

On the Alchemy of Fields

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“It is from language that speech must be delivered.”

— Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*

During a recent conversation with a friend, we struck upon the topic of her nearly complete collection of Nancy Drew hardcovers. I immediately pictured them as they had appeared in my childhood: books aged prematurely by the humidity of numerous seasons spent reading them in the Caribbean. Their deckled pages had been aerated with a random scattering of pinprick punctures—lesions which were created by small worms that would bore through the books, at times (to my horror) even appearing upon their pages as I was reading. Alongside this foundational “oeuvre” were British children’s classics meant to impart a hierarchical landscape of manners I found intriguing. In reading these books I keenly felt myself to be a spectator, a feeling I was already well used to. As I read about Nancy or Anne or Mary, ants wove through my grandmother’s house in Trinidad and rain fell heavily upon the corrugated steel roof.

While colonial rule had been placed comparatively in the past by the world my parents immigrated to, in the tropics I still experienced its echo. I wondered what it meant to be a “former subject” of this legacy. My grandmother, a retired schoolteacher, was presumably aware of the social coding of these texts, which were emblematic of the appropriate social education for the “post-colonial” child. By extension, they were emblematic of the material a diasporic child of mixed-race might attach, from the other side, to such an upbringing. Needless to say, the beginning of my education, in that word’s truest sense, remained far in the future and would require a great deal of unlearning.

The recurrent image of those Nancy Drew hardcovers offered me nothing more in the present than it was capable of offering then: the false sense of shared experience with a friend whose collection was far more complete than anything I could have found in my grandmother’s house and whose racial background could not have

necessitated a reading experience comparable to my own. I am not interested in participating in a narrative I was thoughtlessly written into upon the involuntary occasion of my birth. The discontinuity of image, word, and actuality are all equivalent surfaces. To read in translation—I do this always.

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I was given a language. This language was directive. A series of titles appeared to me with insistence and, one might say, urgency: *girl, diasporic, mixed-race, second-generation*. I was awarded additional designations through trial and error: *daughter, sister, granddaughter*. I struggled beneath these titles, attempting to fashion my face in a manner that would adequately reflect these names. I struggled in this way for many years.

One day, I came to be introduced to another language. A poet, also of Caribbean background, invited me to her home. She spoke to me of poetry, generously lending me a stack of books, which she encouraged me to read and copy out. A scintillating, unforeseen world opened up before me: that of Charles Baudelaire, Saint-John Perse, Arthur Rimbaud. In awe of the books, I was afraid to touch them lest a single page become marred. I gingerly read a few, overwhelmed by the the spillage this opened up over the modes of articulation that I had both accepted and struggled against up to that point.

I took on my own name: *poet*. After returning the books, I never visited that apartment again.

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English is neither my father nor mother tongue yet it is the language I've existed within and alongside. In childhood, I spent a period of time unable to speak because of things that happened to me. When the words came back they did so with brokenness and fragility. I've spent time trying to retrain that fearful voice, and to learn other languages, but I'm still aware of the strange sensation of the invisible patriarch or colonial master—which I envision being a French man, a Dutch man, an English man on a plantation in Tobago blocking the light, giving commands in Guyana, presiding over Suriname's bauxite roads. I'm still alienated within language's house, kept at a distance from fully occupying any one of its rooms.

What the language of speaking establishes is both encounter and code, demand and surfactant, collusion and refusal—I am challenged to interiorize this speaking, whose inadvertent placement within my body presents itself as a limit. One can encounter and establish oneself within other limits, but the conditions of this language, the rules which dictate the reach of my expression, remain the same.

Not because I want to avoid speaking about my past, but that the conditions of my past are inordinately tied to the ways in which language so often takes power in an unspeakable way.

I've since given myself a few names in addition: *painter, lover, warrior, survivor*.

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Not that I want to avoid speaking of my past, but that so little was passed on from the pasts that I originated from. So spent years processing a deeply felt, inherited silence.

I had always lived alongside the awareness that “I” had come from elsewhere, though the terms of this elsewhere remained uncertain. Elsewhere’s assumptions were always immediate, somatic. One cannot begin to alter the specificity of one’s face to pass beneath the gaze of this elsewhere. I began to understand its implications as it began to iterate: elsewhere was catastrophic; elsewhere was benign; elsewhere was a footnote at the margins, left in exception of the mainstream. One could read of this elsewhere. While I would often try to locate myself there, what the words revealed could not touch my experience. The words excluded my lived reality, removing me from any line of connection to those who might know more about navigating the strange situation of lostness I found myself in.

