Emma Stone watches The Affair
Will Dart meets a doppelgänger
Jon Catlin reflects on loss
Angela Qian interviews Monkey Business

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The Midway Review publishes informed, accessible essays featuring literary, cultural, and political commentary and criticism. It is a forum for serious reflection and civil discourse across a variety of intellectual perspectives. We are currently accepting submissions to be considered for our Spring 2015 issue. For submission guidelines, please consult midwayreview.uchicago.edu.

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When we take gender as a human legacy of collective forgetfulness, memory cracks open.

It’s unwise to speak to them, or lend them cigarettes, and their advice should never be taken, lest they lead you into peril.

Foer’s project was obviously born out of reverence, not malice. Still, is it marred by the violence to Schulz’s text it entails?

A good popular song is better than a second-rate classical music piece. And a good manga is better than a third-rate literary short story.
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Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

Emma Stone quotes Eve Sedgwick in our first essay: “People are different from one another.” At its heart, this issue deals with difference and translation—between times, languages, and persons. Can memory be communicated? How about, asks Jon Catlin in an essay on Jonathan Safran Foer’s Tree of Codes, catastrophe? Or culture? The mission of the literary journal Monkey Business, interviewed by Angela Qian, is to translate between literatures in Japanese and English.

In short, for every way we are the same, we seem to be different as well. (Except, per Will Dart, for doppelgängers.) These differences can be crucial, beautiful, or tragic—all, as Emma Stone writes, demanding a “constant critical engagement, a certain lightness of foot.” At least, that’s what we think this issue is about. You might have your own ideas.

—The Editors
The Violence of Memory
Showtime’s The Affair and the gender politics of recollection

Emma Thurber Stone

“"It's a good fairy tale," said Van.
"It's a fairy tale," said careful Ada.
— Vladimir Nabokov, Ada, or Ardor

Can you remember where you were when you first became aware of how little you owned your own image? I was fourteen, standing in the checkout line at the Jewel-Osco with my mother. He was red-faced, my age; he looked hungry and bewildered. His eyes dug at me over the top of a paper bag.

He had taken something from me, but as I stood and wished for obscurity I realized that I had also given it. Hadn’t I? By merely walking outside and into the line of sight of others, I had made a copy of myself available to anybody and everybody who wanted one. Mannequins with my body and snippets of my affect probably roamed in the minds of more strangers than I could ever count. More than that, I was guilty of the same procedure. I also pressed people into the thin paper of my mind like flowers, greedily collected and hoarded. Who didn’t hold on to people in this way? There was nothing to do about it. It seemed like the oldest thing in the world.

By the time I started working as a waitress, and watched myself being remembered at a far greater frequency than before, I had a new literary arsenal with which to hammer at this question. I also
had an excuse to write—with a serious enough facial expression, you can always make out like you’re correcting an order, or re-numbering the guests at your table, or making sure you charged for three glasses of wine instead of two. Instead, I wrote: *We all keep people, but who has more power to do it in the way they want, and to bring the world into line with those thoughts? Whose memory carries weight? Whose memory can be felt by its target? Whose fantasies have teeth?*

**THE AFFAIR**

A slim woman in a bathing suit approaches a man leaning on the edge of a pool. “Mind if I split?” she asks. “Sure,” he says, smiling, and she dives over him and into his lane. This first moment of dialogue in Showtime’s *The Affair*, though brief, is charged. For one, it is a beginning of sly misdirection in a show that will take up misdirection as a major theme; these two characters, despite some heavy-handed sexual tension, are not the two characters that will carry out the show’s titular affair. That the man, our first protagonist Noah Solloway (a rumpled and perpetually weary-eyebrowed Dominic West) permits the entry of a figurative disruption into his space in a feminine form also seems telling—we are witnessing, in a way, precisely the kind of moment we are expecting as viewers of a show called *The Affair*. The reason why one watches a show called *The Affair*, after all, is to figure out what leads to such a moment: to a giving of permission, to an entrance into space that was previously exclusive and cordoned off—why someone, in short, might break a promise, and how they do it.

But there’s something else, too. The “Mind if I split?” also serves as a tongue-in-cheek request to the viewer, given that *The Affair* itself is split: in what may seem to be an unpromising premise but is (usually) masterfully executed, each episode of the first season’s ten, which aired last fall, is cut in half, presented from the perspective of each of the show’s two main protagonists. The narration, at least in the beginning, is revealed to us in voiceover to also be a retelling in the present: both Allison and Noah (loaded names for a romantic plotline, especially since for about a thousand reasons *The Notebook* this is not) are relating the story of their relationship to a detective in an interrogation room.
That story is revealed slowly, piecemeal, and in conflicting terms. Noah is a teacher and father of four, fresh off the publication of his first book, happily married and living in New York on his in-laws’ dime. Those in-laws live in Montauk, where the Solloways travel every summer and where Allison (an electric Ruth Wilson, who won a Golden Globe for the role) is a waitress at the Lobster Roll, married to the son of a prominent local family that owns and operates a ranch (as well as, we learn, a sizeable cocaine operation). Allison is trying to salvage a marriage with her husband after the death of their young child while Noah, in full canonical midlife crisis mode, is struggling with fulfilling expectations and trying to pull together a second novel. In some episodes, they narrate the same exact set of events pertaining to their entanglement, or at least operate within the same timetable, while in others their stories fit chronologically one after the other.

The split perspective is the show’s greatest risk, greatest triumph, and greatest sticking point for critics. Commentators have noted the differences in the portrayal of events but with regard to gender most of the interest has been disappointingly cosmetic. It is remarked, for instance, and never explored, that Noah remembers Allison with her hair down, in shorter skirts and falling spaghetti straps, while she remembers herself dressing more conservatively with her hair...
tucked away—because, of course. Otherwise, the question of gender disappears altogether. Discussions about the discrepancies between Noah and Allison’s stories become a generic and dull meditation on perspective in which writers feign surprise that two people’s memories of the same event can vary.

In my view, this perspective completely fails to engage with what I think the show does best: call up the gendered complexities regarding (1) memory and (2) sex. The first is done through the dual-storytelling device, which provides a dizzyingly enormous catalogue of moments to compare Noah’s and Allison’s perspectives. The second is achieved through explicit scenes. As more and more TV is doing these days, thanks to the fact that “the golden age of TV” is largely taking place on smaller networks and providers who can afford more leniency in this regard, The Affair challenges the legacy of sex as a narrative black hole that art cannot represent without compromising itself and becoming pornography. Game of Thrones, which has been criticized for its nudity and explicit sex, has done something similar. Sex on Thrones is (for the most part) about characterization and conversation. “Sex scenes” are not scenes that are comprised entirely of sex; they are scenes where sex is also happening. The Affair follows in this tradition, taking up the line between art and porn, and tying a gleeful knot in it.

This brings me to the main point of this essay, which will be that both sex and memory are often treated like analytical antimatter—beyond, for whatever reason, the space of meaningful critical engagement. The real genius of The Affair, for me, is that it puts both sex and memory squarely at the center of our engagement with its story: in order to follow along, we have to get involved with them, and in order to critique the show, we have to get critical about them.

**REMEMBERING GENDER**

**ALLISON:** Can I ask you something? What do you see now, when you look at me?

**NOAH:** What do you think I see?

Noah’s Allison is charming, knowing; an open-mouthed wink in
human form. Allison’s Noah is exuberant and professorly. Both exaggerations clearly represent something that the Noah and Allison, in recollection, believe that they needed: for Noah, someone with adventurous direction and spark to lead him out of his aimlessness; for Allison, someone with determined optimism and affection to lead her out of her grief.

When I was about halfway through the first season of *The Affair*, I called my sister Claire, who had recommended the show to me, to tell her about my thoughts. I confessed, tentatively, that I had begun to treat Noah’s story like the fictionalized version of events, and Alison’s like the truth. My hesitation was unwarranted: Claire told me she had started to do the same.

This approach to the story felt somehow taboo. I think it’s because, like sex, memory was supposed to be a dead analytical and narrative space: since Noah and Allison both want to remember things as better than they were, and both want to remember themselves in a more flattering light, one ought to trust them, or distrust them, equally. If sex was narrative antimatter, memory was moral antimatter: it was where one could not go without collapsing the question.

But I felt unsatisfied by that explanation, rather similarly to how I felt unsatisfied by Janet Halley’s October 2014 talk at the University of Chicago Law School, where Halley deconstructed the famous rape case *State v. Rusk* by showing a chart with five to six “Pats” (the plaintiff) and six corresponding “Eddies” (the defendant). The exercise imagined, at each end, a “completely innocent” Pat/Eddie paired with a “completely evil” Pat/Eddie, with “neither evil nor innocent” possibilities in between. This seemed to me like it couldn’t possibly be necessary. Is creating a set of coordinates, a visible spectrum of pairs, the only, or even best, way we have to make
judgments of character? The question of whether it is perhaps an unfortunate obligation of the law to think in this way is a different issue, and one I don’t want to speak to here. But when we want to get a grasp on the past, do we have to mark the memories of those who were there as always-already unreliable and disposable if they don’t match up? Is our only recourse to imagine, crudely and approximately, what kind of people they might have been?

