

Backscattered Scraps: Storytelling, History & Apocalypse in Supermodernity

by

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*Swingtide*

Listen, says my brother, to the cries swallowed by the backbeat of distant waves. For a moment I am young again, helpless on the driveway, flinching at the salt whisper of stones beneath my father's feet. As children, we took handfuls of our homeland to hold as the ocean carried us across her ridged back; now we have returned to where her tides sweep out and pull in ships with infants from far away places. My brother and I listen to the backbeat of the waves, watching people swim from shore to shore to shore among the salt weeds where our ancestors learned to stand. The beam of my lamp sways along the ocean's flank. We root our toes in the wash of cracked sea, and my brother picks up a child's waterlogged shoe. For a moment I am young again.

## I

Ninety-five years into the past, my grandmother was born in a small Thai village with no name. Fourteen years later, she fled the village disguised as a boy whilst Japanese troops invaded Thailand during the Second World War, forcing young girls into sexual slavery and diffusing families across the continent. At the age of 18, four years following the loss of her family, my grandmother met and married a Cambodian shop owner's son. They had their first child shortly after. She would spend the next thirty years tending to a small farm, running a local convenience store and raising seven children with my grandfather until the onset of the Cambodian genocide. Between the years 1975 to 1979, after three unsuccessful attempts at fleeing the country, my grandmother lost her husband, two sons, and a grandchild. She was left to raise her three surviving children in the darkness of their work huts, huddled in the stench of the killing fields. My mother, the youngest of her seven siblings, tells me of how her dog barked incessantly through the window of her childhood home as the family fled with the few belongings they had. She tells me of her older brothers and the songs they sang, the cattle they raised, their executioners and the wristwatch that soldiers ripped from my grandfather's corpse. She tells me of air raids and hunger, shovels breaking dry soil, schools used for killings, shops locked up with useless trinkets and clothes, landmines, gunshots, my cousin's tiny voice. There were walls of stacked heads, ankles lined with leeches, feverish nights, malls like mazes, crying, numbness, cannibals, blood all over.

These are the stories that were repeated to me over the years and throughout my childhood by my elders who could neither read nor write. These stories are of horror and apocalypse; they are the images that guide our state of living. I run from these memories as much as I return to them. It is a world that haunts me just as I haunt it. Indeed, these experiences were not meant to be retold to children, but now, embedded in an institution that seems so far away from the foundations of my youth, I feel a certain conviction that I, in my own way, must retain and pass on these scraps of human existence as they threaten to slip away alongside the elders who held them in their tongues. Perhaps even more important is the unique and jarring perspective these human experiences lent me when I took a moment to contemplate them—a perspective we so lack in an era that attempts to erase so much. In undertaking this project, I give acknowledgement to my elders who have never had a voice in these institutions that refuse them due to the colour of their skin, due to their impoverishment, due to their lack of westernized education, and whose invaluable experiences sharpened my awareness of the slow apocalypse we create in our everyday lives. Ultimately, this project grasps at one fundamental concept: the importance of human experience – that is, experience as it is lived and experience as it is retold in the form of story. It is experience that shapes how we move through our lives on an individual basis, and it is direct experience that is most fragile in the currents of what we consider to be history.

It's important to note that these connections are inherent and lived, but only in myself, just as they are manufactured for those outside of the specific experiences I engage with as an

individual. That does not, however, make these links any less real; I believe there is something to be said about how we are losing the crucial aspects of living in our shielded lives—aspects that constitute the very humanness that we might cling to when our worlds come to an end. We exist as enduring traces of those who survived before us. Within them, our voice; within us, theirs. To lose sight of that is to lose core aspects of ourselves.

*West of the Mekong*

Mekong translates to “Mother of Rivers.” Its water is our blood.

I sent you the rooster and watched as you killed it. A patch of sky drained into your body as you swallowed mouthfuls of its blood. Take us for strength. Mother. Father. Brother. Wife. Our child called out for us from beneath a blanket of earth. I remember her cries, long and thin like the mountain wolf’s whistle. They ripped the rings from our fingers and the flesh from our bones. Live as you can and run when the borders fall. Run West of the river, beyond the bone towers and crow storms. Run until your feet turn raw and we will follow you to the sea. Your siblings are living in a camp forty-eight miles south of the river village. I found your brothers working the ploughs over impotent soil. Kiri collected saliva in his mouth so that he had something to swallow and fill his belly. Devi could no longer sweat. Sometimes a landmine would shatter one of the runaways and the boys would feel the echo of death beneath their naked feet.

Across the work fields, Seda and Sann knelt in a grass hut before a foreigner with leather books and hair like rice straw. He asked the children about their lives before the rebellion. Sann explained how they would go to school and climb rooftops with their friends. Sometimes they’d edge along the soft borders of the local pond and break water with stones. They would run and read and feed the wild dogs in the courtyard; there was laughter strumming in the walls, and their mother would hum *Tous les garçons et les filles* as she roasted chestnuts on the hearth.

The man put down his pen and asked the children in French if they could speak the language fluently. His skin was sunless, like the American soldier we saw outside your uncle's shop. Seda watched as he removed his eyeglasses and set them on a stack of books. Both children glanced at the guarded door and the man leaned forward to catch their answers. Sann's head twitched. *Yes*. Their veins trembled like cobwebs beneath their skin.

