IRREAL HISTORY

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## CONTENTS

PREMIÈRE ........................................................................................................... 4

DEDICATION ......................................................................................................... 5

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................... 6

PROLOGUE ......................................................................................................... 7

IRREAL STORIES ................................................................................................. 11

IN THE PURSUIT OF BELONGING ................................................................. 12

HISTORIAN’S PERSPECTIVE ........................................................................... 13

ANCESTOR’S PERSPECTIVE ............................................................................ 16

IRREALITY AS A WHOLE .................................................................................... 21

AN AESTHETIC TURN ......................................................................................... 23

BEYOND FACTS .................................................................................................. 23

NOT JUST AESTHETICS .................................................................................... 26

THE AESTHETIC TURN ....................................................................................... 29

CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................... 31

CONFESSION BOOTH .......................................................................................... 32

IN THE CONFESSIONAL ..................................................................................... 33

LIVING LEGEND .................................................................................................. 38

ANCESTRAL CONNECTIONS ............................................................................ 43

TOWARD A NEW ANCESTRY ............................................................................ 44

LOOKING BACKWARD ........................................................................................ 44

LOOKING FORWARD ........................................................................................... 49

EMBODYING ANCESTRY: THE LAKE & THE STARS ....................................... 52

DREAMS & THE MAGAZINE ............................................................................. 58

CONFESSIO’S PLAYGROUND ............................................................................. 59

REMIXING .......................................................................................................... 60

THE GUIDED DAYDREAM .................................................................................. 63

THE NON-AWAKE STATE .................................................................................. 67

FINALE .................................................................................................................. 70

EPILOGUE ........................................................................................................... 71

ARCHIVES .......................................................................................................... 72

IN THE CONFESSIONAL ..................................................................................... 73
What she had begun to learn was the weight of liberty. Freedom is a heavy load, a great and strange burden for the spirit to undertake. It is not easy. It is not a gift given, but a choice made, and the choice may be a hard one. The road goes upward towards the light; but the laden traveler may never reach the end of it.”

DEDICATION

To my dear friend Nelson Sullivan for showing me how to dream beyond. May you rest in peace.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the History Department for funding this project. The artworks and responsive design on irrealhistory.com were made possible through the department’s support. Thank you to my senior seminar classmates Baylee Belcher and Rachel Dobb for your early feedback. Thank you to all my friends, who number too many to list, for their comments and suggestions. Thank you to my family for the support and reassurance.

Thank you to my ancestors. You are in every part of my work.

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Thank you most of all to my advisor, Dr Butler, for your constant encouragement and unwavering support in this project. Thank you for allowing me to even do this project because no other advisor would have ever allowed—without hesitation might I add—such a bold, ambiguous, and unorthodox project.
PROLOGUE

“The irrealis domain: the might-have-been that never happened but isn’t unreal for not happening and might still happen, though we fear it never will and sometimes wish it won’t happen or not quite yet” (Aciman, Homo Irrealis, 238).

Part essay, part art, and part interactive, https://irrealhistory.com is a cyberspace deep dive into irreality. Best described as possible worlds, irreality is the space between the real, material world and the unreal, fictional world. Largely inspired by writer André Aciman’s book Homo Irrealis: Essays (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), this project massively expands the concept of the irreal to support frameworks of experience, language, and creation in a hope to reach a larger conception of the human experience. Through this massive expansion of the irreal, this website explores the topics of historical methods, aesthetic evaluation, confessions, autobiography, ancestry, and dream experiences.

The format of irrealhistory.com mimics the magazine. From its combinations of text, art, and interactives to its front-page menus, this collection works as an ode to the magazine. Though the magazine may seem like a strange choice to take stylistic cues from, it’s my belief that the magazine beautifully captures both highly readable language and dreamy, irreal aesthetics in one seamless form. It’s certainly one of modernity’s most effective communication tools. As such, the essays in this collection should be thought of like the articles of a magazine, all loosely related through a common theme but for the most part distinct and separate. While some of the articles are absolutely academic—referencing other works and using argumentative words—other articles are utterly intimate. Caught between the requirements of the university and the ideal of the magazine, this collection blurs the boundary between academics and pop culture.
Many of the ideas presented here could’ve been said in different words and phrasings. I could’ve used the comparable philosophy term modality or the psychoanalytic imaginary or any number of post-structuralist third terms. I’ve chosen irreality because it directly places itself as something between the real and the unreal. It’s a queer word. It exists only as a slippage, as something to capture what real and unreal don’t, as something that gathers up the leftovers between this false binary.

The irreal is the discarded and ejected contents of a world that demands materiality and real results. It’s the time wasted in daydreams and spent asleep in vivid dreamscapes. It’s the lost time of thinking about the “shoulda coulda woulda” of our lives. It’s the laziness of reading magazines instead of “real books.” It’s the spacy, in-the-cloud moments. It’s the unproductive. It’s magazine scraps glued together. It’s anxiety and fear. It’s make-believe, pretending, and imagination. It’s childish and inauthentic. Always in a state of what might have been and what still might be, the irreal is constantly stuck. The irreal’s bad reputation, however, is simply the hearsay of the real world. The material world, try as it may, can’t oust the irreal it so desperately seeks to eliminate because irreality is intrinsic to the human condition. It’s natural to our experience, integrated in the way we speak, and the very essence of creation. Constantly rejected but undoubtedly un-rejectable, the irreal is a queer thing.

Throughout this collection, I work in earnest to show irreality as anything but its perceived poor character. Despite its current standing, the irreal is an immensely powerful world for the production of knowledge, for the creation of meaning, and for the sheer enjoyment of life in its fullest capacities. The irreal is the soul of the future and the backbone of ancestry. Unfortunately, the work here can never fully capture irreality. It’s something that must be experienced, lived, and embodied. It’s something that resists words and favors sensation and
emotion. It’s wholly personal. Nonetheless, in sharing my own irreality through personal narratives and artworks, I hope that the impact of the irreal translates so that you may see the emancipatory potential of this queer tool.

This collection begins with *Irreal Stories*, an exhibit that explores irreality in its connection with history. Taking the vantage points of both the historian and the ancestor, the first article “In the Pursuit of Belonging” acts as the manifesto for all that follows. As both a primer to irreality and a theoretical launchpad for a new genre of history, this article considers how historians use irreality as a tool for knowledge making and how our ancestors and us experience, express, and create through the irreal. The article that follows, “An Aesthetic Turn,” continues to create the framework for irreal history by considering how to evaluate historical narratives. It underscores the importance of evaluating histories, irreal or not, on the basis of truth, rightness, and value.

The second exhibit, *The Confession Booth*, opens with an interactive confessional experience. As you make guided confessions, you learn about the relationships between pleasure and power. The interactive highlights the confession’s key role in activating the irreal for use in the material world. Next, I make my own confession in “Living Legend.” Working through experiences without material counterparts, I flesh out just how integral the irreal is in constructing meaning in our lives. The artwork *His Cyclone* supplements this personal narrative by visually depicting how meaning builds up around nonsensical signifiers.

The third exhibit, *Ancestral Connections*, totally reworks the concept of ancestry to move beyond the categories of humanity and life. Its first article, “Toward a New Ancestry” begins by deconstructing the ideas of humanness and life before building back up from the subatomic level to a holistic account of ancestry. Making a pivotal turn, I then argue that ancestry queers time as
both a backward- and forward-looking pursuit. From the theoretical work in this article, I get personal in “Embodying Ancestry,” I introduce two of my ancestors: the lake and the stars. Included in the exhibits are two artworks named after these ancestors.

In the final exhibit, Dreams and the Magazine, I directly consider the magazine as an irreal format. Naming it confession’s playground, I discuss the way that magazines naturally open up irreality through remixing and recasting. In the first article, “Confession’s Playground,” I demonstrate the powerful role of remixing the magazine with respect to irreality. The following interactive then guides you through an irreal experience in a magazine of your choosing in a process I term recasting. To complete the exhibit, “The Non-Awake State” looks into the integral relationship between art and dreaming. The project then concludes with a brief epilogue from our ancestors in the future as its finale.

These four exhibits are only starting points in an enlarged idea of irreality. Yet the promise of possible worlds suggest that these starting points are the sparks for someone else’s tinder. It’s my sincere wish that the following work is not just another trite series of articles on emancipation but truly helpful and queer ways of rethinking the future. Irreality is a source of knowledge, meaning, and enjoyment. Its potential is as expansive as you dream it, and its power is as great as you confess it. Just as queer knows no limits, neither does the irreal. If we want to upend matters in the material world, we’ll have to stargaze on the dreamscape of irreality for new constellations of being. This search for new paradigms is an act of creation. It will require us to take our roles as the magicians of our lives, grasping our intellect, emotions, wealth, and ambitions to create anew. Irreality is the wellspring of possible worlds, and despite its forceful expulsion from most of the material world, it’s still here. So, dream on star dust.
IRREAL STORIES

“Like a link in a chain, from the past to the future that joins me with children yet to be, I can now be a part of the ongoing stream that has always been a part of me!”

2 “This is One of Those Moments,” song from Yentl, directed by Barbra Streisand (MGM/UA Entertainment, 1983).
IN THE PURSUIT OF BELONGING

In brief, irreality is the immaterial yet still experienced world. Like reality, it’s something we perceive: We sense, interact in, and remember it. It’s a real part of our lives, but it has no substance. It comes to us in three modes: experience, language, and creation. As a form of experience, it’s the world of daydreams, nightdreams, visions, hallucinations, trances, disassociation, lost-in-thought moments, and certain states of meditation and prayer. As a form of language, it’s the parts of our sentences which express the dubious, desirous, hopeful, conditional, necessary, hypothetical, and probable. As a form of creation, it’s the origin of fantasy and history. Together, it is the world beyond.

Irreal history centers all aspects of irreality. It does this from both the perspective of the historian and the historical subject. It seeks to fill in the gaps and slippages between materiality and experience to uncover a more complete understanding of the human condition. In effect, irreal history grants insights into how human ways of knowing and being have developed by reinforcing parts of experience typically disregarded as meaningless. It also works to pull the historian out of a place of impersonality and faux objectivity into very personal dialogues with the world as it may have been and may still hope to be. In earnest, these goals desire to redefine history as the pursuit of belonging.

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HISTORIAN’S PERSPECTIVE

Irreality from the historian’s perspective describes the role that possible worlds play in the creation of histories. History making has its roots in the material world. It’s firmly founded in evidence. Evidence is not enough though to make a history. To make history, evidence has to be combined with interpretation. It’s here in interpretation, in the act of imagining possible worlds and breathing life into them through narratives, that irreality lies.

Like the scraps of bones, residue of sauces, and bits of grain on a plate after dinner, historical evidence is only the leftovers. Though we can often tell what was served from what’s still on the plate, we can never be certain what the whole meal looked like. Historical evidence, separated from what didn’t survive and changed from the passage of time, isn’t the past itself. It’s only a fragment of a larger whole. These fragments, however, like the bits and pieces on a dirty plate, are symbols that can be read to see the whole past, or the whole meal, again. This is the foundation of historical thought: We can learn to read objects in the present as symbols for things that have happened in the past. A piece of historical evidence can be read in a range of possible ways, all which still create valid histories that are true to the leftovers of the past. This is the difficulty of history.

All interpretations of historical evidence are simply likely descriptions of how the past unfolded. We can’t ever be certain because we don’t have access to the whole past. We only have fragments and therefore only have possible pasts. Just as we have to imagine what was on the plate from what was left over, we have to imagine what happened from what has survived. Imagining what happened is always a consideration of various possibilities and when historians take one to of these possibilities to be true, they engage in counterfactual thinking. That is, they consider that if this possibility is true, then this happened.
Historians have different ways of conveying this style of thinking. On the one hand, historians can choose to take their suppositions as truth and present them in a factual manner. This is somewhat problematic because it overconfidently asserts that one version of the past is the only valid reading of the historical record. On the other hand, historians can constantly adjust their sentences with the language of probability, using words such as “likely,” “probably,” and “seemingly.” While these words acknowledge that history is an open process of imagining the world as it may have been, they also undercut what could be extremely strong historical arguments. In practice, historians slide between factual and probable styles of presentation, trying to achieve a balance of confidence and uncertainty.

The probable style of presentation in historical thinking is the irreality of language. It’s a state of talking about experience without evidence, that is, materiality. In historical thinking, there’s no way around the gaps in evidence other than by conjecture. Historians must propose experience without material proof. Such gaps are not just unavoidable but widespread and guaranteed. An attempt to do history around gaps in evidence is merely to reproduce the evidence itself. For historians to interpret at all, they must invent. The extent to which invention makes up historical thinking is up for debate, but the existence of such invention is not.

This means that the irreality of language is not enough to capture the full force of irreality in history. It’s not just that probability and uncertainty show up in historical thinking through language. It’s that telling history at all is an act of irreality. It’s an act of imagining the past as it may have been. Consider that no historian ever tells the same history in the same exact way as another historian. The differences in these identically sourced histories results from different propositions of how evidence relates together and what that evidence symbolizes. The way that historians relate and symbolize evidence does not arise strictly from the historical record because
if it did, then there should be no ambiguity as to how to do so. Instead, historians find themselves trying to offer the best possible series of relationships between things and events in the past through the best possible interpretation of their sources. To do this, they must think, consciously or not, about what it is the past might have been like.

Narratives—consistent stories with beginnings, middles, and ends—are the form historians tell these relationships, events, and things through. Narratives combine historical evidence with historical interpretation, weaving the real and irreal together. Writing narratives is the irreality of creation. It’s the way we express irreality in a meaningful way by hooking it into real elements. In essence, the irreality of creation is the confession of the historian’s imagined possible world.

Is it the case then that historians who swear off narrative for analytical, “scientific” forms escape the irreality of creation? Assuredly, no. As historical evidence is symbolic and incomplete, there can’t be an ascertainably correct way of reading a given source. Analytic historians assert that a certain way of reading produces the past most correctly. This, however, is always an assumption. There’s no way to certainly produce the best history of the past.

Finding possible interpretation for a given piece of historical evidence is an irreal practice. The first part of this process is introducing context. The historian must ask: What is this thing? Who (or what) made this thing? Where was it made? When was it made? Why was it made? These questions situate historical evidence into a given moment and place in time. Essentially, their answers will integrate a piece of evidence into a larger narrative of what happened in the past. Getting to this integration step requires thinking about the possible ways that a piece of evidence can be read and still validly placed into a larger historical narrative. Considering these possible solutions means playing with a world that might have been. It means
putting on the shoes of our ancestors, placing oneself back in time, and attempting to sense what
the past was like. This is an irreal experience that tries to breathe life back into the signs of the
past to recreate an event. Especially powerful moments of these virtual experiences energetically
immerse historians into history. Suddenly, a dead world is living again.