*The Affair* is distinctive in that it not only portrays explicit sex but also employs its device of twin-rememberings in its portrayals of that sex—and, in doing so, calls into relevance this whole set of questions related to current discourse around sexual violence. While there is never an incident where consent is in question between the two main characters in the show, the specter of sexual violence hangs permanently at the periphery of *The Affair’s* central relationship. In the pilot episode we are shown a scene where Noah views Allison having sex with her husband against a truck; in Noah’s memory, the sex is cruel and forced, and he only refrains from heroically intervening at Allison’s shake of the head; in Allison’s memory, the sex is consensual, and she feels at first horrified and then aroused as she realizes Noah is watching. In the direct context of their relationship, both Noah and Allison recall that the other person initiated more sexual and physical contact (although there is some asymmetry in how this is done).
There are high current political stakes to these decisions. Various review outlets have spoken of The Affair as a “he said, she said” story, a turn of phrase that has often been—and still often is—put to use in the context of dismissing sexual violence. What “he said, she said,” means is: a man and a woman disagree, so no one knows.

But can’t we know? Or can’t we try? After Halley’s talk I requested that she explain what she had meant by the phrase “fear of Eros,” which she had identified as a problem among young activists working on issues of sexual assault. She explained, confirming what I had suspected but had hoped was otherwise, that she used the term to refer to a fear of seduction, a fear of sex. Having the benefit of a more direct perspective on the youth she was referring to, I cannot help but guess that she was speaking either of (1) the recent and, in my opinion, deserved pushback against the flattening ideological regime of sex positivity, or, even worse, of (2) the ridiculous but surprisingly popular proposition that all this talk of assault is keeping people from having good sex anymore.

I’ve already said that I think part of what makes The Affair so great—and this is something the showrunners realize—is the way it treats sex not as a singular plot point but as an interaction, as a multilayered, non-universal form of human experience whose importance to narrative exceeds a suggestive fade to black. Sex does not stop time. Sex, like time, is motion (if, perhaps, a motion that can enable a certain kind of stasis). Within it space relations are rearranged minutely or re-inscribed; new or old fissures between people and ideas and pasts and presents are called into friction. Sex, like many other forms of human interaction, means a thousand things, and rarely even means the same thing to those involved. This is an argument others have made, and wisely, to end the stigmatization of sex work, for instance. It is one that also works against the emerging idea of sex positivity as a universal human aspiration, as I mentioned above. And it is the same argument that Halley is afraid of: that if we draw attention to the plasticity of sex as a form of experience, we somehow compromise its sexiness.

But both sex and memory do more for us when we let go of them as inaccessible and mysterious homogeneities of life. When
THE VIOLENCE OF MEMORY

we see them as spaces into which life, power enter *differently*, and unexpectedly, we can ask new questions. We can ask, for instance, what we might see when we allow ourselves to explore the possibility that what Noah is telling is less like the truth.

THE PLUNGE

Sometimes I have worried that *The Affair* expects nothing more of us than what most television critics have offered—that it expects us to be sated by its gimmick, content either to chart out Noahs and Allisons in corresponding pairs (Good Allison, Bad Noah; Good Noah, Bad Allison) among whom we can divide blame, or throw up our hands in the face of conflicting stories and decide that nothing can be done.

But then I re-watch. That *The Affair* begins with a dive portends its most recurrent and oppressive theme: characters swim lengths in pools, contemplate drowning, take oddly frequent showers. The sea looms over Montauk and over the plot of the show darkly and inevitably. It is the site that precipitated the death of Allison’s son, who was a victim of secondary drowning. *The Affair’s* promotional images, in a scene that has never appeared in the show, portray Noah and Allison submerged in the ocean, peering suspiciously back at us. The show’s Fiona Apple-penned theme, in the tradition both of her oeuvre and *The Affair*’s aesthetic, is oddly as jaunty as it is chilling and minimal, and ends with Apple repeating

*I have only one thing to do and that’s
Be the way that I am and then
Sink back into the ocean.*

*The Affair* suggests, through the recurrence of depths and their approximations, a vast unconscious, an oceanic feeling *a la* Freud. It urges us into the multidimensionality and messiness of things. And as part of this project it points, quietly but surely, to gender.

I decided to doubt Noah in the fourth episode, the first time he and Allison concretize (and consummate) their affair. They go away together, taking a ferry to a small island, and in both their versions
of events, they share a conversation by a beach where cliffs rise in
the distance and rocks rise out of the spray. Noah’s version of events
includes this remark from Allison:

ALLISON: My grandfather used to bring me out here
when I was a kid—he was a bit of a shipwreck fanatic.
There’s one right out there past the break, and sometimes
when the tide is low you can still see the tip of the mast.
We used to come down here and we’d pretend it was
Neverland. And Peter Pan and the Lost Boys on the
shipwreck, and I was Tiger Lily, waiting for them on the
beach. My grandfather used to say if I listened closely to
the wind, I would hear Peter calling for me.

For Allison, this moment goes like this:

ALLISON: They say this beach is haunted. You see where
it gets dark suddenly? It looks like a whirlpool. Right out
there about a hundred yards out.
NOAH: Yeah.
ALLISON: It’s a shipwreck.
NOAH: No kidding.
ALLISON: Yeah. This island is famous for them.
NOAH: Huh. It seems like such a pleasant place.
ALLISON: They say if you, um, if you listen closely to the
wind, you can hear the sound of a little boy who died in
the ship calling for his mother.
NOAH: Jesus.

The first obvious difference here is one of form: in Noah’s
memory, Allison speaks in monologue; in Allison’s memory, this is
a conversation. In the second instance, Noah is what I would call
*actively subordinate*: he reacts to each piece of the narrative to confirm
its receipt and his continued interest; all the while allowing Allison
to push toward the story that she really wants to tell. Allison is clearly
the conductor of this conversation, and the scene is shot such that
she faces away from Noah, looking out over the landscape. In this
exchange she wanders, and Noah follows behind, picking up what
she strews in her wake.
The monologue, in contrast, is toward, and for, Noah—it is shot with Allison facing him. In this version her story is charming, it does not gesture toward darkness, and its function is to entertain. Noah, silently, consumes.

The same themes emerge in the relation of each of these moments to place. In Noah’s memory, Allison has personal history with the spot where this conversation occurs: it is directly bound up with her past. She is part of its beauty and wildness, native to it, a player in its mythology. It is her grandfather, her childhood; Peter calls to her. But in her memory of the exchange, she, like Noah, is merely a spectator to that mythology—rather than entertaining, she is sharing knowledge. Her grandfather replaced by an amorphous “they”, the Allison in her own version of the story has no particular connection to this place. The tale is the kind of local knowledge that might be found in a brochure—possibly part of an intellectual and narrative inheritance, but never part of her body, of her self. She is not of it. She stands together with Noah at the distance of a tourist.

The importance of this distinction is brought into relief for us by a remark of Allison’s elsewhere, in which she expresses her surprise that anything ever happened between herself and Noah at all, given that he is a “summer person”. “They come in, they leave”, she tells the detective. “They barely even notice us, the ones who wait their tables or bait their lines. We might as well be traffic lights to them. Stop signs, lamp posts. We blend into the scenery.” In Noah’s memory, Allison has to be part of the landscape—he is, after all, fictionalizing her not only in memory but also in his new novel, which is a thinly veiled reproduction of his and Allison’s affair. Part of the purpose of the island trip is to do research for the book, which not only mirrors their situation but also contains a twist that Noah decides to add at the prompting of his agent, who suggests that stories like Noah’s are not terribly new. “So how is it different?”

Noah pauses to think about this, and then says: “He kills her. In the end.”

If this is the harm Noah does for Allison in memory, that her struggles with grief and self-injury are forgotten, that her gaze
outward is forced back in upon Noah and his need for levity and adoration, then what is the harm Allison does to Noah? She remembers that he is kind, that he sees and recognizes her pain. She misremembers, possibly. But is it a harmful forgetting? Noah himself admits, in the first monologue of the pilot, that he was not unhappy, that he could not trace the genesis of the affair back to any specific sensation, not even boredom. One cannot help but remember here—or at least I can’t—that Allison is a waitress, that her body in uniform, and perhaps outside of it, too, signals not only occupational but emotional availability to those who are looking for it. She is paid to pretend that her will is synonymous with the needs of the table and its guests, that she can sense its aches before it can cry out. She is in this sense asked to be inanimate, to be tidal, to bring in plates and saltshakers and then to pull them away. She is asked to be scenery. Noah never says so, but maybe he asks the same.

CRACKING OPEN MEMORY

Part of a good politics is figuring out what you can live with, and what you can’t. Stephen Sondheim’s Into the Woods, another work for whom sex surfaces (though less explicitly) as a key site of characterization, contains the following verse, in a song called “No
One Is Alone” (whose moral, I hasten to add, is rather more complex than the platitudinous title suggests):

People make mistakes—fathers, mothers—people make mistakes
Holding to their own, thinking they’re alone
Honor their mistakes, fight for their mistakes, everybody makes—
One another’s terrible mistakes

I have always liked these words for how terrible they are, and how certain. How can one honor a mistake, and why should one? Should one not strive to condemn mistakes, even of those one loves and respects? Can’t one condemn mistakes and spare those who make them? What this verse suggests is the inevitability of our imperfect entanglements in the world: we will all fail, sooner or later, to be able to cleanly separate a mistake from its maker, and we will all find ourselves in the position of having to defend mistakes, and to fight for them. The question is: whose mistakes will you honor? Whose mistakes can you live with?