Bombs continued crushing patches of land throughout the night, just as they did months ago when we huddled under a table in darkness and waited for the ceiling to collapse into fire, except missiles no longer terrified your siblings so much as the crack of wagon wheels turning outside their hut. They prayed for the thunder of air raids over the empty sound of the red rebels taking families to the fields. Devi and Kiri quivered on a bed of wooden planks, eyes wide and unblinking as their flesh tightened against their bones.

I followed the ox wagon through the thick black of night until I heard the muted thump of dropping bodies and found my own, eight weeks gone and engulfed under a stack of limbs. Our child called out for us from beneath a blanket of earth. I remember her cries, as long and thin as the mountain wolf's whistle. She asked for a bite of bread, and the fever thickened until the jungle turned her body to dust and left a rooster in her place.

I saw a halo of gnats circling your head as you slaughtered the bird. Swallow its flesh for strength and run when the dirt camps topple. Run until you see gulls like white flakes circling the sky. Run until your feet turn raw, and you will find Seda and one of your three brothers standing by the ocean on a ship with sagging sails. Though their shrapnel scars and shoeless feet

will fill you with sharp little agonies, know that their mouths will never again grow heavy with the taste of hunger. They will cry and tell you about the harsh rattle of the axle shafts—the way it thrashed fear into their hearts and how it seemed as though the bombs only stopped for the slaughter wagons. The earth will wrap itself around your mother's bloated body and your father's whip-slashed limbs, and they will feed the thick bright jungles of Cambodia. The wind will fold us into flickers of life beyond the knotweed fields. You will see me standing on the sand as you push your boat from the shores, and you will hold my face in your sun-bleached eyes until your soul has grown as old and powerful as the oceans you crossed, reaching a land somewhere west of the Mekong.

## II

It is experience that shapes how we move through our lives on an individual basis, and it is direct experience that is decaying in modern life—that, I must emphasize, is not purely an academic problem. The loss of shared stories affects the underlying features of all contemporary life. This paper intermingles the exploration of story, experience and interpretation with the more traditional route of academic writing in order to join both ends in productive tension. Overall, my methodology addresses, first, the importance of storytelling as a form of shared knowledge-making in everyday life, and second, the purpose of intermingling theory and creative text from a personal perspective. This thesis marks my attempt to embrace the politics of personal experience by turning the stories passed down to me into creative texts that reflect my own experience and personhood, using theory to further illuminate the knowledge embedded in those stories.

I owe my ways of being and knowing to the roots of my childhood and the lives of those before me. My grandmother had twenty-one grandchildren; of all her grandchildren, I was one of three to be born in Western Canada. I grew up learning a great deal about writing business letters, the quadratic formula, parabolas, titrimetry and volumetric analysis, grammatology, and the political underpinnings of the Cold War. I enjoyed learning for the sake of learning; indeed, it became an obsession of mine to excel in academia, to the extent that I can hardly remember a day where I did not study immediately after returning home from school. But this pursuit did not come without a sense of guilt. My mother, scarred from the events of the genocide,

confined me to the safety of our home – a rented duplex shared with two other families, housing five adults and seven children. One of these adults was my grandmother, who was seventy-three when she witnessed my birth and seemingly never aged from that point on. It was difficult to imagine her young; she gave the impression that she was born elderly. I did not have many friends, and as the youngest in the family, I was left straggling behind the other children. My grandmother thus became my closest companion – and yet, I could not speak to her about the things I had learnt in school. It was nearly impossible, I thought, to describe such complex notions to her. She could not read, and she could not write. The knowledge she had accumulated and passed down to me was far-flung from the knowledge I had come to cherish. I felt guilty for thriving in a world that my grandmother had no access to. I could not find room for her teachings in this new world I had discovered. I felt as if I had left her behind. But now, as I grow and shift in spirit, I would like to try and step back into her world.

Entering University, I discovered a particular interest in literary theory; in this interest, I discovered the language I needed to communicate the links between the world my grandmother lived in and the world in which I currently reside. But before I touch on the links themselves, I'd like to discuss how my methodology indirectly supports my findings. Referencing bell hooks, I would emphasize, as she does in her own writing, the importance of bridging the gap between theory and experience. Though hooks is a black-feminist scholar focussed on contemporary studies of women, race, love, healing, and pop-culture – a far cry from the white, male, history or sociology orientated twentieth-century scholars we discuss throughout my paper – I draw

from hooks as an anchoring point to my methodology, supporting how I came to approach this paper as a form of exploration rather than a product-to-be. In her own struggles with academia, hooks describes how “[t]here are so many settings in this country where the written word has only slight visual meaning, where individuals who cannot read or write can find no use for a published theory however lucid or opaque. Hence, any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public” (64). This resonated with me especially as I couldn’t fully understand if theory had a place in the realities I was raised by. Now, taking after hooks, I would ask how we might integrate our theoretical knowledge into the everyday – especially as we consider the histories of those who are excluded from the academic community we speak from. This thesis thus builds theory upon the foundations of storytelling to not only preserve the lessons of my elders but also communicate my own unique perspective and knowledge-making. It is an attempt to grasp at the most fragile and crucial aspects of my grandmother’s world and share them with others using the small voice I’ve been given and the scraps of language I’ve accumulated. That is how theory can emerge in the everyday – by using all we have learnt to give shape to the most vulnerable moments of human life to encourage change, connection and creation.

