷⁹ Conrad Metcalf, our (anti)hero, an archetypal noir detective,

⁷⁹ With apologies for this summary: detective fiction is a genre designed to resist such neat paragraphing.

alcoholic, gun-slinger, wise-cracking, misogynist, ex-cop, stalks a Californian landscape of people living under a system of points. Authorities can deduct points for infractions or add them for greasing the wheels; anyone who reaches zero points is put quite literally on ice, to be awoken when time's served. Metcalf is hired to find who murdered a famous local urologist, but the police, the murdered man's wife, and everyone involved in the case swears an omertà which eventually leads to Metcalf being frozen. The novel ends several years after the case is officially closed, with Metcalf desperately trying to piece together a narrative. In the first sections, everyone uses a drug concoction that enables them to selectively forget and remember certain events—laconically called *Forgettol*. In the epilogue, memory has been entirely externalized: people carry mechanized versions of their memories which can be cued up and played like a dictaphone recording. Metcalf's memory remains internal, because he was frozen when this “update” was released. Oh, and it's worth mentioning that there are both evolved animals—which can now speak and act like humans—and compressed babies, who do not grow; Metcalf also underwent a procedure to have his genital nerve-endings transplanted into his girlfriend's, and vice-versa; the girlfriend promptly skipped town.

We see how memory plays out in Metcalf's first-person narration: “I jotted the name down mentally on that tattered notepad I called a memory. The pen skipped” (20). As the novel progresses, and Metcalf avoids each new technological update, preferring his *Forgettol*, he realizes the murders are “the outcome of an inexorable series of past events climaxing in the act, and with repercussions stretching into the future far beyond the usual inquisition” (34). As memory grows increasingly tactile, more open to overt corruption, he gestures at a term that will come to define Lethem's narratives: “the opposite of *déjà vu*—nothing reminds you of anything, not even of itself” (85). Finally, memory moves from

episteme to ontology: “Memory was permissible when it was externalized, and rigorously edited [...] I hoped it made [the murdered] feel vulnerable to see his memory in the palm of my hand” (176; 185). In his resistance to the progressive, technologized sweep of history, Metcalf stretches the ontological limits of what it means to be a liminal body existing in threshold space.

Lethem fictionalizes what he elsewhere calls “time’s attempt to remember itself”: human consciousness (*Ecstasy* 445). Under this rubric, self-awareness replicates the logics of gentrification, or, “the sentimental auto-marginalizing of (beloved) zones” (274). Memory is surely one of these sentimental (by definition) auto-marginalizing zones:

It is possible we are only things to remember. The enumerated lives, the names of those gone, our letters and maps and charts, a mnemonic device for otherwise uncountable eons, a way to give a hint of flavour to the void. Yet time most likely found it unbearable to remember itself entirely. A glance in that direction was all that was needed. (445-446)

And this, ultimately, is how Lethem positions his detective fictions: as glances in the direction of genre that telescope our understanding of the auto-marginalizing fabric of memory. Memory is coded as singularly self-referential—whatever we see the opposite of déjà vu as being, it means that memories can only refer to themselves as slices of fractal, geometrical conscience. We can therefore liberate Mohaghegh’s otherwise hard to parse idea that silence is not “how the extreme converses” but “where it happens,” where words fail, where the “hostile underside of alterity” comes to “pulverize the stadium of words” (154; 157; 185). The silent space of memory is self-referential, auto-valorizing, and words no longer refer beyond themselves, merely to previous instances *of* themselves. Under Lethem’s

definition, *memory is plagiarized by definition*, even if that plagiarism is turned inward, against the self.

As memorial writing, Lethem's first novel interrogates detective fiction's genre conventions in order to establish an amnesiac mode of apprehension in which memory is inherently untrustworthy, malleable, pliant, and open to corruption. Memory—as literal site—metaphorizes the tropes of detective fiction not only to subvert them, but to position the novel itself as a piece of amnesiac narrative.

Having established the subversion of memory in modernity, Lethem turns to *déjà vu*. The catastrophe at the heart of *Amnesia Moon* is like all the best catastrophes: totally inexplicable. It resists schematization. It cannot be rationalized. There are no sensible explanations for what happened, only inferences. Only small moments give insight: "I prefer to think of [the disaster] this way: *there isn't anything to remember*. Things were always like this. It's just a feeling that something else came before, an endemic feeling. The whole world has *déjà vu*" (24). In this view, *déjà vu* is a *sense* of recollection, *as though* remembering an event that either has not yet occurred, or was not experienced. But Lethem positions it as a diagnosis of memory itself: "memory honours no point of origin, has no interest or indeed any capacity for making a pure return to the site of its inception. No, instead each memory is only a photocopy of the previous memory. Memory, ventriloquist but no dummy, loves the path of least resistance" (*Ecstasy* 444). *Déjà vu*, as memory, refers to itself, for memories are themselves recursive, photocopies of previous recollections. Either *all* memory is *déjà vu*, or *déjà vu* diagnoses the function of memory itself. So, Lethem first defines his own writing as amnesiac, using narratives that invert or distort memory's guarantee of continuity. He then

attempts to show that all memory is *déjà vu*. Lethem's early novels are therefore negotiations between these two nominal opposites: remembrance and amnesia.

In *Amnesia*, we can read this paradox into Chaos's statement that *déjà vu* is endemic—tied to discrete FSRs—and finally to the phrase that Peacock misses. In 2007, 13 years after Lethem first articulates a vision of *déjà vu*, he publishes *You don't love me yet*, an indie-romance bildungsroman about a group of musicians who are booked to host a silent concert as press for a local artist. *You* is a novel of wordplay: Lucinda, the protagonist, is working in an artist's studio, featured in a piece of art called "The Complaint Line," an anonymous call-centre where people can call in and complain. Here, she meets a man named Carl, who writes jingles that have made him fantastically wealthy. Carl insinuates himself into Lucinda's life, and then into the band. Carl's laconic phrases are coopted by Lucinda into lyrics for the band, and he is remarkable for his ability to turn a phrase: "Room service, bring me a room" (73) or "as a good friend of mine used to say, you can't be deep without a surface" (141). But it is earlier in the narrative, before Carl, that Lethem finally enunciates a truly amnesiac genre: "nostalgia *vu*. Longing for longing, instead of for the thing in question" (29). And there it is, in somewhat prosaic fashion, 114 years after Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle": *nostalgia vu*, just like John Marcher, *waiting for waiting*, realizing the wait is the thing itself.

Nostalgia, sentimental, wistful, languorous; *vu*, literally, "seen." Compare this to what Peacock identifies as Lethem's treatment of writing:

Writing avoids amnesia by explicitly remembering and acknowledging what came before; in this way it achieves a kind of mobility [...] the lack at the heart of events—whether it stands for trauma, loss, truth, knowledge, the proof of the universe's

love for humanity or all of the above — is impossible adequately to verbalize. Even if you give the void itself a voice, it can only produce words, approximations of itself, in a vain attempt to describe, know and possess its own being, to become identical with itself [...] representation itself (as language, as symbolic text) is traumatic and inescapable. (56; 68; 74)

Nostalgia *vu* contradicts the idea that writing avoids amnesia, contending instead that writing *is* nostalgia *vu*: it is the articulation of amnesia's verbal form. The way Peacock defines language as approximate, figurative, and gestural is not just how Lethem uses language, but how he also sees memory. Memory's photocopies are amnesiac in the truest sense, because they know and possess only remnants of their previous forms: language is recursive because it too refers back to conventional understanding, itself embedded in memorialization. The process of memory is an attempt to "become identical with itself." Lethem, then, writes back against genre through amnesia, because all memory is self-referential and auto-valorizing; all writing is amnesiac, but only writing aware of *nostalgia vu* is conscious of this wilful forgetting.

Amnesiac writing admits to its own artifice, and is thus more honest. Writing is predicated on memorialization, and all memories are photocopies of previous, unstable memories; language acts to verbalize amnesia. Lethem neither celebrates nor condemns amnesiac writing, instead situating it as the only ethical and authentic response to trauma. This is an extension of Thoreau's attempts to bring clarity to an event by remembering it, rather than transcribing exactly what happened. It is, according to both Lethem and Thoreau, a more honest approach to writing.

We see this theme recur throughout Lethem's work. In "The Insipid Profession of Jonathan Hornebom," for example, the eponymous artist is suffering from blackouts where someone defaces his paintings, creating nightmarish monstrosities. It is revealed, of course, through classic detective style, that Hornebom is self-sabotaging. But the "changes in his paintings forced him to consider the gaps in memory that made a patchwork of his days" (48). Or take "The Billboard Men," about dystopian future graffiti artists: "Salem and Marlboro could envision an end to their work, not because it had failed, but because its success reframed not only the wasted city but their own vision of their places in it" (107). Lethem's characters invert memory: memory as a framing device becomes realized through the physical, built environment, and changes in that environment alert characters to modifications of their memories, rather than the other way around. As Luter notes in his summary of the end of *Motherless Brooklyn*, "the attachment to the past *that is visible* here is selective and thoughtful" (46-7; emphasis added). It is the visible past about which amnesia can be selective. It is "those who speak to the invisible while disavowing the visible, the proximate, the present. Those concerning themselves with ghosts" to whom Lethem directs his ire (*Ecstasy* 253-4). Peacock's definitions give us a rubric for reading Lethem's work as amnesiac writing.

Trauma

We have established amnesia as a mode of selective forgetting which justifies itself by revealing the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of all memory. Amnesia is both an ignorance and a hyper-localism, but it is also self-reflexive, and in the form of nostalgia it performs a commentary on the very nature of memory itself. Amnesia, in this form of

nostalgia vu, is recognized through its material consequences, as seen in *Gun* and “The Insipid Profession.” Interestingly, localism, selectivity, and self-reflexivity are rubrics Scarry identifies as marks of terror. Although she wrote *The Body in Pain* long before the endless war on terror, it was released in the brutal heyday of the war on drugs; the tactics of these wars, despite technological advances, remain largely the same, and so I believe her work carries as much relevance today as it did in 1985.

Scarry argues that the two main targets of torture are sentience and self-extension (61-63). Pain is inexpressible, but must be articulated, or it remains solipsistic, and unbelieved (3). Pain is invisible, (3) and torture is a way of materializing pain, (27-28) in order to convert the everyday into a taxonomy of horror (38-39). As such, the torturer’s weapon of choice, from auto-da-fe to Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo Bay, is something that we traditionally associate with the non-threatening or everyday, more often than not, a *room* or something that replicates the structures and familiarity of a room: a nominally private space whose sudden egress into the public becomes a vector of the torture itself. In this logic, semi-public spaces such as town squares can be rationalized along the same lines, as the square is a private space for the town to pass judgement, but also to publicly condemn the accused. As Scarry says, “In normal contexts, the room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand, an enlargement of the body [... and] it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, a civilization” (38-39). Note here that the room takes on, to borrow Nixon’s phrase, a host of potent valences that articulate the amnesiac view of nostalgia I locate in Lethem’s work: the self-reflexivity of an enlarged body, the excessive localism of miniaturization, and the selectiveness of normal contexts.

But one of the premises of torture is the “dissolution of the boundary between inside and outside” which gives rise to “an almost obscene conflation of private and public. It brings with it all the solitude of absolute privacy with none of its safety, all the self-exposure of the utterly public with none of its possibility for camaraderie or shared experience” (53).⁸⁰ Scarry shows how the benign space of the room “in both its structure and its content is converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone. Made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners, made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them the fact of civilization are annihilated” (41). Whereas Thoreau would locate in this dissolution the centring of *possibility*, Scarry’s familiar torture sounds remarkably like nostalgia *vu*. Whereas for Thoreau the obscene conflation crystallizes in threshold space, for Scarry it reaffirms the primacy of the nominally familiar semi-private space of the room.