A show like The Affair asks us, invites us, to make judgments about these questions. What I have tried to do here is to show that when we hunt for criteria to answer them—which we can do—we can enter memory rather than deny it as a space of nihilistic sameness. The past is not an unreadable muddle of fantasies that inevitably conflict, in which everyone is equally and similarly self-aggrandizing. When we take gender as a human legacy of collective forgetfulness, memory cracks open.

The first principle that canonical queer theorist Eve Sedgwick outlines in her essay “Axiomatic” is, “People are different from one another.” By this she means something like what I have claimed above, that is, that categories of experience are necessarily flawed and distortive; that frames of reference for meaning, while guessable, are not predetermined and must always be assumed to be in flux. Rather than endorsing a kind of negative and total cultural relativism, this view encourages constant critical engagement, a certain lightness of foot. It urges us onward toward horizons of
difference. How are people different from one another? And what different kinds of permission do they have to forget?

Somewhere within, or perhaps slightly before, its last frenetic hour of television, *The Affair* falls apart. The heart of the show becomes submerged underneath the choppy waters and baffling drama of its poorly conceived murder plotline. Its true center, for me—and maybe Ruth Wilson is more to blame for this than the showrunners—was always the question of where Allison is, where she goes. Noah’s imagination, one senses, begins and ends in Montauk—the setting of his book, where his characters and those he characterizes go about their lives. Allison is elsewhere. One wants to call it grief, but it’s more than that. She’s listening to something else. He never asks her what.

Two episodes after I lost faith in Noah, his memory takes us to a nightclub called The End in which he pretends to meet Allison as though he never knew her. They stumble back to a hotel room, where Allison stands up on the bed. Noah stops and stares at her. “You know,” he says, “sometimes I worry you’re just a really great dream.”

“Well, don’t wake up now”, she says. Noah’s Allison, the one he remembers. As if to say: I allow this. As if to say: let me be what you made me. I am happy like this.
Double Trouble

Will Dart

*Editor’s note: Names, besides Will’s, have been changed.*

We’re the same person. Five foot ten and 145 pounds, with darkish hair, blue eyes, a straight nose, full lips, high cheek bones and a weak, asymmetrical jaw, the sides of which are marked by weird scars from random accidents, occasional acne, and a few pretty serious ass-kickings.

I first heard about my double a few years ago from a girl in the neighboring dorm, who’d said she’d seen me at a party the night before. I told her that this was impossible; that I’d spent that night—as I spent every Saturday—in my room, alternately reading *Green Arrow #15* and listening to Bon Iver’s first album while staring soulfully into the flame of a scented candle. But her roommate corroborated the story: they’d been at Psi U last night. And so had I.

It’s possible that I’d developed multiple personality disorder. That I had a twin brother who also scored well on his ACTs. That I’d been cloned by a secret government subcommittee in the early ‘90s. That both of these women were insane. It was also possible that there was a kid at this school who—when viewed under the influence of strobe lights and alcohol—looked like me. There are only a certain number of phenotypes in the world; maybe this was inevitable. But, as an avid consumer of Lovecraft, pulp fiction, and late ‘70s speculative horror, I came to another, more logical conclusion: that I’d finally encountered my double. And his motivations were...sinister.
I should say that the double—as a concept—has long been of great interest to me, beginning in about the second grade, when my buddy’s grandpa told us a weird and probably bullshit story about running into himself while lost in the woods near Devil’s Elbow.

“He tried to bum a smoke off of me,” he’d said. “But I turned tail and ran for the hills!” And the nonchalant way that he told us this tale prevented me from sleeping for a long time afterward.

Granted, this was a man who’d introduced himself by grabbing me by the shoulders and shouting, “HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ERASERHEAD?!” (I had not). But meetings like this are still a well-documented phenomenon, even among persons with no history of heavy drug use. Percy Shelley famously saw himself on his terrace before drowning in the Bay of Spezia. The eighteenth century German statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe apparently came upon what appeared to be an older version of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe while travelling through a dark wood—only to pass by that same spot eight years later and wearing the same clothes as the double. Even Honest Abe Lincoln claimed to have had a run-in with a spectral twin shortly before his death. Clearly there’s something going on here.

There’s different names for these ghoulies in different mythologies; the German doppelgänger is the most famous, but there’s also the Irish fetch and the Norwegian vordoger. Sometimes the double likes to walk in front of you, going in and out of rooms, completing tasks, and meeting people right before you get to them, thereby sowing confusion and chaos in your household (such is the case for the aptly named Finnish etiäinen, or “forthcomer”). Usually these creatures are ill omens,
forecasting the impending death of those they imitate. Often they cast no shadow. It’s unwise to speak to them, or lend them cigarettes, and their advice should never be taken, lest they lead you into peril.

Where do they come from? That’s tricky. The Ancients thought they were demons-fiends in disguise, I guess. Some scientists think that they’re electrical glitches in the brain, or some alternate version of you that slipped through a rift in our dimension. A lady at an herbal medicine store once told me that the doppelgänger is the product of your own energy, reflected back at you in permanent replay. Creepy, mildly annoying, but harmless. Like looking in a mirror.

Anyway I thought that these were old-world phantoms, the kind of spooks you only ran into on moonless nights in the weird woods of Bavaria and Northern Michigan. Only mine followed me here. Or, rather, I followed him. From what I heard, Other Will was a second-year. He was taking STAT 200 and was doing okay on the quizzes. I was told that he was in a fraternity, which made sense, given that he was mostly spotted at parties. Another person said that he was on the football team, which was unlikely given that we have the physique of a Lusty Cabin Boy in a musical revue.

He was evidently popular and charismatic, running in numerous and diverse circles on campus, a fact which I was able to triangulate after noticing the kinds of people—big dudes in bro tanks, cute girls in yoga pants, bomber-jacketed hipsters—who had started to smile and wink at me, before noticing that I was the Real Will, and not the Imposter they’d befriended.

Complete strangers had started to imagine that they knew me from somewhere; that they’d seen me DJ at Delta Upsilon, or taken shots with me at an apartment. I’d be standing in line for a flu shot at Student Health when the dude in front of me would turn around, look at me very closely, and then smile with recognition.

“New Jersey!” he said, pointing at me.

“Sorry?” I’d already sensed his mistake.
“You’re from New Jersey, right?” he asked, with less confidence. “We played beer pong last night!”

“I don’t think so,” I said. He yielded there, though from the way he continued to smile and look back over his shoulder every so often, I could tell that he didn’t quite believe it. Me and him had played beer pong, and that was that.

This was an exceptional interaction. More often than not, I’d end up playing along with the charade, finding it easier to impersonate my lookalike than to convince his buddies that they’d confused me with someone else. It’s probably unsettling to find out that someone you think you know can be so easily replaced by a geeky first-year with a passing resemblance to him. So, imagining that it was for their benefit, and not because my identity was being slowly subsumed by that of a fraternity brother I’d never met, I’d nod and smile, faking my way through vital biographical details which I knew nothing about, confirming that, yes, I still lived in Regents, no, I was no longer seeing that blonde girl, and yes, I’d love to smoke with you this weekend, hit me up. This kind of thing happened multiple times, and I got used to playing the role.


Ryan, the Double. Ryan, the Walking Shadow. Ryan, Specter of my Ego, following me around campus like a curse. I’m not saying that I devoted myself to tracking him down and destroying him before he had the chance to infiltrate my life, insinuate himself among my family, and befriend my dog before finally killing me in a dramatic rooftop confrontation, ready to commence his life as the Real Will. None of that happened. But I did think about him a lot.

I was worried that he was somehow the better copy—Will 2.0 or something—living the consummate college lifestyle: bedding hot women, hobnobbing among cool
dudes, and snorting very good cocaine for breakfast, while I listened to my neighbors fuck through the thin plaster of a dorm room wall. I was worried that Ryan was the man I should have been. I was not worried that he would replace me. Because I’d long since realized who the real Imposter was in this thriller. I was the one assuming his name, after all; I was the one pretending to be Ryan while chatting with a stranger on the bus; I was the one fantasizing about living his fantastic life. I was Ryan’s Evil Twin.

Or was I?

Sometimes I’d run into people who’d had less than genial experiences with Ryan. Numerous individuals seemed to hate this guy’s guts—I could tell by the way they’d give me a wide berth on the quad or throw me the stink eye when I walked into a classroom. I’d heard stories about certain slacker-ish tendencies in my double, a kind of bro-ishness, leaning towards misogyny and douchebaggery, and a general disregard for the feelings of others. I sat beside a girl in a remedial math class who, whenever possible, would look at me as
though I’d killed her father in a duel. This went on for two months before the mix-up was clarified; Ryan—that rascal—had jilted a close friend of hers. I’d had no part in this. Clearly, I was a good person. But why did I still feel like I had to apologize?