Taking on a broader scope, this thesis further considers the overall loss of storytelling in the everyday as a symptom of the time in which we currently live. For Walter Benjamin, the loss of storytelling is linked to the overall decline of shared experience. His essay, “The Storyteller”, outlines the ways in which modernity has consigned generational knowledge to

oblivion as ‘wisdom’, experiential knowledge that is passed down and lives within the practical interests of daily life, is no longer being shared between people. Benjamin claims the nucleus of our modern experience is centred around what he identifies as *information*—not experiential knowledge, but a jumble of events that comes to us “already being shot through with explanation” and valued insofar as it is ‘new’ (33). An example of this is the modern news station; events are reported not by *what was witnessed* but rather *as they are being witnessed*. It is in this that information requires no act of careful listening, nor does it require reflection and interpersonal connection. The event is isolated; it leaves no mark on our everyday proceedings, and we often forget the news nearly as quickly as it was told to us. Benjamin’s distinction between story and information is not unlike what bell hooks addresses with regards to how we might go about connecting with others through knowledge. It is in this manner that I would point to the importance of repetition. By repeating and retelling stories from our own voices, we enable ourselves and others to push against the slow decay of storytelling in dominant narratives that conceal various forms of suffering and experience. Unlike the information that Benjamin describes, the stories and poems within this thesis ask you to interpret – that is, to draw subtle lessons from their narratives. Drawing from this connection between hooks and Benjamin, I believe this is how we grasp at the histories embedded in everyday life: by adding our own voices to those whose stories remain vulnerable to the rapidly evolving mass of information hurled at us.

Of course, the written nature of this text cannot entirely align with the mouth to mouth experience of oral storytelling; however, this difference does not overwrite the crucial aspects of my project which arises in the narratives themselves. The theoretical analysis of my paper is splintered by short stories and poems, and that structure in itself echoes my experiences in piecing together the fragmented narration of my family's trauma stories. For some time, I referred to this project as a hybrid thesis, but I think it might be more accurate to describe it as a *research-creation*. As with many of my peers, my formal education raised me into a Western framework that gave me strict guidelines on how to write a paper or make an objective argument; this becomes most clear when we look at the misconception among students that the word "I" should never be used in an academic paper because that would somehow weaken our argument. Research-creations push against this notion as they "integrate a creative process, experimental aesthetic component, or an artistic work as an integral part of the study ... scholarly form and decorum are broached and breached in the name of experimentation" (Chapman & Sawchuk 6). This isn't new, of course, because Indigenous scholars have pushed for multi-modal ways of knowing and being, and encouraged reflective learning even before the term "research-creation" was developed. But as a non-indigenous individual who was raised into a Western framework, this concept is valuable in helping me reshape how I approach my work and utilize the lessons embedded in the stories passed down to me. The texts in this thesis are mediated by the creative and critical voice I have slowly built in the process of my academic journey. Though I employ language my grandmother could not understand, I do so in order to

acknowledge how meaning is made from our relationships to those who live before, around, and after us, and to explore how academia might further emphasize “study-as-experience” and the process of creation over its products. I bring my grandmother’s stories into the context of my own life, my own background, and amplify her stories and the stories of many others using the individual voice I have found; these texts bear the marks of my lived experience, as well as the lived experiences of my elders who survived before me, and they crystallize, for a brief moment, the story of our small forgotten histories.

*pantoum : peal*

ghostly under the white fire of the stars  
backscattered light dusted across the pond where  
grandfather's fire-eaten hands  
cradled fistfuls of earth

backscattered light dusted across the pond where  
the wash of candlelight  
cradled fistfuls of earth  
and the dance of a baby's laughter

the wash of candlelight  
softening in the press of dawn  
and the dance of a baby's laughter  
in the air of this desiccated road

softening in the press of dawn  
the whistle of the grassbird  
in the air of this desiccated road  
this village people once called home

the whistle of the grassbird  
grandfather's fire-eaten hands  
this village people once called home  
ghostly  
under the white fire of the stars

## III

Recalling the stories of my grandmother, I saw myself numb to the experience of death in its most natural and non-sensationalized media form. The dissemination of information on a mass scale, and its increasing imbrication with capitalist consumption and commodification, results in the culture of the spectacle where our experiences of death are regularly mediated by images. And yet, at the same time, in the modern world, experiences surrounding death have become increasingly separated from daily life. We watch television shows based in extreme violence, and yet we sentence our sick and elderly to the confines of hospitals and senior care homes; we are surrounded by, and indeed find small thrills, in the abundance of media coverage on unnatural deaths including suicide, mass shootings, and beheadings – and yet we fail to recognize the histories of those who passed before us, and who were not included in the narrative represented by memorials and statistics. Perhaps most evidently, we are ourselves surrounded by the death of the non-human, be that objects crushed under objects in a junkyard that we now call cities, or the mass destruction of ancient forests, the killing of ecosystems, the eradication of entire species. In this abundance of information, we find ourselves in danger of devaluing death for the lessons it holds. We risk losing crucial aspects of pure experience in its most unfiltered and blaring form, half-blind to the suffering of this changing world.

