RIDING RENGA

low theory and collective critical dissatisfaction

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IN THE QUEER ART OF FAILURE (2011), J Halberstam explains that low theory "revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and ... seeks not to explain but to involve" (15). Halberstam further states that "we can think about low theory as a mode of accessibility, but we might also think about it as a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the high in high theory" (16). Indeed, Halberstam's emphasis on the importance of academic involvement and accessibility is reflected in a commitment to first person plural throughout *Queer Art*. This is not merely a stylistic choice but a political one, dependent upon anti-individualism, community engagement, and the assumption of shared utopian impulses. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz states similarly that "We must vacate the here and now for a then and there. Individual transports are insufficient. We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion. We need to step out of the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present" (185).

Yet this "we" of both texts is purely theoretical, and is always spoken for by these authors' singular perspectives. It is ironic that, for all the emphasis post-structuralism and queer theory have placed on collective modes of becoming/being-in-the-world, it has largely been other disciplines (such as science and technology, education, and the creative arts) that have led the way in producing multi-authored and non-authored texts. Meanwhile, there is a radical disconnect between theory and practice in literary and cultural criticism such that the creation of "assemblages" is purely formal, and "contact zones"—whether colonial or species-related—are merely referenced in the abstract (Puar 2007, Pratt 1992, Haraway 2007). Nonetheless, in the concluding sentence of *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz affirms that "[f]rom shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality" (189). Indeed, the "we" of this renga has formed out of the shared dissatisfaction we feel with this critical disconnect between theory and practice.

The paper you now read is the result of creative, and occasionally anonymous, collaboration. We have constructed this critical renga to demonstrate, as well as to discover, the uncharted possibilities of low theory. "Renga" means "linked poem" in Japanese. To create a renga, several poets each write an individual stanza following from an image or theme in the previous one. Each stanza leaps from the last, but the renga as a whole will wander through various themes and images without focusing on one question or perspective in particular. With this definition of renga in mind we have constructed this paper such that each writer has been responsible for one section of roughly 1000 words—building upon one important theme, question, critical device, or text that has been incorporated in the previous section. Thus, the essay remains linked between immediate sections, yet as a whole it is free to wander into unpredictable places. Our editing process has followed from the same desire to collaborate creatively, using an open-sourced text editor to engage in revisions concurrently and without prescription. Ultimately, it is through these processes that we span the possibilities and pitfalls of low theory.

Throughout the following paper, we rely on deduction, induction, metaphor, metonymy, and the accidents of our surroundings to *forge* our arguments. For, it is these latter forms of reasoning that too often become excluded from institutions of "higher" learning. Yet, it is precisely such connotative leaps and contextual catalysts that imperceptibly alter our academic landscape. Thus, like the speaker in Michael Ondaatje's poem, "King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens" (1991), we have each found it necessary to ask ourselves questions like, "Is it significant that I eat bananas as I write this?" (39). Indeed, we likely raise more questions than we answer—but we do this heavy lifting from a place just beneath the surface of acceptable academics. And, in so doing, we hope to provide a model for other scholars who wish to explore the possibilities of collaboration, (counter)-intuition, and alternative objects of study.

Our analysis delves into the seas of paradox that surround notions of personal identity, traverses the various plights of our current academic landscape, flies below the radar to scrutinize popular cultural artifacts such as Kanye West's *Yeezus* and John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus*, hones in on the domesticated pets of rock star academics, and passes into the metaphysical to consider the relationship between living organisms and the undead. Our subject positions range across educational backgrounds, places of origin, areas of specialization, current geographical locations, as well as countless other features that are thought to make us "us". We prefer multiplicity to universality, our tone ranges from meditation to manifesto, and we do not always agree. Thus, this paper does not aim for the sort of formal cohesion that would permit the inclusion of a "clear thesis statement". In fact, this paper may serve as a kind of anti-thesis statement to the extent that it focuses on process at least as much as product. Nonetheless, certain

emergent properties should be particularly noted. Without exception, our collective applies a methodology of hope, embraces and extends the concept of possibility, and locates itself beneath the formal hierarchy of traditional academia. Please take this as a warning and as a welcome of what follows below.