That’s the other thing about finding your double: you’re looking for the wrinkle—some feature or flaw that delineates you from Bizarro-You, something that makes him the Good Twin or the Evil Twin, the Original or the Copy. That’s the fetch or the vordoger again: evil imitations, not the real thing. But deep down, you also fear that you and he might be exactly alike. I think about the lady in the herbal medicine shop, how some of my energy—my deepest fears and insecurities, my faults and failures—might’ve taken on a life of its own somehow, floating off into the universe and bouncing off Neptune and coming back in the form of a frat boy to haunt me forever.

When people mistook me for Ryan, were they confusing my eyes, my nose, my mouth or hair for his? Or is there something else about me that struck them as familiar? Hearing stories about Ryan, I started to worry that I might be similarly vapid, duplicitous, cowardly, and cruel. And I started to worry that these people could see it.

I met the Real Ryan in my second year. We had Spanish 101 together. And it sounds weird—but I didn’t see it. In fact, I didn’t even realize that Ryan was my Ryan until I checked his biography against the one I’d recently been in the habit of impersonating. We had similar features, true; the same tired eyes, the same nasally voice, a certain shared countenance of disinterest. From some angles, we might’ve been first cousins. But identical? No. Not physically, anyway.

As the quarter progressed I did not find Ryan to be the Ultimate Evil, or even the Darkness Lurking at the Edges of my Mind. I did find him to be generally annoying, and kind of a dick. He was already quite proficient in Spanish, and was taking the class for an easy A. He sat in the back of class and chatted incessantly, and was often openly insubordinate to our very nice professor. The narcissist in me
wanted to like him. But I did not want to be Ryan.

It’s been suggested to me that maybe I should call Ryan now and ask him what he thinks of this whole saga. Was he ever mistaken for me? Did he pretend to be Will? And does he stay up nights, wondering if Will Dart is the better Ryan, and if he’s a coked-up loser who should’ve socialized less and spent more nights alone in his room? Is he, in fact, human, or is he actually something sinister that crept through an interdimensional portal in the basement of Psi U?

I now try to live under the assumption that the doppelganger—or the double or the fetch or the vorbinger or whatever—is not real. I assume that Ryan is Ryan, that I am Will Dart, and that a passing resemblance was all it took for the two of us to get a little confused for a year or so. There is no evil entity that wears my face and follows me around and waits for the opportunity. I mostly sleep okay.
The Art of Erasure: On Tree of Codes

Jon Catlin

The origin of a story is always an absence.
—Jonathan Safran Foer, Everything is Illuminated

Jewish-American writer Jonathan Safran Foer’s most recent novel, the 2010 Tree of Codes, is a strange but beautiful book. It belongs to an exclusive genre in which the author has not written a single word, yet his voice is undeniably present throughout. Tree of Codes is a die-cut redaction of Foer’s favorite book, The Street of Crocodiles, a 1934 collection of magical-realist short stories by the Polish-Jewish author Bruno Schulz, who was murdered in a Jewish ghetto in 1942. His stories, written in Polish, were collected under the title Sklepy cynamonowe, “Cinnamon Shops,” and translated into English by Celina Wieniewska in 1963. Due to Tree of Codes’ unique form (the publisher calls it a “sculptural object”), the book received few reviews and is relatively unknown outside the worlds of craft publishing, Polish-Jewish studies, and the academic subfield known as “object-oriented ontology.”

I have previously called for taking Foer seriously as a writer of the human response to catastrophe. Yet Tree of Codes, because of its unique form, does not admit one way of reading, much less interpreting. Still, it is worth considering how powerfully this book resonates with Foer’s earlier creative works borne out of historical traumas. In fact, I’ll argue that Tree of Codes is Foer’s novelistic practice...
made literal, working through the absences left behind by historical traumas by presenting them as absences.

Designed by Visual Editions, a small London-based publishing house, and published by a specialty printer in Belgium, *Tree of Codes* is a page-for-page copy of the English translation of Schulz’s *The Street of Crocodiles*, but with the paragraphs on each page removed by die-cuts except for a choice few words and phrases—about one tenth the original number—turning the pages into a delicate lace. Looking at the first page—or rather through it, as all its words have been excised—one sees a jumble of holes and parts of words poking through from the pages below. But looking at each page by itself, one sees that on the front side of each page reads a story in full, grammatical English, save for capitalization. That is, Foer created his own novel out of Schulz’s, using the same words and punctuation, but giving them an entirely new context and meaning. Just as the phrase “tree of codes” emerges from a redaction of “street of crocodiles,” the work itself is, in Foer’s words, “a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book.” Foer thus weaves words and phrases from Schulz’s separate short stories into one unified narrative.

Critics have noted that *Tree of Codes* was created in a digital context. A leading figure of the subfield of literary studies known as object-oriented ontology, N. Katherine Hayles, detects in many contemporary novels like Foer’s an “anxiety about the continued life of books and a desire to reassert the book’s authority in the face of the exponential expansion of the Web and the ongoing conversion of books into digitized texts.” *Tree of Codes* indeed prompts us to question the digitalization of books; it would lose half its meaning if read on a Kindle. Hayles thus includes it among contemporary books that “displace some degree of narrative complexity from the semantic register of words to the physical forms they present.” Shockingly for a best-selling author like Foer, the book is already out of print, and no digital edition exists.

Also important, however, is *Tree of Codes*’s context as a tribute to Schulz, who was murdered in the Holocaust. Now considered one of the greatest Polish modernists, during his lifetime Schulz was a high school drawing and handicrafts teacher in the small town of

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Drohobycz in southern Poland (now Ukraine). In addition to two volumes of fiction, he produced thousands of sketches. His Book of Idolatry, a graphic narrative, brings together caricatures of Eastern European Jews, shoe fetishes, and sadomasochistic fantasies. Connected with literary circles across Europe, Schulz corresponded with Franz Kafka and translated The Trial into Polish. Yet by 1941, as the Nazis invaded Poland, Schulz, a Jew, was confined to the Drohobycz ghetto. For a time, a Nazi officer protected him in exchange for Schulz painting murals in his home. Fragments, depicting dwarves and fairies which he painted under coercion, are now, after great controversy, on display in Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust museum. In November 1942, while bringing home a loaf of bread, Schulz was shot in the streets of Drohobycz by a rival officer of Schulz’s “protector.”

In his afterword to Tree of Codes, Foer writes of Schulz’s slim volumes of extant work, “Their long shadow—the lost work of history—is, in many ways, the story of the century,” the generation of Jewish culture, including Schulz, wiped out in the Holocaust. Yet the temptation of revisiting the “shadow” of the work of Bruno Schulz is to flatten it out into “Holocaust writing,” with the plight of its author overshadowing the text itself. This effect is immediately clear in Tree of Codes. The Street of Crocodiles bursts with mythic, childlike possibility, with the narrator’s father emulating, and eventually metamorphosing into, a bird and a cockroach. In another scene, Father overturns huge rolls of brightly colored cloth in his shop, letting loose a sea of raw material that he shapes into a detailed landscape over which he rules like the Biblical figure of Moses. Tree of Codes, on the other hand, evokes suffering and erasure. Told from the perspective of a young boy, the story centers on the initially odd but increasingly psychotic character of his father, who metamorphoses.
into objects and ultimately disappears.

At first, Tree of Codes thus seems complicit in performing a reductive, Holocaust-dominated reading of Schulz: Father seems to represent the vitality of prewar Jewish life sapped by the Holocaust. The text uses holes in the page to make physical the words lost by Schulz’s premature death, including the manuscript of his purported magnum opus, The Messiah—whose loss has since prompted experimental reconstructions from Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, David Grossman, and Chicago’s own Aleksander Hemon. Compared to these more traditional homages, Hayles mockingly imagines Foer’s proposal to Schulz’s literary estate for their eventual “blessing” of his project: “I plan to rip the guts out of Schulz’s text, erasing ninety percent of his words and eradicating everything that has made his stories objects of perennial fascination.” Foer’s project was obviously born out of reverence, not malice. Still, is it marred by the violence to Schulz’s text it entails? By considering Tree of Codes alongside Foer’s other responses to catastrophe, I will argue that the text is a compelling and inspired reuse of Schulz’s literary heritage.

THE ART OF ERASURE

THE COMPULSION TO WRITE THE CATASTROPHE

It makes sense to read Tree of Codes alongside Foer’s first novel, Everything is Illuminated, which bears clear influence from Schulz in its magical-realist style. The novel is also autobiographical. In a 2003 interview, Foer confirmed that the basic plot of Everything is Illuminated is true to his own relation to the Holocaust. Foer’s Ukrainian-born Jewish grandfather was saved from extermination by an unnamed Ukrainian woman. One summer, while he was a student at Princeton, Foer drove across Ukraine to search for her. Foer described his findings, or lack thereof: “I did go, and I just found—nothing. At all. It wasn’t like a literary, interesting kind of nothing, an inspiring, or a beautiful nothing, it was really like: nothing. It’s not like anything else I’ve ever experienced in my life.”

Everything Is Illuminated grew out of this experience, preserving this void but also drawing inspiration from it. Foer abandons the task of reconstructing the events in question because what was lost so vastly exceeds what one could ever represent. His grandfather lost his daughter and wife in the Holocaust, and that loss is the starting point for his novel.