Three of Lethem’s short stories exemplify this torsion or tension. The first, “The King of Sentences,” is about a straight couple who are obsessed with a certain unnamed writer—the eponymous King of Sentences—obsessed to the point that their apartment is a patchwork quilt of scissored cuttings from the King’s novels, a Kubrick-level pastiche. They travel to meet the author, but are waylaid by the sheriff of the town who asks them: “I’m just wondering if you ever troubled with the content of his books, as opposed to just the sentences” (34). And one of the couples replies, “Sentences *are* content” (34). This is precisely what Scarry envisions when she remarks that torture destroys language’s ability to cohere, and it is what I read in to Peacock’s amnesia. Here, the divisible units of speech, codified or otherwise, are both the blueprint and the finished structure. A house is not a whole, irreducible, but a gestalt combination of rooms, feelings, and reveries. Each element is

⁸⁰ Is this not precisely the core motivation behind *The Scarlet Letter* or Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”?

constituent of the whole, encountered within the broader context. As Bachelard reminds us, “the house is physically inscribed in us. It is a *group of organic habits*” (63). In much the same way, the novel—as writing—and speech—as narrative—is a group of organic habits, an agreement between writer and reader, or, in Scarry’s terms, between torturer and victim. The breakdown of the novel, like the breakdown of the house that Marshall and Žižek identify as moments of parallax or corridority, unfolds with the same practice as the breakdown between torturer and tortured: a dissolution of the everyday. This breakdown reveals the “secret but ever-present reciprocities that bind people to objects in [...] domesticity” and the way that these reciprocities turn domestic space into an “agent of self-surveillance” (Vidler 163). Coded into the way people interact with domesticity is a logic that underpins the way they encounter the group of organic habits that constitute speech. If sentences are content, genre itself becomes a method of self-surveillance through which the everyday dissolves. Semi-privacy is innate in writing.

In Lethem’s second story, the less successful “The Empty Room,” a family’s home centres around an empty room, empty under the authority of the father, the Law. The dad explains the room’s existence “by means of a series of exclusions” (109), in a commentary on the room itself, which exists only by means of exclusions: no entry, no geography, no population. The room is compared to the human lung, “the empty room of the human body, not mere negative space. By filling and emptying with the stuff of the world it stands as the most aspirational organ, in a literal sense” (111). Lethem revives the theme of “The Shape We’re In,” a novella that takes place inside the human body, with one cell’s attempt to discover the Eye. The premise of that story, of course, “I was afraid I’d lost sight of the objective—that being *to lose sight of the objective*” (46). The room’s purpose is to resist

schematization, to refuse incorporation into the body politick of the home. The room does not turn against the house, or the people who live there, but its emptiness becomes a compulsion, its utter silence that will eventually drive the father insane: “the empty room, being a tabula rasa, bore aspects of total corruptibility” (118). The room is *not* a tabula rasa, as it already bears aspects of total corruptibility.

Finally, “Procedure in Plain Air” rounds off Lethem’s quixotic treatment of the public/private divide and its consequences for language. Stevick, our hero, is grabbing a morning coffee when two men turn up and start jackhammering a massive hole in the sidewalk. The coffee shop’s patrons all leave, but Stevick watches as the men carve a human-sized hole in the ground, retrieve a jump-suited captive from their van, and plop him in the hole. They board it over, but Stevick points out that the planks will not keep the prisoner dry. The jailers hand Stevick an umbrella, and he thus becomes a jailer too, standing guard on this mysterious hole. The fact that the captive and guards wear the same uniforms, and the sudden exodus of the café’s patrons makes this a not-especially subtle account of surveillance and torture under the newly reinvigorated war-efforts of President Obama. As Stevick realizes, “he ascribed a certain strength, a gravity and authenticity, to the man in the hole, *or perhaps to the hole itself*, with which he wished to be associated, as in the sense of a shared undertaking” (65). Lethem is trenchantly aware of how community can form in torture. When Peacock comments that the government creates amnesia by means of mobility, he means that signifiers of freedom are reconverted and undone: the road becomes an emblem to ensure communities do not form. Just so, the hole in the ground—an act of overt, public torture about which the community is wilfully blind and amnesiac—becomes a

site of community between guard and imprisoned, but this community is a shared undertaking between the jailer and *the room of the prison*.⁸¹

Amnesiacked

Clearly, Lethem is acutely aware of the intersections between trauma and amnesia. More importantly, he's aware of the way that metaphors, particularly nostalgia *vu*, are able to articulate this tension, demonstrating the way these phenomena can become excessively localized in a person's everyday life. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Chronic City* (2009).

Scarry's beautiful discussion of wartime trauma helps preface a discussion of *Chronic City*:

The essential structure of war, its juxtaposition of the extreme facts of body and voice, resides in the *relation* between its own largest parts, the relation between the collective casualties that occur *within* war, and the verbal issues [...] that stand outside war [...] The first two paths by which injuring achieves invisibility—omission and redescription—are of course, nearly inseparable; they are manifestations of one another [...] What is first of all visible is the extremity with which or the extreme literalness with which the nation inscribes itself in the body; or [...] the literalness with which the human body opens itself and allows 'the nation' to be registered there in the wound [...] *What is remembered in the body is well remembered*. (63; 69; 109-112; emphasis added).

War is a relation between the physicality of fight—which takes place within the war, privately or publicly—and the verbal descriptions of it—which take place outside the war, privately or publicly. Injuries sustained in war, metaphysical or literal, emphasize either of

⁸¹ *The Stanford Prison Experiment* (2015), the fictional account of Philip Zimbardo's 1971 experiment of the same name, make a nice complementary reading for "Procedure in Plain Air."

these referents, with death-as-omission or silence-as-redescription. National consent to war, however fractured, allows war's wounds to be politicized, and thus while nations can lose war, patriotism and nationalism are enshrined in the bodies of the fallen and the spectators: "What is remembered in the body is well remembered." This is a prescient (if depressing) description of the world's answer to 9/11.

Chronic City, like other Lethem novels, is hard to summarize. The novel focuses on a group of friends in New York. Chase Insteadman, a recovering child actor, is *ostensibly* married to an astronaut, Janice Trumbull, with whom he communicates only via heavily-moderated letters published in a "war-free" (read: sanitized, state-propagandist) version of the *New York Times*.⁸² Janice's spacecraft is allegedly stranded in high-orbit; though never explained, it is likely that Janice died before the narrative began, and these letters are fiction. Chase meets Perkus Tooth, a geriatric, irascible man making his money like Dylan: writing liner notes and blurbs for music and film. Perkus is a kleptomaniac of trivia and old advertising; he's a conspiracist, believing that Marlon Brando (the world's best actor) is not dead. Chase meets Perkus's friends: Oona Laszlo, a ghostwriter, Richard Abneg, the mayor's assistant and ex-hippie, Georgina Hawkmanaji, an heiress, and Biller, an itinerant who makes a fortune on a digital game called Yet Another World.

Strange events dominate the landscape of *Chronic City*: a tiger escapes from the zoo and ravages downtown (no one ever sees it in the flesh); a mysterious fog settles over New York and will not clear (no one knows why); Chase seems to have no knowledge of Janice, except for what he learns in their correspondences. And the entire story is dominated by a mythic, digital-currency: Chaldrons. Chaldrons are unique items created by Biller within the

⁸² Equally prescient (and depressing) in the Trump era.

Yet Another World universe. Everyone is fascinated by them, but no one has ever seen one in real life (as it turns out that they're only digital). Much of the early novel is dominated by Perkus (and soon the friends') overwhelming desire to obtain a chaldron on eBay, by means of Perkus's lamentably slow dial-up internet. The slow infrastructure of the early-web is an icon of the wheezing, public explosion of Chase and Janice's relationship, and the space station's apocryphal, mythic status, hanging unseen over New York, the unimaginable but thinkable. Whether letters, eBay, or the novel itself, communication crawls.

Very little happens in *Chronic*. Events that do take place are often inconsequential, or it's possible they didn't happen at all. The everyday goings on of New York are mediated through a propagandized newspaper, and the group of friends get most of their information secondhand from Perkus's elliptical tangents, drawing parallels between Hollywood conspiracy and the real world. So, it doesn't make much sense to divide the novel, but it can be roughly halved: part one, before the tiger destroys Perkus's home, focusses on friendship, especially how it manifests in language; part two, after the destruction, focusses on trauma and the ambiguity of closure. It's an indelibly 9/11 novel, and it is thus fair to consider part one, pre-the-analogous 9/11, amnesiac, and part 2, post-9/11, traumatic. Part one's focus on language, then, becomes a medium through which Lethem communicates a genre of suspense—waiting for an event that has already taken place, both in the real world and the world of the novel.⁸³

Chase first meets Perkus in the offices of Criterion, where he writes by the grace of god (or Marlon Brando). Perkus is described as “ellipsistic, derived from ellipsis. A species of blank interval, a nod or a fugue in which he was neither depressed nor undepressed, not

⁸³ That the novel takes place only in letters between Chase and Janice is a plausible reading.

struggling to finish a thought nor to begin one” (6). Perkus exists in the blank space between the last thought and the next. Even in his home “[he] seemed to dwell in this place as he had at Criterion’s offices, indifferently, obliquely, as if he’d been born there yet still hadn’t taken notice of the place” (14).⁸⁴ Perkus’s home has the same ethereal quality: it is “invisible to the street. It had nothing to enunciate to the street” (34). The invisibilia of everyday life is an ongoing concern. In *As She Climbed*, Philip Engstrand is professor of interdisciplinary studies—he studies the gaps between knowledge(s), “the hidden data, the facts that hide inside obvious things. The interdisciplinary dark matter” (70). In *Chronic*, both Perkus and Richard have this role: they are the people “who [...] uncover what hid in plain sight” (49).⁸⁵

It is Chase’s belief that New York City is living under a spell of hyperconsciousness, and that the digital revolution has inaugurated in people a tendency to over-estimate networks and connectivity. The clearest examples of hyperconsciousness are found in the strange, corporeal installations created by the mysterious and never-met artist Laird Noteless. Chase *Insteadman*’s name (not a man, not deep, one-note) gives us a clue to the importance of naming for Lethem: Laird Noteless’s strange moniker could plausibly be read quite literally: the owner of land without proof, a man who requisitions and occupies space with no account for who he displaces. Either way, each of Noteless’s installations is staged as

⁸⁴ Knowing Lethem, this introduction is likely cribbed from the way Steven Spielberg started his career. Escaping from a studio tour, the adolescent Spielberg squatted in an empty office, 23C, for months, until he was discovered (Corliss).

⁸⁵ A comparison between *Chronic* and Poe’s “Purloined Letter” could be fruitful. The mysterious letter stolen by D— is talismanic in the same way as Chase and Janice’s letters. Lacan’s reading, that the letter has no intrinsic meaning but is valuable dependent on who owns it and for what purpose, is significantly more sympathetic when read through *Chronic*. As I discuss later, one of the main consequences of plagiarism and amnesiac writing is that it emphasizes the importance of context above all else. Poe’s story testifies to Lethem’s idea that every story “requires furniture, whether it is named or not” (*Ecstasy* 153), because it is around this furniture that meaning is determined. Poe’s “foes and slaughter, haunted gardens and ghosts” (354-355) can be read alongside the tiger, Janice’s letters, the fog.

a framing device through which Chase can articulate his thesis that our reliance on digitized networks masks the real, actual things beneath a glossy patina of patterns and connections. He remarks that “(*buildings do persist, Manhattan does exist, things are relentlessly what they seem even if they serve as hosts, as homes, for other phenomena*), and later clarifies, “Maybe the empty border around the picture says something nothing else could ever say” (240). What persists is the *frame in which meaning appears*. The digital architecture of *Chronic* is a frame through which Chase is able to analyze both Perkus’s language and America’s trauma, and these frames become most clear as frames when Chase visits any of Noteless’s installations.

So it is that Chase parrots Perkus’s belief that “some human freedom has been leveraged from view at the level of consciousness itself. Liberty has been narrowed, winnowed, *amnesiacked*” (14; emphasis added). Here we have the informal verb form of amnesiac, alongside “narrowed” and “winnowed.” Strangely, each of these words has a different meaning: first, compressed; second, with the detritus removed; third, made forgetful. In fact, the entire sentence is almost unfollowable, bending language into an unrecognizable shape. “Leveraged” can mean either borrowed or used to the maximum, but the implication is that it has been hidden; there is no optical consciousness, so the idea of a “view” at the level of consciousness is hard to parse; and narrowed, winnowed, and amnesiacked are completely different concepts. But this is not a fair reading: Perkus deserves a better frame.