This is the **irreality of experience** from the historian’s perspective. It’s the immersive
quality of doing history. It’s the moment of imagining that we are suddenly there with our
ancestors. We are hearing them speak to us. We are seeing what they see, feeling what they feel,
hearing what they hear, tasting what they taste, and smelling what they smelled. It’s a full
sensory experience that is totally imagined. The irreality of experience is the most important part
of history because it’s the inheritance of our shared world, our shared belonging, and our shared
hopes. It is what causes history to be *meaningful to us* because, in the end, our ancestor are us
and we are them.

Irreality from the historian’s perspective is simply a way of working with the
uncertainties that gaps in evidence create. Irreality has three critical roles in historical thought.
It’s the way that historians express their uncertainties and hypotheses. It’s the way that historians
pull together evidence to create history itself. And it’s the way that historians come to experience
their sources and interact with their ancestors. Irreality is an irreversible and unavoidable reality
of historical thought.

**ANCESTOR’S PERSPECTIVE**

Irreality is not just a gateway into the possible worlds of the past, it’s an intrinsic part of
human life. Much of how we talk, experience, and create in the world is irreal. When looking at
our ancestor’s irreal speech, experiences, and creations we are at a disadvantage compared to
looking at the real parts of their lives. Unlike reality, irreality doesn’t have a material existence. It’s an imagined part of life.

As an experience, irreality is extremely sensitive to culture and time. Each culture and time period has had its own ways of creating, organizing, experiencing, sharing, and realizing irreality. Still, there are irreal experiences universal to all people despite cultural differences, and they make up the **irreality of experience** from the ancestor’s perspective. These universal experiences are daydreams, nightdreams, visions, hallucinations, trances, dissociative experiences, lost-in-thought moments, and certain states of meditation and prayer. Central to these ideas is an experience with no material object causing it. In the real world, freshly baked pastries will cause us to smell buttery croissants and irresistible cinnamon rolls. In the irreal world, such as in a dream, there’s no material object causing us to smell these baked goods. We are experiencing without materiality. These experiences are not real, but they’re not unreal either. They’re irreal.

We can influence our chances of having irreal experiences. We can increase the likelihood of nightdreaming by waking up at certain times, writing our dreams down, and taking certain medicines. We can go on a walk or a drive to trigger a daydream. At an art gallery, staring into a work often causes us to lose ourselves in thought. The religious among us can attest to divine experiences during prayer, perhaps caused by saying a mantra or fasting. Cultures around the world have found substances to induce hallucinations and visions from toads to mushrooms.

We might be inclined to dismiss these experiences as meaningless, just fantasies with no material consequences. But these experiences of the irreal are not fully, or at all in some cases, consciously controlled. It’s not as if we are manufacturing an imagined world like in fiction.
Rather, there’s a force underlying irreality that conjures up its contents and that induces us into experiences. We have little influence over the content of our nightdreams. We could hardly predict what will happen next in a daydream. Nor do we have power over our other irreal experiences. Some form of power drives irreality.

A psychoanalytic explanation for what’s happening here suggests that the contents of irreality belong to unconscious processes. Through repression, the unconscious acquires a vocabulary that it strings together through wordplay and rhyming. Just as our conscious minds think by relating meaning, our unconscious minds “think” by relating sounds and spellings. The “flower tattoo” that sunk into someone’s unconscious might transform into a “sour rat stew” in a nightdream which later might becomes “cowered at spew” in a haunting daydream. When we experience irreality, we experience the unconscious freely thinking, endlessly associating words together in meaningless patterns.

Analyzing irreal experiences shouldn’t be a psychoanalytic practice, however. Irreal history is not interested in how analysts interpret the irreal experiences of ancestors but how our ancestors interpreted their own experiences. Although psychoanalytic theory may guide our understanding of how irreal experiences come to be, develop, and fizzle out, it’s just as important to recognize that how our ancestors saw their irreal experiences shaped how they consciously lived their lives. For example, slips of the tongue have rarely been thought of as meaningful throughout history. While they might be meaningful to study for historians to get to the root of how an ancestor’s irreality was constructed, it gives no insight into an ancestor’s lived experience because a slip of the tongue likely didn’t change an ancestor’s conscious thoughts or actions. Irreal history is not psychohistory for this reason. Irreal history concerns itself with
consciously lived and understood experiences of ancestors. Psychohistory concerns itself with the unconscious, repressed actions of ancestors.

On this account, irreal history dedicates itself to evidence far more than psychohistory does. Its evidence always comes in the form of a confession. Because irreality has no material component, it must be made real, or realized, by attaching itself to some form of confession. This is the irreality of creation from the ancestor’s perspective. Confessions can take various forms from speech to writing to artworks to actions. Any attempt to realize irreal experiences is a confession.

Confession don’t necessarily have to come from irreal experiences. They can come from just thinking (versus experiencing) possible worlds. The confession is a possibility generating device. It’s a powerful tool to reveal how the world could have been, how it might be now, and how it still might be in the future. Our ancestors’ confessions give way to the many possible worlds that have been thought and experienced. Studying these confessions shows us how our ancestors regretted, feared, hoped, desired, doubted, and longed for the real world to reflect their irreal worlds. In other words, the irreality of our ancestors marks their perceptions of the real world, showing us how they came to understand the world and came to understand their being in it.

Language has a special construction to confess irreality: the irrealis mood. The irrealis mood refers to things which may have happened, may be happening, or may happen in the future. It expresses the uncertain. This is the irreality of language from the ancestor’s perspective. In contrast, realis moods refer to things which have happened, are happening, or will happen. They are certain. Typically, irrealis phrases need a realis phrase to stand, though not always.
I hope that my friend visits me.
She wishes that her dishwasher wasn’t broken.
We believed that he was telling the truth.

In the first case, “I hope” is the realis phrase. I did hope. That is a fact. But my friend has not visited me. I have only hoped that they would. So, “my friend visits me” is an irrealis phrase. It has not actually occurred, at least not yet. The verbs “hope,” “wish,” and “believe” trigger the irrealis mood. What follows them will always be irrealis phrases. Similarly, verbs like “dream,” “desire,” “fear,” and “think” mark that what follows are irrealis phrases. Even verbs like “recommend,” “demanded,” and “deny” set up irrealis phrases because their sentences do not describe facts. For examples:

I recommend that you buy this dress.
They will demand that the government lower the sales tax.
He denied that he ate my lunch.

Note how in each of these sentences “that” could be deleted. The word “that” can be a clue that a phrase is irreal, but it is by no means a guarantee. Learning which verbs trigger irrealis phrases is the most reliable way of identifying the irrealis mood.

For an irrealis phrase to stand without a realis phrase, it needs a marker of some kind to alert us that we are not talking about things that have happened, are happening, or will happen. Words like “could,” “should,” “would,” “may,” “might,” “if,” and “let” mark the irrealis mood. For example:

I could go home.
I should talk to my professor.
I would like to help her.
It may rain later today.
It might be wise to choose the more expensive option.
If I were to take the bus, I would be late.
Let us get ice cream.
In each of these cases, the irrealis denotes possibility rather than certainty. Again, none of the things in these sentences have actually happened, they merely could happen. They are possible worlds.

The irrealis can also be triggered by words of uncertainty and hope. They often come in the form of either impersonal expressions—expressions which use “it” as a placeholder—or as adverbs. For examples:

- It’s probable that they’ll cancel the wedding.
- Hypothetically, you could buy a house without a mortgage.
- Hopefully, she got the promotion.
- Maybe we drove the wrong way.

The irrealis can also appear in other constructions, but the above cases cover the vast majority of irreal phrases. All languages have constructions to express irreality—or, as it’s known in linguistics and philosophy, modality. It is a necessary feature of a language to refer to things without a current material presence, and, as an extension of this need, to refer to experiences without material causes.

From the ancestor’s perspective, irreality has three bearings on life. It’s part of the way ancestors experienced the world. It’s part of how ancestors transformed their possible worlds into real things. And it’s part of how ancestors have expressed themselves in language, denoting the possibility of other worlds. Irreality is an inherent part of life, art, and language.

**IRREALITY AS A WHOLE**

Experience does not correspond one-to-one with materiality. There’s a fundamental difference between what was experienced and what materially happened. This difference urges us to rethink the use of historical evidence. How can we bridge the gap from what the material record states and what the recollections of lived experience state? How, especially, can we do
this when the lived experiences of the dead are largely inaccessible to us? Moreover, how can we make the lived experiences of our ancestors meaningful to us personally? How can we arrive at a more holistic history?

Irreal history does not have the answers to all these questions. It’s only a radical reconsideration of where to start when answering these questions. In trying to answer these questions though, irreal history desperately hopes to find breakthrough pathways to connecting with our ancestors. There is no higher purpose in history than that of finding our inheritance and meeting our ancestors. May irreal history be a new method to fulfill this purpose. May it reconnect us with a past we have largely seen as fixed, past, and stable. May it remind us that the past is merely another possible world created in the present and ready for disruption at every step. May it encourage us to dream of possible worlds which far exceed the limits of this real one. And may it give us the courage to realize such worlds.
AN AESTHETIC TURN
BEYOND FACTS

A basic goal of historical research is the recovery of facts from the past, but a list of historical facts alone is not enough to make a history. Each individual facts may make sense on its own. As whole, however, these facts don’t mean anything until they’re in the right order with interpretive elements. Consider this list:

- Martin Luther rejected the Church’s use of indulgences.
- Luther died on February 18, 1546 at age 62.
- Luther was ordained as a priest in 1507.
- Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in the Holy Roman Empire.
- In 1521, Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther from the Church.
- Luther released his Ninety-five Theses in October of 1517.

This list is almost nonsensical. It’s just a series of unrelated facts. While we understand each individual fact, they don’t mean much as a whole. By placing facts in chronological order, historians create the framework for narrative: a timeline. Timelines take time-specific facts, or events, and put them in order. This is the most basic process of organizing facts in historical research. Consider the list now re-organized:

1. Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in the Holy Roman Empire.
2. Luther was ordained as a priest in 1507.
3. Luther rejected the Church’s use of indulgences.
4. Luther released his Ninety-five Theses in October of 1517.
5. In 1521, Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther from the Church.
6. Luther died on February 18, 1546 at age 62.

Put in chronological order, we now have a beginning, Luther’s birth, a middle, Luther’s publication of his Ninety-five Theses, and an end, Luther’s death. But a beginning, middle, and end are still not enough to have a history. This is only a timeline. To write a history, we have to relate these facts to one another. We need to write a narrative. Consider the list now as a narrative:
Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in the Holy Roman Empire. In 1507, Luther became an ordained priest. As a priest, he came to disagree with the Church’s use of indulgences. Expressing his concern, he published his *Ninety-five Theses* in October of 1517. This soon led to his excommunication from the Church by Pope Leo X in 1521. Luther later died on February 18, 1546 at age 62.

Finally, the facts have been put into order and interpreted together to make a cohesive, brief history of Martin Luther. Notice how facts two, three, four, and five are now put into synthesis with each other, creating a flowing story bookended by facts one and six. These small additions and reorganizations to these facts are *historical interpretation*. Together, timelines and interpretations form *narratives*.

While we can evaluate each fact in a timeline for its validity—that is, is the fact true—evaluating historical narrative as a whole, with both its timeline and interpretive components, is more complicated. Facts purely tell us what verifiably happened in the past and can only be judged on whether they are true or not. Historical narratives, on the other hand, tell us how to understand our past. Assessing historical narratives on facts alone may take us far in historical understanding. Facts drive arguments of causation, correlation, contingency, change, consistency, complexity, and comparison. Yet such arguments make the past meaningful as far as we use the past to control the present and predict the future. Such a narrow idea of what history should do turns it into a tool of control and domination. It levels our ancestors into something to be learned to the extent that it can teach us to rule each other.

To make the past meaningful to us as individuals and communities we need a holistic method to evaluate historical narratives. We have to evaluate on the dynamics of morality and aesthetics too. Evaluating historical narratives then becomes a three-pronged approach. We must assess narratives for their objective truth, moral rightness, and aesthetic value. These three criteria can tell us if a given narrative is true to the past, does justice to the past, and expressively
connects us to the past. If a narrative adequately meets these three conditions of being true, just, and expressive, then it’s a compelling account of the past. Historians have long been concerned about the objective truth of their narrative and have in the last half-century become increasingly concerned with the moral rightness of their narrative. While hopefully all historians have a general desire to write (or speak) well, in what might be called an aesthetically pleasing way, the criteria to judge such aesthetics has fallen back mostly on traditional conventions of expository, descriptive, narrative, and persuasive writing. Oftentimes even these conventions have been overwritten for lackluster, de-personalized academic writing.

Telling history expressively is not important simply because it makes history more interesting or bearable. It’s important because to express the significance of the facts and morals of a historical narrative, historians have to use effective language. In Marcus Rediker’s “The Poetics of History from Below” in the September 2010 issue of Perspective on History, he notes that the way a story is told “can bring a historical moment to life, even sear it into memory.” Facts come alive in good storytelling and become meaningful. And if historians want to “show retrospective solidarity and ‘accompany’” their ancestors “through their history,” then they must successfully tell that story in the first place. Otherwise, there’s no accompaniment and hardly any solidarity.

While the aesthetics of history are important in the areas of truth and rightness, they’re also important for their own sake. In Laura F. Edwards’ article “Writing Between the Past and the Present” in the January 2011 issue of Perspectives on History she asserts that writing history is a way of writing between our ancestry and our identity, between “where we came from” and “who we are.” The result is that “historical writing can be as much about self-discovery as it is about discovery of the past.” Edwards hits the nail on the head here. Good history expressively
connects those of us in the present with those who are in the past, momentarily displacing time to allow deep personal reflection. Good history doesn’t just grant us our inheritance, it grants us our identity. Good history is art.

I propose that the aesthetics of history be judged on this simple, personal question: Does this narrative expressively connect those of us in the present with those who are in the past? By moving beyond the aesthetic standards of, God forbid, academic writing or even the basic conventions of good writing to a history specific aesthetic value, we reinvigorate history with drive. In the choice to highlight our connections from the present to the past, we dedicate history to the pursuit of belonging. And all history derived from this pursuit can be guaranteed to be meaningful to us as individuals and communities. Moreover, when a history is objectively true, morally right, and aesthetically valuable, we can be certain that it’s a history that accurately presents our past, does justice to it, and makes it meaningful to us.