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point of Foer's creation.

Crucial here is the fact that Foer's grandfather died long before he was born, so even the story of his grandfather's survival was a step removed from the author. Thus structural trauma, to use Dominick LaCapra's term, and not historical, or experienced, trauma, motivated Foer to write about the Holocaust. Literature scholar Philippe Codde considers Foer representative of third-generation Holocaust victims, “those who were not directly affected by the event, but who nevertheless seem to carry the burden of this traumatic past.” While the second generation had to live with the ramifications of trauma through their parents, third-generation writers like Foer chose to reawaken that trauma and, to use Freud’s term, work through it. Codde notes that following generations can remain haunted by the trauma “due to the obsession that arises with the black hole, the hidden horror in their family history.” Codde quotes Dina Wardi: “Their [parents’] silence left a terrible vacuum in the children’s hearts, and they had no choice but to fill it with fantasies and dreams that they wove out of fragments of information.”

Foer uses voids as a means of representation, recalling Jacques Derrida's concept of the trace: in Codde's words, “spectral elements that are at once concealed and discernable within the text as absent presences.” Foer’s earlier works, *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, also use fragmented styles and structures, such as blank pages or words printed over each other, but these are made concrete in *Tree of Codes*, with its physical voids and linguistic fragments. While most Holocaust literature attempts to represent a certain historical past, Foer shows us a more self-conscious way to remember, by maintaining our distance—remembering that no matter how much we might empathize with victims, we cannot ever fully imagine their experiences. Yet as the character Jonathan narrates in *Everything Is Illuminated*, “The origin of a story is always an absence,” and he writes as if he had no choice but to fill that absence with narratives spun from the scraps of information that remained. LaCapra would consider this a healthy response to trauma in that it starts by “acknowledging and affirming, or working through, absence as absence,” rather than mistaking ancestral loss for one’s own and thinking of oneself as a victim.
THE ART OF ERASURE

Foer’s strategy is imaginative, entering what Marianne Hirsch has termed the realm of “postmemory,” since memory here “is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation...dominated by narratives that preceded [his] birth.”

Though Schulz’s own writing is not a Holocaust narrative, Foer responds to it as a “witness through the imagination,” to use Norma Rosen’s term. Rather than drawing from Schulz’s biography as many others have, Foer recalls Schulz on imaginative literary terms. Foer’s approach of adding distance between reader and text ultimately turns the reader’s imagination to what was lost, in this case pointing back to Schulz.

TREE OF CODES’S SCHULZIAN AIDS

In his afterword, Foer links Tree of Codes to the story of the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem:

It’s been tradition, ever since, for Jews to leave small notes of prayer in the cracks of the wall. It could be said that these form a kind of magical, unbound book, conjuring the enormity of the desperation of the world, the needs we haven’t defeated.

Following discussion of Schulz’s murder in the streets of the Drohobycz ghetto, Foer continues:

Like the Wailing Wall, Schulz’s surviving work evokes all that was destroyed in the War: Schulz’s lost books, drawings and paintings; those that he would have made had he survived; the millions of other victims, and within them the infinite expressions of infinite thoughts and feelings taking infinite forms.

Or is Schulz’s work more like a bound version of those disparate prayers left in the wall?

By comparing Schulz’s original work to a bundle of prayers, a creative adaption of tradition, even in the fragmentary form of Tree of Codes, extends the line of that tradition. Tree of Codes literally gives Schulz’s work a second life.
Foer explains in the afterword that he had wanted for many years to make a die-cut book, but that from trying the process out on “the dictionary, the encyclopedia... various works of fiction...those options would have merely spoken of the process...I was in search of a text whose erasure would somehow be a continuation of its creation.” It took Foer over a year to decide on *The Street of Crocodiles* because “so many of Schulz’s sentences feel elemental, unbreakdownable.” And so *Tree of Codes* preserves, erases, creates all at once: “At times I felt like I was making a gravestone rubbing of *The Street of Crocodiles*, and at times that I was transcribing a dream that *The Street of Crocodiles* might have had.”

Foer concludes that *Tree of Codes* “is a story in its own right, but it is not exactly a work of fiction. It is yet another note left in the cracks of the wall.” Foer even describes Schulz’s fiction itself as too precarious and magical to be the product of ordinary writing; instead he imagines it “exhumed” from a larger text, like that of Schulz’s short story “The Book,” in which a magical book exudes shifting, dreamlike stories and images, different each time the narrator, a young boy, opens it, until it disintegrates into scraps of tissue. Foer writes: “It is from this imagined larger book, this ultimate book, that every word ever written, spoke or thought is exhumed. *The Book of Life* is the Temple that our lives strive to enter, but instead only conjure.” Yet when the boy asks his father years later what happened to *The Book*, he replies, “The Book is a myth in which we believe when we are young, but which we cease to take seriously as we get older.” Schulz and Foer apparently forgot to grow up.

Schulz’s mythology of the explosive potential of literary creation resonates deeply with Foer. Foer writes in his foreword to *The Street of Crocodiles*, quoting Schulz:
There are things, Schulz wrote, “that cannot ever occur with any precision. They are too big and too magnificent to be contained in mere facts. They are merely trying to occur, they are checking whether the ground of reality can carry them. And they quickly withdraw, fearing to lose their integrity in the frailty of realization.” Our lives, the big and the magnificent lives we can just barely make out beneath the mere facts of our lifestyles, are always trying to occur. But save for a few rare occasions—falling in love, the birth of a child, the death of a parent, a revelatory moment in nature—they don’t occur; the big magnificence is withdrawn. Stories rub at the facts of our lives. They give us access—if only for a few hour, if only in bed at the end of the day—to what’s beneath.¹¹

Foer possesses Schulz’s eye for the chance reality that does not occur, and strives to keep it alive through storytelling. He “rubs at” The Street of Crocodiles the way Schulz’s narrator rubs at the mythical and explosive book in “The Book.” Yet Schulz wrote that he wanted to look his reader “straight in the eye” and try to communicate his meaning directly: “For, under the imaginary table that separates me from my readers, don’t we secretly clasp each other’s hands?” This sense of intimacy is glaringly absent from Foer’s depersonalized redaction.

The greatest difference between Schulz’s text and Tree of Codes, though both are limited to the same vocabulary, is the inevitability of reading the former through the lens of Schulz’s tragic death, which is inextricable from Foer’s project. This reframes Tree of Codes’s frequent references to suffering, loss, and destruction as allusions to the Holocaust, highlighted by deliberate excision from Schulz’s pre-Holocaust work. Though Tree of Codes retains the rudiments of Schulz’s Father character’s metaphysics of spontaneous creation and metamorphosis, in Foer’s version it is tinged with destructive undertones.

Whereas stepping into a mythological, precarious realm promises salvation in Schulz’s, it suggests erasure in Foer’s creation: “we stepped into the shadow and did not fight against it.” Schulz’s
innocuous phrases take on ominous weight, recalling the calm and false sense of trust seen in Holocaust memoirs that the war would be over before deportations begin: “[Mother’s] boundaries held only loosely, ready to scatter as if smoke...There was something tragic in fighting the borders, the heroism of shortcomings.” Father is likewise “condemned to float eternally,” for Mother “had condemned him to mirrors.” Such phrases preserve Schulz’s claim that “There is no dead matter,” but now taken on valences of the disposability of persons.

Foer finds tragedy where Schulz finds exhilaration in, for instance, the uncanny phrase “memories which would suddenly blow away.” Whereas Schulz’s Jewish origin was of almost accidental significance for most of his life, it haunted him during the Holocaust: “hideously enlarged shadows attached to my father” echoes the damning label of Jewish origin. This continues with the trope of masks, a metaphor for Jewish appearances, which appear in Schulz’s sketches. The masks first worn innocently by children in Schulz later afflict Foer’s Father: “No human could bear such a tragic mask. He would run to a corner of a room and shake. He no longer possessed resistance. Instead of fighting, he subjected to the fear and sadness.” Whereas Schulz’s Father constantly collects and creates, Foer’s withdraws into “a dialogue swollen with darkness,” caught “in dull suffering that does not know why it must be what it is, arbitrary tyranny for which there is no outlet.” Father’s “disappearance,” due in Foer’s version to illness, echoes the state of starving Jews in the ghettos awaiting deportation:

He used to disappear for many days into some corner and these disappearances ceased to make any impression on us, we did not count him one of us anymore. Knot by knot, he loosened himself, as unremarked as the gray heap swept into a corner, waiting to be taken.

Such language of objectification recalls Primo Levi’s concept of the Muselmann (literally, “Muslim”), the prisoners in Auschwitz who were starved to the point that they were no longer living in any meaningful sense. This situates Holocaust victims in simultaneous existence and nonexistence, turning into objects—in Tree of Codes’s
words, “reduced to the indispensable minimum.” Numerous passages recall images found in Holocaust literature: “in the depth of the grayness, weeks passed...we were full of aimless endless darkness. Mother burned in the farthest rooms” and “we used pieces of bread to wipe up the remains of nothing and it did not matter.” Tree of Codes traces a descent from life into dead matter—a slow, uneasy path at the end of which “we felt Betrayed, surrendered.”