This is Perkus and Chase’s first meeting, and it is lubricated by weed and black coffee. Perkus first identifies *amnesiacking* in media, in much the same way that Chase uses Noteless’s installations as mediums that reveal the taxonomical frames through which we interpret the world. Perkus believes that the font of *The New Yorker* assails the brain, for it

has “meaning embedded, at a preconscious level, by the look of the magazine; the seal, as he described it, that the typography and layout put on dialectical thought” (14). Conspiracist or not, Perkus uses the word “amnesiacked” to mean

something like the Mafia itself would do, a whack, a rubout. Everything that mattered most was a victim in this perceptual murder plot. Further: always to blame was everyone; when rounding up the suspects, begin with yourself. Complicity, including his own, was Perkus Tooth’s only doubtless conviction. The worst thing was to be sure you knew what you knew, the mistake The New Yorker’s font induced. The horizon of everyday life was a mass daydream—below it lay everything that mattered. (15)

Perkus’s definition of the verbal form of amnesia (affected, done to someone or something) is thus twofold: first, it is a murder. But not a regular murder, or there would be no need to mention the Mafia explicitly. Instead, a Mafia murder is either retributive or political, to gain power or influence. Second, it is a complicity. He also mentions that “the horizon of everyday life” is a dream, under which lies the “matter.” When Perkus uses the term *amnesiacked*, then, he means that something has been taken from human liberty, but it has been taken with our complicity. It is our ability to see below the view of the everyday that has been taken from us. Such a revelation would be fairly mundane—a classic marijuana philosophy, a classic *The Matrix* talking point—if it wasn’t for our earlier definition of “nostalgia vu.” Nostalgia vu argues that memory is self-reflexive, and that amnesia is a function of memory itself. The active *amnesiacking* therefore is an extension of memory’s own purposes. Found in the *New Yorker* is a superstructural, preconscious meaning that

interrupts the horizon of the everyday, that interrupts the flow of every communication *as a piece of communication*. This is a corridor without a door.

There are three ideas here: amnesiacking, framing, and nostalgia vu. Perkus argues that memory is inherently amnesiac in construction, but that amnesia as a framing device is hidden from everyday view. Movies, newspapers, and art reveal the frames. The best example of this is one of Laird Noteless's installations. Chase is invited to Noteless's latest installation by his part-time lover and Noteless biographer Oona. Noteless's installation is a huge sculpted hole in the ground, the *Fjord*. Chase brings along the novel *Obstinate Dust* to sacrifice to the fjord.

A lot is happening here: Oona is a biographer, but this event is narrated like the rest of the novel; *Obstinate Dust* is written by Ralph Warden Meeker, a name indebted to both Thoreau and Emerson; and the narrative itself is still told from Chase's first-person perspective, which opens up the possibility that it is actually being told to us through one of Chase's letters to Janice. The episode is thus enframed on multiple narrative levels: Chase's letters, Oona's biography, and Noteless's installation. The unclear authorship, the weirdly bland description of events that sounds more like a biography than a novel, and the *petit objet a* *Obstinate Dust* seem to suggest that at least in this instance, *amnesiacking takes place at the level of writing*.

Chase begins his journey saying that "The New York subway is a vast disordered mind, obsessing in ruts carved by trauma a century earlier," invoking perhaps the underground railway's traumatic history appropriated as a mental map by which New Yorkers can orient themselves (100). Chase's journey evokes Michel de Certeau's diagnosis of 20th Century life. For Chase "had barely a chance to dwell on the dismaying cityscape as

the train roared aboveground, the slate-brown monolithic prewar tenements, the rusted Coca-Cola-sponsored bodega signs [...] before we'd abandoned the elevated views and descended to that unfriendly map ourselves" (104). The prewar tenements, monoliths, foreshadow the fjord's play on 9/11: the deep traumatic wound of absence. And Chase identifies a key distinction between a city viewed from above, and one experienced below. This is what de Certeau calls the "technocratically constructed, written, and functionalized space in which consumers move about, their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable pathways across a space" (27). An aerial perspective, the "space [of] panoptic practice," enables an articulation of how "forces are distributed" before they are assigned (120; 125). That is to say, there is a paradox in the encounter with space: height can enable control, as it allows you to see a journey's trajectory more clearly, but height is only enabled as a product of control. Like a Möbius strip, at once technically infinite, but also unorientable. This paradox is what de Certeau calls a "fiction" (240). This fiction is created because "elevation transfigures [a person] into a voyeur" (239). The voyeurism is "itself visible [but] has the effect of making invisible the operation that made it possible. These fixations constitute procedures *for forgetting*. The trace left behind is substituted for the practice" (251; emphasis added). Height, in other words, "makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text" (240-241).

The alternative, however, is not preferable, for "to walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper [sic]. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place" (263-264). Under de Certeau's scornful eye, then, the city is a landscape cleaved by two warring tendencies: placelessness and *forgetfulness*. Chase's train thus

descends onto the unfriendly map, and he feels “a little overwhelmed, being one who flinches from any wider world but prefers to feel at home in Manhattan, to glimpse the island’s own provinces and badlands, its margins” (104). The distinct placelessness of riding the subway train, quite literally a marginal space in its own right, moves them from aerial or “wide” view to an up-close “map” view. Strangely, Chase uses “map” to denote up-close, as though mapping is consequent on experiencing, rather than seeing.

While de Certeau argues that “marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority,” (25) we can instead side with Chase who sees the margins as something experienced in the everyday patina of encounter with the city. Marginality is not defined here by space or time, but by one’s relation to it: this is precisely the relation that Thoreau attempted to articulate in his discussion of threshold space. Chase’s remark is also difficult to parse: he is one who flinches from a wide view, *but* prefers to feel at home in New York. The *but* implies that to feel at home in Manhattan requires a wide-view, a voyeur’s perch in a digital crow’s nest.

Chase and Oona leave transit behind, and are shepherded to Noteless’s installation by an itinerant.⁸⁶ Noteless’s work is a chasm hewn in the ground, difficult to find, isolated by concentric rings of shattered glass and used needles. The giant hole in the ground—the fjord—is decorated with sneakers tied to the escarpment. Visitors have sacrificed various items which have landed at random points throughout the chasm. Chase wonders “whether the refuse was Noteless’s flourish, or the local community’s spontaneous outpouring. In any event, the cascade of garbage was the only thing ‘urban’ about his Fjord, since the city was entirely out of view” (107). Urbanity is ocular, and the fjord isn’t so much palimpsestic as

⁸⁶ Given Biller’s role in the story, this scene also mirrors the overall narrative.

overflowing with an abundance of meaningless, decontextualized offerings. Layered, rather than erased, a tabula rasa again pockmarked by aspects of total corruptibility, the fjord's framing "constantly breaks from its context, [and] this self-breaking becomes part of the very definition" (Butler 10). The fjord's framing is defined by its corrupted iterability, the fact it absorbs the self-breaking into the structure itself.

So it is that,

Oona and [Chase] stepped as though hypnotized nearer to the lip—there was no definite limit to approach, only whichever foothold on that curled ridge of landscape you'd last judge safe to take [... Chase tries to leave.] 'Wait, I want to take it in,' Oona said. 'It's a *total vision of death*.' (108)

This *total vision of death* is a vision of performed absence: an artificial vacuity that not only resists description but "actively destroys it," to borrow Scarry's terrifyingly accurate phrase (4). Noteless's installation—or more precisely, his evacuation—is staged at the exact level of Lethem's narrative, an avatar for the role genre plays in framing knowing and knowledge. Lethem directs readers through a narrative without definite limits, and Chase's myopic view of his own everyday reality, performed through the city's sudden material disappearance, reveals a trauma at the preconscious level. Enframed by the trauma of 9/11, Chase sees in the fjord a concrete representation of absence, an unimaginable fact that nonetheless persists in the real.

The anxiety of contingency—the last safe foothold on that curled ridge—is both a condemnation of writing itself and a panacea to the "anaesthetized drudgery of the endless present" that Peacock sees as a hallmark of amnesia's immobility (37). Noteless's installation is an immortalization of the ideas discussed throughout this chapter—that the traumatic

lack at the heart of narrative is non-verbal, unrealizable, even *unimaginable*. Noteless's fjord is amnesiac precisely because it works hard "to reduce the world to a tiny zone of activity, a mini-utopia which excludes contiguous groupings" (106). The ekphrasis of trauma excludes the urban landscape, working hard to reduce a national wound to a small, hyperlocal spot for voyeurs to throw trash at. This is pure complicity as an act of national trauma. This is complicity at the level of narrative.

Oona's remark is a commentary on the conventions of narrative. Oona's biography, Chase's letters, and Lethem's narrative encase the narrative world in a series of frames that "delimit the sphere of appearance itself" (Butler 1). Ellison was able to stage his assault against narrative at the level of the body, but Lethem interrogates the "normative conditions" that produce subjects as "historically contingent." These norms are contingent to the degree that "our very capacity to discern and name the 'being' of the subject is dependent on norms that facilitate that recognition" (4). In other words, genre both epitomizes and is the result of historical contingency, and thus this *total vision of death*, is a total vision of the *unimaginable fact*, itself a reference to the frame through which death can be conceptualized as either an endless present, or destructive absence. Trauma is a meditation on being able to live in the frame of the present. The unimaginable fact returns us, forcefully, to our earliest engagements with Thoreau's long probations.

De/solitude

Having thus established Lethem's interest in amnesia, trauma, and the unimaginable, I will show how he articulates his own version of solitude. Thoreau's solitude begins in the tensions of threshold space, and Ellison's solitude is a practice that inhabits and reforms

process-spaces into thresholds in order to resist totalizing narratives. So the question that animates the final section of this thesis must be: what does Lethem's solitary practice look like? I will demonstrate how Lethem extends Thoreau's idea of the long probation through a discussion of the unimaginable fact, in which Lethem identifies the crucial aspect of solitary practice—its attentiveness to *waiting*.

"Their Back Pages" is one of Lethem's least successful short stories. In it, a group of cartoon characters escape from a book, and become stranded on a desert island after a plane crash. An interesting enough premise—a kind of meta *Lord of the Flies*—which is never really explored, but one of the characters makes an interesting observation: "On the fifth day of our *desolitude* I fear our little compact of necessity has fractured" (9; my emphasis). What are we to make of this word, desolitude? The prefix "de" can mean privation, removal, separation, negation, descent, reverse, and intensity. These affects share only one similarity: they speak to something that *was* but that is no longer. Privation: losing something you had; separation: having something taken away; negation: the opposite of what you had; descent: the opposite of ascent, etc.. Figuring out what Lethem means by desolitude, and whether we can plausibly map it to Thoreau's idea of solitary practice, takes some digging.

Motherless Brooklyn, Lethem's most self-aware, conscious lampoon of genre fiction, is not simply about Tourette's and language. Instead, it uses Tourette's to strip back the story to its skeletal form in order to satirize the genre narratives of detective fiction that we otherwise take for granted. Tourette's is deployed as an interruption of "the reality-knitting mechanism people employ to tuck away the intolerable, the incongruous, the disruptive" (64). The punctuated, pockmarked language of Lionel Essrog takes us behind the scenes, like the backstage of Neil Gaiman's deserts in *American Gods*, to expose the constant

anxieties humming beneath the surface of everyday life. “Have you ever felt,” Essrog asks us, directly, “a guilty thrill of relief having a character murdered before he can step onto the page and burden you with his actual existence?” (150). These characters are “mentioned early on but never sighted, just lingering offstage” and have taken “on an awful portentous quality” (150). If *Motherless* is about anything, it is about the suspension of time in the face of disaster: “These characters had met disaster in being born onto the page, and their more extreme fates were only *realizations of their essential nature*” (272). For Lethem, the disaster of writing (and its reliance on memory) means that fate is lived *in the present* even if it began in the past. Writing mirrors our own encounter with stories we use to construct continuities of the present, and disruption to those conventions reveals the anxieties inherent within narrative construction. These are additional examples of the total vision of death and the way Lethem deploys literary tropes to reveal the frames enacted by genre, convention, and expectation. Writing as disaster is an iteration of the logics of trauma in its absolute solitude.