Under the culture of mass media, an individual, in the last moments of their life, remains only a number in a statistic; death is massified and depersonalized, its mobilization in our contemporary convergent media landscape placing the term ‘death’ under threat of

becoming wholly meaningless. For Benjamin, the storyteller's authority is bound in death, which is itself changed in modernity. He writes, "There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died ... Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity, and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs" (Benjamin 38). Indeed, death is increasingly hidden in that we find ourselves fearful of homes where people have passed; however, at the same time, I would argue that it isn't the sanitization of death so much as it is the loss of sharpened experience that is shifting our reactions to death. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* describes this loss of experience through an explanation on the 'society of the spectacle' in which we live. It's important to note that Debord is focussed more on the ways in which the quality of life is impoverished by a lack of authenticity and the degradation of knowledge; this is not what I intend to convey. Instead, I am concerned with the power of experience, the dangers of its loss, and its connectedness to the places around us. I reference Debord as an attempt to elaborate on a particular facet of his argument, which is the loss of experience in the creation of spectacles. I would argue that the loss he observes is, in part, a contributing force in the devaluing of, and numbness to, death. According to Debord, the spectacle operates as a means of distraction distributed en-masse by the modern conditions of capitalism. As with Benjamin's notion of information, Debord ultimately argues the spectacle reduces the human experience to a flurry of commodifiable fragments. He adds further that the spectacle demands "passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply" (29). It is

this 'passive acceptance' we must be careful of. Not unlike information, the spectacle operates separate from the essence of storytelling, contributing to the numbing effects of the modern condition and shattering life and death into an immense assemblage of displays. The spectacle creates, for us, the paradox of both presence and absence with death; we are on all sides surrounded by stories of death, yet we live our lives largely untouched by death. It is in our passive acceptance of the spectacle that both enables and numbs us to the mass reporting of death, rendering the powerful tragedies of a life lost nothing but a scene to be absorbed and dissolved. How many deaths do we read of in the news? How many do we remember? The sharp edge of past and present is lost, our minds gripped by an obsession over the illusory future, asking, each time one turns to news: "what is the latest tragedy we can find?"

Present memorials signify an attempt to remember and acknowledge the deaths that occur. Indeed, memorials as a means of preservation are crucial to conserving traces of the past in the present; however, I would argue that a reliance on memorialization is dangerous in that the lasting artifacts we preserve can only be passively understood without the nuances of lived experiences. In a multidisciplinary analysis of modernity through memory studies, Paul Connerton describes how "[t]he relationship between memorials and forgetting is reciprocal ... If giving monumental shape to what we remember is to discard the obligation to remember, that is because memorials permit only some things to be remembered and, by exclusion, cause others to be forgotten. Memorials conceal the past as much as they cause us to remember it" (29). Our relationship to memorials is thus paradoxical: we forget as much as we remember. I

would argue that perhaps it is the taken-for-grantedness of memorials that render them ineffective in capturing the very nuances of history – we assume, in viewing memorials, that what *ought to be* preserved is indeed present in the memorial, and we disregard all other aspects of that which has been memorialized. It is in this manner that memorials are distinguished from storytelling: they risk, more so than experiential stories, becoming another form of information that passes freely through our minds without leaving a trace. They fall in danger of becoming spectres, bolstering our numbness to death in their ability to become passively acknowledged spectacles. The name we give to a moment in history cannot possibly encapsulate the complexities and horrors of that moment; the act of remembering and honouring those who lived before us requires an active engagement with the experiential fragments that threaten to slip away from the present. We must remember what memorials fail to bring to the surface: the stories of the people whose bodies were left unburied to bloat in the summer heat; recollections of raw flesh scattered about landmine territory; the young children chewing on insects and scraps of leather shoes to stave off hunger. It is only through an active engagement with the past – the interpretation, repetition, and reflection of experiential stories – that we might reawaken our senses to the lessons of death and remember those who are forgotten by history.

Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" concerns itself with the voices of the dead by urging us to question the authorial voice that is telling history and grasp what is being overwhelmed or subjugated. According to Benjamin, each generation holds what he

terms a “*weak* messianic power” (197) – that is, the ability to resurrect, redeem, and protect the voices of the past against the tradition of the oppressed. Perhaps most striking is Benjamin’s use of the ‘angel of history’ to encapsulate what we consider to be ‘the present’: this present leaves behind a “single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” (*Theses* 201), pulling along with it the angel of history, who struggles to tarry at the ruins of the past and retrieve the souls buried beneath the rubble. According to Benjamin, it is this ‘progression’ that we simply accept which gives rise to more horrors and instances of barbarism, carrying on a tradition that darkens every generation. To push against this, one must reclaim what is being subjugated by pausing, for a brief moment, and collecting the fragments of what the storm has torn apart.

Connerton’s argument echoes Benjamin’s in that memorials exist as material items that will indeed outlive us and our stories, yet conceal, simultaneously, the turmoil of the horrific experiences they seek to represent. Memorials, alongside other artifacts of horrific events, exist separate from the deaths they depend on for their significance. That isn’t to say artifacts or memorials are entirely without value; I would argue that they are indeed crucial in remembering historical events and the lives of those who have died. But in order to fully bring the most vulnerable yet powerful scraps of the past to bear on our present realities, we must consider the experiences that cannot be preserved in the same manner as the items we so rely on in our remembering. We must aid the angel of history in retrieving and saving the voices that threaten to slip away, for they hold within them the spark of hope – and hope, as Benjamin

implies, comes not from the future but from the past. This is the value of story in reviving the power of death.