Foer later reworks one of Father’s monologues: “Father would say, ‘How beautiful is forgetting! what relief it would be for the world to lose some of its contents!’” While the second phrase is from Schulz, it takes on new significance in light of the horrors of the Holocaust that one would rather be able to forget. New phrases like “An enormous last day of life” and “a transcendental hour a moment forever” seem to go against Schulz’s philosophy of the deathlessness of matter, frozen within the memory in horror. While Foer preserves, “But the future lay open, a thousand kaleidoscopic possibilities,” these are no longer magical possibilities but rather “an awkward, undecided direction, a shaky and uncertain line of indefinite sadness”—evoking the existential problem, to use Theodor Adorno’s phrase, of how one can live after Auschwitz. Reaching back to Foer’s biography, the narrator’s line to his mother, “Why did you not tell me,’ I whispered, crying,” recalls third-generation frustration at the silence of earlier generations’ shame about the Holocaust.

And yet Foer preserves several key Schulzian elements. A certain danger receding into its corner “restored normal and the urge to joy. Something stirred in me the feeling of no permanence in life transformed into an attempt to express wonder.” Here, Foer suggests the resilience of Schulz’s mythology of creation even after the Holocaust. As Foer’s character Alex says in Everything Is Illuminated, “With writing, we have second chances.”
THE AUTHOR-READER RELATIONSHIP AND MORAL TRUTH

In Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*, Jonathan and Alex, Jonathan’s Ukrainian translator, develop a shared “nomadic truth” through writing. Their initially opposite perspectives on the Holocaust are ultimately bridged through a literary relationship. In a moment of awareness that his relationship with Jonathan goes beyond the content of their letters, Alex writes to Jonathan:

> Let us not praise or reproach. Let us not judge at all. We are outside of that already. We are talking now, Jonathan, together; and not apart. We are with each other; working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel it.

Correspondence is more than a compilation of perspectives; it builds a moral bridge. Similarly, Schulz wrote in a letter to two friends: “I need a friend. I need the closeness of a kindred spirit. I long for some outside affirmation of the inner world whose existence I postulate...I need a partner for voyages of discovery...Maybe we’ll dream something up together.” Foer similarly sees an interpersonal dimension, a need to connect, behind all literary creation.

One wonders, then, about the relationship Foer sought with Schulz. One passage in *Tree of Codes* seems to recall Foer seeking his own family history in Ukraine:

> I submitted to the passion of pursuing trembling. I set out like a castaway. Groping blindly in the darkness and pushing deep to explore against the current, I woke up as does a sleeping passenger when the train stops at a station. Out of the depth of yesterday I wanted to turn inside out. I wrote in a notebook, added it all up...I could not contain the groaning, swelling, deep pulsation of the enormous awe, those colossal exuberances... Shaken into consciousness, I was a vigilant observer of the secret gnawing life.

Foer’s project of seeking meaning in the traces of the Holocaust is, like Schulz’s pursuit of a hidden reality, most distinguished by

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its incompleteness. Foer continues, “All I wanted was to be unsure. I found myself lost.” Unlike so many other writers who fit their stories into received narratives about the Holocaust, Foer’s reflects a morally undetermined world just as Schulz’s reflects a physically undetermined one. For Schulz, it is a question of reevaluating appearances, while for Foer it is about creating anew out of the deceptive appearances of testimony. Foer writes in *Tree of Codes*, “Truth is not a decisive factor”; yet, shortly after, “Our hunger is to succumb.” To that I would add that our hunger is to oversimplify deeply complex narratives—ones which have no clearly articulable truth.

If we read *Tree of Codes* as a third-generation Holocaust text, Foer tells us what he intended with his project: “When writing these tales about my father, I surrender to the secret hope that they will merge into the rustle of pages and be absorbed there,” in “the great book of catastrophes, copied a thousand times, incessant draft, relentless, flowing bleeding.” Foer’s works will never replace first-person Holocaust memoirs, but they will merge into those stories and color them with complexity, even if they create holes—even literal ones—in the original in the process. Whatever violence Foer does to Schulz’s work in *Tree of Codes*, he preserves an homage to his literary father: at the end of the world, “my father was the only one who knew a secret escape.” Schulz’s mythological toolbox ultimately grants Foer the possibility of remembering by creating. *Tree of Codes* serves as a powerful model for trusting oneself to imagine a lost truth, even if one may never find it. Foer recovers Schulz’s phrase, “reality is as thin as paper,” putting the real and the written closer than one thought possible.
“Culture is Not a Zero-Sum Game”
A Conversation with Monkey Business

Angela Qian

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*Monkey Business* is a Japanese literary magazine founded in 2008 by translator and critic Motoyuki Shibata. *Monkey Business: New Writing from Japan* is the annual translated offspring of the Japanese literary magazine, featuring essays, fiction, and graphic narratives for an English-speaking audience. While on tour for the newest issue of the journal, editor-in-chief Motoyuki Shibata, contributing editor Roland Kelts, along with illustrator Satoshi Kitamura, and writer Aoko Matsuda, both of whom contributed to this issue, sat down to talk about contemporary Japanese literature, translation, and cultural differences and similarities between Japanese and American literature.

Motoyuki Shibata is a major Japanese critic and translator who has taught American literature and literary translation at the University of Tokyo, and has translated Paul Auster, Rebecca Brown, Stuart Dybek, Kelly Link, Charles Simić, and many other writers into Japanese.13

Roland Kelts is the author of *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop*
“CULTURE IS NOT A ZERO-SUM GAME”

*Culture Has Invaded the U.S.*, who has appeared on various T.V. and radio talk shows, and has written on Japanese culture for many publications including *The New Yorker, Vogue, Salon,* and *Zoetrope.*

Aoko Matsuda is the author of two short story collections, *Stackable,* nominated for the Yukio Mishima Prize, and *Eiko’s Forest.* She has translated Karen Russell’s *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* into Japanese.

Satoshi Kitamura is a picture-book artist and illustrator, both in Japanese and English. His many awards include the National Art Library Award, The Mother Goose Award for Most Exciting Newcomer to British Illustration, and a New York Times Notable Book of the Year for his *When Sheep Cannot Sleep.*

**AQ: What is the project of Monkey Business, and how is it related to the Japanese counterpart? How did you originally conceive of the journal?**

**MS:** The easiest answer is a little bit long. Do you know the book *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories?* It’s a standard anthology of Japanese short stories. The editor is Ted Goossen, who teaches at York University in Toronto. This is a minor bestseller. It is used in so many courses on Japanese literature. The publisher has been pressuring him to create a contemporary version of this anthology, and Ted thought about it, but he thought that an anthology of new stories would become dated very quickly. Classics don’t get dated so quickly, stories by Natsume Soseki or Mori Ōgai – you know, they last. But you know, those anthologies made of stories from the 2010s would become very dated after a while. So he came up with the idea of doing the annual anthology every year. He looked up my magazine, the Japanese *Monkey Business,* and thought, why not get the best stories out of those stories in Moto’s magazine and create an annual anthology? And he talked me into doing it. He is the co-editor of *Monkey Business.* The official mission would be something like, “To let readers in English-speaking countries know more about contemporary Japanese fiction.” But we don’t think in terms of the mission, of why we’re doing it. We just pick up what we like and translate it and put it on paper.
AQ: [Roland Kelts] You wrote a book called *Japanamerica*, on how Japanese culture has infiltrated the West. From my experience, the most famous cultural products that come over are anime and video games. In some places, there is a certain stigma attached to people who like those things. Japanese literature is frequently underplayed in American culture. Do you think this perception of Japanese culture in the West prevents a more serious appreciation of Japanese literature?

RK: You mean the popularity of anime and manga prevents people from discovering Japanese literature? I don’t think so. In fact, I think it’s the opposite. I think a lot of young Americans who are interested in anime—maybe they discover *Dragonball Z*, or *Pokémon*—or something newer, like *Death Note*, they become interested in Japanese culture beyond that. You know, why are people eating *onigiri*, what are *tatami*? They see these things in the anime and manga, and that tends to lead them to more questions about the culture. And I think that awakens in them an interest in Japanese food, Japanese politics, samurai traditions, whatever one may exhibit of *bushido* and so on, and then, of course, literature is the next doorway, because it’s the work of the imagination, but it also enriches your experience of culture. I think there is a positive relationship. Of course, not every manga or anime fan will discover prose or poetry. But some of them do. And I think in particular, in contemporary Japan, the work of Haruki Murakami has been a huge selling point for Japanese literature. Obviously, with *Monkey Business* we want people to go beyond Murakami’s work, even though he

15. Rice balls wrapped in seaweed with different fillings.
16. A type of mat used in traditional Japanese rooms as flooring.
“CULTURE IS NOT A ZERO-SUM GAME”

is a contributor to *Monkey Business*. But we hope to draw people in further. But I think anime and manga serve that function as well. I’ve taught at the University of Tokyo and at Temple University, which is an American university in Japan, and Sophia University. And in all of those places, some of those students were drawn to move to Japan through manga and anime, and actually pursue their whole education based on their entry through Japanese pop culture. And I think this is the same for other countries.