This position is not simply a recapitulation to Dumm and Mijuskovic’s nihilistic statements on the purposelessness of life: the disruption of narrative continuity does not necessitate the conclusion that there is no way to overcome a foundational discontinuity at the level of self (*Loneliness* 1656). The recurrent image in Lethem’s fiction is of a person on the cusp of the chasm of selfhood—not yet trapped. In *You don’t love me yet*, for instance:

On a stepped pavilion a smudged man maneuvered a shopping cart to the lip of a vast inhuman fountain, alone amid sentinel buildings. He might have been the first mortal figure to cross that plain, a Thoreau approaching his Walden. In the passenger seat, *waiting to know their destination*, Lucinda felt encompassed by an

oceanic tenderness that bloomed beyond the space of her car to cover the far *solitary bum* and his cart. (65; my emphasis)

Lucinda reiterates Chase's feelings at the lip of the chasm: a sudden, overwhelming disorientation; this same disorientation underpinned Thoreau's reliance on threshold space as a route to humanism. As she rightly notes, "solitary confinement is a self-perpetuating thing [and] she wasn't learning anything about proper socialization by being stuck in the pit [of despair]" (121). Instead, Lucinda realizes that in response to an alienating world, she must "move certain parts of the interior of [herself] into the external world, to see if they can be embraced" (139). This is precisely what Chase does in throwing *Obstinate Dust* into the chasm. Notice how 'waiting' is emphasized as an important part of Lucinda's conception of 'oceanic tenderness.' Her realization correlates to her ability to pause, as if solidarity begins in waiting.

Bruno knows this experience, too, in *A Gambler's Anatomy*: "Why shouldn't future catastrophes be legible, too, trudging columns of dirty-bomb refugees or zombie-plague survivors traced in advance?" (32-33). Lethem even says it explicitly in *Conversations*: "It's the explanations which claim to justify the outbreaks which are truly surrealistic" (37). And Ilfrod in *Amnesia Moon* is painfully aware of the problem of rationalization: "You can't go back. Especially when you're changing things as you go along. You can't reclaim a thing that changes as you touch it" (137). What is happening here is neatly summarized by Rose in *Dissident Gardens*, when she says that emotion is "as political as it gets, the passage of exiled sentiment from one subject's body to another's. The transmission of affect" (220).

Or, most explicitly, by Sergius in *Dissident*:

Sergius had cultivated a private science of remembering, in order to understand and absolve himself for what he couldn't. He'd figured it this way: You remembered what was continuous and what was anomalous. The continuous because it stuck around to remind you of itself. The anomalous because it stuck out and so your mind made a Polaroid of the oddness, to gaze at in fear, lust, or bewilderment forever. (289)

Each of these examples articulates a vision of a private, lonely knowing that is interested in the transmission of affect, the unreliability of memory—its nostalgia *vu*—, and the pregnant sense of waiting that pervades life. The question is to what extent these feelings are consequences of the waiting, or whether waiting is a symptom of a thinking that would already lead to these conclusions. Are these feelings desolitude, or is it the wait?

The authors in this thesis use solitude as a means of articulating the ineffable sense of waiting implicit in each moment of the present. For each of them, it required an interrogation of marginality, liminality, and an aesthetics of the threshold. Navigating the present relies on either displacement, alienation, or dispossession: systems of power would occlude the future, and block the past; or, they would contrive narratives of historical continuity that themselves would hide true access to authentic history or possible futurity.

Both Thoreau and Ellison offer the same palliative to this oppressive logic: writing and memorialization. Ellison's *invisible man* writes his narrative as a means of self-knowledge, as a way to determine his own future. For Thoreau, remembrance of an event changes the event, but that does not undermine the necessity of remembrance. Indeed, it reinforces its importance—memories must be preserved, even inaccurately, because they create the texture of the present. Thoreau's million-word journal testifies to this idea. Solitude, like memory, is realized in the present.

Thoreau sees moments of solitude as both thresholds to transcendental realization and as sanative breaks from the desolitude of the everyday. Desolitude “dissipates” his days (f 568) because “narrow, trivial men” break “these solitudes” wherein “the problem of existence is simplified” (569). Lethem similarly creates worlds in which characters are dissipated by the ongoing everydayness of their lives, finding relief in moments of solitary becoming.

For Lethem, fiction disrupts the flow of solitude to desolitude: moments of transcendence, steps over the threshold, carry with them a trace that transforms desolitude:

By limning a world so subtly transformed, so barely *nudged* into the ideal, the Dire One’s fictions cast a shadow back onto the everyday. They induced a despair of inadequacy into the real. Turning the last page of one of the Dire Utopianist’s stories, the reader felt a mortal pang at slipping back into his own daily life, which had been proved morbid, crushed, unfair. (“The Dystopianist” 165-6)⁸⁷

The Dire One’s fictions use ekphrasis to create tiny ripples in the fabric of the real, thereby poisoning that real. Embedded within this quiet story is one of Lethem’s tropes: art about an artist—a secondary remove through which the narrative unfolds. We live the process of limning twice: first through our complicity in the Dire One’s fictions and second through the Dystopianist’s invented narratives about the Dire One.

This replicates the process Thoreau had earlier identified:

When I get far away, my thoughts return to [my friends]. That is the way I can visit them. Thus I am taught that my friend is not an actual person. When I have withdrawn and am alone, I forget the actual person and remember only my ideal.

⁸⁷ Limning: to describe, or to represent in a drawing or painting.

Then I have a friend again. I am not so ready to perceive the illusion that is in Nature. I certainly come nearer, to say the least, to an actual and joyful intercourse with her [...] I feel like a welcome guest. Yet, strictly speaking, the same must be true of nature and of man; *our ideal is the only real*. It is not the finite and temporal that satisfies or concerns us in either case. (652; my emphasis)

Both Lethem and Thoreau rehearse this notion that our ideal is the only real. For Lethem, this is eulogized through hyperconscious narratives *about* narrative, and for Thoreau it is through journalling. And both are poignantly aware that these methods are fallible. Our access to the ideal—which is to them a-if-not-the real—is therefore mediated through an inherently amnesiac media.

Narrative overflows with its own performance. Retreat from these narratives is imperative, but only to the threshold. Beyond the threshold lies the reality of a “morbid, crushed, unfair” Real. The practice of disengagement is an annihilating negation of desolitude, but the break is never clean, and tendrils always creep back into everyday life. For Thoreau, this means that the transcendental inspiration of Nature *must* be replicable socially, but we are stymied by a paradox: more nature means we are better equipped to understand the ideal of artificial life, but more nature means we are less willing to return to it, less able to deal with it. Hence, the proper attitude to the split between nature and non-nature is a threshold pose. Lethem, likewise, emphasizes the importance of the threshold as a bulwark against the overflowing of the ideal into the real: “Let anyone imagine I gaze at the horizon,” a nameless blogger tells us, “I gaze at the horizon. It is a kind of horizon at which I gaze, an inner-made-outer vanishing point, a place where feeling ventures out to

make a meeting with language and finds itself savaged” (“The Dreaming Jaw” 123). This *inner-made-outer* vanishing point is writing as threshold.

Lethem further interrogates writing’s performance of the threshold through an analysis of plagiarism and its parallels with gentrification. Lethem’s stories unfold like Christopher Nolan’s *The Prestige* (2006), a story so self-aware that one of its main characters announces at the start that whatever the audience focuses on they will miss the big trick both within the film and of the film itself. Lethem’s attack on genre is written as a series of misdirections. Lethem, like Nolan, is interested in pushing the limits of detective or SF genre fiction to comment on the way we interact with our own senses of reality as inherently elastic or palimpsestic.⁸⁸

Perhaps the clearest example of this is Lethem’s reliance on ekphrasis. Ekphrasis introduces a secondary mediation into a media already mediated: in Lethem’s work, you encounter an object described by a character, translated into description, and then contrived into a novel, often told as a series of first-person vignettes. In Lethem’s worlds, nothing is reliable. Perkus’s obsession with cutouts and poster-folds in *Chronic*, for example, is dismissed by Chase in a glib comment about the city’s tendency towards disposable, once-use materials. Surveying a fence littered with advertisements, he notes that, “Nobody even removed posters, they were in too much of a hurry, they’d just layer them with other stuff. Sometimes somebody would rip away a chunk and reveal seven or eight different layers, and I’d see something I put six months ago or a year earlier resurface in a new context” (245). The poster’s subject is secondary to its context, derived only by its position against other posters, themselves secondary to a context of their antecedents. While the content of the

⁸⁸ Some of Nolan’s other projects, like *Memento* (2000) or *Inception* (2010), testify to this.

poster is many-use, the nature of the poster itself is inherently disposable, and designed to be used just once.

The palimpsestic nature of context—as a derivative of plagiarism—enables Lethem to draw cities as bodies, cribbing Scarry’s war-as-bodily-tattoo analogy and creating worlds in which nothing is meaningful except in hindsight. Led by Perkus, the friends in *Chronic* create a conspiracy theory around the tiger allegedly savaging New York: it is, as with everything, a symbol-as-a-means-of-control. That is until it destroys Perkus’s house: “The site had evolved rapidly in our absence—most of all by becoming a ‘site’ (or possible a ‘zone’), by revealing the unnerving readiness of a familiar street to be revised in martial strife, like a gentle friend suddenly enlisted in war, then returned decorated, missing limbs, and with a hundred-yard stare” (268). As Chase says: “You absorb a thing before you’ve assembled the context necessary to grasp it” (399). Our memories assign meaning to events of the past to create a contextual-present; our memories are palimpsestic and inherently flawed; therefore, the past inaccurately determines the present through a series of woundings. The street becomes a site in the same way that a body reveals its own fragility through trauma, after the fact. Our conception of continuity is thus disrupted *in the past*, but the consequences of the disruption are felt in the future. What *is* remembered in the body is well remembered; what *is* once well done is done forever. *Is* — it will be.

An alternative view is found in both Olson and Mohaghegh: they argue that silence acts as a palliative to the interminable, sublime (ecstatically painful) “open-endedness” of life (Mohaghegh 22). In their view, waiting is an analog for thinking of death. Mohaghegh’s silence is indebted to Blanchot’s thinking of the disaster: death cannot be experienced (19), it has always-already happened (1), the language of waiting is silence (59). If we accept these

thoughts, we accept that death represents unknowability, and that the turn from “the cadaverous” is an escape only in name (Mohaghegh 22). The cadaverous awaits around each corner, like a blot, and thus is Blanchot able to conclude that “*shining solitude, the void of the sky, a deferred death: disaster*” (146; original emphasis). Solitude is the suspension of death, and a turn *towards* the cadaverous. From the same logics, we therefore have two conclusions: either waiting is to think of death, or waiting is to suspend death. It is no coincidence that Mohaghegh defines these spaces as either “chasm[s]” or “flickering corridor[s]” (65). These are synecdoche deployed by both Thoreau and Lethem to visualize the transcendent thinking of the disaster manifest in the war between solitude and desolitude.

To put this as simply as possible, it seems that there are two approaches taken to the problem of waiting. The epistemological, offered by Mohaghegh, Olson, Blanchot, and to a lesser extent modernism more generally, is to embrace the fractured nature of life. If death is unknowable, it is unknowability as such, the only avatar for ignorance. Art all turns towards death, and thus all art is about unknowability, and must itself manifest qualities of the unknowable. If death is defined as unknowable, the turn *towards* it masks the fact it is a turn *away* from it, for there is nothing there to see or to find. The result of this tension is history (Mohaghegh 22). The unknowable, death, the disaster takes place in a moment “outside history, but historically so” (40). The ontological, offered by Thoreau and Lethem is to dispute the primacy of history; history, for the ontological argument, is a palimpsestic site created out of present-contexts. Our encounter with anything is determined only by our existence in the present. The present is a problematic category, *but our bodies always exist in the present*. This is the more logical conclusion to the epistemological arguments advanced above, for the body persists in the present whether alive or dead, and offers a counterweight

to thoughts of the cadaverous. Scarry's arguments therefore fall firmly into the second camp, and while I accept (and adore) the arguments of Mohaghegh and Blanchot, their conclusions are inaccurate once read through either Thoreau or Lethem. As Thoreau says, "As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body" (20). The body persists.⁸⁹

We can see this split play out by comparing Lethem's remarks on 9/11 to his remarks on context more generally. Because of that dastardly "eternal intertextuality of cultural participation," (*Ecstasy* 137) events in the present are remarkable because they were missed in the past. Lethem relishes the cliché, but complicates it: "Be careful what you wish for; you may turn out already to have had it. That's to say, to have had it before you could make intelligible use of it, perhaps before you could get your synapses to parse it for what it was" (220). Of course, what it was can only really be parsed after the fact; therefore, we could safely apply this description to all events. If intelligibility precedes ownership, everything you have you have always had. Waiting is therefore self-contradictory, because to 'know' precedes to 'wait', and therefore waiting is always already realized in the moment of its knowing.