Already, the current "I" of this renga's "we" has begun to anticipate the more menacing aspects of our multi-headed monster. This "I" is already toppling onto its side, stretching its length into the utopian horizon that forms the line between "below" and "above", and becomes the temporal and theoretical links of this renga's "we". Indeed, the inevitable additions and revisions of my colleagues will not simply follow from mine, but will help to (re)produce mine. There is no "welcome" to recursive time, no soft beginning to the obliteration of self that a project like this entails. Perhaps this existential anxiety can be better communicated through a thought experiment, well-known to philosophers of identity as "the ship of Theseus". But taking the uncharted course of "low theory" described by Halberstam, the Sugababes may represent this paradox more appropriately. Formed in 1998, the Sugababes are amongst the highest selling pop bands from the United Kingdom. At various intervals, each of the three founding members left the band to be replaced by other singers. By 2011, the original members formed a new band called Mutya Keisha Siobhan, even though the Sugababes continued to perform under its new membership (Jacob 2011). Like the planks of Theseus's ship that are removed and replaced over time, the Sugababes both continue and cease to exist simultaneously. In the sense that they cease to exist, it is perhaps impossible to say at what stage this exactly occurs. And yet, by definition, identity is that which demarcates and clarifies the boundaries between self and other, existent and non-existent. Likewise, after the additions and revisions of this critical renga are complete, the current "I" of this "we" will both continue and cease to exist. At this point we leave it to two unlikely adversaries, Popeye and Shakespeare's Iago, to determine the truth about identity—"I yam what I yam" and yet "I am not what I am".

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Popeye's second theatrical short, "I Yam What I Yam" (1933), is a retelling of colonial encounter in the New World. Popeye, Olive Oyl, and Wimpy travel on a rowboat across the ocean. The boat is depicted as traveling from right to left, eliminating a horizon: there will be nothing unexpected or anticipatory in this story, it has all been told before. The overpowering of "hostile natives" is depicted comically, concluding with Popeye punching the chief, whose clothes fly off of him, revealing him to be Mahatma Gandhi. The punchline? One "Indian" has been replaced by another. Or more accurately, the wrong Indian has been replaced by the right one. It is not Popeye (or Columbus) who misidentified the Americas for India, who is in the wrong place, for, as his song goes, "I yam what I yam and that's all what I yam" (Fleischer 1933). It is the Native Americans who are in the wrong, are wrong, and must be corrected and eliminated. The redundant violence of his statement is further emphasized by the cartoon cells that repeat upon each other – Olive Oyl knocks out the same three Native Americans over and over again, Popeye escapes the rhythmic arrows of a "swarm" of Native Americans that consist of only two types. Popeye's mantra points to the ways in which an unassuming "I" embodies a dominant "I", one whose insistence on individuality expresses, in this case, a distinctly American exceptionalism that renders anybody and anything not "I" as generic, irrelevant, and hostile to stable subjectivity and thus necessary to eliminate.

On the flip side to this individualism and exceptionalism is Shakespeare's Iago, another seaman who braves the waters, but whose proclamation, "I am not what I am", can be read as a disavowal of authentic identity (I.i.65). It is a poststructuralist mantra, suggesting "I" is an empty, floating signifier. Unlike Popeye, Iago eschews his identity wholly, suggesting that he has no stable one. Yet it is no less sincere, and no less violent, than Popeye's "I". Honest Iago is responsible for the entire unfolding of the plot, the direct and indirect deaths of its cast of characters. His refusal of identity has led to a critical canonical obsession with him, as if knowing who his "I" really is would lead to a more persuasive motive for his actions, despite his own warnings of "[d]emand me nothing: what you know, you know" (V.ii.303). Claiming individual identity leads to problems of appropriation and dismissal, but rejecting it results in, and allows for, political and ethical detachment.

As a collective of academics enrolled or employed at an accredited institution of higher learning, we have been taught over and over of the pitfalls and limits of identity politics. It is, supposedly, why cultural nationalisms failed, why second- and third-wave feminism failed, why the canon wars were so bloody and contested, and most recently, why the humanities are in dramatic decline. In the case of the latter, for those who argue for traditional humanities, identity politics boils down to self-interest groups that are attacking the canon, compromising standards, and thus undermining the entirety of higher education. To cite just one critic who laments upon "the failure of departments of English across the country":

> What departments have done … is dismember the curriculum, drift away from the notion that historical chronology is important, and substitute for the books themselves a scattered array of secondary considerations (identity studies, abstruse theory, sexuality, film and popular culture). In so doing, they

have distanced themselves from the young people interested in good books (Chace 2009).