On a mass scale, the danger in consuming deaths as information lies in the tendency to dehumanize others, slotting them into a mosaic of world suffering. Storytelling the experience of death enriches the experience of living by grasping at moments of humanity as they flash before our eyes. It is in this claim that I am most reminded of my grandfather, cousins and uncles. Their deaths are, in essence, miniscule constituents of a larger statistic, and though many may acknowledge the tragedy in such reports, the power of their experiences will never be drawn by numbers or memorials alone. To the credit of those who carry on their stories, we can picture them so vividly at different moments in their lives. My cousin, a child no older than five, stands against the backdrop of 2 million bodies buried throughout Cambodia. And yet, I see so clearly the day she passed away from starvation – a child telling her grandmother she missed the taste of bread; a woman holding her son's dying daughter; a woman holding a baby who she will later bury with her bare hands in soil caked hard with blood. I think of my cousin on my strolls past the neighbourhood bakery and every time I take a mouthful of bread or see a child clutching a lunch box. It is the story of her death that echoes in my mind, and though I did not know her, her story was repeated to me many times over the years, each time pulling me into the pause before death, sharpening details of living that had been previously dulled. These experiential stories, passed down to me by my elders, taught me to contemplate the lives of

those who've died and to bring their stories into the context of my own life. In these particular experiences, we are reminded that the dehumanization of others removes us from ourselves.



## IV

A modern internet lore called "The Backrooms" began increasing in popularity in 2019. This modern horror story was founded on an image taken by an anonymous user on 4chan depicting an empty but otherwise standardized office building without furniture and brightly lit by fluorescent lights. Fascinated by the unsettling aura of the room within the photograph, internet users began accumulating details on the conceptual Backrooms, creating the mythos of an alternate, horrible reality. The urban legend describes The Backrooms as the location one finds themselves in when one nearly dies, falls into insanity, or enters a coma. Some theorize that The Backrooms exist as an alternate world that has collided with our own; many others believe the space exists as a prison for human souls, trapping wanderers into its endless hallways for eternity. It is, in essence, a modern purgatory.

Why, we must ask, do so many feel unsettled by the leftovers of daily modern life? The face of hell has been changed for new generations: for those who know of The Backrooms, abandoned liminal spaces offer glimpses into an inevitable apocalyptic reality, the haunting presence of something sinister tucked beneath our current realities. But I would argue that the story of The Backrooms is not simply a modern urban legend – it has its roots in history.

Approximately forty-six years ago, a young woman could be seen limping through an empty building, scavenging scraps of supplies as she went. A narrow stairwell twists downward to her left; to her right, a defunct industrial fridge. Out the window and across a patch of trees, one could see the wide sweeping arc of shopfronts with a romantic view of what would've once

been a bustling street flooded with street vendors and pedestrians. Now, the whole area stood as a relic of a world that no longer exists. The young woman shivered profusely, right hand gripping a set of matchsticks and a knife whilst the left pulled open empty cupboards. She is feverish and near deaf from landmine detonations. If there are birds in the trees, she cannot hear them. Her mother is burning banknotes in a fire thirteen hours away on foot down a jungle path marked by rat bones. Nothing of use can be found and it is now midday – she must return home. The young woman does not look at the abandoned structures as her blistered feet drag trails along the dirt. *There was nothing*, she told her younger sister that night. *Even the ghosts have left*. At the time, she was twenty-two years old and ill with dengue fever. Today, she is sixty-eight with a peculiar fear of entering office-building stairwells. This woman is my aunt.

Though many regard abandoned liminal spaces and The Backrooms as apocalyptic possibilities, they fail to realize that apocalypses have already happened time and time again in history and it is still happening today. War itself marks an immense transitional space. That isn't to say a fascination with ruins is a new phenomenon: we see Roman ruins in renaissance paintings and find ancient structures at the centre of global tourist attractions. But perhaps it is not so much abandonment that contributes to the eeriness of The Backrooms and other similar spaces so much as the pristineness of the items within it; they exist as perfectly empty marks on the land, reflecting back upon its viewers a total dissociation between objects and the people who left them behind. It is not the mark of disaster that produces this particular and subtle fear but the realization that these items are, at once, both fragmented reminders of somebody's

existence and empty shells that signal the inability of the material world to grasp at the transience of each lived story.

Michel Foucault attempts to draw attention to the ways in which power, or some other social condition, reveals itself in space; though Foucault is widely known for his work in examining the interwoven nature of power and knowledge as it is used as a form of social control, his musings on modern space is valuable to us in examining the complex nature of our contemporary structures and their relations with human behavior. In a 1967 lecture to the Cercle d'études architecturales (Circle of Architectural Studies), Foucault outlines the dissociation and eeriness associated with the Backrooms and other liminal spaces through the term heterotopia. Foucault begins by delineating the difference between 'inner' and 'outer' space. Whilst he also discusses the idea of a reflexive 'inner' space that constitutes *conceptual* boundaries such as the private and public sphere, Foucault focalizes the more physical and often neglected 'outer' space that is "[t]he space in which we live ... in which the erosion of our lives, of our time and our history occurs, the space that torments and consumes us" (Dehaene & De Cauter 16). The term heterotopia comes in as one of two prototypes of Foucault's outer space, the other being utopias. Utopias are fundamentally fictitious – heterotopias, on the other hand, act as its localizable counterpart, perceptible and yet still 'outer' in that it is a place outside all places. Heterotopias are thus useful for our discussion as they are places where *history is weakened* in the tangible world. The reason for this lies in the peripherality of heterotopias, and the fact that they, according to Foucault, act as mirrors that invert, juxtapose and contest all