9/11, on the other hand, involves "the mind's raw disinclination to grant this new actuality, cognitive dissonance run riot" (234). For Lethem would "reenact this denial again and again in the next hours [...] I'd entered—we'd all entered—a world containing a fresh category of phenomena: the unimaginable fact" (234). Note here that the event is not unreadable, but the mind is *disinclined*—not unable. Lethem reenacts the event as series of

⁸⁹ Ta-Nehisi Coates makes the same point so frequently overlooked in abstract discussion: "racism is a visceral experience, it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth" (11). Any discussion of a redefinition of the human, or worse of the post-human, that fails to adequately address the pure visceral reality of the body has simply failed; or, perhaps more accurately, has only accurately described the white human.

iterations, favouring the highly, impossibly real visibility of the unimaginable event. Indeed, this event *does not require imagination*, and this is what makes it unimaginable, its shocking bodily realness. Whereas normal cultural contexts require assembly, 9/11's legibility was overly-present, and overly-*present*. 9/11 was realized in the immediate, but replayed endlessly; a normal day is replayed endlessly as a means to realization. The sheer materiality of 9/11 superseded its suggestion of *waiting*, knowledge and the event coincided to the point that it became simply unimaginable. Unimaginable because *too real*.

I am suggesting that Lethem's approach to both of these events are the rubrics he applies to his fiction, the "bursts that inject energy into the reality of decline" (*Critique* 1948-1949). I am also suggesting that we can read in this analogy the way Lethem understands solitude and desolitude: as differences in immediacy. So defined, immediacy becomes a way to think through issues surfaced by amnesia and its counterpart, nostalgia *vu*.

In many respects, the discussion of solitude offered throughout this thesis has followed what Dan McCall identifies as the force behind Bartleby's silence. For McCall, when we ask "what is wrong" with Bartleby, neither Bartleby, the lawyer, nor "the story itself" can tell us. Instead, "the repeated answer to our question, and the profoundest, is silence" (58). McCall certainly means that the questions are always answered by silence, but he also means that the answer to the question *is* silence—silence is itself an answer, not the absence of an answer.

Like Bartleby's "cadaverous triumph," (Melville 33) or Thoreau's refusal to grant society a voice, (Cavell *xv*) I have resisted the temptation to attempt to define solitude. Instead, I have offered two distinct views on what solitary practice might look like. In this final section, then, I offer a brief discussion of the final version of solitary practice. This is

Lethem's solitary practice: it starts with a view of narrative as fundamentally amnesiated, and our participation in culture as by definition plagiarist, appropriative, and referential. Lethem looks to memory, a nostalgia *vuew*, so to speak, and discovers three conditions for desolitude: immediacy, and the unimaginable. Lethem's solitary practice is ultimately an approach towards the unimaginable—because it is within the threshold that Lethem locates the beyond, the unimaginable, the essence of writing.

Immediacy

Immediacy's logic first appeared in this discussion in chapters one and two; it first appeared in prison. Both Smith and Dumm emphasized depersonalization as the first strategy used by 19th Century prisons to unmake and remake prisoners. It's important that depersonalization begins as soon as a prisoner steps into their new life: "A prisoner who entered the prison [...] was *immediately* placed in the strictest solitary confinement" (108). This process was designed to "break the prisoner from [their] *immediate* past" (*Democracy* 108). In Dumm's formulation, these prisoners exist in the "immediate time of [the] penitentiary sentence" (108). Immediate time is contained and contrived time: a time of reference loss and of uncontrollability. Immediacy does not simply mean, then, something which happens at once, instantly; no, immediacy is a lived experience, a praxis of oppression and a new temporality. Like Lethem's "species of blank interval," (*Chronic* 6) immediate temporalities are imposed as a mechanism of control.

Ann Smock, in her discussion of Maurice Blanchot, shows how we can read immediacy into literature, and by extension Lethem's writing. Smock argues that to understand something is normally to place it at a distance (like Thoreau says). However, literature is distance "returning like an echo." This echo is "no longer a handy gap, a familiar

and useful nothing, but an unidentifiable something, the strange *immediacy*, foreign to presence and to any present, of remoteness itself” (11). Like McCall’s *silence as the answer itself*, the very nature of distance is coded into literature: literature occupies a space that is the distance between ourselves and our understanding of something.

We can thus read immediacy as a map for navigating Lethem’s complex referentiality and its assault on genre-fiction. Rivka Galchen explains

the referencing in *Chronic City* contributes to my faith that if I go to, say, turn on a sink in a back room of an unnumbered apartment, on the tiniest of streets not even mentioned in the novel but merely implied, the water will actually run. And being able to imagine that water running makes it easier for me to believe that my neighbour’s tap works, too. Between those two taps is, somehow, *the place to be*. (166)

Lethem solidifies the hidden space of his fiction by situating his narratives in the middle of a complicated network of references, a “space made by theatricalizing” (178). Such a movement echoes Godbey’s version of gentrification and the way collapsing middles and thresholds suspend moments of transition from authenticity to transient inauthenticity (146). For Galchen, referentiality both guarantees and slows immediacy by revealing that, yes, there’s no sink, no street, and no water, but the faucet will still run clear. Literature cannot be held at a remove, but returns without reference; when Lethem describes *the place to be* through his hyper-referentiality, he articulates a deep absence that undergirds writing and our encounter with the space of literature.

Immediacy is not only performed as a critique of the gentrified city, but also as a formal trope of language and of story-telling itself across all of Lethem’s stories. Essrog sees his detective group as “an arrangement around a missing centerpiece, as incoherent as a

verbless sentence” after the death of Minna (117). Locating the verb requires Lionel to throw away his sense of continuity and embrace the contingency of chance and reality: “Perhaps this foyer had only waited for this moment, for me and my story, to become a real space instead of a provisional one” (262). The foyer is the premise for stories like “The Happy Man,” about a man who is occasionally trapped in Hell, but able to function autonomously in the real world: “Hell is stuck in time, repeating endlessly. Hell doesn’t have a past. It just is” (213).

We should therefore speak back against Peacock’s claim that “writing avoids amnesia by explicitly remembering and acknowledging what came before” (56). Instead, writing, as narrative, embraces amnesia as its proper attitude. For instance, the moment at the end of *Gun* where Metcalf encounters his first perp with an externalized memory. Turned into a dictaphone, “memory was permissible when it was externalized, and rigorously edited [...] I hoped it made him feel vulnerable to see his memory in the palm of my hand” (176; 185). Metcalf seems unaware of the irony that there is no inherent vulnerability attached to the externalized memory, either because (presumably) there are backups or because the memory itself has already been heavily edited. Alternatively, however, Metcalf might be saying that even inauthentic, editorialized memories constitute a person’s present-presence, and therefore is intrinsically reliable, in that it makes a person reliable. Externalized memories are quite literally amnesiac writings, meta-demonstrations of the fragility of human memory. Amnesiac writing enables immediacy because it explicitly attempts to articulate the trauma of remembering.

Girl in Landscape, for example, is a third-person narrative told through the eyes of the eldest child, Pella. Caitlin and Clement, Pella’s parents, are moving the family to a new

planet so that Clement can restart his political career away from the sun-scorched, uninhabitable earth. Before the move, Caitlin succumbs to a sudden brain tumour. For Pella, mediated through the narrator, the death and the move are causally linked, but the link is not clear: “Caitlin’s strange, rebelling body, her illness; and the impending move, the frontier that seemed to be rushing to swallow them like a horizon in motion. The point of relation between these realms, the arrow of causality, was obscured” (32). This is, however, not exactly the case, as the narrative goes on to explain that “one thing was certain. Caitlin’s illness was the unspoken text of their days, and the move to the Planet of the Archbuilders was the spoken” (32). Caitlin’s death is unspeakable, but the Planet needs not be spoken; their connectivity is simply contiguity, a contingent proximity that gestures at a pattern that does not really exist. The distance required to understand Caitlin’s death is unavailable to Pella, but the move to the new Planet allows the narrative to respond representationally, to code distance into the very process of storytelling.

Lethem argues in *Ecstasy* that remembering is a process of overlaying patterns on facsimiles of inauthentic original events in order to create a continuous narrative in the present (444-446). Pella’s move and Caitlin’s death represent two kinds of amnesiac writing: formal acknowledgement that unrelated events are in fact unrelated, or an admission that even with this knowledge, we are unable to see these events as anything other than related. Pella’s response to this complexity is to refuse to take her acclimation drugs, and therefore become one with the mysterious animals of the new planet; she is able to inhabit their bodies for spy-craft, entering a kind of trance, cribbing from caricatured myths of indigenous spirituality. But the only revelation from her subterfuge is that their new landscape simply repeats the emptiness of a home without Caitlin: “the house was empty.

No, that was wrong. It was the valley that was simply empty. The house was something worse. It was a failure, a travesty [... an] unhaunted, impersonal emptiness of the ruined land” (164). Caitlin’s death is ultimately irrelevant, but the absent mother sits at the heart of the narrative—not so much as unspoken but unsayable, inarticulate, suffusing the empty space left by her absence.

There’s no mistaking Lethem’s critique of what we can call ‘self-contained systems,’ be they colonialist, familial, or neighbourhood. Pella’s turn to deviance, then, should be read as a response to the death of Caitlin, and Clement’s absence, but, much more importantly, the failure of society represents *the death of the future*. All that remains of the failed town is the frontier, the prison, the fire. That is to say, Pella’s only available temporality is immediate. The death of the matrilineal, coupled with the abject failure of the patrilineal, forestalls any sense of past: all that remains is the fact of Caitlin’s death and Clement’s inadequacy. The failure of the settlement precludes the future; and Pella is therefore doomed to not just an endless present but an immediate one.

Immediacy should therefore be considered not merely a temporal fact but one that reveals a middle- and middling-space in which Lethem’s characters gain access to the false reality kernel at the centre of their stories. Galchen asks, “How do you reach an in-between?” (167). The answer is: “repeat with variations. When you can skate gracefully on [a] maddening surface, you are at the heart of things” (167). This heart is *between the two taps*, as Galchen earlier noted. That is to say, there is nothing but a maddening surface, no depth beneath it, and orienting yourself against this two-dimensionality gives you insight into the vast contingency that underwrites human life.

Lethem borrows language from the sociological critique of prison as a response to 9/11 in order to demonstrate our constant reliance on a revanchism which is psychological before physical: it is about the daily re-inscription of context and its communal meaning. America's response to 9/11, essentially a *supermaxing of society*, to bastardize Loïc Wacquant's foreword to *The Globalization of Supermax Prisons*, is metaphorized by Lethem less as a demonstration of the death of innocence than a sad recusal from the future. Once the trauma occurs, immediacy is the only option left, because everything requires sudden, contingent reassembly. The natural consequence of this diagnosis of postmodernity is that Lethem's characters spend most of their time waiting *and thinking about it*.

Built in to the process of waiting is the fundamental nature of solitude: its readiness to accept the impossibility of the immediate. Or, in other words, its embrace of the amnesiated. The impossible immediate, so clearly manifest on 9/11, is writing's admission of its own unreliability. This is, finally, Lethem's answer to Thoreau's long probation.