In this view, identity politics is antithetical to "good books", and leads to selfish individualism (Popeye's "I Yam what I Yam"), or to relativist nihilism (Iago's "I am not what I am"). However, the fact is identity politics is how Western humanities have always functioned—predominantly white males who primarily study other white male authors. But for some reason, when non-white, women, and queer folks engage in non-white, women's, and queer literature, or if we read canonical works with a different focus and emphasis, all of a sudden the entire foundation of higher education is thrown into shambles. Only if!

Yet equally frustrating as these Dinosaurs of the Discipline are the academic lefties who suggest we should "get over" identity politics. Calls for a post-identity politics, or a "beyond" identity politics, assume some sort of positivist development, one that suggests we are smarter and know more and better now, so there is no reason to make those mistakes again. But what to do with the reality that for many of us, these identity politics are necessary to work through, not only for our professional development, but our very sense of selves? That beginning sentences with phrases like "as a woman of color" is equally liberating and confidence-boosting (however temporarily) as it is corny and polemic while we maneuver our way carefully and strategically within the ivory tower, seeking out allies and avoiding side-eyes? Most of us would not be in academia today were it not for the selfish conviction that what we were interested in—our lives, our history, our worlds—had to be worth studying, and that there were surely others out there who felt like we did.

Robin Kelley reminds us in his book *Freedom Dreams* (2003), "[u]nfortunately, too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they 'succeeded' in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves" (ix). Every day of our existence is enabled not only by the success of social movements, but also, and perhaps more importantly, their *failures*. We, the specific we of this article, would not have been allowed to enter college, to apply for student loans, to apply for citizenship, to learn how to read, precisely because of our identities, had it not been for the failures of others like us, before and with us. As Philip Levine (1992) writes, "We're all here to count / and be counted" (16-17). This is not about a romanticized nostalgia for how far we've come; it is about a rigorous historical materialism that refuses to forget that academia is structured by power and privilege, and that we have chosen to exist within that circle for now. It is about a continued, perhaps unresolvable anxiety regarding our own positions within the belly of the beast, one that demands we continue to "worry about the university", not celebrate our assimilation (Halberstam 2011, paraphrasing Moten and Harney, 11), and that we continue to worry about the "we".

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If largely absent from literary and cultural criticism, where do we, as guerrilla academics acting from within the discipline, begin to search for these Halberstamian and Muñozian tenets of accessibility, anti-individualism, and community engagement? How do we slay the monstrous "I" that has made us who we are today, while still waiting for that same "I" to be represented within the great ivory tower of academia? Taking the lead from Foucault, Halberstam advises that we explore what has been "buried or masked" by other "disciplinary forms of knowledge" (2011, 11). In other words, we must unearth what is "subjugated" and marginalized, or what is "below", and stop privileging dominant and authoritarian sources of knowledge. Looking for answers in these unlikely and "unregulated territories of failure, loss, and unbecoming" (7), we find an equally unlikely hero—an anti-hero of cultural criticism in the "masked" musical and rhetorical crusader, hip-hop artist and live-broadcast pariah, Kanye West. In a recent interview with *The New York Times* entitled "Behind Kanye's Mask", West provides everything but the clear "who", "what", "why" of his I-dentity, and instead points out the contradiction that exists in his own life and that of our own guerrilla collective: fighting for an inclusive "we" while maintaining the defining "I". He expresses both his desire to "[k]ill the self" and retain his individuality when he states, "I am the nucleus" (Caramanica 2013).

As the son of an English professor raised in a middle-class household in Chicago, West has felt the tensions of manoeuvring the "above" of capitalist success while maintaining a perspective from "below" as a Black man. In some ways, West is allied with our collective's "warring" purposes—to recognize and subsequently deconstruct our complicit role in feeding the power-privilege beast. In fact, West's first album, *The College Dropout* (2004), was described by social and political theorist George Ciccariello-Maher (2007) as "a direct expression of the anguished, divided self, torn apart by the 'warring ideals' of the Black-American and specifically one whose simultaneous access to education and exposure to the racist veil ensures that this anguish will be at its most extreme" (386). This Du Boisian "racist veil", one of the polemical heads of our identity beast, rears itself in each one of West's subsequent albums, eventually culminating in a critical and violent takedown of his complicit "self" in the newly released album, *Yeezus* (2013).