I was unable to access any preexisting explanation which might clarify this gaze of occlusion directing itself towards the past—such a means of understanding could not, after all, exist. Colonialism’s natal alienation reaches endlessly forward, such that I know little about those ancestors who preceded me on continents I am now only able to visit as an outsider. At times I would attempt to follow a line, a trace already established by family members who came before me, but the end to this line would arrive quickly and definitively. What my mother knew of her past was not my own, nor what little my father knew.

Trauma as that which negates (falsely but with great conviction) the credibility of the present. Which also undoes the possibility of claiming any relation to the past. Not that I want to avoid speaking about my past, but that I found it preferable not to speak, then. I turned to poetry to cope with the present's intolerable surface.

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To touch again upon a "source" of poetic language, moving beyond disclosure of an inadvertently foundational experience, a worm-eaten Nancy Drew hardcover and borrowed English translation of Baudelaire —

My language began to undergo a process of expansion. That borrowed copy of Saint-John Perse became my first introduction to the possibility of speaking from a place in the Caribbean (a goal which would not remain my main intention). The ironies of Perse, a white French diplomat and colonial presence in the Caribbean, acting as such an introductory presence did not register until later. While I aimed to come up with my own way of speaking, an authentic means by which the poetry I hoped to write could be transmitted, this sense of alienation continued to suffuse the books I had previously found solace in.

I found myself participating in an intolerable duality. I wrote without the belief that poetry could be used to achieve the consecutive line I hoped it might establish, and yet I remained unable to pass beyond the absolute nature of poetry's magnetic force. What was it that I was trying to give voice to? The trajectories of my own life and being remained obscure to me. I lived facing multiple planes of disconnection at all times: sustained memory loss caused by childhood trauma separated me from the world I had already passed through, while dissociation and Complex PTSD's effects on mental health distanced me from the world I had created for myself in the present, causing echoes from the past to resurface in disempowering and often retraumatizing ways. The generational consequences of colonial displacement, violent deaths, and mental illness severed me from maintaining any reliable connection to my extended family. Poetry existed as the one line connecting me to the world of the real, the world I existed in now, and yet I felt my poetry was increasingly characterized by articulation's failure. Disbelief.

The internality of an experience is that which has very little relation to events as they occur in the real, and so one may never impart the significance of this

experience onto another, one may never come to release it in this way. I could not speak of the things that had happened to me using the language I had learned but I still wrote with the vague hope that it might extend the sense of having originated from some knowable place, presenting a means to speak beyond that reinforced interior I existed within.

Poetry remained for me an unfulfilled belief that I might be able to approach the world of legibility I believed others inhabited.

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My language continued to expand. Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Jean Rhys were writers in whose work I witnessed this expression of ontological authenticity, of a voicing which transcended language's stark limitations. The space that opens within literature being conducive to such a voicing: the realization of a medium that functions beyond language yet remains tied to the ongoingness of being. Through these writers I became aware that there were precedents to the kind of work I hoped to engage with, a means by which one's being, obscured as it might be, could be spoken to. At the same time, I was becoming aware of multiple puncture wounds appearing across the erroneously blank pages I had so far composed.

Not that I want to avoid speaking about my past, but this supposed act of translation, which is not necessarily tied to language's capacities/incapacities, occurs when you don't have a space reserved for language. This space being occupied by an unnameable substitute, a trauma and susceptibility to trauma, which can, at times, assume the place of identity.

Not that I want to avoid speaking about my past, but I am critical of any means by which I may, suddenly, utterly and without effort, become capable of speaking with ease, with a voice (void) corresponding to any situation in an accessible and broadly relatable way. There were times in my life where I spoke only lies so the truth might also become less plausible.

I thought rectifying the source of my feelings of alienation was just a matter of uncovering certain historical truths. I held the misconception that language could act as a medium to speed my progression towards an intensified experiencing of

identity and continuity, conflating the ability to speak of oneself with the kind of consecutiveness I believed as being equal to “belonging.” I had seen origin as a potential path preceding the moment you were involuntarily brought into and kept being involuntarily brought into—a path that existed on the other side of a fence I was clinging to, watching those within carry on beautiful conversations using words I couldn’t hear, words which would never be able to reach me.

I was thus able to conceptualize this image of connection, yet I remained incapable of knowing how such a state could be achieved. I saw the means of such exploration to be subject to a myriad of self-negating constraints—I only had language to turn to, yet language had proven to be an entirely inadequate venue for this particular kind of seeking.