Trauma and the unimaginable fact

Immediacy, waiting, and trauma were perfectly understood by Thoreau after he lost his brother, with whom he was very close. On February 21, 1839, ten days after his brother's death, he writes: "I have lived ill for the most part because too near myself. I have tripped myself up, so that there was no progress for my own narrowness. I cannot walk conveniently and pleasantly but when I hold myself far off in the horizon" (49). It would be three more years until he realized how to achieve this. On July 5, 1842, he moves to Walden; on July 6 he writes that he wishes to "meet the facts of life—the vital facts, which are the phenomena or actuality the gods meant to show us—face to face, so I came down here" (54). Trauma

inaugurates in Thoreau a sudden overwhelming awareness of what I will call “self-selfishness.” That is, until his brother’s death, Thoreau did not recognize his own needs. He was, as he says, too close to himself. To remedy this, he turned to nature, and attempted to articulate the loss that is the “actuality” we were meant for.⁹⁰

W. J. T. Mitchell, in his article that draws links between terror and cloning, argues from a premise of trying to explain Wittgenstein’s famous aphorism concerning speech and silence: “Concerning that about which one cannot speak, one must remain silent” (qtd. in Mitchell, 293).⁹¹ For Mitchell, the divide between unspeakable and unimaginable can be mapped onto the differences between the signifier and the signified; whereas in the unspeakable, we speak around, or euphemistically, about something—“G-d” instead of God—in the unimaginable, we simply *cannot* think of something, it is unthinkable and thus unimaginable (295). Mitchell uses the image of a coin with two faces: on one side the face is gagged, on the other it is blindfolded (296). For Mitchell, the gag is far worse, as it functions as both. The unspeakable is thus the most insidious, according to Mitchell, because it bears the “most attenuated, indirect, and weak connection to the act to which it refers” (296). Mitchell, however, introduces another category, as a bit of a throwaway, when he says that “trauma, like God, is supposed be the unrepresentable in word and image” (295). We thus have three categories of the ‘un’: speakable, imaginable, and representable. The proposed solution is the realization that the “unspeakable and the unimaginable are, to put it bluntly, always *temporary*. Which means they exist in historical time as well as in the discursive time

⁹⁰ It is not surprising, then, that John Stilgoe, in his introduction to Thoreau’s abridged journal, says that it is “a record of what he and Nature did on a given day, and *how those doings affected each other*” (12; emphasis added). It did not change him, and he did not change nature: they affected each other.

⁹¹ This phrase is translated many ways. The other popular version is: “Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.”

of the unfolding utterance, or the temporality of personal experience” (297). Mitchell concludes that we “should always say, then, this is unspeakable or unimaginable—up till now” (297).

Whether or not we accept Mitchell’s overall argument that cloning is the worst version of this question, or even his lesser argument that the unspeakable is “worse” than the unimaginable, is not especially relevant. Whether or not we can—or, to use Mitchell’s joke, *should*—even classify these horrors on a scale of “worst” without also saying that one of them is “best” is also besides the point. What is important is that Mitchell identifies, rightly, that these categories of un-ness exist temporally and are manifested exclusively through the relationship between signifier and signified. What this means is that the unspeakable is linguistic, but the unimaginable is *also* attached to the process of verbalization, and is thus engaged in language. The unimaginable is thus a category of the unspeakable, even if they are not identical. Additionally, whichever approach we take to understanding that which cannot be translated, it is our relation to it that determines its historical significance. These events, because they are temporary, are only situated in time by our relation to them. I argue, then, that we can place Mitchell’s argument alongside Peacock’s understanding of amnesia, and thus introduce a category of historical time into a concept otherwise determined by its refusal to be historicized.

If we recall, Peacock says that amnesia results from the “immersion in tiny memorial details” which “can trigger a kind of blindness, excessive localism or amnesia” (30). For Peacock, amnesia creates the “anaesthetized drudgery of the endless present” (37), but if we read amnesia via Mitchell’s discussion of the unimaginable, we can amend this. Indeed, amnesia *does* operate in the realm of an endless present, but *our* relation to it is not tied to

this interminable telos. When Mitchell says that the event is unspeakable or unimaginable up until now, he gestures at two truths: before an event occurs, it was not precisely thinkable, nor could it be accurately articulated; indeed, before it occurs, that it is an event is simply unknowable; additionally, in the telling or imagining, the event is situated in the present, but the person is not. It is thus not coincidental that Mitchell uses language also found in Mohaghegh. Both are discussing ways of conceptualizing the failure of language, and its admission of the category of the unimaginable and unspeakable: “the *frontiers* of the unimaginable and the unspeakable, the place where words and images fail, where they are refused, prohibited as obscenities that *violate the law of silence and invisibility*, muteness and blindness” (292; emphasis added).

The frontier, this border-town, this *threshold*, is the irreducible site where that which previously existed ceases or fails to continue to exist. Even in this opening salvo, the concession to the past is codified. But what are we to make of the idea that the unimaginable and the unspeakable are ideas that violate the law of silence? Silence is figured here as the default, but Mitchell suggests that the unimaginable and unspeakable are blasphemes against the law of silence, and we must therefore assume it is because silence *chooses* not to, whereas the unimaginable and the unspeakable *cannot*. This reading is plausible, as Mitchell later quotes Sidney Morgenbesser’s dictum that “can implies don’t” (294). Silence can, but doesn’t.

For Lethem, the unimaginable is an admission that reveals the crux of trauma. 9/11 is the best example of the unimaginable, because it was an event that you could see, feel, hear, and rewatch, but it was torn by a double-bind: it could neither be described, nor could the image itself be tied to the event. Everything existed in a vacuum, irreducible. For Thoreau,

the divide is of course most visible in nature: “That night was the turning point in the season. We had gone to bed in summer, and we awoke in autumn; for summer passes into autumn in some unimaginable point of time, like the turning of a leaf” (*Merrimack* 432).⁹² For Lethem, the unimaginable is “a fresh category of phenomena” (*Ecstasy* 234), whereas for Thoreau the phenomena have always existed, and the proof of that is that they are essentially unobservable. Both views of the unimaginable, however, are situated in historical time.

Whether unspeakable or unimaginable, it is silent; whether irreducible, historical, or phenomenological, it is solitary. The unimaginable—silent, solitary—is best explained by one of Thoreau’s last entries in his journal. Six months before he died, in November, 1861, he writes of a large storm that rushes in during the night but clears up by day:

After a violent easterly storm in the night [...] I notice that the surface of the railroad causeway, composed of gravel, is singularly marked, as if stratified like some slate rocks, on their edges, so that I can tell within a small fraction of a degree from what quarter the rain came. [A lengthy description of the rain’s effect on stratification]. *All this is perfectly distinct to an observant eye, and yet could easily pass unnoticed by most. Thus each wind is self-registering.* (1025; my emphasis)

Thoreau seduces from the most banal of sights an astonishingly precise definition of how the unimaginable manifests as a process of self-registration. Notice that each component of the image is knowable, observable, and speakable: the storm, the rain, the gravel, the railroad, the pebbles; but overall, the gestalt is entirely *unimaginable*, for the complex interrelation of circumstance, happenstance, and material reality is wholly “singular,” and

⁹² Emerson agrees: “The dawn is my Assyria; the sunset and moonrise my Paphos, and unimaginable realms of faerie” (“Nature” 10).

therefore impossible to repeat. “Distinct” is here doing ambiguous work—either reinforcing the discrete nature of the observations, or gesturing at its accessibility. Each piece is observable, within notice, and *thus* is the unobservable cause self-registering. The wind—unseen—is parsed through its consequences, direct (in the moving of stones) and indirect (in its effect on the rain’s effects). The literally unimaginable is articulated in reverse, by working backwards from its impact. Scarry makes the same point about the nature of God’s voice in Genesis: “It is iterative not only in its form but in its content, its images and metaphors of unimaginable multiplicity” (191). The labyrinthine and essentially infinite slipperiness of the unimaginable requires constant iteration, a performative attempt to ring-fence its meaning by curtailing its activities to registers of the known.

A few final examples from Lethem’s work can help finally clarify the way de/solitude exists in this iterative, unimaginable space. In “Traveler Home,” a man is stuck in a snowed-in house with his dog. Gazing out at the snow he remarks, “Distant stratospheric signal unblocked from local occlusion of particles. Unfathomable mysteries of science best ignored. Sleepless detective restored oblivious to malfunctional interlude. Empty rooms equally oblivious, carrying on without” (43). In this truly solitary space, the language is all about lapses, gaps, and pauses: the unblocked occlusion, the mysteries ignored, the malfunctional interlude, the empty rooms that continues ambiguously “without.” Each of these iterates on the idea of the unimaginable object and its intersection with the solitary space. The man’s reverie, in essence a banal description of the snow and the television, becomes a commentary on suspension.

These icons also appear in “Five Fucks,” arguably Lethem’s most commercially successful short story. Here, a woman has sex with a man, each time waking up in a slightly

distorted temporality; each fuck loses time. Heading to the missing persons department, she meets a detective (repeatedly) who tells her, “it’s best to keep from bogging down in ontology. Missing Persons is an extremely large and various category. Many people are lost in relatively simple ways” (2020). The irony here is hard to miss: the words that follow ontology are “missing persons.” A detective who specializes in people thinks, presumably, that epistemology is a more practical approach to solving mysteries where people are lost. As he says, most people are lost in simple ways, and are thus simple to find. However, we can also interpret this as an admission that these people do not want to be found.

A final, longer example demonstrates this precise logic:

Haven’t you wondered why the average consumer is uncomfortable with letterboxed movies? [It’s] to keep people from having to consider the frame’s edge, which reminds them of all they’re not seeing. That glimpse is intolerable. When your gaze slips beyond the edge of a book or magazine, you notice the ostensible texture of everyday reality [...] When your eye slips past the limit of the letterboxed screen, you’re faced with what’s framed and projected in that margin—it ought to be something, but instead it’s nothing, a terrifying murk, a zone of nullity. But the real reason it’s so terrifying is because it begs the question of whether they’re the same thing. (*Chronic* 98-99)

Here, across a decade, and several media, Lethem offers four visions as to what exactly the unimaginable is. First, it is the frame’s edge, the box or orientation that frames or enframes the content of the thought, image, or position. Second, it is the glimpse itself, the ocular or ontological glance, the action of noticing the frame’s edge, but not the frame itself. Third, it is the movement beyond the frame’s edge, an encounter with a null-space or empty texture.

This, as with Lefebvre, he calls “everyday reality.” Fourth and finally, it is the episteme of looking: the knowledge—clichéd or trite as it might seem—that beyond the frame is a reflection of a nullity that occupies the frame. These definitions are redolent of Koch’s finite infinities, the “silent space[s] of freedom” (299), and how solitude offers a person “all that really can be had” (161). They are also indicative of Butler’s claim that “frames are subject to an iterable structure—they can only circulate by virtue of their reproducibility” (24). In other words, frames are constituted *in the movement of framing*, and thus frames are always already in some way self-reflexive, pointing to their own placedness.

Whichever of these explanations we accept, and all are plausible at least within Lethem’s work, each reaffirms Mitchell’s statement that things are only unspeakable or unsayable *until now*. If de/solitude maps to these encounters with the unimaginable, it follows, and must, that de/solitude exists only as a temporary apprehension in the present.

Thus, there is one other possibility, if we accept the idea that the unimaginable reflects the shifting nullity of both inside and outside of the frame. As Žižek writes of the Lars von Trier film *Melancholia*, “[the] Event is not something that occurs in the world, but is *a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it*” (Event 12). The planet which threatens earth is “the Real Thing which dissolves any symbolic frame” (17). Such it was when Thoreau wrote that thoughts accidentally collaged “become a frame” in which new thoughts surface (*Journal* 139). Contingency underwrites solitude. “Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality,” as Butler has it (71). de/solitude exceeds the frame.

de/solitude is a category of the unimaginable that maps to this dialectic between enframed, frame, and outside-frame. de/solitude is *itself* a lens. Not a destination, nor a route

to becoming or understanding, nor a goal, nor a starting place. de/solitude is a genre of amnesia, self-consciously aware of its own traumatic roots: the unimaginable, unforgettable. It writes back against stability, totality, and progress—the immediate present of de/solitude is a constant riposte against narratological ownership, the kind Dylan tries to impose on Mingus. A revival of amnesiac writing allows us to reemphasize the body’s materiality, for if *all memory is suspect by its very nature*, the only way to navigate continuity is through the body. The unimaginable cannot be imagined, but it can be thought of, *and the body can experience it*. de/solitude is the container through which we encounter that infinitely temporary present, how we think of the unimaginable. de/solitude: it’s a total vision of death, and is thus the ultimate unimaginable fact.