Seemingly stroking his "I"-ego with songs like "I am a God" and the album's title, a play on Jesus, West draws his audience in with his "mask" of egoism, self-praise, and excess expected of Black hip-hop artists today, only to expose and artistically destroy the same self he seems to be promoting. West demonstrates his desire to relinquish selfish individuality and assemble a new "we" to express a "shared dissatisfaction"

with the racism and consumerism inherent in American culture. This is also evident in the construction of the album itself, physically presented in a clear jewel case. With no artwork and minimal labelling, it evokes the feeling of an ordinary mix CD: a collection of artists assembled, reproduced to the point where there ceases to be an original, and then circulated en masse. West brings together an assemblage of musical genres, such as trap, electronic, punk, industrial, and soul. He also rallies together a community of producers and artists such as Kid Cudi, Charlie Wilson, S1, The Heatmakerz, Mike Dean, Hudson Mohawke, Skrillex, Young Chop, Chief Keef, Frank Ocean, Odd Future, Travis Scott, The-Dream, Cyhi the Prynce, Malik Yusef, King L, John Legend, James Blake, RZA, Mase, Pusha T, Justin Vernon, and Assassin.

The individual tracks themselves, especially "Black Skinheads" and "New Slaves", express the "anguish", "warring ideals", and "above/below" tensions of being both Black and American that Maher points out in West's previous albums. In these tracks, West reaches points of hysteria in moments of general and self-criticism, describing a lack of collective action against racism as he shouts, "You niggas ain't breathing you gasping / These niggas ain't ready for action" while sounding frenzied and out of breath himself. Sampling from Billie Holiday's haunting song "Strange Fruit", which describes the lynching of Blacks in the 1930s, West describes excessive consumerism as the "new slavery" of Black Americans. He admits his own complicity by lyrically aligning himself with the "we", "I know that we the new slaves", and connecting himself with this history of Black slavery: "Y'all throwin' contracts at me / You know that niggas can't read".

While the two aforementioned tracks also contribute to the album's greater purpose to kill his "self", "I am a God" both spotlights his selfish individualism and subsequently destroys it in lyrics and sound. The most repeated lyrics in this song are: "I am a god / Even though I'm a man of God" (West 2013). This paraphrases Psalm 82:6 from the King James Bible: "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High". Therefore, in calling himself a god, he does not make himself exceptional but rather assimilates himself within the plural personal pronoun "ye". The sudden and disquieting screams of pain and fear at the end of the track are intentionally prolonged to the point of discomfort for the audience. This symbolizes the violent death of West's artistic "I" —the killing of his "self"—to make way for the collective "we" he rallies for and successfully creates throughout the course of the album. As both a plural personal pronoun (i.e. "you, the people") and West's commonly known nickname, "Ye" comes to embody the absorption of the "I" into the collective "we". Exposing these otherwise masked and buried truths from below results in the creation of utopian potentialities, what Paul Gilroy describes as an "anti-anti-essentialism" (1993). This is an identity politics that neither embraces nor rejects essentialisms, and it allows for the kind of community engagement that still remains accessible to the general public. By slaying the "I" while maintaining his assault on disciplinary power, West's album *Yeezus* becomes the example for the collective and dissenting "we" for "ye".

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Just as the voices of our "we" continue to overlap and modify one another, the voices of our eclectic archive do the same—inviting Popeye to stare down Iago and Kanye West to anticipate a productively awkward bedfellow in Derrida's cat. It is through this multiplicity that we interrogate who can write from below in our respective disciplines. Often, the theoretical texts that revel in rejecting canons and hierarchies in terms of disciplines, politics, and identitarian perspectives are only given voice and taken seriously if they are produced by an institutionally sanctioned academic at the pinnacle of their career. Finding legitimacy and approval for the radical graduate student is a very different struggle. To phrase this as a question: Does the current academic climate mandate that scholars earn the right to be subversive by paying dues to conventionality? Must one be at the top to write from below?