other conventional sites around it. The traveller, for instance, experiences shifting spatialities in their movements from home to airport to hotel and through a multitude of entryways, essentially passing by mirrors upon mirrors without considering the inverse images they hold. The strangeness that accompanies the heterotopias littered across our perceptions arises as a result of one recognizing both the transience of the mirror image as well as the mirror itself as an entity that once held the movements of life. The peripherality of life in these liminal spaces is displaced by a distinct absence of people; as such, heterotopias emerge as lingering reminders which pulse with the fleeting stories of those who once moved within them. In the permanent absence of people and stories of where they've gone, we are haunted by the material objects of their existence.

As with Connerton's analysis of memorials and Benjamin's depiction of the angel of history, in order to fully bring the most vulnerable yet powerful scraps of the past to bear on our present realities, we must consider the experiences that cannot be preserved in the same manner as the items we so rely on in our remembering. What is left from the violence of history is the more solid materials such as buildings. The first things to disappear in this violence are experiential stories, which are arguably the most significant precisely because they are so vulnerable. These stories teach us things that can only be grasped through specific contexts, repetition, and a special kind of connection one makes to the story. When every person is gone, we are left with a landscape of objects that ultimately fail to preserve the stories of those who left them behind. Thus, we find ourselves in places haunted by the ghosts of ghosts

– a fear that my aunt still harbors forty-six years after her exploration of the abandoned rural trading town and that is centred in the creation of the Backrooms, recognizing the fragility of experiences in the violence of history, at once vanishing as if they had never existed to begin with.

There are faint similarities between Walter Benjamin's analysis of the Paris arcade and Foucault's conception of heterotopias. Benjamin's *Arcades Project* avoids a singular theoretical perspective, offering a movement of commentary through a vast assemblage of displays and observations, allowing them to bounce off each other, reflect, and echo. His unfinished collection is an especially remarkable attempt at grasping history; the *Arcades Project* is itself a kaleidoscope of colour salvaged from the scraps of his surroundings. In his theory, the buildings, spaces, objects and monuments that compose the urban landscape are both a response to and reflection of our social lives. These materialities exist as imprints of human life: Benjamin writes, "To dwell means to leave traces" (Benjamin, *Arcades* 9). Indeed, these traces are not unlike those discussed by Foucault in the disorienting role of heterotopic mirror-places. Consider, for example, Benjamin's claim that "[f]rom this epoch derives the arcades and *interieurs*, the exhibition halls and panoramas. They are residues of a dream world. The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening" (*Arcades* 13). The arcades and various other public areas of movement are described here as dream-like – in other words, spaces of illusion or divided perceptions. This ambiguity of experience chimes with the

alterity of the heterotopias in that the arcades emphasize the threshold between 'here' and 'elsewhere', reflecting a tension between the currents of future, present, and history. Indeed, Benjamin's kaleidoscope of fragments are far removed from Foucault's discussion of heterotopias – and yet they overlap in their implications of how the details of history slip away in these material spaces: for Foucault, heterotopias witness the erosion of history; for Benjamin, history is veiled by an illusion, uncovered only in the tensions produced by brushing against the grain of perception.

*To live means to leave traces.* And yet the traces that disappear most quickly are held in intangible memory – *experience* and stories, not materials. In times of war, the material traces of living haunt us: where have the people gone? Are our stories so fragile? *Even the ghosts have left.* When I look upon objects, photographs, mailboxes, shopping malls, shoes and children's toys, I'm taken by how they are often left behind as traces of lost stories and experiences in times of war. Our everyday items signify *living* as much as they signify *that which once lived*, reminders of how we exist with one foot in our own changing realities and the other rooted deep in the blood-stained soil of worlds that no longer exist. This is where the experiential stories I inherited converge with our lived experiences in the urban landscape.

*clay scraps*

when I was nineteen I relearnt the words for left and right  
where strip malls cluster  
soft and vacant  
bodies met and burnt through  
tenements wrapped around our bodies like ocean  
vents and a subsonic shrill  
eyes blotting out stairwells bursting with voices  
angled tubes in a closed machine running footfall systems fed by walls  
don't you ever think about how we are vast and infinite  
in some other form? spirits  
draped in the deep space of our appetites  
as children our bellies filled with the throb of passing engines  
labouring the want and fear of being witnessed  
moving between welters of brickwork metals and glass  
our shadows fray into splatters of light  
still sometimes forgetting the sky  
still sometimes forgetting the words  
standing under the snow moon we lost to script and substance  
I speak to my mother's gods but they no longer recognize me

## V

In an anthropological study of contemporary cityscapes, Marc Augé describes an erosion of the past as a symptom of the era in which we live – a symptom of *supermodernity*. Unlike ‘post-,’ ‘super-’ implies not overcoming but exacerbation and amplification. It is, according to Augé, an “image of excess” (30) – an excess of space, time, and information. This excess goes on to produce “the acceleration of history ... We barely have time to reach maturity before our past has become history, our individual histories belong to history writ large” (26). We are, in other words, increasingly *consumed* by history. Augé echoes Benjamin’s conception of the storm we call progress and his definition of ‘information’ against the backdrop of storytelling; in particular, Augé observes how supermodernity brings about the often unspoken destruction of history.