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I was brought abruptly into an awareness of relation upon news of the passing of Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite. I found myself struck with grief as I listened through PennSound’s archive of his recorded readings. I grieved Brathwaite’s departure, and at the same time experienced isolation’s sharp, familiar resurgence. The alienation I had been feeling before that moment was akin to the alienation I felt often as a reoccurring absence throughout my life, a feeling which became illumed in stark precision that evening. This recurrence, in which the connection I felt with Brathwaite’s work opened to the disconnection I was experiencing in my being, this absence of my own place to speak from or voice through which such a speaking might manifest. It was a feeling that often surfaced upon reading the works of certain writers, often diasporic, often of Caribbean background like myself.

The assumed impossibility: to find a voice that speaks to you from your point of origination, suggesting possible modes of connection and engagement. This initial opening of a pathway or door. Simply, the yielding of this surface, which had previously appeared impenetrable.

Brathwaite’s voice forms the exact measure by which his poetry is to be sounded, explored—it expresses itself as directive in this way, requiring that one enter into a position of correspondence. The breakage of lines and words within the work both energizes and destabilizes language through transformative tectonics. This reconstructed world comes to be revived through a process of generous exchange

and recognition. Brathwaite invokes the fractality of a postcolonial landscape before recomposing it into a kaleidoscopic image of crystalline clarity. The material limits of speaking are thus transferred, undone, impeding unchecked assumptions contingent to a postcolonial processing of language. From “Mid/Life”:

i am born/thorn
w/my navel string/cut

like a cracked egg leak-
ing

As I move in amongst his words, I have the uncanny feeling that I am being seen through.

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My encounter with Brathwaite’s work, brought into sharp outline through the lens of his recent passing, had triggered a shift in my awareness. I wasn’t able to immediately grasp what this change signified, hadn’t been capable of locating the conditions of this difference in me. I experienced the tangible quality of this connection in tandem with its completely fleeting nature. As is the case with such moments of illumination, impermanence articulates the edges of its duration. Brathwaite’s poetics, his voice and riddim, expressed to me the difference between using language to articulate a language of pure externality and the implications of moving past surface into voice. I began to understand the specific nature of my feelings of disconnection in language and poetry, as well as become aware of certain repeating failures in my own writing, which I could not continue to ignore.

Poetry, existing as it is, somehow being apart from, impartial to, the rules of ordinary language—I would not here set it apart from “ordinary” language but say instead that the actuality of any event cannot be adequately accessed through these means. Which is why I had turned to poetics, somehow hoping to cast a similarity, to implement through material means the difficulty and persistence of a perceiving subject. The limits to this access were becoming clear to me. What could be said of a poetics which appears but whose revealing was itself a surface, when peeling back the exteriority of an image served only to reveal another exterior beneath it? What denotes the

authenticity of a poetry whose true measure is that of absence, of a language whose occupation of worlds continues to enforce this intolerable contradiction?

It's been said that trauma does not have a language — this being its difficulty — that the particular language of an essentially unspeakable event continues to escape articulation indefinitely after its conclusion. How is one to delineate the means through which one becomes capable of speaking such an impenetrable dissimilarity? Trauma has no surface that is not a reflection of another surface. Language necessarily fails in the face of this kind of experience.

Being mixed-race of multiple colonized races, I didn't even have claim to the myriad histories of postcolonial traumas present in me. I had been barred from belonging to both the immediate world of origin and from the clarity of knowing, at the very least, the source of the body's terrified dreams and distances. Barred from releasing my personal trauma through an inability to speak, displaced from the traumas of my ancestors whose faces would never appear to me in a photograph, whose names I would never know, whose voices had never spoken to me as a child and could never reach out to me in the present, created an impossibility in the very conditions of my being.

I was beginning to fear I would remain indefinitely incapable of seeing my face as it appeared in its entirety. I again felt the true uselessness of speaking from within a system that denied my existence, whose forms, the only forms I had been given to work with, had been determined by whiteness. The reach and implication of these colonial afterimages continued to present themselves to me in the midst of simply living my life. I still existed within a context that positioned me and others like me as archetypal identities to be represented or spoken for but remained disinterested in engaging with the complexities and departures covalent to such a subjecthood. My being wasn't just tied to the histories of places I originated from; rather, origin was that unknown which I felt kept me from identity.

I kept coming up against the difficult separation of voice and language, between poetics and its vehicle. I felt repulsed by the exclusionary material such a voicing, my voicing, was forced to consist of. The language I knew, whose specificities were inordinately tied to a history of oppression, could not be used to excise my disconnection and lived condition of breakage. I decided, tentatively, to take a hiatus

from poetry. I offered myself a number of valid reasons, but at any rate continuing poetics in this way exhausted me, presenting yet another mirror image upon a series of unreadable surfaces, all of which originated in me.