Munõz's ruminations on utopian performances and desire are pertinent here. He reminds us of Ernst Bloch's important claim that "the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present" (Bloch 1988, 12), a sentiment that emanates throughout this renga. By acknowledging that the uncritical championing of identity above all else is just as hazardous as the uncritical erasure of identity, our collective gives each of us a voice while simultaneously subsuming, confounding, and enhancing the voices of our peers. Nonetheless, we remain conscious of the fact that a physical invisibility through the medium of writing cannot stifle the valences of power, privilege, and difference that operate between us. Through our utopian critique of the present (more specifically, *a* present: current theoretical trends in literary and cultural criticism), we aim to invoke a culture of intellectual possibility. This phrase is borrowed and adapted from Munõz's deployment of Douglas Crimp's lament over the loss of "a culture of sexual possibility" in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic (1988). We seek to further Munõz's exploration of the intersections between utopia, sex, and possibility (as opposed to success and failure), by productively unpacking additional connections within the contemporary institution of critical thought. Ultimately, we aim to see if the utopian horizon of queer futurity is every bit as much about falling below as it is about rising above.

We strive to imagine the possibilities of alternative scholarly collectives while actually existing in an alternative collective—still conscious that we are not immune to fissures between practice and theory, that we too are vulnerable. A kindred project,

linked in both subversive spirit and multiple imperfections, can be found in John Cameron Mitchell's film *Shortbus* (2006), resembling our own aims in both content and conception. *Shortbus* is concerned with a resuscitation of Crimp's culture of sexual possibility, a project that complements and contradicts our exploration of intellectual possibility. The film garnered attention both for its cinematic gestation that allowed Mitchell and the cast to develop characters and stories together through a process of improvised collaboration, as well as for the explicit scenes of unsimulated "real" sex that are crucial to telling a narrative of non-normative attachment. Our renga mirrors this spontaneity, creativity, and exploration through collaborative action. As *Shortbus* unpacks sexual possibility through diversity and experimentation in sex, we seek to fuse the content and context of literary and cultural criticism both theoretically and in practice.

Although the definition of "real" sex has been rightfully questioned and the unfulfilled nature of the "utopian promise of inclusiveness" in the film has been acknowledged (Davis 2008, 626), the cast of collaboratively created characters still provide provocative examples of unlikely alliances that steer away from some conventional manifestations of social stratification. We share the annoyance of struggling artist and dominatrix Severin (Lindsay Beamish) when her male client asks her if she is "a top or bottom" (Mitchell 2006). Such a question blurs categories of submission and dominance, gender, and sexuality, but maintains the necessity of defining oneself—sexually or otherwise—in opposition to another, insisting on reductive binaries. We echo Severin's frustrated "I beg your pardon" when we are required to justify ourselves in similar dichotomous ways: explaining the worth of our scholarship against the institutionalized academic hierarchies that cling to canons, or the validity of our identity against a critical/political climate that almost exclusively legitimates the perspectives of heteronormative white males. With a shot (though not a whole bottle) of Leo Bersani's anti-relationality (1996), writing from below need not be purely antithetical — it can serve as an independent and exploratory methodology to see what we can create together.

In the physical space of *Shortbus*, a salon for artistic expression and sexual encounters, an example of what Muñoz, paraphrasing Derrida, calls the "surpassing of a binary between ideality and actuality" can be found (Muñoz 2009, 43). It is a place that divorces the utopian from the ideal and deploys this as a critique of a present sexual atmosphere that insists on monogamy, privacy, and conventionality—tenets that are equally as unsuitable for our critical project. The patrons of the salon seek new understandings of self and community through the formation of impermanent sexual and emotional collectives, similar to those understandings our group is invested in exploring. As Muñoz strives to rescue "utopianism [from] becom[ing] the bad object" in humanism and socialism (39), *Shortbus* refuses simplistic perceptions of non-reproductive sex as either gross perversity or the epitome of carnal delight, a shared spirit of reclamation which infuses our critical thinking. Conceptions of utopia, sex for exploration and pleasure, and the scholarship deployed in our renga, all lack the concrete pragmatism demanded by neoliberal capitalism, revealing a messy and strenuous connection shared by all three projects: an investment in a desire to explore possibility.