Though he does not identify the nucleus of this acceleration change, I would argue that the erosion of history he observes is a manifestation of our desensitization to experience. Augé describes how supermodernity has peaked in physical alterations never seen in the world before, including the reproduction of what he coins “non-places”, spaces such as malls, airports, casinos, refugee camps, highways, stairwells, and screens – all of which are not measured in space but rather in time, simply because we believe they are only to be passed through. They are measured, not by what they mean to our identity, but rather by the amount of time we must spend within them. He contrasts this to the concept of “place” or “anthropological place” which, unlike non-places, can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity. I would

argue that it is our perception of the non-place, then, that brings about this decay of experience. Though Augé locates the material structures of 'non-places', there is an implied construction of these spaces through the immaterial act of *passing through them*. For example, Augé claims the spectator of a non-place becomes a part of the supermodern landscape as "the position of the poet in the act of looking is a spectacle in itself" (92). The poet, in other words, constitutes a portion of the non-place by distancing themselves from the experience of such places. The traveller derives a kind of pleasure from the sight of a memorial, not because of its historical presence but because the traveller produces a 'second sight' in which they see themselves enmeshed in the *concept* of looking upon a historical wonder. These spaces thus create a distance between the spectator and direct experience; it is experience once-removed, and it fails to grasp at the stories embedded in that space, the spectator's included.

That isn't to say that anthropological places no longer exist in supermodernity, or that non-places are defined by meaninglessness. I would argue, instead, that non-places are zones of great potential and revelations. According to Augé, "the same things apply to the non-place as to the place. It never exists in pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it ... Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed" (78-9). Anthropological places exist both *outside* of non-places and continually reconstruct themselves *inside* non-places. There is, in other words, a potential for non-places to become anthropological places, and vice-versa. This makes sense given the way in which place, as defined by Augé, constitutes an area concerned with one's identity; it thus

follows that the transformation of non-place to place occurs as a result of one overstaying or revisiting one's time in a non-place. It is through the slowness and repetition of visiting such places that these interstitial zones take on a shape of their own. Linger long enough on a street and perhaps you may feel, just as I feel, the footshakes of old mystics passing by, the flash of their feet drawing up wind as it carries the memory of revolution, violins, laughter, the whisper of grass and trees that once rooted themselves in the earth beneath our feet, stories set in cobble lanes which meander like creeks by the carmine glow of tall homes not unlike your own. The non-place no longer appears as entirely flat and featureless; everything holds texture if one looks long enough. Indeed, Augé emphasizes that our movements produce the phenomena of non-places that are reproduced increasingly in the current timeframe; we undeniably spend an increasing amount of our time in non-places like supermarkets, airports, hallways, and tunnels. But it would be false to claim that simply because non-places produce interactions and experiences regarded as temporary that they are blank in meaning. On the contrary, they are bursting with untold stories. They hold the potential for becoming places by virtue of their ability to foster stories under repeated and careful attention; that is what I would like to emphasize.

*she's a wright*

Mother's love is printing in mud  
    the memory of a hand in your braided hair  
    a warm grasp straightening you out of shape  
Mother's love is holding on tight  
    gently strangling what the loved one loved  
thickening those crossover roots, learning to grow in the cold  
    breaking windows from the inside to prepare for past riots  
Mother's love is a steady brake  
    harrowing  
    hot branches lining the skin of your back  
like longing without a heart  
    like an ache that never goes away

## VI

Though I stress the importance of experiential stories, I also understand there are things we may never know. But the act of digging for these scraps is, in itself, valuable. Without this impulse, I would remain ignorant of all I know today. I wouldn't understand, as much as I do now, the violence and complicated nature of loving, helplessly resenting and mourning for those lost in the trauma of the unspeakable. My grandmother's stories gave me the insight I needed to understand my own mother – her distance, emotional outbursts and propensity for violence, all of which imprinted itself into the writings of my own experience in the urban environment I both research and call home. I speak to the past as I would my own mother. The nature of my creative pieces acknowledges this most of all: the power and complexities of what is *not* spoken. In engaging with creative texts, we learn, as storytellers and story-listeners, to read between the lines, to interpret the long gaps between each whisper, and to brush against the fall line of what is written as much as *not* written. To narrate the past is to describe shadows – it is an attempt to understand what cannot be fully understood, and in knowing that we also recognize how the attempt itself creates an echo of the sharpest notes, a specification: this is what has survived, this is what we use to make sense of our realities, and this is what must be carried on. The purpose in retelling these stories is not to conceal its fabricated linkages and corners; I fully acknowledge that I am attempting to reconstruct, through my own writing, an image I had never seen myself using only remnants and fragments. Indeed, I spent my entire life chasing these stories by their shadows, many of which still remain unknown to me – as with the

brushstrokes of an impressionist, each story unravels before me in a patchwork of blank spaces, concrete walls and movements. And yet I still believe that as those who survive, we hold an obligation to both learn from and care for history, even if that history is fragmented – even if that history is cruel and difficult. Emphasizing the importance of experience and storytelling against the backdrop of our material attempts at remembering acknowledges how we do not make meaning alone. We stand on the shoulders of our ancestors, and though we do not know their names or their stories, we have their faces, their blood, their voices. I speak to the past as I would my own mother – *I wish you understood me. I wish I understood you. I'm all you could've been. You're what I could still become.*