Conclusion

“He had been on suicide watch, naked in his cell, for a month. ‘I lost my fucking mind in that bitch. I’m head butting the glass and all types of shit’” (Bauer 179)

“Such injustice deserved only rebellion” (Zinn 560)

“Race is the child of racism, not the father” (Coates 9)

Around the 20th of August, 2018, thousands of prisoners across America began a strike. The 19-day action coalesced around two main ideas: first, that American prisons are a form of legalized slavery; and second, that disenfranchisement as a means of stripping away a person’s citizenry should be dismantled, discontinued, and disavowed. These 2.3 million prisoners are “invisible in a throng of invisible men.” As coverage of the protest demonstrates, carceral institutions have responded to requests for liberty with increasingly draconian lockdown policies: “They have suspended all recreation so we are in our cells literally 24/7. They turn back our mail, threaten [people] with solitary, and they’ve *painted windows in our cells black so we have no idea whether it’s night or day*” (Pilkington “US inmates” 2018). “Details remain sketchy,” the news tells us, “as information dribbles out through the porous walls of the country’s penitentiaries” (Pilkington “Major prison strike” 2018).

Then, on September 11, 2018, hurricane Florence blew towards the American East coast, forcing the evacuation of over a million people across South Carolina and Florida. But the 934 prisoners and 119 custodial staff of Jasper prison, South Carolina, were ordered “to stay behind despite a mandatory evacuation [order]” (Bohatch 2018). Residents of America’s prisons have been forcibly removed from the citizenry, disenfranchised through penal reforms that see them barred from voting for the rest of their lives—whatever their crime—

and then quite simply left to die.⁹³⁹⁴ 95% of people offered bail are unable to pay it; someone offered a plea bargain or cash bail is *nine times* more likely to plead guilty (“@ScottHech”).

Kevin Rashid Johnson, currently locked up in a death-row cell in Virginia, in spite of not being on death-row, writes that “at the end of the civil war in 1865 the 13th amendment of the US constitution was introduced. Under its terms, slavery was not abolished, it was merely reformed” (“US inmates” 2018). He highlights in particular the cases of Texas and Florida, where prisoners are “forced to work in the fields for free, entirely unremunerated.” Rashid says that these prisoners are forced into “chain gangs [...] watched over all day by guards on horseback carrying shotguns. Elite posses of prisoners are used to keep other prisoners in line, through open coercion and violence.” Prisoners like Rashid, who refuse to cooperate, if such language can even be used, are “put in solitary confinement.” Aside from its naked brutality, itself quite unimaginable to anyone who has never had the misfortune to attempt to exist in such conditions, it is startling that to the authorities of American prisons, solitary confinement remains the apex punishment. For Rashid, the conversation ran an insane gamut: ‘Well, if you’re not willing to be a slave, you will be put in solitary confinement.’ Worse or not, it is clear that the guards *think* solitary confinement is worse.

We must resist the temptation to imagine that reforms can fix this degrading, humiliating, illegal, and flawed system; because, ultimately, the American prison system is not broken. We must admit, and we must be loud in this admission: the prison system *is* fit

⁹³ The list of the prison striker’s 10 demands can and should be read in full: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/r5cr546jlscgkhj/Prison%20Strike.pdf?dl=0>. The strikers demand: 1) a recognition of the prisoners’ innate humanity; 2) the end to prison slavery; 3) proper complaint procedures; 4) the possibility of parole for all prisoners; 5) the end to disproportionate incarceration of minorities; 6) the abolishment of gangs targeted at “black and Browne humans”; 7) no one can be denied rehabilitation services; 8) state prisons *must* provide rehabilitation facilities; 9) Pell Grants must be reinstated across America; 10) ex-prisoners must be allowed to vote.

⁹⁴ In a shock result, on November 6, 2018, Florida voted to restore voting rights to some 1.5 million felons.

for purpose. The American prison system does what society requires of it: it removes, oppresses, silences, and kills. It is this purpose we must seek to destroy. The prison system's failures are society's failures. The prison system must be dismantled and never rebuilt.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that there is a connection between prison conditions and how we conceive of aloneness, loneliness, and solitude. I have argued that solitude is a praxis, a lived experience which registers itself most firmly in bodies. These bodies use threshold space to resist totalizing, historicizing narratives that trumpet the alleged onward march of history. Solitude and its practice is manifest *at the level of genre*, in the *essence of writing*. I have tried to avoid defining solitude through a series of negations. I had the luxury of ambiguity; prisoners do not. This argument can seem patrician: discussing Ralph Ellison through Henri Lefebvre can be read as posturing, a white saviour ideology that risks erasing or understating primary black voices. This is a valid criticism that is difficult to respond to. The fact that a lot of historical black writing on solitude comes in the form of prison memoirs in no way excuses this oversight. However, I agree with Toni Morrison and bell hooks, who both suggest that white academia should respond directly to white racism. Morrison says she does not write for white people, and will not apologize for that (Hoby 2015). When my analysis offers, then, a white perspective on black solitude, it is attempting to dismantle or at least draw attention to some of the preconceptions that white authors have about black solitude. It is imperative that the argument does not fall into Dylan's trap: collecting people for the colour of their skin, but it is also imperative that black voices are *given room*. This room does not need to be interpretive, but it must be large. If the argument fails to give adequate room, it has failed; if it fails to be sufficiently interpretive of black voices, it has not failed.

Clearly, for every Alexander, Butler, Ellison, Fields, Fisher, Gilroy, Hassan, hooks, Irfan, Marrs, Mohaghegh, Morrison, Mosley, Neighbors, Pratt, Rashid, Reed, and Sue, there are untold other voices of colour that could be emphasized—and should be emphasized—but were not. Chapter 4 could have focussed on Mosley, and chapter 2 on Wright, but they didn't. It is telling that when a black voice was centred, solitude disappeared and dispossession replaced it. It is unsurprising that when dispossession vanished, gentrification replaced it. These concepts are discussed from a white perspective, predominantly through white authors, and the discussion of prison strikes, prison labour, and gun safety can be seen as tokenism. This is again a valid criticism. The argument has tried to use these examples as a constant visualization of history: where the argument around solitude wants to avoid saying that it grew from one phase to another, from romantic and historical to modern and cold, the ugly brutality of the American prison system remains a constant. The argument has attempted to demonstrate—through white voices—that issues like gentrification, gun violence, incarceration rates, and the fact that the discourse is crushingly dominated by a largely homogeneous group of white writers, disproportionately affect the voices of people of colour.

The argument has not addressed issues of immigration, Latinx oppression, or LGBTQ disenfranchisement. It relied on criticism from the 80s and 90s to illuminate white pain and its impact on black voice. It ambiguously situated prison conditions alongside white freedom. When it spoke of visual media, it was the films of Christopher Nolan or the work of Robin Williams. The main critics of solitude are all white: Ben Mijuskovic, Philip Koch, Thomas Dumm, and Caleb Smith. The writers who most helpfully defined torture were all white: Klein, Scarry, McCoy. The writers who write most compellingly on solitude

are all white: Lethem, Thoreau, Emerson. Acknowledging the complex systems of oppression involved in social capital, it is startling how few of the voices here are female. For every Kate Marshall there are ten Rob Nixons. Black female voices are even rarer. There are no trans voices, and there are no black trans voices, in spite of the fact that in 2018 almost every single murdered trans person in America was a black woman (“Violence against the Transgender Community in 2018”). Queer people of colour continue to be fired, ostracized, and killed at a higher rate than any other group. Rebecka Fisher’s critique of Ellison’s work holds: “in caesura: set in the placeless place [...] an atopia, the no-place or abyss where black being is presumed to fall inexorably into nothingness” (336). Indeed, Fisher’s strident criticism of white nationalism comes compellingly close to exposing the weaknesses of this argument: “the American nation-state emerges as a problematic metaphysical construct of the symbolic realm, subtended by the Law of the (white) Father” (317). So it is that Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black* or Simone Browne’s excellent *Dark Matters* are both conspicuously absent from substantive engagement.

All of these criticisms are valid, worthwhile, and should be given space. Equally valid is the concern that “solitude” here is deployed as a catch-all, a nebulous bucket of a term that can stand in for anything else: silence, alienation, disenfranchisement, loneliness, aloneness, torture, pain, dispossession, gentrification. Obviously, no term—however defined—can encompass such a variety. The conceptualization of solitude at the end of chapter 5, de/solitude, is about as close as the argument gets to confronting an actual definition of solitude. And, ultimately, the argument does not hinge on a functional definition, and it never has. To be successful, it must admit, like Thoreau, that there is *something* even though it cannot be named, translated, transcribed, or encircled. One of Dr. Thomas Allen’s

comments really helps explain this: “When Thoreau goes from his house in the woods to the Concord jail, or when Dylan visits Mingus in prison, they do not get a dictionary definition of their own solitude—yet they recognize it.” This criticism is useful for two reasons. First, it explains quite simply that solitude is too slippery for simple definition. And second, it positions solitude as *deeply personal*. It is thus that the argument relies heavily on fiction, and especially white, male fiction.

“To notice [blackness],” Morrison says, “is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (*Playing* 10). This argument struggles against this: black voices are not merely here to participate as shadows of the cultural body. However, as Morrison says, no Eurocentric culture “has been able to persuade itself for long that criteria and knowledge could emerge outside the categories of domination” (7). That is to say, that the argument has, and will continue to, fall into traps of white, Eurocentric thinking. This is a context of “people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression” in order to create a “singular landscape” (*xiii*). If the argument fails to adequately unpack, for example, Lethem’s singular landscape, or if it centres too forcefully the work of Thoreau over, say, the work of Emily Dickinson, it can be said to have fallen into this trap.

I defer to bell hooks’s phenomenal summary of these issues:

One change in direction that would be real cool would be the production of a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness. It would just be so interesting for all those white folks who are giving blacks their take on blackness to let them know what’s going on with whiteness. In far too much contemporary writing [...] race is

always an issue of Otherness [...] Yet only a persistent, rigorous, and informed critique of whiteness could really determine what forces of denial, fear, and competition are responsible for creating fundamental gaps between professed political commitment to eradicating racism and the participation in the construction of a discourse on race that perpetuates racial domination. (*Learning* 94)

hooks goes on to rightly identify in a lot of contemporary white criticism a performative wokeness that foregrounds intellectual freedom as a “valorizing” concept that “obscures the more crucial issues involved when a member of a privileged group ‘interprets’ the reality of members of a less powerful, exploited, and oppressed group” (95). If this argument fails to adequately address its own power dynamic, it has fallen into the gambit of Otherness and valorization that hooks compellingly dismisses as white saviour criticism. It is not enough to *imply* that the study of black solitude through the media of white voices is worthwhile, because its value would seem to lie in its interpretation of black voice. Instead, arguments of this nature must explicitly state that their reflections are not meant to suggest anything at all about a specific black voice, but that these reflections are mirrored back on the writers themselves. Lethem’s portrayal of Mingus tells us nothing of black freedom, but much about white impressions of black freedom.

Simone Browne’s notion of “dark sousveillance” provides an opportunity for further study: it plays on dark matter—the invisible buried in the visible, but invisible for or from whom?—and surveillance but as a way to describe “the tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of undersight” (21). Browne opens up a huge door for further discussion of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, and to a lesser but significant extent, Mingus’s role in *Fortress* or Oona Lazlo’s role in

Chronic City. The cooption of techniques of control by the controlled enables us to revivify their narratives as deeply revolutionary, as a praxis of oversight which enabled the characters to not only evade white capture but to deploy it back against the “(white) Father.” Additionally, it raises questions for the diasporic communities largely overlooked in this argument: Puerto Rican and indigenous communities. Browne opens their epilogue with a question that penetrates to the centre of this issue: “when blackness, black human life, and the conditions imposed upon it enter discussions of surveillance, what does this then do to these very discussions? Put another way, how is the frame necessarily reframed by centring the conditions of blackness when we theorize surveillance?” (162). It is imperative, obviously, not to say that this argument can be simply moved sideways: how an indigenous frame affects our theories of solitude. But the argument does give insight into questions raised by chapter 5: Dylan’s kleptomaniacal whiteness reframes the framing of white narratives on blackness.