SK: Yeah. And I think maybe fifteen years ago, things started to change. I noticed because I lived in England for about thirty years, until 2009. Twenty or twenty-five years ago, people asked me, “Do you speak Chinese in Japan?” I’d say, “You know, we have a language called Japanese.” So that’s how they saw us. But then when anime became popular, or Haruki Murakami or Banana Yoshimoto, things started to change very quickly. So those people who study the Japanese language from thirty years ago say they are interested in Buddhism or Mishima or stuff like that. But nowadays they are all about anime. I’ve been to Latin America many times in the last ten years. They are the same. And I went to this book fair festival in Bogota, in Colombia. There was a huge section dedicated to comics, Japanese-style comics, lots of them, made by them, and in Colombia. I find it, as Roland said, a very positive thing. It is a good thing.

Also, I was in Yakushima last year. I met a couple, from France, I think. They were there because the location was used in Miyazaki’s films. They wanted to see this forest. It is a remote island in the south of Japan. It is not easy to get there. They just wanted to see the scene in this animation.

AM: Maybe *Princess Mononoke*?

RK: Yes, that one. I just want to add that I don’t think it’s exclusive to Japan. I’ve met people in other countries who loved, say, American Westerns, or Hollywood action films, and through that they become interested in America and want to go to the desert or go to New York or Los Angeles and maybe then they pick up a novel by Kurt Vonnegut, by a classic American, or *Catcher in the Rye*. So the way in can be fairly superficial in a way, but then you go deeper.
SK: But that’s how it is. People who are interested in England because of the Beatles, it’s always like that.

RK: It’s like a love affair.

MS: Culture is not a zero-sum game. So if something sells, it doesn’t mean something else doesn’t sell. The size of the cake is not fixed.

**AQ:** Haruki Murakami’s stories are famous for how he portrays adolescent and adult isolation, and alienation. From what I’ve read, I’ve noticed similar themes of transience and feeling alone in writers like Banana Yoshimoto, Yoko Ogawa, and Matsuda Aoko’s story “Photographs are Images.” Do you think there is a thematic trend of feelings of isolation among Japanese literature, or is it a global trend? And is there a tie to the Japanese of societal phenomena of parasite singles and hikikomori?

AM: I don’t think it’s particular to Japan. I feel that isolation is a huge theme in American literature too. Rather than being particular to Japan, I think the feeling of isolation is shared all over the world. But hikikomori and those types... but America also has hikikomori doesn’t it?

**AQ:** I guess it’s not as famous of a phenomenon.

SK: Don’t you think that in a way—I kind of feel that the world is becoming Japonized in these things. An idea like *otaku*, which became English, the word, came because people behaved in a certain way. The Japanese started doing this ten years before the rest of the world. That’s how I see it—in England, twenty years ago, there was a TV program showing stupid Japanese TV shows. At the beginning they thought, “How weird those are.” Five years later, they start the same TV shows themselves, just like Japanese TV. So in a way, the Japanese, probably because of our society, somehow started—in a negative sense—and are sort of ahead of the rest of the world. In things like isolation, or some style of isolation, like *otaku* things.

RK: I completely agree, and I think part of it is the advances in
technology that have become global. I remember roughly ten years ago, when the Japanese cell phone was the most advanced on the planet, the keitai denwa. They were these flip phones. When I took mine out in New York, at a party, everyone was like ooohh and aaahh and said, “You can take a picture and send it immediately on email?” And you could take a video, and go online. And my friends in New York were shocked. Because they had old Nokia phones that you could only call people or send short messages on. But then these [smartphones] came out. And so in Japan at that time, people on the trains were always like this [mimes staring at phone] on their phones. But if I went to New York, everyone was talking on the phone: “Hey Steve, how’s it going?” But when these [smartphones] came out, suddenly the Americans looked very like the Japanese. Everyone on the train is on their phone texting, typing, checking online. So it’s almost like Japan kind of anticipated a lot of what Western culture is experiencing. And I think the question of isolation, I agree, is very common in urban—especially urban culture around the world. But I think in Japan, the advent of single-occupancy apartments is relatively new, compared to the United States. New York and London and San Francisco have had solo residents, twenty-five year olds, thirty-year olds, for decades. It’s very common. But in Japan, in Tokyo, and in Osaka, for all of these millions of young people, to live alone—

MS: I had the completely opposite impression. I am a specialist in American literature so I tend to compare American literature with Japanese literature. And in American literature, it is so much about families.

AQ: That’s what I was thinking. There is more of a family focus.

RK: That’s true. I guess, what I’m saying is that the urban
experience of living alone without any connection to a community...

MS: But you said that it’s been going on here for a long time and that it’s relatively new in Japan? I didn’t realize that.

RK: Because if you look back at Breakfast at Tiffany’s, part of the humor of the book and the jokes is this apartment life in New York, where a single woman lives alone in her apartment and she is available and the guys come into her apartment. A lot of that humor and comedy is based on a postwar American experience. You know, The Apartment is a classic, right? All these movies and shows about individuals living in their own apartments. But in urban Japan, that experience by young people who don’t live in a company dorm anymore, all those danchi\(^\text{19}\) which came exploding in the ’80s—and danchi culture—I remember then, if you got an apartment, you were supposed to bring a gift for your neighbor to introduce yourself.

SK: Like a towel.

RK: I asked my students at Todai\(^\text{20}\), do you bring anything? And they said, “No, nobody brings anything anymore.” And my students said they don’t know their neighbors.

SK: The style of single, isolated living has changed because of the environment; technology has changed. Therefore, even though Westerners, like Americans or Europeans, lived on their own, especially young people, for many decades, the literature that makes us realize this is a very modern style of living, that Japanese influenced a lot. Not influenced, but, like the idea of otaku, which is very Japanese, and has been common for the last twenty-five years in Japan. So then Americans—some Americans also call themselves otaku—which is very interesting. And that is not only because of them living on their own for decades, but also videos, computers, those changed things. And nowadays those things changed in Japan too. Even families don’t eat together. They get lunchboxes from the convenience store. And they have their TV set and computers in their room. Families don’t meet or talk.

RK: And I think that highlights something else, which I think is

\(^{19}\) A large cluster of apartment buildings of a particular design.

\(^{20}\) The University of Tokyo.
important, which is that this is where the cultural differences sort of are revealing. So for example, a single person in New York, an American, is more likely to feel like they should meet their neighbors, or should go out to the bar and meet a stranger or should go to a party. So my neighborhood in New York, Soho, I get all kinds of requests to come to neighborhood parties. And I never go because I don’t need to meet anyone else. But they come in like Soho neighborhood gatherings, at a park. You know, free wine, sunset. And they try to bring people together. Whereas by comparison, in urban Japan, a lot of people who live alone don’t feel like they should communicate with strangers. And still you keep to yourself more so in Japan. So in some ways the isolation is more pronounced—because of the way Japanese society operates. Even Kōbō Abe, in *The Box Man*—that’s a very Japanese novel, even though it could be a character in an American city. But the isolationism, the sense of being unable to connect to a stranger, I think, is very cultural.

SK: I do feel, because I lived abroad and now I live in Japan, I find it sort of more isolated. Superficially, it does seem super friendly—or, courteous.

RK: Yes, courteous is the word.

SK: But, but it is difficult to talk to strangers in Japan.

RK: It is difficult to make new connections.
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AM: But when you read American literature, especially recently, there does seem to be an increasing lonesome feeling. Don’t you feel that way when you read contemporary American fiction?

AQ: Yes, but it’s different because in a Japanese novel like Kitchen or Hotel Iris, there are not a lot of characters. There’s like two or three characters. And if you read something like Donna Tartt’s The Goldfinch, there’s a lot of characters—

MS: And they are all connected to family.

AQ: And there’re a lot of people’s narratives in one novel and somehow they intertwine at one point or another, even if they end up alone.

AM: Do you know Amelia Gray? She is a new writer. She has only published like, three books. She was born in 1980s. She is a young writer. And what she writes is something that seems very Japanese. What she writes is very familiar to me. Sakuchi Kishimoto, or Kimada Yamada, and a lot of Japanese critics and translators who read her works are surprised by how familiar her works feel to them, and sympathize with them. There are not that many characters in her fiction. So it is exactly like Japanese fiction. Two men are locked up in a box, and don’t know where they are. And it’s about the relationship between the two of them. So I never had the impression this was particular to Japan.

MS: If you go back to slightly older writers like Kelly Link...

AM: Or The Great Gatsby. Gatsby—it’s about isolation.

MS: Well, in The Great Gatsby’s case, it’s more about self-creation. So living alone is positive. You are creating your identity. You are your own God, your own father. Whereas people in Japanese fiction, it is not like that. Gatsby positively gets rid of his parents, even changes his name.

AM: But we have that kind of novel too. Like, Shiroi Kyotō.

MS: Oh, I haven’t read that. It’s a very popular novel that I should
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have read.

AM: The White Tower. It’s a really famous novel about a hospital. It’s about a doctor who comes to the city from the country and creates himself, going up in the ranks of the doctors.