**NOT JUST AESTHETICS**

In the November 2021 issue of *Artforum*, Pablo José Ramírez—adjunct curator of First Nations and Indigenous Art at the Tate Modern—reflects in his article “Blood and Treasure” on the *Slavery* exhibition at Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum. The exhibition focused on the Netherlands’ role in the slave trade. At the center of the exhibition were two Rembrandt paintings of two newlyweds, *Portrait of Marten Soolmans* (1634) and *Portrait of Oopjen Coppit* (1634). The paintings show us “a world of comfort and privilege paid for by the stolen labor of others.” Ramírez underscores that a historical exhibition that deal with trauma comes up against two problems. There’s the problem of the distant and cold authority of curation, and there’s the problem of treating non-white people as objects of an obsessive scientific inquiry. In his opinion, *Slavery* avoided these problems “with some success” (73).
It did this by displacing the scientific gaze with narrative storytelling and “informed speculation.” The exhibit included a number historical narratives which did not directly describe the artworks. Museumgoers had to speculate how the artworks and narrative might come together. By choosing to encourage speculation, *Slavery* overcame both the rigid authority of the curator and the objectifying pursuit of scientific looking. In the paintings, there’s room for the audience to make their own narratives from what they know and see. Viewers might speculate on how a celebration of harvest at Jonas Witsen’s Suriname plantation was both a moment of collective emotional relief and a time for organizing insurrection for the enslaved. Informed speculation here cuts off the curator’s fact and argument driven commentary and the, intended or not, white objectifying gaze.

What Ramírez calls informed speculation is what I would just call history. In my other essay in this exhibit, I outline that the basis of all historical narrative is the creation of a possible version of the past that can’t be confirmed. In the *Slavery* exhibition, museumgoers were creating histories to interpret the artworks in front of them. Of course, these museumgoers were less informed than historians, but the act of what they were doing in informed speculation is really just creating historical narratives.

In *Slavery*, the curators had given up control over the narrative making process but only in part. By still selecting the works in the exhibition (what historians would call evidence), the curators set the framework for the narratives that would be woven together. The curators very specifically chose to include objects like “an earthenware sugar funnel” and “collecting jars” that were “connected [to] the extraction of sugar.” These objects were made by Dutch laborers who, even without having had direct contact with slavery, were deeply connected to and benefited from the extraction of profit from enslaved people (74). This selection process controlled, to a
large degree, how museumgoers interpreted the past. The benefit to the primarily white, Dutch audience who saw this exhibition was that it purposefully selected works for them to find themselves caught in, forcing them to reflect on their ancestries and identities.

From this perspective, *Slavery* operates just as any other historical work does. It presents evidence, gives facts about the past, and makes arguments (even if they’re quiet or self-decided). In this sense, *Slavery* can be judged on the three prongs of historical evaluation: truth, rightness, and value. I’m not particularly concerned here about the truthfulness of *Slavery* because such evaluation is already engrained in the historical discipline. I’ll assume that the exhibition is truthful for sake of example.

On aesthetic grounds, *Slavery*, according to the catalogue’s introduction, sought to build connections and recognition. “An inhabitant of Wijk bij Duurstede will recognize a depiction of the town’s windmill; a mother will be affected by a painting of a sick child” (74). Doing this through narrative storytelling, created by the informed interpretation of museumgoers, is a highly effective strategy for encouraging aesthetic reflection. Museumgoers, taking the historical narratives presented to them by the curatorial staff, uses the new stories that they’ve learned to craft stories for the artworks in front of them. And when the artworks necessarily include a large portion of the audience, the museumgoers are forced to form narratives that speak between their ancestry and their identity. In doing so, they pass the criterion I set forth earlier. Earnest museumgoers expressively connect themselves with those who are in the past.

Yet *Slavery* sits on very problematic moral grounds. In its success of avoiding the pitfall of historical trauma and in creating aesthetic reflection, it failed to consider exactly what the purpose of a slavery exhibit is and if that purpose is moral. Ramírez criticizes that while *Slavery* may provide some level of connection and recognition, that it’s insufficient and always will be.
The brutal horrors of slavery could never be fully imagined, described, or even paid back. Nor should they be. We need not continue resurrecting the ghosts of the past, especially when doing so reasserts power in colonial patterns. Narratives produced by white, wealthy, Dutch art lovers about the vicious conditions of the enslaved merely reproduce the same dynamics of master and slave. The master museumgoer forces the slave ancestor into working again for their own emotional profit and guilt extraction. Is this connection? Or is this enslavement?

While *Slavery* has aesthetic value and presumably objective truth, this doesn’t ensure that it’s a moral work. Historical works can be completely successful in any one of the three areas of evaluation, but failure in one is a failure as a whole. *Slavery* is not a compelling account of the past because it’s an abuse of the past. It uses the past as a tool to level our ancestors into something to be learned to the extent that it can teach us to rule each other. *Slavery*’s mechanism of rule is the economy of inherent guilt and forced forgiveness, and in this rule it levels the very ancestors it attempts to acknowledge. *Slavery* shows us that even aesthetically successful historical works do not necessarily produce good history.

THE AESTHETIC TURN

An aesthetic turn should critically challenge the format of historical narratives. While academic books and journal articles have their places, they nearly always fail to actually create aesthetic engagement. Why is this? Why can it be so hard to read an academic text and see our ancestors and then see ourselves? Perhaps it’s because we’re only seeing text. In Western culture, the visual has been at the forefront of aesthetics for millennia. Nearly all sensory technologies—tools that enhance and reproduce sensations—have been developed around sight, such as microscopes, telescopes, glasses, cameras, text, printing, computer monitors, artificial lighting, and mirrors. These technologies augment our everyday interactions in the world. If we
need to read a small serial number on a part, we might use the camera on our phone with flash to light up the numbers, zoom in, and take a picture. And every day we wake up, turn the lights on, perhaps put on glasses or contact lenses, and look in the mirror to get ready. This same enhancement exists partially for hearing. We have hearing aids, microphones, headphones, and records. But it’s nowhere near as widespread for hearing as it is for seeing. There are hardly any technologies, on the other hand, for enhancing and reproducing touch, smell, or taste. Visual technologies simply have taken precedence in our lives. As a result, we’ve been culturally socialized to do personal reflection in the face of the visual. Perhaps that’s been in front of a painting, mural, sculpture (that we don’t and usually can’t touch), political cartoon, meme, photo from the past, or even the mirror. The visual is strongly tied to personal reflection.

Combinations of visual technologies with auditory ones have been especially effective for producing aesthetic engagement. From theater and dance performances to music videos and movies, our art world is often done in two senses. Whatever the case may be about how aesthetics is typically done, what’s clear is that aesthetics, in our culture, prefers sensory experience focused around vision and hearing. While history has absolutely moved into sensory technologies beyond text, nearly all of its work is still trapped there. For as many historical play, movies, podcasts, and songs as there are created each year, there are certainly far more history books and journal articles, most without pictures, published. In fact, just mentioning history almost immediately conjures up ideas of big stacks of books.

Historians, if they want to make aesthetic impact, have to reconsider if books and journal articles will get them there. Perhaps things like podcasts, gallery exhibitions, storytelling events, and short films might be the better move. These formats will certainly challenge historians with regards to the objective truthfulness and moral rightness of their works, but the enhancement of
the aesthetic value might well be worth it. Whatever historians do, an aesthetic turn will not come from simply writing more expressively. It will take more. It will take engagement with senses that historians have neglected for far too long.

CONCLUSION

An aesthetic turn comes to history from a reconsideration of how to evaluate historical narratives. Historical narratives have to be judged on their three distinct components: objective truth, moral rightness, and aesthetic value. If a given narrative is true to the past, does justice to it, and expressively connects us to it, then it’s a compelling narrative. On account of aesthetic value, historians should judge narratives based on how well they connect those of us in the present with those of us in the past. This can’t be the only value under consideration, however. A dedication to objective truth and moral rightness is still required. Moreover, an aesthetic turn for history will require new formations of how to do history and how to engage those of us in the present with the past. These new formations will likely use visual and auditory technologies. Whatever the case, an aesthetic turn is absolutely necessary for history to be significant to us as individuals and communities and to prevent the levelling of our ancestors.
CONFESSION BOOTH

“I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah.”

Psalm 32:5, KJV
IN THE CONFESSIONAL

This is an interactive adapted from parts III and IV of Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction* translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). Please see the archive for an academic summary and interpretation of these two parts.

Welcome to the confessional. This is a completely unrecorded, open space for you to say anything. No one will know what you write here. Everything you submit will only be stored on your computer and when you submit another confession, it will be deleted. So don’t worry about anyone finding out. It’s absolutely private. In fact, if you’d feel more comfortable, put your device into airplane mode. This page will still work because anything you write here isn’t sent anywhere. Please note, if you refresh this will send you back to the beginning of these dialogues, and if you hit the back button, you’ll be taken to the last page you were on. Alright, go ahead and make your first confession.

#

It feels good to admit something, get something off your chest, come clean, reveal a secret, say something you shouldn’t, disclose some private information, declare your feelings, let loose some insecurities, to be intimately sincere, or to tell the truth. Making a confession gives you a little pleasure, even if it’s just a tiny rush or a bit of relief. Confess again and try to notice how it makes you feel. Try to pick something intimate, something you wouldn’t share with anyone. These confessions give us the most pleasure.

#

It felt good, didn’t it? Did you get a little rush? Maybe a bit of relief? Again, don’t worry about anything you say here. It’s not going anywhere. To keep moving through these dialogues,
you’ll have to keep confessing. Take your time with this. Confessions are sacred and shouldn’t be rushed. This guided interactive will help you notice how confessions are intricately involved in the way you experience pleasure. You might feel emotional or excited as you keep confessing, that’s good! And if you’re not feeling much of anything, try to really dig into those secret parts of yourself and let them out. To advance, confess again.

#

Confessing a little urges you to confess a little more. You’re chasing after that rush or relief. But why does it feel so good? Does it feel good because you like it when computer programs make you tell secrets about yourself? Probably not. Many people confess in other ways and get the same pleasure out of it. Some people write diaries. Some talk to themselves. Some dish tea with their friends. Some pray to a higher power. Some tell their therapists. Some blurt it out inappropriately to acquaintances. Some do it in the confessional at church. Where are you making confessions in your everyday life? You do it there partly because it makes you feel better, right? There’s something about confessions and pleasure that just go together, like two peas in a pod.

There’s something else going on here though. Something causes you to confess, we could call it a demand to confess, and when you do, you feel pleasure. You could ignore this demand to confess. There’s no punishment in not confessing. But the demand to make a confession, to blurt out what’s on your mind or what’s weighing on you, keeps increasing. The itch keeps getting itchier. The demand gets more demanding and giving in feels even better the longer you put it off. There’s no consequence to confessing here, and if it makes you feel good, why shouldn’t you do it?
For your next confession, explain your last one. Write more details. Give the full story. Don’t leave anything out. This might take some time, but I believe in you.

#

The demand to confess is never ending. After every confession, another one is demanded. No confession is ever complete. There’s always something more to say. You said something more, didn’t you? It might have taken you a while to confess more, but you did do it. This isn’t bad thing at all. This means that confessions are infinitely capable of making more pleasure. They’re endlessly productive. Giving into confession is giving into a boundless pool of pleasure.

Your previous confession may have been about any topic. Confessions can be about anything, but a privileged theme of the confession is sex. It’s been that way since the Catholic Church started to get into the confession business almost a millennium ago. Our culture certainly hasn’t moved beyond it. It seems like most TV shows, movies, and songs are confessions about sex. Even the very act of sex itself is spread with confessions from talking about fantasies and what you’re going to do beforehand, to dirty talking during, to discussing what you really liked afterward. It doesn’t really end there. Soon you talk to your friends about it, or maybe your therapist, or maybe even just yourself. Each little confession begets another one. After all, after every confession, another one is demanded.

For your next confession, admit something sexual. Maybe try a fantasy? Remember, none of this is going anywhere. Nothing is sent anywhere. This is all private and confidential.

#

In other cultures, from different places and times, pleasure was mostly made from actually having sex. Something happened in Western culture though. When we got into this confessing business, we realized that we could make pleasure just by asking our bodies to say
something we had been withholding. We soon learned that sexual confessions were by far the most pleasurable ones. Suddenly, instead of pleasure coming from doing pleasurable things, we were getting pleasure from just thinking about pleasure. We were getting pleasure from every admission, omission, exaggeration, understatement, guess, and analysis about sex.

The confession is an extraction of the truth about sex from our bodies. Oftentimes people believe that talking about sex means that they’re not repressed, that they’re fighting off sex negative culture. They’re fighting off a power that wants to hold them back. This couldn’t be further from the truth! It is power itself that demands all these confessions. When we confess we’re not fighting power, we’re giving into it.

Worry not though. Power isn’t negative, bad, or wrong. This just tells us that power and pleasure and linked together. Moreover, they’re linked in such a way as to be endlessly productive, always ready to spin us into new spirals of ecstasy. Consider it this way, how could power ever get something done if all it did was repress, if it all it did was say no to things? It couldn’t get much done at all! Power has to be positive. Power has to say yes.

Now that you realize that your confessions are pretty powerful things, I’ll give you a little break on the hard confessions. Go ahead and confess what you had for your last meal.

#

Are you still hanging in there? We’re almost done with this interactive. Two more dialogues to go.

Alright, you now know that confessions make pleasure, they like to make pleasure from sex the most, they’re unending, and that they’re related to power. They’re pretty phenomenal things, aren’t they? They’re also the method that we use to take things from our irreal worlds to put them into the real world. You do this all the time without even realizing it. It’s your human
nature. If you’ve ever told someone about a dream you’ve had, if you ever looked into a painting and suddenly been moved and wrote that down, if you’ve ever gone out for a drive and that one song came on and you took a moment to call someone, then you’ve used the confession as a tool to make your irreal world real.

Confessions can take experiences and express them: aloud in spoken language, written with words, or even in artistic works. Because irreal experiences don’t have material counterparts, the only way for them to enter the real world is through the confession. You probably already realize this without thinking. If you have fantasy, it doesn’t exactly correspond to anything in the material world, does it? But you still have a way of making that fantasy real by admitting to it through a confession. Oftentimes, the contents of the juiciest confessions are irreal. The sick sexual fantasy that you have and the wrongful impulsive thoughts you want to act out probably have no material existence. And until you confess them in speech, writing, action, or art they’ll stay irreal.

For your second to last confession, submit one of your dreams. Is there a reoccurring one that you keep having? Is there one that was really good you had recently?

#

You made an irreal confession. Congratulations. You’ve also made it to the end of this interactive. Take pride in your confessions, forgive yourself for what you feel guilty, and relish in the sweet, sweet pleasure. You’ve done a great job. May your confessions continue to lead to ever more pleasure. In the spirit of the confessional, tell one last confession.

#

The end.
LIVING LEGEND

He is on my mind. He is in my thoughts. He is on the tip of my tongue. The more I think of him, the more intense pleasure comes on. So, I write and I talk and I think and I dream and it feels so good to let him overwhelm me. I revel in his fingers, his voice, the hair on his legs, his confusion, his persistence, his past. I eagerly await his confessions, noting each detail for my own confessions later. I take his truth and I take his body. And it becomes my body and my truth.