The mistress of *Shortbus*, transgender performance artist Justin Bond, declares the space "a salon for the gifted and challenged" (Mitchell 2006). This label may work for our own collective, although perhaps reframing it as those who are "gifted *at being* challenged" would be more appropriate. And so, we ask those who lament the decline of humanities scholarship, English departments, or literary and cultural criticism: what about the "young people" who are interested in "good books", but are also determined to constantly confuse and rewrite the merits of subjective categories such as youth and quality? The literature-lovers who want to cross popular culture, identity, and community with critical thought? Those gifted at being challenged, and who enjoy challenging? We, as individuals, as a collective, and through our tenuously linked archive (a mix CD gone happily wrong) remain committed to unpacking possibility, in all of its manifestations, through theory and practice.

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This chimaerical project practices the possibilities preached by the theorists that populate our archive. To make sense of the beastliness of writing from below, let us turn briefly to Derrida... and his cat. Donna Haraway, in *When Species Meet* (2008), acknowledges Derrida's contribution to thinking about posthumanism, and what exists beyond the "I" of Western thought, but chastises him for his lack of sincere interaction with his cat. "Something's missing" (19), Haraway writes: Derrida is too caught up in the spectacle of nakedness and the shame that goes along with it, thoughts that are "of no consequence" to the cat's quotidian life (23). However, we suggest that Derrida, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), in many ways laid the bricks and mortar for thinking and writing from below. He writes about how the "I" "erects" and "raises man infinitely above all other beings living on earth" (Derrida 2008, 92); "I" is the "originary unity of the transcendental apperception that accompanies every representation" (92). That is, "the subject that is man is a person ... who will be the subject of reason, morality, and the law" (92). The seemingly simple and singular letter "I" does a lot of dirty work, consolidating human exceptionalism, patriarchy, and the image of the philosopher/critic as a monad. However, Derrida notes the "detumescence" (36) associated with this erection, a "shame related to

standing upright" (37). Therefore, the erection of uttering "I" is simultaneously an emasculation. Derrida reveals "I" to be a mask, an artificial line by which the Western philosophical tradition has divided the rational (male, monadic) human from the irrational animal. As we are doing with this essay, Derrida topples "I" onto its side, off its high horse, and down to earth with the rest of the animated world.

Haraway prefers an "oral intercourse" with her dog to Derrida's naked encounter with his cat (2008, 16), but Derrida engages in his own interspecies intercourse. Through his feline visual interaction, Derrida is naked, and also *becomes* naked. The "bottomless gaze" (Derrida 2008, 12) of the cat strips Derrida of the "I" mask, denuding him truly. The translator David Wills reminds us that "naked" is expressed idiomatically in the original French as *à poil* (162), down to the fur, animal skin exposed. Through his visual intercourse, moreover, he is reminded of the essential capacities that humans share with animals, namely the recognition that animals can suffer (27). Haraway does not think that Derrida took this musing far enough. Nonetheless, this shared suffering is seemingly key to meaningful intercourse with animals. Suffering for Derrida means sharing a "vulnerability", "the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower" (27). Derrida feels shame at being naked, exposing his animal skin. But perhaps this "shame" is the feeling of coming back down to earth, humility—that is, feeling closeness to the humus, or earth. Derrida's interspecies interaction reminds him that there is no stable "I", no higher order or faculty. We are all animals: there is no above, we have always written from below.

Derrida's and Haraway's critiques of human exceptionalism have bearing on the present of literary and cultural criticism, as they allow us to revisit the "I" of academia, the stable monads at the center of schools of thought. Haraway criticizes the "monomaniacal, cyclopean, individuated Oedipal subject" at the nucleus of the Western philosophical tradition (28). We take this further: to look at the monomania for the academic monad—the focus on the individuated, classifiable, and hierarchized structure of scholarship. If we have been thinking about the posthuman as a way of being-in-the-world for decades, why not the postmonad in scholarship? For academia is all about interaction: brilliant ideas come from seminar discussion, impassioned conversations, passing remarks, snippets from Derrida to the Sugababes, and everything beyond and in between. We are always collaborating. Why has this not translated to publication?

Haraway writes of the queer possibilities surrounding interspecies interactions, which are fleshed out here too with our beastly writing: the creation of "something unexpected, something new and free, something outside the rules of function and calculation, something not ruled by the logic of the reproduction of the same" (223). We have eschewed reproducing the usual "who" of academia and played with strangers

(Haraway 2008, 243). We have explored *how* to write from below with Derrida: down to the earth, *à poil*, but we turn to Haraway for *who* writes from below. She states that "*who* refers to partners-in-the-making through the active relations of coshaping, not to possessive human or animal individuals whose boundaries and natures are set in advance of the entanglements of becoming together" (208). By co-creating this chimaera, we acknowledge that scholarship is always shaped by interactions with other species, and we have allowed each other's thoughts to be transformed and animated by the writing process, creating something new and unexpected.