## Glosa : Fine Dashes

*The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole  
what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise ...*

— Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

—the distant gleam of glass double doors  
striking the shattered panels of a motor car  
papered by lichen, dead by a ditch, next  
to some place where the trees have reclaimed dirt  
roads and buckled homes of love and hurt; some  
place where the moss-swollen lines of a railway  
once shook the porch lamps we sat under  
as children, now caught at the throat  
by willing decay,  
some place where the angel would like to stay  
—and beneath the tidy blankness of the room  
where your brother lost his first tooth;  
where  
you pretended you were not a thing that needs

some fleshless hope,  
folded so small beneath the bedspread,  
the carpet a patchwork of stains  
from young wine,  
books rippled at the masthead,  
the drip of saltwater upon flames  
waiting to awaken the dead

—feet the earth  
weave our names  
woven of mud  
bodies ring cries of freedom  
and the debris we engraft  
into our ways of meaning  
desire, a longing without  
end, thoughts bashed  
as to make whole what has been smashed

—take in the salt white of fractured sea;  
recall the backfuls of cattle straw

under the haunt of the nightjar;  
the sore stroke of a tree branch  
fine dashes drawn through anger  
to shape up what we sometimes call sacrifice;  
to make sense of the red film over mother's eyes,  
tenderness curling, there, its dim lure into impulse  
—and we think of the things we could not have  
wanting only what those things meant  
and wanting, still, only to catch the imprecise

*but a storm is blowing from paradise*

*a storm is blowing*

and times walk by

us in this limbo of endings—

look                    how we forget

how to live

*Look how we forget*

## VII

Though we are surrounded by decay and desensitization, we are also surrounded with life and possibilities. This thesis does not aim at a nostalgic view of history, nor does it concern itself with creating a perfect theory; instead, it opens itself up to interpretive possibilities and illuminates the voices of my elders under the colours of my own existence. It works to preserve the shards of history in order to reveal the powerful potential we hold as those who survived.

As for the future of this project, my analyses may be expanded by further examining the links between colonialism and urban capitalist structures, bringing in historical studies to trace the shifts in literary attitudes toward urban spaces in the onset of modernity, or examining the links between cultural collective memory and individual trauma-stories. Most of all, this project extends itself to other individuals beyond myself and asks them to consider the importance of the experiential stories that shaped their ways of knowing. That is not to say that all experiences are analogous; what resonates with one may not resonate with others. But it is not so much the perception of the stories by others that matter so much as it is about culminating the self-impulse to actively learn from and acknowledge those whose stories were discarded, buried, oppressed or abandoned. It is the *process* of storytelling that is most valuable.

Traces of supermodern destruction manifest something crucial about our era – it is a destruction that is absolute and sudden, such as war and nuclear devastations, as well as gradual and unseen, like the decay of experience and stories. I focus on these traces of loss, not as a gesture toward a nostalgic past, but as a study of stories in the derelict, ghostly places of

abandoned attention. In all our efforts to preserve the material aspects of our lives, we forget the most fragile pieces are held in the tongues and souls of our dead. We stand within a tunnelling storm shielded from the spirits rising above us in the bone wind, plucked by flares of lights, and our stories bear traces of these spirits; to focalize these traces is to illuminate aspects of life we have yet to see. We hold, as Benjamin claims, a messianic power to resurrect and redeem those buried in history.

*eccho* <ohcce>

where are the dried lips of a village creek?

the monuments

tribal memory?

in that silver cellar they call

clay-inked mesopotamia

*Sea*

<moiling crowds> first words

heaving oil <heavy songs>

a synod of crows moving through

the far north

*light*

wind

the lantern of a caravel, distant

sweeping hair from my face to see

laughter,

my eyes

sailing south of the white whale

reflecting visions of

belly

sun bear bones

spiked with harpoons

buried

(below) the drifting wood held

in places our mothers called *home*

<packed cries>

<stacked bodies>

pounding against the doors of clepsydrae

grass shivers, men shout

*raise the cross*

gasps of time divided by dials

<loosed arrows>

<backward sailing ships>

motioned by onyx-eyed knuckles

and somewhere far,

while the redbirds gave hush to my daughter's hands,

*there, their*

blood sang, spirits trailed the sky pushing back upon us

the backpedal of rising sand

caged in the gloss of twin goblets

*the touch of two Seas*

and (below)

coral soldered <iron to iron>

<bone to bone>

## VIII

As a child, I fed sparrows in the yard with my grandmother, whose mangled hand held the ceramic bowl from which I took a fistful of wet rice grains. She cared for me when my own mother could not. Ninety-five years old, my grandmother died suddenly and alone in the night. In the hours after she passed, my cousins flinched at the sight of her body. This was death in its most natural form: eyes blank, mouth agape, body blue. The next day, I returned to her room to find the nurses had gathered up her items in black trash bags by the door, left outside in the cold. One week later, we lined her coffin with written letters she could not read as the mortician rested her head on a pillow. For a moment, I was young again, hugging my grandmother around the neck for comfort. I held her in death, just as she held me the day I was born, both of us oceans away from her birthplace, now nothing but the shadow of a small Thai village with no name.

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