Maybe it’s his voice that does it for me. Or is it his posture? Or is it his warmth? Maybe it’s the way he talks, or the way he carries himself, or the way he invites people into his life. Is it his becoming or his being? It is the static or the dynamic? The component or the system?

I dream of the lost time spent in a different past, one where I confessed to him months ago the way I felt. What could have been might I had been courageous? But now he stays on my mind as a hopeful past and present. Just because it never happened doesn’t mean there wasn’t potential. Had the good orderly direction crossed our stars, maybe we would have been something more than each other. Maybe our stars are still destined to cross. Either way, he pulls me forward in my spiraling fascination with him.

Maybe the thoughts of what might have been and still might be are the truth: the crux between history and fantasy, presence and make-believe. Maybe it’s in my fantasies, nightdreams and daydreams, hallucinations, visions, the creative things I jot down, the things I get caught on and things I jump over that the truth of my experience lies. Maybe to tell the history of who I am I have to escape time, I have to escape beginnings and ends, I have to escape the here and now and the there and then, and I have to escape what really happened because so much of who I am has never happened at all. My presence in the world, my attunement to my senses, the way I interpret, the way I understand sensation, process it into emotion, and transform
it to thoughts, the way I do these things is largely the bounty of the things that have yet to be. To understand who I am, to get my history, demands knowing how I play my memories, how I invent, how I refashion, how I intuit, how I craft the world around me, and how I have understood my being.

Telling my true history starts with telling my irreal history. It starts in my dreams and fantasies. It builds up into my journals and ponderings. It plays out in my conversations and in my quiet affirmations. It reveals itself in my art and my prose, and it settles in the way that I live my life, in all my intentions and beliefs, in my desires and fears, in the way I claw forward through the endless cycling of the clock.

I start with my confession, divulging the thoughts that toy with me as I daze off into space and as I drift into sleep. While slips of the tongue, garbled sentences, and unintended actions suit themselves well here, these acts of the unconscious are real. They did happen. They’re historical events. My dreams, awake and asleep, are irreal. Based on the material world, revised by the unconscious, and recalled correctively, dreams offer a region of events that have yet to happen or may have happened. Though they’re not quite unreal, I have experienced them. I have lived those moments. Yet no evidence of them exists in the material world. To create such evidence, I have to record my dreams and make them something I can work with. I have to confess.

I confess that he comes to me in my dreams. In one dream, I awoke to him sitting at my desk. He looked over at me with a grin, his legs spread wide. He was wearing blue jeans, the rough, stiff kind. His energy was infectious, and I returned his grin with one of my own letting his happiness fill me. And I was at peace suddenly. All anxiety, sadness, anger, fear, shame, and disgust had vanished leaving simply love in their place. He must have known that I was unsure if
he was my boyfriend because he taunted me about it. But he was. We spent the entire day together, inseparable. I held his hand, I cuddled him, and I fell asleep on his chest and I awoke in his strong arms. Before he left my dream, he picked me up, balancing me over his shoulder like a fireman. And then he started to spin. Round and round we went, inertia pulling me away so that my body was flying. He danced me all around the room, our joy overflowing in every laugh. But every dream ends, and my eyes fluttered open to my dark room, the seat at my desk empty.

I have too dreamed of running errands with him in his truck. I’ve dreamed of stealing him away from work. I’ve dreamed of him kissing me. I’ve dreamed of him teasing me and me teasing him. We’ve gone on wild adventures, uninhibited by the constraints of the material world. In my dreamscapes, we are two men in love and lost in dogdays of August. We are the scraps of stardust shooting across the sublime landscapes of the American West.

I confess that I daydream of driving with him on hot summer days, pressing up against him in crowded spaces, holding his hand on our way to the bar, hearing his voice in the morning, watching him dress after sex, talking about his childhood, and comforting his sadness. I’ve visualized the comfort and warmth of his body. I’ve thought of the vacations we might take to places with nights so dark the entire cosmos appears. I’ve envisioned us looking at rocks, reading the clues to a long-gone history. I have pictured how he might interact with my family, talking sports and politics just the right way, shying away from argument.

I confess that in these dreams I slowly lose him. He becomes any man. He becomes no one, and I realize that what I have desired is not who he actually is. I have imagined a man who does not exist, attempted to answer to an Other without form, and fallen for something conjured up between the real world and my dreamscapes. All my thoughts, dreams, and fears dance around him. It seems no matter the thoughts I pick up to play with in my mind, he’ll eventually
come along and I’ll end up right where I always do, spinning around him. But he, like a
blackhole, is a void, nonsensical, meaningless. The idea of him refers to nothing at all. To evoke
him produces an absence. Every part of my mind which cyclones around his name finds that no
matter how much I might try to connect my life to him, I end up at a wall. I end up nowhere. I
end up in the void.

Although he may be my void, he too is my living legend. He is the myth that circulates
my body. While he might be meaningless, he makes everything else meaningful. His name itself
crops up in the strangest of places. It’s a name that has already drawn me in before. It’s a name
which easily slips into the sounds of other words. Its syllables rhyme with the things that have
obsessed me. Long before I knew him, the pieces of him were gathering up. They were sticking
tightly to each other, lurching for a name which could hold and hide them. The words chained
themselves together not by meaning or content but instead by their mere sounds. And as I look
for his meaning, I am left with a chain of words that sound like him, as if I am playing a game of
charades with no answer.

He, my living legend and void, sweeps through my vocabulary, pouncing at every
similarity. At each edge end of my brains, he etches himself in with that wretched damn hymn.
He tattoos himself as an eponym on my body leaving me with what happened then. And all the
flattered men who see his name in their own tattered thin souls, may God grant them peace
because this man’s name has power beyond any legend I’ve heard.

Displacing his void means knocking his name into a new legend. A part me is ready to do
this, ready to empty him of his power, ready to destroy his position of master of my head, ready
to bury him deep into the next word that blitzes through my fragile head. But a part of me wants
to keep him right in his place, let every part of him course through my body, let each syllable of
my vocabulary fall to his name, and completely become his. I am caught between moving on and
digging in. Do I want to savor the pain of the things that have yet to happen or do I want to cash
in on a new era of irreality?

I have created an irreality so vivid that moving on seems like giving up a part of who I
am. That part of me has no material presence in the world. It is fully imagined, but its
consequence cannot be understated because I cannot see the world through anything except
through this living legend. As I walk the spaces of old memories to visit the ghosts of my past, I
recode my recollections in the light of his name. I zip off into a world I have shared with him,
altering the memories that have been rewritten a hundred times over. So even when I do choose
to move on, he will remain, as all my other blackholes do, in the recesses of my memory. His
gravity forever changing who I am and who I will be.

He is my living legend. But one day, in the irreal world I have created of him, he will die.
But the marks of the past do not vanish. They harbor themselves in all the ways I think, feel, act,
dream, and desire. His irreal death will only mean that his name no longer finds itself at the end
of my thoughts. Yet he will always remain, locked into the parts of my body that do not forget,
the parts that years after the fact will remember the motions and feelings of who I once could
have been, the parts that will act out these thoughts, wordlessly, unbeknownst to my ego,
sabotaging or playing accomplice to a me who has yet to exist.

Right now, he is my living legend. He is the myth that spins me around on his shoulders.
He is the key to parts of me I’ll never consciously know. And he will have never existed at all,
yet his presence could not be more real in my life. He is my history not because I have written
him into the story of who I am, but because he has. He is my irreality. And he is, and always will
be, mine.
“Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand in my youth are dead, even Jessie. But I still reach out to them.

Of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman. And now I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think that I shouldn’t.

But when I am alone in the half-light of the canyon, all existence seems to fade to a being with my soul and memories, and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River, and a four-count rhythm, and the hope that a fish will rise.

Eventually, all things merge into one. And a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.”

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TOWARD A NEW ANCESTRY
LOOKING BACKWARD

History’s aesthetic turn will require a broader conception of ancestry. The current idea of family trees and genetics, of shared traits and passed down stories, artificially limits us. Telling a history that brings us back to this fraction of our belonging largely misses the vast timescapes of the universe and places us squarely in a misconceived idea of our origins. We relate to this world far beyond our grandparents, far beyond fourth cousins and distant lands, far beyond any meager conception of our personal histories.

Taking ancestry to be the story of belonging, I see it as fundamentally synonymous with history. The story of our belonging usually begins at the first humans, or, at least, how the God(s) who later would make humans came to be. In a post-mythological society that demands empirical evidence, we begin somewhere in the evolution of our species to trace out our ancestry.

In his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2015), historian Yuval Noah Harari expands the idea of human history to include not just our species, *Homo sapiens*, but all human species. While part of this is simply to place Sapiens into the larger picture of our evolution, another part of it is simply that where the line of human history should be drawn is unclear and frankly arbitrary. But all the same Harari draws that line at the species belonging to the genus *Homo*. These species walked on two feet, used stone tools, and had brains roughly larger than 45 cubic inches (740 cubic centimeters). This brings the birth of humanity back to about 2.3 million years ago when *Homo habilis* and *Homo rudolfensis* evolved from an older genus of ancestors, *Australopithecus* (the Southern Apes). About 2 million years ago *Homo erectus* evolved and became the first human species to leave Africa and control fire. Then,
roughly 300 thousand years ago, *Homo erectus* evolved into *Homo denisova* (the Denisovans), *Homo neanderthalensis* (the Neanderthals), and us *Homo sapiens*. About 70 thousand years ago, Sapiens began to overrun the planet and drove the Denisovans, Neanderthals, and other human species to extinction. It’s only a recent phenomenon, then, that we are the only human species on Earth. Today our closest living relative is *Pan troglodytes*, the chimpanzee, who also evolved from the *Australopithecus* genus.

This is a far larger conception of human history than we are usually familiar with. Our academic understanding of human history usually begins with the advent of agriculture about 12,000 years ago, even though we’re well aware that humans lived before then. Harari’s extension of human history to the evolution of the genus *Homo* is just as arbitrary though as choosing agriculture as a starting point. Why shouldn’t we include the genus *Australopithecus* in our definition of human history? They used tools, walked on two feet, and had somewhat large brains too. In the end, there’s no truly convincing start point for the beginning of human history. While using language seems like an obvious place to start, it’s equally problematic. It has no clear beginning and the history of its complexity, usage, and effectiveness are for the most part unknowable. And even if it were, at what point do we decide that language is sophisticated enough that we can begin human history? We’re back to the fundamental point that any qualification for what human history is finds itself stuck in the constant slippages of the idea of humanity.

Moreover, deciding an arbitrary point to begin human history is just a matter of convenience more than it is of utility. That is, we choose to begin human history at agriculture not because agriculture made us humans but because we have to begin somewhere, and this seems far enough back that anything before doesn’t matter. The same is true if we pick the
advent of tool use, or fire use, or language use. Moreover, our ancestors certainly don’t have to be limited to just humans. From a strictly biological perspective of ancestry as a line of descent, species from the *Australopithecus* genus are still our ancestors even if they’re not humans. The question here becomes: In thinking about ancestry, is there any highly convincing reason to stop at humanity? Giving up humanity, though seemingly extreme, is the best option. There’s really no reason that we need to demarcate humans from earlier ancestors. Not only is any attempt to do so arbitrary, but it also only takes away from our ability to see our belongingness in a complete portrait. *Expanding ancestry only helps us to see our place within the cosmos better.* If we continue to trace back our evolutionary roots farther than *Australopithecus*, we slowly trace out genetic inheritance back to the first mammals, then to the first amphibians, then to the first multicellular lifeforms, all the way back to the common ancestor for all life on Earth today, a single celled organism that lived on Earth roughly 3.8 billion years ago. And perhaps we might trace back even farther, hopping off the DNA timeline to the very early stages of life on Earth.

But why stop here? Why should our ancestors only be living things, however murky that term is? In their book, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), Mel Chen points out that we construct the world from a perspective of liveliness, or animacy—the quality of having life; the ability to do or cause things; the ability to move or be aware. But it’s not just living things that have animacy. After the sealing of the Deep Horizon oil well’s catastrophic spill, the media declared that the well was “‘killed,’ ‘killed for good,’ ‘dead,’ ‘effectively dead,’ and even ‘permanently dead.’” The use of kill and dead presumes “that a toxic spill was a *lifely* thing,” one that was “lifely” partly because oil “had flowed out of it with such vivid animation” but also because “it was a threat to life in the Gulf, as well as to a *way* of life” (225, 227). Pages away Chen highlights that rocks, “despite
their mainstream representation as dead and inanimate,” are “dynamic and even moving, changing and shifting at a time scale that seems to outrun human life spans” (235). Moreover, it’s not just a matter of living and not-living. There are entire hierarchies of animacy. A human is more animate than a sea turtle. A sea turtle is more animate than an oil spill. An oil spill is more animate than a rock. Chen suggests that the reasons behind what has more animacy than another thing largely falls on the lines of sexuality, race, and ability. Is the oil spill animate because it represents a “dirty” substance that “contaminates” pristine communities? And if that’s so, that strongly aligns with racial narratives.

Chen’s work brings two critical points to our attention here. First, life is not a matter of living and not-living. It’s a hierarchy of animacy (created mostly on cultural boundaries). Second, the idea of life, if expanded to geologic and cosmic timescales, enlivens everything in our world. These two conclusions lead me to consider ancestry from beyond the typical conception of life. Our ancestors can absolutely be water, rocks, and stars. At vastly larger timescales, these ancestors are overspilling with liveliness. Water cycles from rivers and lakes to glaciers and underground reservoirs, from the clouds and the dew drops on grass to transpired vapor of leaves and exhaled moisture of our breaths. In much the same way, rocks cycle from igneous to metamorphic to sedimentary forms. They become molten magma and microscopic fragments. They undergo intense heat and pressure and daily weathering. The stars are no different in their lively transformations. They come from nebulae collapsing into stars. Some of these stars will rapidly grow as they start fusing hydrogen around a core of helium, becoming red giants. Once the atoms for nuclear fusion deplete, the star will eject its outer layers and turn its inner layers into a white dwarf. Larger stars will explode in massive supernovas as their cores turn into neutron stars and black holes. In the water and rock cycles and in stellar evolution
there’s an immense amount of action and huge movements of matter. These are lively processes. But they’re only lively when we give up a human-centric idea of time.

Including all matter as our ancestors, as this conclusion ultimately causes us to do, leads us to an investigation of the origins of all matter. First, we must see, however, that all matter is fundamentally the same, made up of the same elementary particles. As we zoom in on anything, we’ll eventually arrive at atoms. Magnifying closer we see that atoms are made up of protons, neutrons, and electrons. And magnifying even closer, we see that all matter is made up of quarks and leptons, the most elementary particles. These are the constituent parts of all matter according to the Standard Model of particle physics. Every physical substance in the universe is made up of quarks and leptons.