This line of argument follows the map laid down two decades earlier by Kimberle Crenshaw in the landmark “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” Crenshaw argues that the “multidimensionality” of a person’s experience, specifically black women, is erased in the context of how we think through “dominant conceptions of discrimination” as existing along a “single categorical analysis” (139-140). This is what Michon Neal describes as a form of power, a power that is “embedded even if it’s never spoken” (“Conversations”). The arguments for intersectionality that can undermine this thesis’s examination of black persecution as framed by white narratives of solitude do indeed agitate for a critique that acknowledges the multifaceted and deeply embedded

structures of power that constitute the multiple gazes and positions under examination here. This view, however, also dictates that the centring of certain experiences can be both singular and intersectional, recognizing difference whilst advocating for a more specific and sustained critique.⁹⁵ In other words, the centring of narratives of enslavement, removed by my own perspective, and Thoreau and Lethem's, is both a strength and a weakness. A strength because it is able to acknowledge the intersectionality of this position, but a weakness because it cannot do justice to those intersections.⁹⁶

These questions may be picked up in the slate of forthcoming books about solitude. John Lane's *The Spirit of Silence*, David Jones's *The Philosophy of Creative Solitudes*, *Solitude & Company* by Silvana Paternostro and Edith Grossman, Yoshiaki Furui's *Modernizing Solitude: The Networked Individual in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, or even Lethem's new novel, *The Feral Detective*. Furui's especially will bear especial relevance to this thesis's argument: Furui looks at Thoreau, Dickinson, Melville, and telegraphic communication to argue that contemporaneous digitalization reduced physical and psychological solitude by networking individuals into new social structures. Furui's analysis ties solitude to communication technologies; this thesis ties it to prison technologies. The intersection between communications technologies and prison communities could be read quite fascinatingly via Browne's technique of sousveillance. A study that cross-examines

⁹⁵ This is an important dimension to acknowledge when discussing Crenshaw's work, because it has, most recently, been coopted by trans-exclusionary radical feminists to pathologize 'femaleness' so as to exclude non-cis people.

⁹⁶ A quick look at recent releases in queer cinema testifies to this: *Moonlight* (2016), *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2018), *Sleeping Giant* (2015), *Love Simon* (2018), *Call Me By Your Name* (2018), *Boy Erased* (2018), *God's Own Country* (2017), *Beats Per Minute* (2017). These represent a tiny percentage—and a distinctly Western perspective—of recent films showcasing LGBTQ issues.

imprisonment and technology could elicit a specifically modern version of solitude, providing ample pushback against banal commentaries about the social media age.

Furui's book grew out of a thesis and article where he argues that Thoreau's approach to modernity was "porous" in its dismantling of binaries between inside/outside, society/solitude, purity/impurity and so on (331). Thoreau "attend[s] to the different layers of temporality [...] within the context of his era's rapid modernization" (330). Inadvertently, Furui gestures at some of the complex temporalities I suggested engage Thoreau's study of solitude. Where I disagree with Furui is in the basic premise of his argument: whether or not solitude is actually tied to geography, physicality, or proximity is superseded by the *implication* that networked technologies debilitate our ability to be alone: "In such an age of rapidly developing connectivity and synchronicity, it seems counterintuitive and even anachronistic that Thoreau began to live the life of a hermit" (332). Furui *is* aware that Thoreau's meditation on solitude is complex; from 332 to 335 he discusses the various contradictions and hypocrisies of Thoreau's not-especially-solitary solitude.

But Furui positions this as only a complication and not the essential nature of Thoreau's solitude. If Thoreau's "overt endorsement of solitude in opposition to modernization" is accepted, indeed Thoreau's solitude is nostalgic and defunct. But Thoreau was not a Luddite. Furui says later that "the paradox of Thoreau's situation is that he craves solitude and escape from modernization, but he cannot effectively define solitude without the modernizations that encroach upon his solitary cabin" (337). Thoreau would likely counter that there is nothing inherently paradoxical about defining solitude against a hyper-communicative modernity, and that the encroachment of technologies and industrialization does not by definition occlude solitude. It's axiomatic that he cannot define solitude except

via the modernizations of his time; industrialization as *zeitgeist* can be read simply as “context.” Additionally, Thoreau does not attempt to define solitude; and, as we saw in this thesis, Thoreau was not *against* technology, but against its misuse, its profligate cooption by government and financier rather than by farmer, cooperative, or fisherman. Thoreau was ambivalent to the train, the post-office, the wire; he was disgusted with the *consequences* of those technologies. And these consequences were controlled by men who could not be trusted, in Thoreau’s view. If we define Thoreau’s solitude as simply in relation to the development of communication technologies in his era, we can dismiss it entirely: Thoreau was *desperate* to write for Emerson. Furui also seduces Thoreau’s imprisonment as evidence of his engagement in everyday life. Again, this is correct, but misses the broader point—Thoreau did not seek recusal from society, but to refuse society its poisonous voice. It is not, as Furui contends, “pure solitude, a solitude in which one is completely dissociated from society” (345).

This is not to dismiss Furui’s argument, but to point out that even in modern scholarship, our understanding of Thoreau’s philosophies of loneliness falls into a number of traps that either call for Thoreau to be entirely dismissed, or for his solitary attitudes to be adopted wholesale as the only balm to the age of the internet that has “annihilated time and space” (346). Thoreau did not advocate for anyone to adopt his lifestyle, his attitudes, or his quirky misanthropy. Indeed, if someone does emulate Thoreau—without coming to the conclusions themselves—they are antithetical to the kind of personhood Thoreau wished to inspire. He would not have “any one adopt [his] mode of living on *any account*” (*Walden* 71). No experience was universal, nor could it ever be: the transcendental philosophy precluded the chance of there existing some kind of solitude ‘out there’ in the world. Solitude could

only be forged in one's apprehension of the immediate world, by sketching a cursory life on the threshold between man and nature. Solitude can *only be* individual, for each interpretation of any phenomena is subjective. Furui updates what Matthiessen argued 50 years previous. In *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen suggests that the transcendentalists believe that no man can come into full relation with one another (179-180). In fact, the transcendentalists believed that man must come before society; perception is always subjective, so even if there is an objective world, it can only be apprehended subjectively and thus to speak of objectivity is to speak of subjectivity as it materializes *in nature*.

In 2011, the UN's Special Rapporteur defined solitary confinement of over 15 days in breach of the UN's rules around torture. He also found that solitary confinement was antithetical to the purpose of prison, defined as rehabilitation. Finally, he concluded that the presence of solitary confinement meant more obvious tortures would be harder to detect and less likely to be reported. In other words: solitary confinement is a torture that enables further torture (UN General Assembly). In January 2018, a judge in British Columbia found that indefinite solitary confinement was both rife *and* unconstitutional (Kassam 2018). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) describes solitary confinement as "fundamentally inhumane" ("Solitary Confinement"). Laura Purviance, a prisoner in a Californian all-woman prison, describes her solitary incarceration as a "waltz into hell" (Voices 2018). Shane Bauer's undercover work in a privately-managed Louisiana prison revealed one prisoner describing solitary as, "Welcome to the hellhole [...] welcome to the dungeon" (62).⁹⁷ Craig Haney describes one facility in Georgia as "draconian" and says that, essentially, the routine

⁹⁷ Since 1970, prison populations in America have risen 700%. <https://twitter.com/ACLU/status/1043993411047411713>. The last available statistic for those in solitary is around 80,000. This statistic is a decade old: <https://www.afsc.org/resource/solitary-confinement-facts>.

confinement of often mentally ill prisoners increases the likelihood of suicide, and the loss of sanity (United States, District Court). But solitary confinement is defined, in essence, as the involuntary removal of someone, for an indeterminate period of time, into a locked space that has no recreational capacity. There exists no sincere ethical framework that could define solitary confinement as anything other than torture.⁹⁸⁹⁹ This is to say nothing at all of child detention camps, or the government-sanctioned, terrorist organization “Immigration Customs Enforcement.” A practiced solitude does not ameliorate the astonishing brutality, animalized cruelty, and barbaric policies of a failed, for-profit prison system; solitude cannot speak to racist policy making, racist lawmakers, and racist neoliberalism. The sad conclusion that we can no longer call these punishments “unusual” seems inescapable.

It is not clear when Thoreau originally wrote the following; one source claims December 4th, 1860, some 18 months before he died.¹⁰⁰ However, the text appears in the essay “Huckleberries,” though reorganized to make more stylistic sense.¹⁰¹ It is unclear when this essay was first written. Riffing on the idea of “diameter,” he draws a comparison between naturalists, political speech makers, and the verifiable, empirical facts of natural reality. I cite uncorrected from the original journal transcript, because the published version, I feel, lacks some of the flighty and sporadic connections that are easier to trace in the messier text:

⁹⁸ It’s also worth mentioning that prison guards “commit suicide two and a half times more than the population at large [...] Those that don’t kill themselves die about a decade earlier than most” (Bauer 111).

⁹⁹ We have entered an era—if we ever left it—where the entire American prison system is cruel and inhumane *in principle*. Take any day and any newspaper, and you’ll find an article such as this one by the Associated Press: “Texas prisons deny dentures to inmates with no teeth, claim chewing ‘isn’t a medical necessity.’” <https://www.wnct.com/news/national/texas-prisons-deny-dentures-to-inmates-with-no-teeth-claim-chewing-isn-t-a-medical-necessity-1473312082>

¹⁰⁰ http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals_pdfs/J16f7.pdf /

¹⁰¹ See “Huckleberries” in *Wild Apples and Other Natural History Essays*, pages 166–167.

Many, if not most of our public speakers are accustomed, as I think foolishly, in a patronizing way sometimes to talk about little things—& occasionally suggesting that they be not wholly neglected— But by these to patronize them—& by these they mean those whose diameter consists of but few inches or lines—& which few men know much about— In making this distinction they really use no juster measure than a 10 foot pole & their own ignorance [...] Greater is the diameter of the husk of any fruit than that of its kernel—but it is commonly the husk only that is gathered & stored up.¹⁰² (“Thoreau-Journal” 110-113)

Thoreau says that the focus on little is worthy, but that our tools for measuring the small are mistaken. There is a justified attitude towards the overlooked, but the 10 foot pole tells us nothing. Reiterating the idea that you cannot be deep without a surface, Thoreau uses the kernel of a fruit to metaphorize the way political speech elides the container, favouring instead the kernel or core. In this way, both the huckleberry and our misplaced political speech function as avatars for two things: speech, and its quest to get to the truth of the observable through the observable itself; and how oversimplification makes us overlook the verifiably small details of everyday life. Thoreau speaks of a “juster” measure, that is, a measure of justice, as well as an accurate judgement; he also refers to diameter as measurable by “lines.” Evidently, the main threat of poor measurement comes in speech, for when it fails to accurately render its subject, it threatens the whole enterprise.

However, if the “husk” gets “separated from the kernel” then “almost all men run after the husk” (“Huckleberries” 167). A double-bind is enacted in our quest to articulate the size and scope of the subjects of our speech: a patronizing diminishment is coupled with a

¹⁰² This is verbatim.

lionization of the wrongly-identified husk. In splitting the kernel from the husk, an artifice is laid over the natural, and the “graver pursuits and severer studies” become the “real trifling and misspense of life” (167). Without dedicated study, such as Thoreau did on the huckleberry, meticulously charting its seasonal patterns, its growth, its flourishing, its death, we are only able to make generalizations which wrongly identify scale and size. After all, “the only scientific objectivity is a machine” (*Invisible* 395). We are thus doomed to focus on the things we consider little, but that are not really little. We need to focus on the *actual* little, because this is the kernel of everyday life. Maybe we can call this solitude, maybe not. “Hermit alone,” Thoreau says, “Let me see; where was I? Methinks I was nearly in this frame of mind; the world lay about at this angle” (*Walden* 224). Not quite, but about that. We must, in essence, focus on the little *so that we may see the large*.

Solitude is a practice, not an experience. Solitude as praxis uses threshold spaces and liminal aesthetics to write back against totalizing narratives, against stories of indelible progress. Solitude is a frame through which certain lives and certain moments are encountered. A reenergized study of solitude and its intersections with the mechanized prison system in America seems urgent. A better understanding of the use and misuse of solitude can help articulate the fundamental brutality of solitary confinement, as well as give us insight into dealing with contemporary traumas both local and national. New studies of solitude can help us understand how genre and narrative act as valences of oppression. We must recognize Zinn’s claim that American prisons are an “extreme reflection” of America itself, (557) and we must extend this idea: the stories we tell of America are extreme reflections, too. And when we go this way, we must then ask what of solitude: what does it reflect? Against whom? And, far more importantly: who does it reflect? And *who does it not*?

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