MS: But they are more subject to the system, those salarypeople.\footnote{Term for a Japanese white-collar businessman, paid a corporate salary.} Gatsby creates his old system.

AM: Richard Yates.

MS: Thirteen Kinds of Loneliness.

RK: Eleven.

MS: Sorry—eleven. But I do think in the ‘50s and ‘60s loneliness used to be a big theme in American literature. Like you said, Truman Capote, John Cheever, Richard Yates...

RK: But I think you hit on something with Gatsby because a lot of characters in American fiction, they’re lonely but they’re very proactive. They try to reinvent, they try to fall in love, they try to have a fight, they try to strike out into the West, go West....A lot of Japanese characters are, by comparison, more passive.

MS: Yeah, they just want to be left alone.

SK: It’s very different with Japan and America. You could probably compare Japan to European countries more easily.

RK: A parallel, I agree.

MS: Kazuo Ishiguro, you know, you could imagine that kind of writer even if he weren’t born in Japan. Britain could have created that kind of writer. But not America.

RK: He would not be an American writer, yeah.

MS: That kind of resignation, restricted by the system.

RK: I often point out to people that most of Haruki’s characters—
they hardly do anything. They get sucked into an adventure by circumstances. You know, they’re just cooking and drinking beer and they lost their job and the cat’s missing, the wife’s missing, and they go out into the alleyway, like, “Oh, what’s going on?” They’re not trying to change the world.

SK: Something slightly unique about Haruki Murakami is that there are no parents. They are just individuals. There are no mothers. It’s a bit strange, but somehow, that is how we are in a way—not just in Japan, but elsewhere. That’s why he has so many readers. It may be twenty years ago when that sounded unrealistic, that someone has no connection to his mother or father.

MS: He would have been very unrealistic in the fifties, but in the seventies and eighties, as Roland pointed out, so many people started living on their own in cities. And these novels really caught up very quickly. So it wasn’t just Haruki, but so many writers started to write about people who live on their own in cities. And that’s a sort of basic format of contemporary Japanese fiction. Whereas in the United States, even though they might be living on their own, they go back to their family on Thanksgiving and Christmas, and there are some connections, positive or negative, with their own families.

AQ: [Aoko Matsuda], you said you translated Karen Russell’s *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. She is a surreal writer. And in an interview for *Ignition Magazine*, Motoyuki Shibata said that “ambiguous boundaries between self and other, human and animal, may be considered very Japanese,” and you cited Hiromi Kawakami. In Murakami’s novels, too, there is a blurring between human and animal or a weird surrealism element there, too. How did this surrealism in Japanese fiction develop, and why do you think it is “very Japanese”?

AM: We have a great tradition of ghost stories and old folk tales, tales about monsters and ghosts. And everyone growing up listens to or reads these stories, and when you’re a child, you don’t think it’s fiction, you think it’s the real thing. Like, “a demon will get you if you do something bad”, and that kind of thing. It’s naturally a part of you, and it remains even when you grow up. Of course, you fall in
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love with other cultures as you grow up, but the old things you fell in love with as a kid still remain. And the new anime and movies are dealing with that kind of old tradition. Rumiko Takahashi used to be huge in the ‘80s and ‘90s, a manga artist. And she brings in all sorts of myths and folktales. And she was hugely popular because of that. Her most famous one is Inuyasha, about a wolf boy. It’s an essential part of Japanese culture. I find it very easy to find empathy with works by Karen Russell or Kelly Link.

SK: But I have the impression of children’s literature, in Europe and the West, that it has lots of animals. They speak, and behave like humans. But especially in England, there is a divide between children and adults. They start to feel that picture books should stop when you are twelve or thirteen. They draw a line here. So these are children’s books. Now, you are grown up, you must read books with no illustrations, and no speaking animals. That’s the kind of thing. Although it’s not as strict as it used to be.

MS: Especially in the United States.

SK: Still, there is a sort of line drawn. So children, like European or American children, read books with animals speaking and so on.

MS: American readers are especially hung up on realistic fiction. It’s the mainstream. But things are starting to change, with writers like Kelly Link, Karen Russell, Amy Bender.

AQ: But they are still in the minority.

MS: That’s right, that’s right. Especially male writers. I think female writers are more flexible.

AQ: So a lot of literary magazines, like Granta, Tin House, Agni, and so on, do not include comics or graphic narratives in their content. But Monkey Business does. And in this issue, there were two. So why did you choose to include those?

MS: We always do. I mean, it’s part of literature. It doesn’t make sense that if you have images along with the text, it’s not literature. That idea doesn’t hold. It has no real basis. And it is fine to have
images if they are good. A good popular song is better than a second-rate classical music piece. And a good manga is better than a third-rate literary short story.

SK: So you don’t have the sort of literary magazine that Art Spiegelman would contribute to?

MS: There are some—like McSweeney’s?

RK: The New Yorker also has illustrations.

AQ: But a comic panel isn’t the same as having a chapter of a graphic novel.

SK: I wouldn’t be surprised if Spiegelman could have ten pages in a literary magazine.

AQ: Though we do have a yearly anthology of the best comics.

MS: That’s right, you do. But it’s interesting, because I think American comic artists feel more isolated. The isolation is a huge theme in American comics because the artists themselves are so much more isolated from the mainstream culture.

AQ: Since you [Satoshi Kitamura] spent time in England, and your “Variations and Theme” did have a poem by Charles Simic, who is an American poet—did you feel that your time abroad influenced your art style and content as a Japanese illustrator?

SK: Yes, I think so. I started working in England and I had to, first of all, write in English and communicate in English. That influenced me a lot. But also, an as artist working in a different cultural background, there are certain things that I took for granted that didn’t work. If I drew something in a certain style in Japan and showed it to the editor, they understood. But sometimes they were puzzled, and asked me for more of an explanation. And then I thought if fiction that needs an explanation is not successful, I started to draw quite logically, and on point. And not just draw logically but think logically as I was drawing, and try to make everything self-explanatory. That was a good education in a way, because, basically, drawing is
But actually Moto suggested I should do “Variations and Theme” and gave me the chance to do it in a magazine—Monkey in Japan and Monkey Business, here—so this is my new thing, at least to me. And I’m very interested. I want to do more.

AQ: Nagai Kafū, the writer, once said “Purely Japanese literature died out around the year 1897...[after that] it is Western literature written in the Japanese language for the sake of form only.” And in her book The Fall of Language in the Age of English by Minae Mizumura, she also argues that contemporary Japanese literature is “juvenile” and with the dominance of the English literature, both the quality of Japanese literature has dropped and the writing style has changed, too, to become more easily translatable for an international audience. How do you feel Japanese literature...
angela qian

has evolved in the last 100 years, and do you agree with Minae Mizumura?

SK: That kind of statement is a sign of age.

RK: She is aging.

MS: She thinks that Meiji literature is really great.

SK: Most of us can’t read Meiji literature.

AQ: She really thinks the Golden Age was, say, Natsume Soseki or Yasunari Kawabata. She said they are not being taught as much. And the fact that you are translating Japanese literature into English is a sign of the dominance of the English language.

MS: She has a point, but it is too extreme. She says writers who write in the English language get to be read all over the world, which is not true. It’s only 1%, or even less, of the people who read serious literature. And she also says if you read books in a minor language like Japanese that are not translated into English, no one reads it, which is not true. There are so many readers in the Japanese language. She makes everything all or nothing, which is a huge distortion.

But having said that, I do feel that the Meiji period was a golden period for literature, and also for translation. Because things were so much in flux in those days. There were so many directions they could go in. Nobody knew what is going to happen next. And that created a huge intercultural excitement. Whereas now we have this sense that things have been done, so many things have been done, and there is so little room for creativity.

But having said that, again, I do feel that contemporary American fiction and Japanese fiction are in such good shape. That writers are creating new, exciting things and incorporating—especially from other genres. Like, serious fiction writers are using elements from science fiction and fantasy, or folktales, or ghost tales, or movies, and music. There are fewer boundaries between each genre. A hybrid. You don’t have to use the word “hybrid” because everything is a hybrid now if it’s good. But everything is in good shape. As Satoshi
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said, she is just too old and she doesn’t even mention one good or bad Japanese artist today. She just says “everything is junk” and that’s it.

SK: I write in British English, and I used to be published in America or Europe more, but my main readers are in Latin America. I am more popular over in Latin countries—that is my market. So writing in English is not that helpful, Spanish is the language.

AQ: If you could recommend contemporary writers from the Japanese literary scene, who would you recommend?

RK: Aoko.

MS: Read writers from Monkey Business.

RK: Mieko Kawakami, Hiromi Kawakami...

MS: And you know Yōko Ogawa.

AM: Akiko Akazome.

AQ: Are they translated?

MS: Not yet.

AM: But she got the Akutagawa Prize.

MS: That’s right.

RK: So she should be.

AM: She should be. She’s amazing.

RK: Hideo Furukawa, of course.

AM: Yoriko Shono. One of her books has been translated. It is very interesting.

MS: She led the trend or tendency of female writers to not be afraid to go beyond boundaries. She is a very political, provocative writer.
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Will Dart meets a doppelgänger

Jon Catlin reflects on loss

Angela Qian interviews *Monkey Business*

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