All quarks and leptons originate from the same source and, through their lively transformation, have created everything that we interact with today. Approximately 13.8 billion years ago from an infinitely dense and hot singular point the universe rapidly began expanding and cooling. From this expansion and cooling came the elementary particles and later atoms, mostly hydrogen and helium. Due to gravity, denser areas of atoms coalesced and these formed nebulae, stars, and galaxies. Heavier elements, like boron, carbon, and oxygen, were then and continue to be created through nuclear reactions within stars, as well as nuclear reactions caused by cosmic rays. Elements created in these reactions, along with hydrogen and helium during the initial cooling and expansion of the universe, formed dense bodies, and one of these came to be the Earth. We, along with everything else on Earth, are made up of this matter.

We’re not sure what happened before this rapid expansion and cooling of the universe. But our origins, at least in one point in time, were at an infinitely dense and hot point. In this sense, all matter fundamentally originates from the same source and all matter relates to one
another. Our ancestors are merely that matter in different configurations, whether that be a cloud of star dust or the condensation on a mirror or the body of a loved one. In the end, if we consider the colossal past we have inherited, we realize that we are related to all things, living or not, close or billions of lightyears away.

Separating our ancestors out as only humans doesn’t give us the whole picture of our history. In thinking about who our ancestors are, if we disregard the ideas of humanity and DNA, we end up with far more to work with and far more to make sense of our position in the world. As creations of the world, as inheritors of all our prior ancestors, and as beings at the subatomic level no different than anything else, we are deeply entrenched in a far wider and larger conception of ancestry, whether we want to be or not. Our ancestry is queer. It slips beyond categories like humanity, life, and time. The great wonder of ancestry is that we are children of the cosmos. Let’s embrace the queer reality that our differences come from the same ancestry. Our cousins the frog, the glacier, and the North Star are just as much ancestors as are our great grandparents are. Though they might be far more distant in the cosmological tree of existence, they nevertheless notate our point in belonging. And telling the story of our belonging requires telling their stories as well.

LOOKING FORWARD

So far, the story of our ancestry has been told in the past tense. Such a large conception of ancestry as I’ve presented so far is not particularly profound. Carl Sagan with his book *Cosmos* and the entire Big History movement largely hold to many of these same beliefs. They fundamentally miss a part of our history, however. They miss the very real ways that the future creates our present. They miss that in imagining the future, we project ourselves into countless possible worlds all which affect the one we live in now. In dreaming of having a different job or
moving to a new place, we adjust the picture of ourselves in the present to conform to a possible version of us in the future. In this way, ancestors, things which give us our belonging, can very much exist in the future. In existing only in the future, these ancestors are irreal. They’re stuck in a world that may be and may not be. They’re stuck in hopeful desires and anxious fears. Nevertheless, these ancestors as still very much a part of our ancestry.

This is my intervention. Ancestry is both backward and forward looking. It’s both real and irreal. *This is a queer ancestry*. It’s one that totally transcends all form and time to mark our belonging in the world. Whether we look to stories in the past to guide us in the present or hope for new formations in the future to move us through the present, we are seeking ancestors. These ancestors provide us with answers on our own belonging in the world. For historians, this means that to understand a given person’s belonging in time they must also understand the ways that they imagine the future, or other possible worlds.

Be careful to note that irreal history is not counterfactual history, such as the popular *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* edited by Niall Ferguson (New York: Basic Books, 1999). In counterfactual history, historians in the present make up a past that did not happen as an attempt to understand how history unfolds. Such as, what if the American Revolution hadn’t happened? Irreal historians aren’t interested in how people in the present make up pasts that couldn’t have existed. They’re interested in how people in the past made up futures, or dreamed of other types of possible worlds, to understand their present. An irreal historical question might be, what did Incan women dream about in the sixteenth century? From an irreal historian’s perspective, the things in these women’s dreams would be considered ancestors and understood to be sources of belonging. In asking such a question and looking at in
this way, irreal historians seek to understand a fuller range of the human condition to access their own ancestries better.

From a queer ancestry, irreal history determines the belonging of any given person in time. Whether irreal historians look to the irreal ancestors of the future or the real ancestors of the past, they seek out belonging in its widest conception. Such a wide conception may seem daunting, but anything less than this can’t capture the full range of how humans have found their places in this world and realized the relationships they’ve found. In other words, the way people of the past understood their relationships to other humans, to other life, to nature, to everything that exists, and to everything that might come to exist defines their belonging in the world. These relationships—or in a more concise word, these cosmologies—are the study of irreal history.

What separates irreal history from other forms of history that focus on cosmologies, however, is the belief that ancestry is both backward and forward looking. In this distinction, a wider scope of belonging comes to life.
EMBODYING ANCESTRY: THE LAKE & THE STARS

I’m at the beach in March. The waves make a soft white noise and a constant cool mist. It’s cold, gray, and I keep thinking about getting in my car to go warm up. I’ve dedicated myself to sitting out here though. I’ve come to the water for a reason.

I’ve come by myself, book in tow in case it takes a while before I get what I came for. I read carefully through the first chapter after finding a place to sit in the sand. In the summer, the sand is so hot you put a towel out. In the early days of spring, the sand is so cold you put a blanket out. I’m in a secluded spot, only a couple people are at the beach today.

After reading into the second chapter, I put the book down and get up to walk along the shoreline. My eyes scan across the wet sand at the shells and stones. I’m looking for an orange or red pebble. I stroll down the beach for a while and the wind is starting to pick up. I’m getting cold enough that I regret not bringing a thicker jacket.

There it is. It’s a small, reddish pebble, granite. There are little specs of black mica covering it. I pick it up and hold it in my hand, feeling it smooth weathered edges. The rocks on the beach are usually smooth from the abrasion of the wind and the wash of the waves. Granite is an igneous rock, coming from slowly cooled magma within the Earth’s crust. This little rock has taken a long journey to get to my hands.

I didn’t come to beach looking for stones. I came to the beach for the water, looking for a sense of meaning or belonging or something. As I uncurl my fingers from the pebble, I look back down at it. Maybe this is why I’m here, to hold this little piece of granite. I walk with it in my fingers back to spot where I’ve left my things. I settle back down and tuck the stone into my jacket pocket and return to my book. I read some more before I’m finally ready to look out at the water.
The water at Lake Michigan today is surprisingly calm. It gently laps at the beach despite the wind’s occasional fierce gusts. I look over the waters, and I slowly sink into my ancestor’s arms. As the waves wash over the shore, the water slowly rocks me in her arms. I close my eyes and just listen to her gentle lullaby.

There’s an Anishinaabe story about the lake. Long ago, across the lake, there was a great fire. A mother bear and her cubs trying to escape the fire began to swim across the large lake. The bears swam for hours and hour. The cubs got tired on the long swim. The mother bear reassured them that land wasn’t far away. She was right, soon they could see the land. Mother bear reached the land first. She climbed to the highest bluff and waited for her cubs to join her. But they, in sight of the shore, had drowned. Mother bear never left her spot, waiting eternally for her cubs to join her. Where they had drowned formed two islands and where mother bear lay and wait formed a sand dune.

I imagine that as the two poor cubs swam to exhaustion, the lake pulled them into her arms, singing her sweet lullaby, and guided them to their final resting place. The gentle lapping of the waves comforting them into eternal sleep. Today, as I sit here on the beach, I listen to the same lullaby the lake always sings, and I think of those bears, sitting like mother bear waiting.

Eventually I open my eyes, gazing at my old ancestor the lake. The crest of the waves reflects the light in sparkling patterns. According to scientists, we’re sixty percent water. Perhaps to feel the arms of my ancestor the lake I don’t need to come here. She’s always inside of me, constituting me, always holding me together. Maybe that’s why I’m here, I’m hoping that listening to the lullaby of the lake will remind me that’s she always within me. I decide that the little granite piece I’ve found can remind me from now on of my ancestor the lake, at least, while I’m away from her.
I’m very cold now, my fingers feel like ice. I pack my things up into my bag and walk back to my car. Sometimes you go searching for something and you don’t find anything, but today I found something. I found a rock. I found my ancestor the lake. I found that within me all along was the lake. I get in my car, start it, and warm back up. I pull the rock out from my pocket and inspect it more carefully this time. It’s not very sparkly like some granite is; in fact, it’s rather dull. As I play with it between my fingers, I mull over the other forty percent of me that isn’t water. It must be things like proteins and… well whatever else we’re made of, I’m not too sure. I laugh at the thought that I’m not really sure what I’m made up of. I return the rock to my pocket, and I drive home.

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My mom had taken us camping at a dark sky park. Dark sky parks are places that have especially magnificent views of the stars. I have always felt an affinity for the stars ever since I learned to spot the Big Dipper, the North Star, and Orion’s belt back in third grade. I can remember going camping years ago during a meteor shower. I don’t think anyone else realized it, but as I peered into the night’s sky hundreds of shooting streams of light shot across the black canvas. It mesmerized me. Once when my dad took us to the natural history museum, we went to a planetarium show. Our planetary guide showed us all sorts of cool things on the ceiling, zooming us from the Milky Way to the Andromeda galaxy. When I was in high school, I bought Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* and read several passages from it. I learned the universe was astoundingly old. What really stuck with me though was that we were seriously made from star dust. Sagan says something along the lines of, we are the cosmos learning about itself. I thought that was beautiful.
So, while I was absolutely not excited to wake up at four in the morning, shortly before
the sun was set to rise, I knew it would be well worth it. My mom and I walked out to an open
space and laid down to stargaze and wait for the sun to blaze to life in the horizon. Even though
twilight was quickly approaching, I don’t think I’d ever seen as many stars as I did that morning.
It had to have been tens of thousands of them, maybe more. I kept thinking that I wish I knew
more constellations. With so many stars out, I could see just how colorful the night’s sky can be.
It’s a mix of warm and cool light, regions of dark black and regions of lighter gray. Yet
somehow, even with this minimal palette it truly looks vivid, colorful even.

Soon though, the sun started to rise, and dawn began to warm the sky. Then the pure,
golden edges of the sun peeked out from the horizon and the Earth roared to life. The stars
slowly faded away and the vibrant night’s sky disappeared. While the sunrise was beautiful, it
simply couldn’t compare to the intensity of seeing the cosmos like that in their total grand scale
as humans have long seen as they looked into the sky. It’s a moment in my life which has no
equivalence. I’ve never seen the stars in such detail since. I’ve never seen the world open up to
me in the same way. Perhaps once is all it takes, though.

The amazement of looking into the cosmos like that comes from, I believe, the realization
that we are a part of all this. Sometimes it can seem as if we’re spinning in circles, unsure what
the hell we’re doing. The second you look up at that night’s sky though, that’s the second you
remember that every problem you have is so insignificant in the scale of the universe and that for
as troubled and broken as you may be, you are living star dust. Take a moment to feel your body
and just realize that you really are, in honest to God truth, living star dust.

The stars, my so distant ancestors, enchant me for the simple fact that I am from them.
How wonderful it is that our sun, a bright yellow star in his own right, takes us into his care,
nurturing us with warmth and light, knowing too that we are from his relatives. Each morning, as light filters in and touches my body, I am invigorated with my ancestors’ spirit, in a sense of long belonging, of knowing that from this cosmos I have come and to it I will return. Contained in this spirit is the knowledge that, despite all that has happened and all that may happen, I can trust I’m here because the universe wanted me to be and that when the universe decides I should no longer be, it will take me, and transform me, as it always does to all things, into something new.

The stars, my cosmic ancestors, unlike the lake can never disappear from my life. When the sun sets, and I look up, they will always be there. No matter where I am in the world, they’ll be above me. Maybe a cloud will block them on some nights, or the pollution of city light will blur them, but they will still be there, watching over me. In millions of years many of them will transform into the next cycle of their stellar evolutions, transforming, as all things do, into their next lively forms.

Eventually my mom and I get up off the ground, dust the dirt away, and go back to the campsite. I’m not sure if we said much of anything to each other. After all, when you’ve seen the sublime, there’s not much to say. In the still morning, my family got ready, and we went out to kayak on Lake Michigan. The kayaking was fun, but it’s the sky that night I will always remember. It was that night I came face to face with my ancestors in a way that was totally unexpected. Sometimes you’re not looking for anything at all, and something quite magnificent finds you.

+++ The lake and the stars are my ancestors. They’re not always there in front or above me. They don’t have to be because when I close my eyes and dream of being at the beach or dream of being at the dark sky park, they come back to me. The lake sings her lullaby, and the stars
silently twinkle. I am reminded in these moments that my ancestors are always inside me. I embody them and they are embodied in me. Every once in a while, when I truly just get overwhelmed, I slow myself down and close my eyes and go back to my ancestors, the lake and the stars. I ask for their guidance. I think about what they might do.

The past few months I’ve felt stuck. So stuck. I have reoccurring dreams of trying to leave places and I just can’t ever get out. I’ll get stuck at the casino, stuck at the park, stuck in my house, stuck. Always stuck. I get stuck writing. I get stuck driving in the snow. I get stuck looking for a job. I’m always stuck.

When I look to my ancestor the lake, when I feel her within me, I am reminded that I am in constant motion. I am like the wave, cycling forward and backward, shimmering in the light. Some things only stay the same by changing. If I feel stuck, it just means, paradoxically, that I’m always changing. And if I’m always changing, then I’m not really stuck at all, am I?

When I look to my ancestors the stars, when I let them glow upon my skin from above, they urge me to remember that like the star dust I am made of, I am infinitely capable of creating anew. No matter how stuck I am, I can remake my world. I can unstick myself. I can explode like a supernova into something totally different.

My ancestors, present or not, in the past or in the future, they’re here. They’re within me. They’re outside of me. They’re everywhere and they are everything. I need not worry in the constant care of my loved ones. I let them fill me with the love I so desperately need these days, and everything is alright.
CONFESSION’S PLAYGROUND

The magazine has taken confession as its most powerful technology. With its tell-all interviews of celebrities, holy grail, must-have, top secret product recommendations of editors, eye-catching reader submitted admissions to the raunchiest acts, and miles of bodies freed from clothes, the magazine is post-modernity’s forgotten confessional. We the readers are the priests, and the writers the parishioners. Unlike priests though, us readers bask in such confessions, begging for more, awaiting the next issue. In its dizzying intoxication of our senses from the oh-so-glossy touch of the page to the alluring, provocative fragrance samples to the almost audible headlines to the utterly hypnotizing pull of the visually stunning bodies, clothes, and cosmetics, the magazine is the sensuous playground of desire. While we may be silent like the priest, we are assuredly sinful in our magnetic attraction to confessions.