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In Joss Whedon's 2012 film *Cabin in the Woods*, a different type of animal intercourse is presented: a girl licks the mouth of a dead wolf. Although Derrida's cat and Whedon's wolf are not that closely related, interspecies "contact zones" such as these serve to demonstrate our precarious positions in the assumed hierarchy of life. Where this film may serve to push beyond Derrida and Haraway in such considerations of animal empathy is through its inclusion of cannibal zombies. Films such as *Cabin in the Woods or World War Z* (a Marc Forster film adaptation of Max Brook's novel, featuring Brad Pitt) serve to both broaden and undermine what it is we mean when speaking of "life" and "personhood". Such films tend to base their plots on the ultimate value of human life—groups relying upon one another to save themselves as the last people on earth—at the same time as they incorporate the "undead" presence of the zombies themselves. This leads us to ask what seem to be relatively common, or perhaps even "brain dead", questions: what ***is*** the deal with zombies anyway? Is the modern fascination with the zombie body (politic) the representation of the endless dance with identity politics we mentioned earlier? Are zombies "the Other" of continental philosophy? Are zombies consumers? Are we zombies? Are zombies nazis? And why are we asking so many questions? Should we not be answering them instead? Not when we write from below. Writing from below means going *outside* convention, even if still *inside* an academic institution. And pop culture is one of many wormholes to the outside.

By constructing this renga, we embrace myriad epistemological frameworks and assert the porous and mutable nature of knowledge itself. We ask questions and let go of the urge to temporarily solidify into our individual identities in order to answer them. These questions do not even have to be tough; sometimes the most thought-provoking discussions arise from really brain dead questions. In fact, perhaps one of the largest hurdles to productivity in all of academia is the intelligence conundrum. We often pose questions that are more like observational riddles or pretty metaphors,

leaving us sweating and forgetting our purpose. So how then do we get out of the belly of the beast to ask the questions we want answered and then squirm back inside to watch the answers bloom like algae? Learn from the zombies: Embrace the brain dead. Break the rules.[1]

According to the great bulk of traditional Western philosophy, "we" do(es) not exist. That is, the "we" perspective has been largely ignored, and when the term "we" has been used it has been appropriative rather than inclusive. But more than this, "we"—the current writers of this critical renga—do not and cannot exist, say philosophers such as Aristotle and Spinoza, because chimaeras are by definition an impossibility that are only expressible through language. These philosophers have likened chimaeras to square circles, surfaces that are entirely red but green all over, and many other objects that are logically impossible but peripherally expressible. Chimaeras, these beasts of "we", have been linguistically captured to represent everything from the limits of imagination (how is it that we can only imagine aggregates of things we know rather than the entirely original?), the nature of identity and existence (is it more reasonable to believe something exists if it possesses more attributes?), the power of language (how is it we can communicate what we cannot comprehend?). But for too long, chimaeras, like most other animals represented in critical and philosophical theory, have been left in the dog-lizard-goat-hen-mosquito-ad infinitum house. They exist only in language, only insofar as they are useful to the thought experiments and expressions of the philosophers that employ their (im)possibility. Yet here "we" are—an impossibility, but full of Muñozean potentialities—neither wholly "above" in the world of imagination and ideal forms, nor wholly "below" in the real and sensible world.