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In the midst of my disillusionment with poetry, I found myself beginning to reexperience something akin to voice, this speaking I had previously sought in poetry, when I saw “Bend in the Epte River near Giverny” and “Poplars, End of Autumn” by Claude Monet at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the early autumn of 2019. It was (within memory) my first time seeing a Monet painting up close. At the time, I expected the same kind of banality I had encountered before at certain art museums, with their endless hallways of portraiture afforded to the wealthy or delicately prefaced import rooms featuring stolen works of art, not to mention an always-expanding wing devoted to the gallery’s regional twentieth century settler artist of choice. Suddenly encountering these paintings by Monet in what was almost a corridor, or at least a space where only a few of the Monet pieces were being exhibited and certainly not an area of prominence, I felt a certain thrill—something about the colour of the light, which was communicated to me as the particular light the sky would have if the dusk itself were to be illuminated, in a sense, if the dusk itself were a material thing that could come to have light cast upon it in this way. More importantly, the colour made sense to me in a way I had been unsuccessfully attempting to express before then using words. Monet’s oil paintings, as a representation of idealized European aesthetics, would serve as an introduction to another form that would need reworking if it were to continue to hold meaning to me. Nonetheless, this sudden moment of clearing and comprehension became my introduction to another means of voicing: image.

Painting is a practice of resistances. The oils resist any request to form a clear path into meaning. They melt, stiffen, diffuse. Image, likewise—I have yet to successfully plan a painting preemptively. An image either appears or fails to appear. Painting resists the ease of an unburdened pathway, yet something always gives in the midst of this difficulty. Thoughts and experiences previously obscured by trauma’s impassability are transmuted into image with alchemic immediacy. A space opens up in the process of painting, during which time I lose track of subjectivity’s distinctions. Ironically, it is at this juncture of psychic sublimation when the relative

awareness of physicality takes on an insistent quality. The body standing before the canvas appears—it is my body.

This manner of voicing is nonetheless fraught with past, even when I am unaware of past's specificities. As in poetics, this language of understanding often acts as a code leading me nowhere. The struggles, indifferences, and difficulties of the image are entirely concealed upon the painting's completion—the faces I have painted do not reveal how many layers of paint have been scrubbed away in error; the illumining effects of cadmium yellow do not reveal the groundwork of shadow beneath it, which gives such a peculiar dimension to its light. I often feel overwhelmed, depressed by the weight of this language that vacillates, seemingly randomly, between impenetrability and revelation. I need it to reflect an image of a truth hidden to me in my daily life, but nothing so incisive is usually what comes to be revealed.

Art practice has, in the past, at times been compared to alchemy. The concept behind alchemy itself is simple: extraordinary transformation is possible with the combination of appropriate ingredients added in relative quantities. That something must be lost in order for something new to come into being. Not lost—given. While in practical application a disreputable concept, the application of an alchemic mindset to art makes sense. There is something alchemical about the space of exchange that occurs when a painting is created, or a poem. There is a gap, an opening, which is created. Anything can come into being through this space, but only after an equal cost has been paid. This is what gives the work its voice, a quality that transcends the space from which it originates. The innermost ground of the self, or what I am here calling *being*, is not absent from the completed work in the sense of having been removed or denied—it must be given away so that something new be able to rise from it. As such, I cannot conceive of poetics or any art practice as being without radical implications: the artwork that arises from the voicing of being originates from a space in which neither being nor voice exist, yet requires both to make the work appear.

The specificity of what I had been seeking in oil painting seemed, in essence, to be the same as whatever it was I had sought in poetry. It was not a matter of juxtaposition: the originary space of both painting and poem were identical.

It was not that I needed to destroy my fraught relationship with language so that voice might become possible, but that this space of separation between voice and language was a material potential through which speaking, or voicing, could become possible. It was from within this gap I had formerly perceived as absence through which voice could transcend the silencing limit of language, of history and all its implications, where the embodiment of authentic voice could become a real possibility. This space I felt in me was generative, an ache composed of future. Its dimensions were not truly those of an absence or unbelonging, but were more like the pause one experiences standing in the midst of a vast field: a field in which one's being is waiting, bending, encountering and being encountered by whatever currents are circulating there.

I've been increasingly drawn to this image of a field. A beginning occurs there: the field is transformed into a meadow lit by dawn. It is a pasture of prairie grass over which a herd of wild animals is grazing. At other times, a large banyan tree exists at the centre of the field, which is beginning to fade beneath the penumbra of a mountain. The field is an abandoned sugar cane plantation, it is a tropical rainforest, it is a deck leading into an apartment in Montréal. The field nourishes swathes of freely growing hibiscus. The field is a scene from a film, it is a distance I've crossed, it is the clearing I've arrived in the midst of a dream.

At any rate, this field is spacious.