The magazine does not sell us fantasy. Nor does it sell reality. It sells something in between. It sells irreality. From our bedrooms, waiting rooms, living rooms, and bathrooms, we find ourselves caught between a material reality and a feverish explosion of fantasy. Grounded in the former and floating in the latter, us readers mediate a world between. We doubt the rumors that SNL’s Pete Davidson and Instagram’s Kim Kardashian are dating—how could that be! We think about what we would do hypothetically if we were as rich as Beyoncé. We dream of beautiful clothes from the world’s top artists and gorgeous interiors filled with luxurious consumables. We find it necessary to seek out that heady cologne. We presume that even if we were the perfect anti-consumerists that we ought to be, we still would get sucked into capital’s most irresistible marketing invention. We put ourselves in the confessor’s shoes and we play. We play with what might be and what might have been. We play with our lives by playing with theirs.
To dream and imagine worlds that hinge in possibilities, *that* is the essence of irreality. And that is the soul of the future.

While we are attracted to confessions of the magazine, the magazine is also a provocateur of our own confessions. Through its highly sensuous nature it encourages us to play with it and make it our own. There are many ways that magazines generate irreal worlds, but two ways that any of us can get irreal in the magazine are remixing and recasting. Remixing is taking apart the magazine and forming it into new original works. Recasting is putting ourselves into the magazine to play in the shoes of another. These two irreal strategies together make magazines a nearly infinite world of possibilities, a world that can demands us to confess anew. Remixing and recasting are just two of the activities on confession’s playground, but two powerful ones at that. In the following section, remixing is explained. For an explanation of recasting, see the next page in this exhibit, “The Guided Daydream.”

**REMIXING**

Remixing, usually known as collaging, is the process of reimagining content from one form to another. While any type of media can be remixed, magazines are particularly well suited for this. Their love of the confession makes them easy targets to trigger our own confessions. By using the words or picture of another’s confession, we can playfully reveal our own in symbols remixed. Truly, magazines beg to be pulled apart, cut into slices, taped and pasted together in novel ways, and then sent back through that very cycle again and again.

Scattered throughout the exhibits on irrealhistory.com are remixed works. Such works take the magazines I have been reading over the course of the last six months and spin them into totally new works that reflect the thoughts I’ve been thinking while writing these essays. Most of these artworks have been ideas floating in my head for weeks and weeks. Once I’m ready to
confess these ideas, I gather up my magazines and begin to flip through them collecting pieces that match my imaginings. The magazines never fully match what I’ve imagined, and they do limit me. The creativity in remixing is seeking ways to still express the thoughts of my irreality into an artwork. This is the brilliance of the magazine. It forces us to see differently, often very differently.

In my piece *The Stars* I mostly used jewelry advertisements to mimic the effect of twinkling stars. In these advertisements, glitter is spread over a dark blue surface to provide stark contrast to clear, pure jewels. This contrast has the effect of making the jewels look like planets or moons in the night sky, as something worthy of all our attention. Using the blue backdrops of these advertisements and splicing them together with straight, curved, and jagged edges makes outer space seem like a solid instead of a void. It’s as if we could slice up the cosmos and serve it on a plate. In the magazine’s limitation, in its inability to give me pictures of the night’s sky, it provides a new perspective on space: space as solid like rocks, minerals, and jewels. In this sense, we are but a sculpture of this solid form, a chiseled image of the cosmos. Centered on this composition is the carved human face obscured by the cosmos, reflecting this attitude.

Remixing is not always a creative attempt to depict something unavailable though. In my piece *The Lake* I had no issue finding many images and illustrations of moving water, although not always exactly what I was looking for. Remixing here shows just how different water can look. It can froth, bubble, sparkle, reflect, ripple, splash, crash, and rest. In this remixed work, we can see at once how vivacious water can look in its many transformations. The contrast in water’s forms pushes us to recognize it as not just life-giving but life-ly. Moreover, it produces a slight feeling of concern that the concept of water represents all these dissimilar forms. It comes to stand that the word hides the ways that water comes to be present to us in the world.
Yet remixing takes another form in my artwork *His Cyclone*. Remixing here shows the way that signifiers, the spelling of words in this case, form natural webs of meaning. We easily begin to associate signifiers, explaining meaning through the associations. While each signifier has a purposefully chosen location in this work, it’s easy to see how these words could be remixed again creating an entirely new set of valid meanings. In fact, that’s exactly what the work originally is. It’s someone else’s signifiers remixed in my associations. Here, remixing shows where subjectivity lies in art creation. It’s in the way that an artist associates elements from their unique vantage point.

In each of these works, remixing operates in a different way but in essence does the same thing. Remixing functions to create creative, new linkages. Here’s the real move though, it’s not just artworks that do this, it’s confession in general. The act of confessing, whether done in words, art, or action, is the process of creating and realizing new linkages between signifiers. This is why the magazine—despite its vapid, capitalist face—is quite the confession powerhouse. It’s, at heart, a dumping ground of confessions waiting to be picked up and reworked. It’s the playground of creativity.
THE GUIDED DAYDREAM

Recasting is essentially a daydream guided by the magazine. In what follows, I will provide instruction on how you can recast. These instructions are adapted from psychoanalyst Robert Desoille’s lecture on directed daydreaming. While Desoille provides guidance to analyst on how to guide their patients in a daydream, I’ll be providing guidance for everyday people to engage in magazine-directed dreaming without the help of an analyst. This is by no means a therapeutic device and should not be considered medical advice. Instead, it’s a dreaming exercise to encourage creative pathways and explorations into your irreality. As you work through these instructions, try not to overexert yourself. Take your time at each step. Don’t spend more than hour at this. You can take a break and pick up where you left off. Most of all, enjoy this experience, have fun in it. Daydreams are places of immense fun.

1. Begin by selecting a magazine of personal interest. The more specific and relevant to your hobbies and lifestyle the better. If you’re the gardening type, try a magazine on gardening. If you’re a fashionista, pick a fashion magazine. The closer of an affinity you have to a magazine, the easier recasting will be.

2. Browse through your selected magazine for something that catches your eye. This page ideally will be mostly visual, though perhaps it could be a particularly visceral story. You don’t need to know why it catches your eye. This doesn’t matter. But you’ll want something that you automatically and unconsciously gravitate toward.

3. Fully take in the page that has attracted your attention. Give yourself a couple minutes to absorb all the content. Notice every part of the composition. As you do this, write down what you see in no particular order. Try to get a list of at least ten things.
4. Once you have your list, choose five things. Try to choose things you naturally feel attracted toward. They don’t necessarily need to be beautiful or good things, just things that caught your attention. Number them one to five in whatever order you feel like. This list will be your guide through your daydream.

5. Start first by visualizing all the things on your list. Try to see them, feel them, touch them, hear them, smell them, and, if possible, taste them. Really try to fully immerse yourself with each of the things. The things are free to be completely different than the magazine version, although they can be identical too.

6. Now, describe where you’re at. Is it the same place as the magazine pictured? If it’s not, note the differences. Again, use all five of your senses to describe where you are. Try to fully immerse yourself in the setting. Take note of where each thing is in the scene. Once you’ve taken in your perspective, move around a little. Sense things from a different spot.

7. You may notice during this exploration that your thoughts wander and that you end up getting a little lost in your daydream. This is the point! Let yourself get lost. Go look at things closer, move to a different place in your daydream, go play with what in front of you. Do whatever you please. Maybe you’re not getting lost at all. That’s okay too. Just keep exploring your daydream piece by piece.

8. Whether you’re aware of it or not, you’re actually acting like someone else. Perhaps you’ve assumed to role of someone that was in the magazine picture or article. Perhaps you’ve just taken on the perspective of the photographer. Whatever the case is, you aren’t really you in this daydream. You’re someone else. What is this person’s life like? Are they a surfer, a millionaire, an astronaut, or an athlete? Try to picture who you are in this daydream with all five senses.
9. At this point, you may begin to confront things that weren’t originally from the magazine and things which you haven’t directly thought about. Perhaps a dog has run up against your legs or maybe you tripped. These are influences from the unconscious and this means you’re particularly deep in you daydream. As these experiences happen, if they happen, sense them fully. Notice every element.

10. At this point, you can end your daydream if you’d like, or you can keep going deeper. If you choose to go deeper, begin to imagine yourself floating up off the ground. First, one foot comes up off the ground, then the other. Soon you’re a couple inches off the ground a bit wobbly maybe. Steady yourself. Keep floating up until you have a good perspective over the landscape. If you’re struggling with this, imagine someone reaching from above to help you. Once again, take in everything with all your senses. How does this make you feel? Do you feel any different?

11. Once you feel satisfied with seeing from above, now begin to lower yourself to the ground. Feel yourself slowly sink back down. If this is challenging, imagine like a balloon, someone is pulling you back to Earth. As you get to the ground though, do not stop descending. Let yourself move through the Earth so that you are now looking at the world from below. Imagine you can see through the soil up at everything. Take everything in with your senses. How does this make you feel?

12. Once you feel satisfied with seeing from below, start to ascend back toward the surface. If this feels difficult imagine that you’re very buoyant and that your body can’t help but rise. Once back to the surface you can continue exploring your daydream for as long as you’d like.
13. When you’re ready come back from your daydream to material life. Take a couple of breaths. You’ve done a great job. Perhaps now, or maybe later, take time to write what happened in your daydream. What things appeared that you didn’t expect? Who were you pretending to be? Did you go anywhere you hadn’t anticipated? Try to describe your daydream with as much detail as possible. This may take a while, so take breaks or even set it aside for another day.

14. You can end this exercise here if you’d like. Or you can take it one step further and analyze your daydream. Try to investigate what happened. Was something a symbol for something else? Was there a reoccurring theme? Did it remind you of an earlier dreaming experience? Did you keep coming back to something? Did you see someone you haven’t seen in a while? Did anything feel vaguely familiar? Try to work through this experience. Nothing may jump out yet, but if you continue to repeat this exercise you’ll begin to notice trends.
THE NON-AWAKE STATE

States of consciousness can be divided into awake and non-awake states. The awake state reflects our everyday perception of reality where we are fully aware of and caught up in the material world. It’s in this state of consciousness that we share the material world with others. Only in the awake state are we all sensing the same things. Though we all come to the material world from different perspectives, we still share the same objects of perception and interact in the same world. The non-awake states reflect our lapses into personal, irreal modes of experiencing. Non-awake states involve an awareness of a possible world but one which doesn’t exist, at least not yet, in the material world. Non-awake states don’t necessarily mean we have no awareness of material reality but rather that our perception has been augmented by possibilities. We experience the irreal elements of non-awake states completely personally, only sharing it by our choice to confess it.

Whether we are daydreaming, praying, pretending, or visualizing we are experiencing in the non-awake state. Though in each of these activities we can be aware of the material world around us, we overlay on this awareness a personal and irreal experience. It’s in these non-awake states that we interact personally with art and by extension the magazine. And only through non-awake states can art come to mean anything to us as individuals.

While we can absolutely enjoy and analyze art in the awake state, this engagement is one dimensional. It’s on only the level of physical characteristics and cultural context. At this level, art is merely an object to be taken a part, observed, and analyzed. Such a view of art is deflatingly objectifying. It replaces actual engagement with route analysis. We only see the artwork as an object made of certain materials, in a certain form, made at a certain time. While there’s value in this mode of looking at art, it’s too flat-footed for personal evaluation.
In the non-aware state, art gives way to aesthetic reflection. As we immerse ourselves in the material reality of the art in front of us and in a possible irreality of how we play with what’s in front of us, we begin to apply meaning to the work. It’s only from how we imagine an artwork might mean something, in how we dream upon it, that it comes to mean anything to us personally. This is why art can seem like it puts us into trances, because it does. In a personal reflection with art, we are entranced. We are put into irreality. We’re put here to make meaning, to reconfigure how the world may possibly be.

Sometimes we come to art and must start the process of dreaming ourselves. We have to see its parts from the awake state to trigger the non-aware states. Sometimes, however, artworks serve as instant portals to dreaming. Either way, art is not just the object in front of us, it’s also an object in the possible worlds we send it through when we come to engage with it. This is what defines art from an irreal perspective: it can be perceived really and irreally. It’s multi-modal. In an irreal conception of art then, it’s not the form, substance, creator, or context that decides if a work is art, it’s always the audience and how they engage.

Yet it’s not just from the audience perspective that irreality is involved. From the viewpoint of the artist, art is not the cause of irreality but the confession of it. When an artist creates, they take from the possible worlds of irreality and confess into a work. Even the most realistic forms of art are still done through the irreal. The very act of choosing a perspective to capture from is an irreal act of considering possible perspectives. Moreover, always caught between an artist and their work is the substance stuck in irreality. As a confession is never complete and as creation is materially limited, art never truly comes as a full confession of an artist’s irreality. Something is always leftover or missing. Art never quite comes out identically to how its envisaged.
This missing piece in all artworks, a remainder so-to-say, is partly what allows art to be an irreal experience from the audience’s perspective. As a work is never truly a complete representation of an artist’s irreality, the audience can infer what was caught in the artist’s irreality. Though in practice, audience’s typically ask this question as what was the artist trying to convey not as what’s missing. This distance from creation and irreality is unavoidable; it’s also preferable. Without such a remainder, there’s no room for an audience to engage in it through non-awake states. It becomes only an object.

Considering art from an irreal perspective complicates the idea of art. If art is merely a matter of the way we engage in something, then truly anything could be art. With this enlarged perspective of art, however, we are granted a much wider world of personal reflection than the world of just art museums and galleries. If interacting with a flower or a rock or a bag of garbage induces you into a non-awake state, then it’s safe to say that it’s art. If interacting with a Picasso or a Rothko only leaves you looking in the awake state, then it’s perfectly fine to say that those things aren’t art, at least not to you. To some extent, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or put more accurately, beauty is in the irreality of the beholder.
FINALE
EPILOGUE

It’s hard to find a way to wrap up so many distinct ideas in a meaningful way. After all, magazines don’t have epilogues. But college theses do. Usually, magazines end with throwbacks to older issue. Some like to show old covers, other prefer to present an old article or image. This is the first issue, so-to-speak, of https://irrealhistory.com, so there’s nothing to throwback to. Instead, I’ll throw forward.

The year is 2800. Humanity has, miraculously and by the skin of its teeth, survived climate change, the threat of nuclear war, asteroid impacts, and whatever future danger exists. Historians of this year are looking back at the first coronavirus pandemic wondering what we were imagining the future would be like. Would coronavirus go away? Would we go back to normal? Would we get used to a “new normal?” They smirk reading our questions, which seem silly in retrospect. As they look deeper into the ways we started to imagine the future they come to a horrifying realization: a persistent belief in no future. They understand that an impending climate disaster and an unending pandemic would wear us down, but they don’t seem to understand how we could give up our intrinsic human right: hope. In giving up the future, the historians think, our ancestors settled for a dismal present. If only they could’ve known that all they need to get through it was the perseverance and hope for a possible world, a world where things really were better. The historians understand that sometimes it’s hard to look beyond your current circumstances, but they just can’t seem to wrap their heads around giving up the future. Sometimes later generations just don’t understand things. Sometimes they’re right for not understanding.
IN THE CONFESSIONAL

In *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), Michel Foucault argues that “there have been two great procedures for producing the truth of sex:” the *ars erotica* and the *scientia sexualis*. Both procedures regulate truth, discourse, sex, and power in one coherent institution. The *ars erotica* does this through pedagogy while the *scientia sexualis* does this through confession.

In Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Roman, Arab and other societies the *ars erotica* has drawn truth out of pleasure itself. A student of the *ars erotica* understands pleasure in its intensity, quality, duration, and “reverberations in the body and the soul.” The truth the *ars erotica* produces is secretive, making it even more effective and virtuous. Only the experts hold its truth, and they alone teach it to their students in a deft pedagogy. This truth grants “an absolute mastery of the body, a singular bliss, obliviousness to time and limits, the elixir of life, the exile of death and its threats.” Evident in this is the essential bond between truth and power. The power of the experts to prescribe and prohibit the truth to their students defines the *ars erotica* (57-8).

In contrast, the West created a new procedure, the *scientia sexualis*. Alongside witness testimony and empirical observation, testing, and demonstration, confession “became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing the truth.” Originating in the Christian penance, it has become a central part of life. It invaded “justice, medicine, family relationships, and love relationships.” It is both public and private, self-reflective and analyst guided. Confessing is a never-ending, exhaustive task and so obligated that it appears as truth demanding “to surface.” Sex has always been a “privileged theme of confession” and through confession sex has turned into discourse. Where pedagogy mediates sex and truth in the *ars erotica*, confession mediates sex and truth in the *scientia sexualis*. Always in the act of the confession is “the authority who requires it” and this demanded confession “exonerates, redeems, and purifies” the confessor. This authority could be a doctor, psychologist, police officer, judge, one’s own guilty conscious, a loving partner, an eager friend, or a trusted parent. Such authorities silently listen to the confession. But the power to demand confession does not belong to the authority but in the structure of the confession itself: in the relationship of the confessor and the content of the confession. Unlike the *ars erotica* then, the *scientia sexualis* discourse comes not from an above expert but from below in the obligation of the confession. Its truth guaranteed in “the basic intimacy” of the confessor and the confession (58-64).

This unending confession evaporated as it was done, left unwritten, until medicine and psychiatry began to formally record, collect, catalog, sort, and analyze it. Confession exited the judicial and religious domain of innocence/salvation and guilt/sin into the scientific domain of “body and life processes.” This happened through five mechanisms. First, confession was combined with scientific observation to create “decipherable signs and symptoms.” This turned confessions into acceptable empirical practices. Second, sex became a general cause to which all outcomes could be traced back. This mutated the exhaustive nature of confession itself into exhaustive causality. Third, the truth of sex could remain hidden from the subject, only produced through laborious questioning. This allowed intensive, forceful confessions to be a scientific practice. Fourth, the truth of sex was interpreted by an outside authority, “the master of truth.” Changing confession from “a test… [to] a sign” permitted a scientific explanation. Fifth, sex was medicalized into normal and pathological behaviors. As such, science was necessary to cure
these pathologies. Through these five mechanisms, scientific discourse transfigured the once judicial and religious character of confession into a clinical science (64-7).

This use of confession by scientific discourse “enabled something called ‘sexuality’ to embody the truth of sex and its pleasures.” Sexuality being the necessary components for the scientia sexualis to produce truth from sex. It is a nineteenth century invention of the new bourgeois, industrial era. It is a method of meticulously extracting truth, “in ever narrowing circles” around sex, from the subject. This extractive, clinical, scientific procedure of confession over the centuries has formed a bond with “the tactics of power inherent in this discourse.” The tactics of power, the actual method of power for producing a result, are historically developed through the shifting of relationships. Namely, the absorption of confession by medicine and psychiatry was a tactic of power to record the truth of sex from the body (68-70).

Yet the scientia sexualis has not fully replaced the ars erotica in Western society. For example, in Catholicism there was “[t]he phenomena of possession and ecstasy.” Moreover, the scientia sexualis itself has operated somewhat like the ars erotica in its multiplication of its pleasure made from “knowing that truth.” Just as the ars erotica pulls pleasure out of pleasure itself, the scientia sexualis draws pleasure out of knowing, learning, sharing, and hiding the pleasures derived from sex. Truth produced from the scientia sexualis too has an appearance of secrecy like in the ars erotica; it hides in statements of confidence, whispered secrets, and the pleasure of admitting to something. The scientia sexualis is perhaps “an extraordinarily subtle form of ars erotica.” Nevertheless, it is not a negative mechanism in comparison to the ars erotica. On the contrary, its mechanisms “produce knowledge, multiply discourse, induce pleasure, and generate power” (70-3).

In the next part, “The Deployment of Sexuality,” Foucault reiterates that the West uses confession to produce endless discourse on sex hoping to extract knowledge. In essence, sex hides knowledge and its investigation reveals knowledge. In the last couple hundred years, sex has hidden who we are, repressed us, while at the same time revealing who we are, liberating us. Foucault ask why is it that sex has become such a crucial part of our liberation and a producer of truth (77-80)?

Foucault is not the first to question the repressive hypothesis. Psychoanalysts in the early twentieth century argued that desire is the result of repression. That is, repressive power, or the law, causes the lack that manifests desire. Meaning, power is negative, keeping us from our desires and causing lack. Foucault is critical of this representation of power, what he calls “jurdico-discursive,” on which psychoanalysis and the repressive hypothesis depend. There are five qualities of this model of power: the negative relationship between power and sex, power imposes rules on sex, power operates via prohibitions on sex, power censors sex, and power is equally applied at all levels. Thus power in this model “is poor in resources, sparing of its methods, monotonous in the tactics it utilizes, incapable of invention, and seemingly doomed always to repeat itself.” Power only says no. It only works through negative dynamics. It operates through obedience (81-6).

This originates in medieval institutions, like the monarchy. These institutions were constituted by law, defined the law, and operated through law. In other words, law was the central mechanism and expression of power. Even the denunciation of monarchy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was done through appeals to law. This formulation of power as law remains today. “[W]e still have not cut the head off the king.” We still see power as a mechanism of law, of repressive power, despite the law having lost considerable ground in the exercise of power. Now, power works “by technique… normalization… control… and in forms
that go beyond the state and its apparatus.” Power has slipped from the legal system into a more widespread mechanism (86-9).

Therefore, a new “analytics of power” must come about. One that does not privilege “the law as a model.” Such a new conception of power must see beyond the logics of repression, of negative power. That does not mean there is not repressive power, rather that power operates through more than repression. It is creative and productive.

In short, Foucault develops the scientia sexualis as one coherent institution containing truth, discourse, sex, and power. Confession mediates these elements; it is the method of the scientia sexualis. Part by part, the aim and hopeful content of confession is truth, the act of confession itself is an act of discourse, the manifest content of confession is sex, and the preliminary obligation to confess is a mechanism of power. Furthermore, confession developed from the juridical and Christian domain into a scientific domain. Through various impositions, science medicalized, clinicalized, and empiricized confession. This has had the result of transforming the ars erotica, pleasure from pleasure itself, into the scientia sexualis, pleasure from discursive analysis of pleasure. Again, this is not a negative result. The scientia sexualis has been highly productive.

When Foucault suggests that the scientia sexualis is a form of the ars erotica he seemingly destroys the binary he sets up. This false binary is representative of his large false binary: the repressive hypothesis and discursive explosion. But as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in her introduction to *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) “[r]ather than working outside of” the repressive hypothesis, Foucault “might better be described as propagating… [it] ever more broadly by means of displacement, multiplication, and hypostatization” (11). That is, Foucault still continues to argue that there is some amount of prohibition but that it operates by some other mechanism. Meaning that Foucault’s rejection of the repressive hypothesis is better understood as a revision of it and that there is not really a binary here. The exponential increase in sex discourse and the repression of sex is but two sides of the same coin because the very liberation from repression is a reactionary incitement of the demand to confess.

Yet Sedgwick reminds us that “Foucault’s implicit promise” was “that there might be ways of stepping outside the repressive hypothesis, to forms of thought that would not be structured by the questions of prohibition in the first place” (12). How can there be, then, a means of theorizing sex, truth, and power without repression? How have we become stuck in the scientia sexualis? Sedgwick fights with this and concludes that interpretations of Foucault have become “a moralistic tautology” or, in more dynamic terms, “an insoluble loop of positive feedback.” That is, the subversive becomes totally defined by the hegemonic.
LIVING LEGEND

“One of the principal theses in this book is that the psychoanalytic subject essentially has two faces: the subject as precipitate and the subject as breach. In the first case, the subject is but a sedimentation of meanings determined by the substitution of one signifier for another or the retroactive effect of one signifier upon another (or of one symbolized event upon another), corresponding to Lacan’s ‘definition’ of the subject as ‘that which one signifier represents to another signifier.’ In the second, the subject is that which creates a breach in the real as it establishes a link between two signifiers, the subject (as precipitation this time, not as precipitate) being nothing but that very breach.”

The psychoanalytic subject, in Lacan’s view, is two-fold: precipitate and breach. In each of these perspectives the subject is defined through signifiers. Lacan sees words, or signs, as made up of two parts: signifier and signified. The word itself, the actual sounds and corresponding spelling, is the signifier. The signified is what the signifier actually stands for, what it represents, its conceptual content. In Lacan’s view, the signifier and the signified are in an unstable and resistant relationship. The signifier stands over a changeable, fluid signified. Therefore, it is the signifier, not the sign, which is the elemental level of language. The relating of these signifiers is the essence of language. From the relationship of these signifiers we can see the psychoanalytic subject.

From the precipitate perspective, the subject is the “sedimentation of meanings” realized signifier substitution. Every signifier can be substituted for another signifier or series of signifier. In fact, this is exactly what dictionaries do. They define words in relation to other signifiers. The subject as precipitate is like a personal dictionary. It is accumulation of the way that all signifier relate, or chain, together. Because each person has a unique connotation, and to some extent denotation, of a signifier, the way signifiers relate back to each other is different in each person. These differences in the sedimentation of meaning are the location of the Lacanian subject.

From the breech perspective, the subject is the connecting of two signifiers at the moment of creative linkage in metaphors. That is, when a person finds a new way to relate/substitute/chain signifiers, there is a moment of creative spark. This short-lived moment is an act of agency, truly of creation, of the subject who is otherwise totally alienated by language.

4 Bruck Fink, The Lacanian Subject, 69.
Together, these two ideas of the subject create a portrait of what Lacan means by subject. It is a subject defined linguistically as the connections between signifiers. Essentially, it is the way that one relates language that defines subjectivity.

“S\textsubscript{1} simply designates a signifier which is isolated from the rest of discourse (or, as Freud says in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which is cut off from the ‘psychical chain’ of the person’s conscious thoughts). An S\textsubscript{1} is often recognizable in analysis by the fact that the analysand repeatedly buts up against the term; it may be a term like ‘death,’ for instance, or any other term that seems opaque to the analysand and that always seems to put an end to association instead of opening things up. Here the analysand is, in a sense, encountering a total opacity of meaning: remaining ignorant, however, of what they mean *to him or her*, their special, personal meaning that has some kind of subjective implication. The subject here is eclipsed by a master signifier without meaning… In that sense, the master signifier is nonsensical.”\textsuperscript{5}

“Each isolated S\textsubscript{1} is, when it appears, nonsensical. S\textsubscript{1}, unlike S(/A), is not unpronounceable. It is not some mysterious, hidden signifier that finally wells up from the depths one day; it may very well be a word or name the analysand has used every day of his or her life. It insists, however, in the realm of non-meaning when it comes up in a context that seems to involve the analysand, though the analysand does not know how or why. Nonsense may, of course, take other forms as well: it may appear in an incomprehensible slurring of words to which no meaning whatever can be attributed, as the resulting sounds suggest nothing in the way of a play on words.”\textsuperscript{6}

“Object (a), as cause of desire, is the agent here [in the analyst’s discourse], occupying the dominant or commanding position. The analyst plays the part of pure desiring subject, and interrogates the subject in his or her division, precisely at those points where the split between conscious and unconscious shows through: slips of the tongue, bungled and unintended acts, slurred speech, dreams, etc. In this way, the analyst sets the patient to work, to associate, and the product of that laborious association is a new master signifier. The patient in a sense ‘coughs up’ a master signifier that has not yet been brought into relation with any other signifier.

In discussing the discourse of the master, I referred to S\textsubscript{1} as the signifier with no rhyme or reason. As it appears concretely in the analytic situation, a master signifier presents itself as a

\textsuperscript{5} Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 77.
\textsuperscript{6} Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 78.
dead end, a stopping point, a term, word, or phrase that puts an end to association, that grinds the patient’s discourse to a halt… it could be a proper name (the patient’s or the analyst’s), a reference to the death of a loved one, the name of a disease (AIDS, cancer, psoriasis, blindness), or a variety of other things. The task of analysis is to bring such master signifiers into relation with other signifiers, that is, to dialectize the master signifiers it produces.

That involves reliance upon the master’s discourse, or as we might see it here, recourse to the fundamental structure of signification: a link must be established between each master signifier and a binary signifier such that subjectification takes place. The symptom itself may present itself as a master signifier; in fact, as analysis proceeds and as more and more aspects of a person’s life are taken as symptoms, each symptomatic activity or pain may present itself in the analytic work as a word or phrase that simply is, that seems to signify nothing to the subject. In Seminar XX, Lacan refers to S₁ in the analyst’s discourse as la bêtise (stupidity or ‘funny business’), a reference back to the case of Little Hans, who refers to his whole horse phobia as la bêtise, as Lacan translates it (p. 17). It is a piece of nonsense produced by the analytic process itself.”

S₁, the master signifier, is a signifier lacking a signified component. It is an incomplete sign. It is meaningless, nonsensical. It has no conceptual content. While an S₁ may have a dictionary definition, it lacks conceptual content in the subject. In practice, an S₁ appears as a word that ends discourse. It is something which the analysand constantly ends up at because it lacks an ability to associate through signified content. An S₁ is a word that is readily available for use, appearing in everyday conversation. It can very well be known. It’s not hidden, it’s just meaningless.

Importantly, the master signifier forms a dialogical relationship with the binary signifier, S₂. The binary signifier, unlike the master signifier, has a corresponding signified component and forms a sign. Notice though that each S₂ points back to an S₁. It needs a grounding point, something which it can refer to in order to explain itself. For example, for a gay subject, the signifier gay is often a master signifier. It itself means nothing, but through its connection with other binary signifiers it forms a system of signification. Signifiers like boyfriend, husband, pride, companionship, lesbian, etc. relate back to the signifier gay. This partly how they define themselves, through this pointing back to the master. In this sense, gay starts the signifying chain, hence S₁. All elements of one’s gay life will refer personally back to the identity, but it itself is absent a meaning. Sure, it has dictionary definition, but to the subject it is blank. It is simply there.