This brings us back to Haraway's critique of Derrida, too "caught up" in his own musings and unable to take his imagination or his empathy quite far enough into the feral and feline frame of mind. Are these demands appropriate? Are they possible to meet? After all, if the chimaera communicates anything to us, it is that we are bound toward and by our own imaginations. Analytic philosopher Thomas Nagel, in "What Is It Like To Be A Bat?" (1974), considers the consequences of these limitations. He argues that, insofar as an organism has conscious experience, "there is something it is like to be that organism" (436). But, the answer to a question such as "what is it like to be a bat?" is inexpressible because there is something entirely unique about subjective experience. Neither additions, nor subtractions, nor combinations, nor modifications of our own experiences can adequately perform this task. Neither could we eat bat food, nor engineer wings, nor pretend to navigate by sonar because this would only tell us "what it would be like to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat" (439). Equally strange, the current "I" of this "we" ignorantly wonders what it is like to be the "we" that writes/has written this critical renga. Is there something it is like to be this "we"? Not one of "us" could answer, though all-of-"us" does. It is perhaps these practical and imaginative limitations that have made collaboration, anti-individualism, and community engagement difficult—indeed, chimaerical—in the academy and even elsewhere. Nonetheless, our efforts to *be* the impossible in this paper and to communicate the potentials of an unrealizable utopia, may help to foster new and more ethically tenable ways of thinking about empathy, imagination, and experience.

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1 Let us start with footnotes. Footnotes are the marginal; the almost inside and the not quite outside. If we could settle ourselves into the footnote zone, we would approach the place of the alternative collective. The more time we spend in the footnote zone the more questions may arise. And here, fear of failure or brilliance is unnecessary. We must simply enjoy the possibilities offered in this liminal space. This is, after all, an *underworld*. It is a place where people may transgress with wolves and a place where bodies stumble around, neither living nor dead. If the zombie, as a product of the global culture industry belongs anywhere, it is here. A published book or an article is the living testament. The work in progress is the apex of individual identity. The bibliography may be likened to a graveyard of cannibalized and consumed texts. But the footnote is the zombie, constantly undermining and battling the original text from below.

In Kristeva's sense of the abject (1982), the footnote may become the place where meaning collapses. And if meaning collapses, but we still assume the tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology, perhaps all that remains is the truth of experience. So what is the experience of reading zombie fiction? What is the experience of seeing zombies shuffle or run across a cinema screen? The retired grandmother sitting through a film like *Warm Bodies* must experience something completely different from her teenage granddaughter. Does the one feel revulsion when the other feels romantic angst? The preteen playing one of a multitude of zombie games (a cursory search of only the Apple App Store shows 100+) may be in innocent ignorance of any of George A. Romero's work. This experience is countered by that of the so called "zombie purist", those that became bent out of shape when Danny Boyle had the audacity to allow zombies to run and the even more audacious audacity to make zombies NOT zombies in *28 Days Later*.

Though zombie literature tends to be less popular than zombie film (with the exception of certain graphic novel series), reading experiences are bound to vary as much as viewing experiences. For example, there are a plethora of novels in the splatter, humour, cyberpunk and horror categories that are ravenously consumed by a mysterious fan-base—enough to warrant the publication of multiple sequels. Then there are the more "literary" vessels (far fewer in number) such as Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, Max Brooks's *World War Z*, David Moody's *Autumn*, Rhiannon Frater's *The Last Bastion of the Living*, and *The Panama Laugh* by Thomas S. Roche. Readership of these texts seems to be comprised partially of the gatekeepers of "high art". In trying to decipher the cultural significance of the zombie, to which set of experiences do we turn? And what about hybrids such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by Seth Grahame-Smith?

Perhaps the zombie is a cultural chimaera of sorts, or a mix CD gone gorily wrong. Either way, the suffusion of zombies into nearly every aspect of contemporary society is not insignificant. Perhaps one way in which our collectively produced, open-ended, and potentially author-less document could help us to understand zombies, Derrida, Yeezus, utopias, academic dinosaurs, and the paradox of the Sugababes, is that it allows us to pose questions without demanding answers. If European philosophy really is a footnote to Plato, perhaps we just need to readjust our perception of the footnote experience. Is it so bad to be the worm(hole) in the apple? If not, we should break rules more often, forego proper academic citation, break Microsoft's footnote parameters. Because, it is by falling below such expectations that new and untried ideas begin to arise. Just like the undead that populate the imaginative worlds of film and literature, such ideas may not be pretty; they may not be easy to deal with. Nonetheless, they will certainly "open us up" to other worlds of possibility.

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Biography

WE ARE A GROUP of graduate students and faculty currently affiliated with the Department of English, Film, and Theatre at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada. Collectively, our interests include ethics, hip-hop, science fiction, postcolonialism, queer studies, animal studies, philosophy of mind, posthumanism, folklore, and critical race theory. We have cultivated a community through an off-campus, informal reading group committed to forging links between our research, and between each other.