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7 Bruck Fink, The Lacanian Subject, 135.
An $S_1$ can be any number of signifiers and each subject has multiple of them, forming an entire systematicity with all the signifiers, master and binary. For the task of analysis, the analysand must either flip an $S_1$ into an $S_2$, putting it under the domain of a different $S_1$ and thus resignifying all its leftover $S_2$, or they must introduce a new master signifier to realign a collection of $S_2$s. In either case, this is done through dialectization.

In the first case, the analysand continually attempts to plug the $S_1$ into a position of $S_2$, constantly challenging it for its authority. The analysand does this by continually speaking about the $S_1$, desperately trying to give a signified component, that is relate it back to another master signifier. That moment of creative spark, when a metaphor finally displaces the $S_1$, is the subject as a breach. This spark radically transforms the symbolic order and sets up an entire new system of language for the subject. All the personal meanings of each $S_2$ are reset in accordance to the new $S_1$.

In the second case, looking through slips of the unconscious, i.e. dreams, slips of the tongue, and unintended actions, the analysand looks for and spits out a new master signifier. They try to locate a signifier which has yet to chain together other binary signifiers to it. In the example of the gay subject, he may go through his entire childhood without the signifier gay meaning anything at all. But upon reaching adolescence, the signifier gay largely looms in the unconscious, cropping up in gay dreams and so on. The gay subject then must grasp this master signifier and begin to create a new signifying chain that establishes their identity.

These two cases are actually two sides of the same coin though. In displacing a master signifier, something else must take it place to uphold the signifying chain. From the perspective of the displaced master signifier, the first case, it is a matter of making an $S_1$ an $S_2$. From the perspective of the new master signifier, the second case, it is a matter of finding a new $S_1$ to relate back the old master signifier. There are two sides to a metaphor, and that is essentially what dialectization is. Together, this displacement radically transforms the analysand’s knowledge because all the corresponding relationship of their binary signifiers, those with signified components, must be reintegrated into the symbolic system. These new sedimentations of meaning form the subject as precipitate.
AN AESTHETIC TURN

“Even in disputes about questions of taste, we rely upon the rationally motivating force of the better argument, although a dispute of this kind diverges in a characteristic way from controversies concerning questions of truth and justice. If the description suggested above is accurate, the peculiar role of arguments in this case is to open the eyes of participants, that is, to lead them to an authenticating aesthetic experience. Above all, however, the type of validity claim attached to cultural values does not transcend local boundaries in the same way as truth and rightness claims. Cultural values do not count as universal; they are, as the name indicates, located within the horizon of the lifeworld of a specific group or culture. And values can be made plausible only in the context of a particular form of life. Thus the critique of value standards presupposes a shared preunderstanding among participants in the argument, a preunderstanding that is not at their disposal but constitutes and at the same time circumscribes the domain of the thematized validity claims. Only the truth of propositions and the rightness of moral norms and the comprehensibility or well-formedness of symbolic expressions are, by their very meaning, universal validity claims that can be tested in discourse.”

Habermas refers here to a type of argument he calls aesthetic criticism. In this style of argument, validity is claimed on the how well standards of values are met. These values are culturally relative, belonging to a specific “lifeworld.” (The lifeworld is, in essence, background knowledge. The already agreed upon validity of given facts, norms, and feelings.) For us to have a critique of value, we have to already belong to the same preunderstanding, or cultural context, of the world.

“From the perspective of dramaturgical action we understand social action as an encounter in which participants form a visible public for each other and perform for one another. ‘Encounter’ and ‘performance’ are the key concepts. The performance of a troupe before the eyes of third persons is only a special case. A performance enable the actor to present himself to his audience in a certain way; in bringing something of his subjectivity to appearance, he would like to be seen by his public in a particular way…

In dramaturgical action the actor, in presenting a view of himself, has to behave toward his own subjective world. I have defined this as the totality of subjective experience to which the actor has, in relation to others, a privileged access. To be sure, this domain of subjectivity deserves to be called a ‘world’ only if the significance of the subjective world can be explicated in a way similar to that in which I explained the significance of the social world, through referring to an ‘existence’ of norms analogous to the existence of states of affairs. Perhaps one can say that the subject is represented by truthfully uttered experiential sentences in nearly the same way as are existing states of affairs by true statements and valid norms by justified ought-sentences. We should not understand subjective experiences as mental states or inner episodes, for we would thereby assimilate them to entities, to elements of the objective world. We can comprehend having as subjective experiences as something analogous to the existence of states of affairs without assimilating the one to the other. A subject capable of expression does not ‘have’ or ‘possess’ desire and feelings in the same sense as an observable object has extension, weight, color, and similar properties. An actor has desires and feelings in the sense that he can at

8 Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, 1:42.
will express these experiences before a public, and indeed in such a way that this public, if it trusts the actor’s expressive utterance, attributes to him, as something subjective, the desires and feelings expressed…

But in general feelings and desires can only be expressed as something subjective. They cannot be expressed otherwise, cannot enter into relation with the external world, whether the objective or the social. For this reason the expression of desires and feelings is measured only against the reflexive relation of the speaker to his inner world.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive-Instrumental</th>
<th>Normative-Practical</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
<th>Evaluative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teleological, Goal</td>
<td>Normatively</td>
<td>Expressive Self-Presentation</td>
<td>Evaluative Expressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriented Action</td>
<td>Regulated Action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facts</td>
<td>Norms</td>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective World</td>
<td>Social World</td>
<td>Subjective World</td>
<td>Cultural World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propositional Truth</td>
<td>Normative Rightness</td>
<td>Subjective Truthfulness</td>
<td>Standards of Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Discourse</td>
<td>Practical Discourse</td>
<td>Therapeutic Critique</td>
<td>Aesthetic Criticism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**THE NON-AWAKE STATE**

In his book *Dreaming Techniques: Working with Night Dream, Daydreams, and Liminal Dreams* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2017), Serge Kahili King begins with an astounding claim. He argues that “we are dreaming all the time, even when we are wide awake” (28). He concedes, however, that for him dreaming and imagining are the same thing. In a totally awake state, we are fully focused on the material world. But as soon as our attention starts to waver, dreaming (or imagining) slips into our minds. But this dreaming never started and stopped, it’s always a constant stream floating through us. It’s merely our awareness that makes it seem as if dreaming starts and stops.

King then divides consciousness into three modes: awake awareness and eyes open (A mode), awake awareness and eye closed (B mode), and eyes closed dreaming (C mode). In each of these modes, there’s a continuum of awareness.

Fully alert, eyes open, and aware of the material world would be what we typically think of as the awake state. King calls this A1. As we start to lose awareness of the material world, we float into daydreams. Our eyes are still open and were just floating off. This A2 state is where we go when we engage in a good book or go on a long walk. In A3, we’re actively sensing something which is not in our physical environment with our eyes open. Some people might call this hallucination or visions. In involves a full, vivid, real-like experience.

In the B mode, our eyes are closed and we are more distant from our material environment. In the most alert state, B1, it’s simply being aware of our environment without sight. In the middle alert state, B2, it’s imagining a world that’s not there with our eyes closed. We often do this when we remember a memory or try to visualize something. In the B3 state, we are close drifting off into the non-awake state of dreaming. It’s the state between being asleep and awake. This is called the hypnagogic state. It’s different than being asleep because there is a slight awareness of the material world still.
In the C mode, our eyes are closed and we are totally unaware of the material world. This is the classic dreamworld we are all intimately familiar with. King still divides this mode into three states of awareness. In the C1 state, we’re having dreams that are vague, unclear, and just small fragments. In the C2 state, dreams are vivid, clear, with plots we can trace out. In the C3 state, we are lucid dreaming. We can choose our actions and control our dreams to some extent. These dreams are hyper-realistic and vivid.

After drawing out these categories of consciousness, King then argues that these states are all “real experiences.” These states have “thoughts, memories, emotions, and sensations” just as any A1 state of consciousness does (31). The only difference truly is that there’s not a full and complete perception of the material, external world.

Fundamentally, King has made a misstep in his framework for the states of consciousness that come from not seeing the differences between reality and irreality. Beyond this, King also privileges sight unnecessarily and makes a mistake in the organization of his C mode. Correcting these mistakes creates a more holistic vision of the non-awake states and integrates irreality as central to these states.

While King does acknowledge that what distinguishes the awake state where we are fully present and aware of material reality, what he calls A1, by its dependence on the material world, he fails to fully develop that what separates non-awake states is there dependence on another world. Because of this, he categorizes non-awake states by how aware of material reality a person is. This unnecessarily separates states like daydreaming and nightdreaming.

King primary lapse is that he organizes states of consciousness by their awareness of the material world. While King is absolutely correct to point out that we have a state where we are unaware of dreaming, his A1 state, he misses the common link between all other states of consciousness, experience without materiality, or irreality. Instead of judging states of consciousness based on irreality, he judges them on reality. This causes him to place daydreaming, his A2 state, extremely far from nightdreaming, his C2 state. Yet, if we evaluate these states of consciousness by their relationship to irreality, we come to the conclusion that a daydream can, in fact, be equally distant from reality as a nightdream. Daydreams can be fully immersive and experienced, happening with eyes opened, and be completely devoid of material awareness.

Moreover, King judges distance from reality on a seemingly random metric, sight. According to King, sight mediates our relationship to other states of consciousness. Why then doesn’t hearing, touch, taste, or smell mediate this relationship? If states of consciousness are to be organized on their relationship to the material world, why then is sight privileged? Would plugging our ears push us into the B mode? Are those who are visually impaired constantly in the B mode? Furthermore, we can have our eyes open and not be truly seeing. In a daydream, we can be completely unaware that our eyes are open and seeing. It seems seeing or not seeing has no strong relationship to our states of consciousness.

King organizes his A and B modes by their relationships to reality, but in the C mode he organizes by engagement within its mode. A hardly remembered dream takes the C1 state while a lucid dream takes the C3 state. This inconsistency makes his other division seem just as arbitrary. Should we judge our states of consciousness with our engagement in them or by their relationship to reality? King can’t seem to decide.

Instead of organizing states of consciousness by their relationship to reality or by our engagement in them, we should relate them to irreality. I propose first that we divide states of consciousness into two states: awake and non-awake. The awake state in this model is highly
limited to only include the fully alert state where we are only aware of material reality. All other states where we aware of something beyond material reality, where we are engaged in irreality, then belong to the non-awake state. This categorizes what appear to be awake states, like daydreaming, hallucinations, visions, prayer, meditation, imagining, and remembering, as non-awake states. I’m not arguing that these states of consciousness don’t have some awake component to them. Instead, I suggest that we ought to understand states of consciousness by their relationship to irreality before reality.

Privileging irreality before reality comes as a result of seeing that relating states of consciousness to reality creates a nonsensical organizational structure. What relates different states of consciousness is not based on how aware we are of reality but how aware we are of irreality. This is something that King is fully aware of. In fact, he claims that we are always dreaming, we just aren’t aware of it. Recognizing this assumption means we have to recognize then that what relates states of consciousness is how irreal they are.

Now it may seem as if I’m still saying the same thing. After all, isn’t relating states of consciousness on how close to reality they are the inverse of relating them to how irreal they are? Put another way, isn’t it the case that we are simply flipping the structure not fundamentally changing it? On the contrary, the opposite of reality isn’t irreality. It’s unreality. This is the fundamental issue that King comes up against. If he recognizes that other states of consciousness are not related to reality, how can he claim that they’re real experiences?

The solution is to see the structure of our thoughts as three parts: reality, irreality, and unreality. To understand these three concepts, we have to see them from the three modes of irreality: experience, language, and creation. In the reality of experience, we perceive a material reality. In irreality, we perceive without a material reality. In unreality, we don’t perceive. This then complicates what fiction is. In this model, fiction can be both irreal and unreal. If we experience the fiction we are engaging with, then we make it irreal. If we don’t experience it, then we keep it unreal.

In the mode of language, real statements describe the condition of the world as it is. These are things like “the sky is blue” and “water is made up of oxygen and hydrogen atoms.” Irreal statements describe the possible condition of the world. For example, “I may go home after work” or “if the children had behaved, they would’ve gotten a treat.” Unreal statements don’t describe the condition of the world. “Ice is a liquid” and “the sun is green” are unreal statements. They are not true to the material world and don’t claim to see a possible world.

In the mode of creation, a real creation makes the claim that it reflects the reality of the material world. A realistic painting or a photograph taken for reference make such claims. Note, however, that irreality and unreality realize themselves—become present in the material world—in the mode of creation but in doing so make specific claims about their validity to the material world. An irreal creation claims it possibly reflect the reality of the world. An unreal creation claims it doesn’t reflect the reality of the world. In a work of fiction, there will be irreal and unreal elements of creation. Given that some elements don’t reflect the world, fictious works claim that they reflect a possible world. The balance of these elements determines how irreal or unreal they are. In historical narrative, all elements are claimed to possibly represent the world. In historical fiction, only some elements are claimed to possibly present the world while some actively acknowledge that they’re unreal.

By splitting the world into three worlds—real, irreal, and unreal—we insert possible worlds as a part of how we experience life as something which mediates between real and unreal. Returning to the structure of states of consciousness now, what separates seeing them in
relationship to reality versus in relationship to irreality is seeing how they describe possible worlds over how close they exist to the real world and unreal worlds. Making this distinction allows us to move beyond the history fiction binary, acknowledging that our different states of consciousness don’t reveal reality but irreality.

Note, while *Dreaming Techniques* is not an academically published book, King does have some credentials to make the claims he does. He has recorded over 5,000 of his own dreams, using them as evidence to prove his points. He also has his doctorate in psychology and has been trained in shamanism by the Kahili family of Kauai and by African and Mongolian shamans. Of course, his book should still be taken with a grain of salt because it lacks peer review. But knowing this, his book is extremely valuable.

It’s worth consideration, too, of why this book could not be published in academia today. Embodied knowledge, like that of King, is not a respected and valid form of knowledge to academic standards. Moreover, ways of knowing outside of Western rationality have long been sidelined by the formal academic system. Working from an anti-colonial, queer, and feminist outlook, only using academically published books and articles is to not recognize the ways that the academy has invalidated other forms of knowledge making. Under this pretext, I have included his work here. In much the same way, I have worked from Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).
APPENDIX: BIBLIOGRAPHY OF DAYDREAM, DREAM, & VISION HISTORY


BIBLIOGRAPHY

This is a by no means complete list of the works I consulted for this project. I have sorted them topically for the aid of those who want to continue researching.

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**HISTORY**


**PHILOSOPHY & PSYCHOANALYSIS**


