



Interstitial Living: Fragments towards an Ethics

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Abstract

This work in autotheory documents my adoption of an interstitial lifestyle in 2021. I derived my project's guiding concepts from Roland Barthes. After a foreword, which elucidates the project's context, concepts, and genre, this piece turns to a series of fragments arranged by topic. Most of the fragments record my interstitial experiences or reflect on interstitial topics. In the margin are Barthes citations that inspired the project, a structural device borrowed from *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* and autotheory.

Keywords: autotheory, Roland Barthes, ethics, interstice, fragment

[A]t times the pleasure of the Text is achieved more deeply [. . .]: whenever the ‘literary’ Text (the Book) transmigrates into our life, whenever another writing (the Other’s writing) succeeds in writing fragments of our own daily lives, in short, whenever a *co-existence* occurs.

Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*

Foreword

In *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes writes, ‘I live in the interstice’.¹ That one line haunted me throughout my work on Barthes in late 2020 and early 2021.² No matter where I turned, it resonated with what I read, and what I read concerned the fragment. ‘[T]he fragment’, Barthes explains, ‘is like the musical idea of a song cycle [. . .]: each piece is self-sufficient, and yet it is never anything but the interstice of its neighbors’.³ I was more generally drawn to the ethical dimensions of Barthes’s work from the nineteen-seventies. As he relates in *The Neutral*, ‘What I am looking for, during the preparation of this course, is an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project)’.⁴

I was first inclined to write a scholarly essay on interstitial ethics but soon changed course. If Barthes’s theories were valid, I reasoned, they should be viable. And if they ‘transmigrate[d] into [my] life’, to evoke my epigraph, they might mobilize new ways of thinking, being, and acting in the world.⁵ Five overlapping Barthesian concepts guided my practice of interstitial living: fragment, nuance, interpretation, idiorrhythmy, and interruption. My understanding of those notions shifted and mutated over the course of this project. I nevertheless offer the following as one tidy distillation of my otherwise wayward thinking.

Interstitial living favors the fragment, a counter-cultural form. Western culture expects causation, antithesis, and other logical arrangements to connect thoughts.⁶ However, as Barthes explains, ‘the fragment breaks up [. . .] discourse constructed to give a final meaning’.⁷ Eventually, fragments must be placed in some order. Barthes employed ‘controlled chance’, a strategy according to which he titled his fragments and then arranged them alphabetically.⁸ Discussing the fragment’s various incarnations, Barthes shared some of his quotidian practices. While walking on the street or sitting in a café, for example, he made notations.⁹ When drawing, he added details one at a time without adhering to a design.¹⁰

Living in the interstice, one respects nuances, the subtle differences that distinguish one person, thing, or experience from another. In so doing, one resists the impulse to qualify, classify, or equate the things of this world, acknowledging instead their incomparability.¹¹ In addition, one refrains from interpretation. Three Barthesian

fragments—the film still, the photograph, and the haiku—elucidate that concept. Barthes coined *obtuse meaning* to designate a detail in a film still that frustrates meaning-making. Unlike the still's other details, which offer information or symbolism, this detail bears a meaning that cannot be definitively named or described.¹² He applied the term *punctum* to a photographic detail that entices our attention but renders analysis superfluous. This detail unsettles the photograph's other details, which solicit the viewer's cultural knowledge.¹³ Finally, the haiku, 'the essential, musical future of the fragment', conveys nuance but withstands commentary.¹⁴ Indeed, '[t]he haiku's task is to achieve exemption from meaning within a perfectly readerly discourse'.¹⁵

Interstitial living shares an intervallic structure with idiorrhythmy, a term from one of Barthes's courses. The idiorrhythmic subject finds a solitary interstice in the social fabric, accepts periodic interruption, and, to find ample breathing space, negotiates the proper distance from others.¹⁶ However, if subjectivity is comprised of singular, discontinuous moments in time and place, as Barthes believed, it stands to reason that an individual would momentarily occupy one interstice only to be serially displaced to others.¹⁷ Consider, for their instructiveness, three Barthesian interrupters: the intermezzo (a short musical movement that cuts in on what comes before), the asyndeton (a syntactical construction without logical connectors), and the anacoluthon (an unexpected redirection of syntactical structure).¹⁸ All three, if applied to subjectivity, help us to imagine the interstitial subject's perpetual dislocation. Barthes's discussion of laziness provides further illumination. Like interstitiality, laziness is conducive to disruption.¹⁹ In fact, the idle subject is, in its truest embodiment, 'decentered, unable even to say "I"'.²⁰

Those concepts drifted into my world across the spring and summer of 2021. As they did so, I composed a series of fragments. Some began as journal entries, which documented interstitial experiences or ruminated on interstitial topics. Others took shape as incidents, notations, or haiku.²¹ When my project drew to a close, I arranged the fragments into eleven topics, rough equivalents of Barthes's traits and figures. Then, instead of grouping the topics by concept, I named and alphabetized them, thereby applying 'controlled chance'. Within each topic, I maintained the fragments' original chronological order. Finally, I placed in the margin citations from Barthes that had frequently come to mind during this project.²² They evoked, in Barthes's words, 'what ha[d] seduced, convinced, or what ha[d] momentarily given the delight of understanding'.²³

The citations signal this piece's affinity with autotheory, 'a term that describes', Lauren Fournier explains, 'a self-conscious way of engaging with theory—as a

discourse, frame, or mode of thinking and practice—alongside lived experience and subjective embodiment'.²⁴ Notable examples such as Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and Joanna Walsh's *Break.up* place citations in the margin. With *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Barthes set a compelling precedent for such an approach. According to Marielle Macé, he considered literature a rich inventory of possible practices, ones that active readers could select and adapt for their ongoing self-transformation.²⁵ Citations in particular inspired his daily living. 'Les phrases sont [. . .] moins des objects', Macé writes of Barthes's citational practice, 'que des directions et des appels, les promesses d'une pratique à venir; elles sont à citer'.²⁶ Accompanied by words that likewise summoned me, the following fragments document my adoption of an interstitial lifestyle.

Fragments

Aeration

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>'[A] haiku [. . .] in its entirety, its finitude, its solitude on the page, forms a single ideogram'.²⁷</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">23 March 2021</p> <p>I'm on the periphery of Washington Square Park, where I'm detached from action but can nonetheless take it all in. I hear industrial machinery a short distance away. Then, suddenly, it stops—and all I hear is the murmur of voices and skateboards. I take a sip of wine, lean back, and breathe.</p> |
| <p>'[I]diorrhhythm is almost a pleonasm: the interstices, the <i>fugitivity</i> of the code, of the manner in which the individual inserts himself into the social [. . .] code'.²⁸</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">6 May 2021</p> <p>I sit alone under a tree in Washington Square Park. Occupying my own interstice, I silently watch other visitors walk, sit, talk, eat.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">26 June 2021</p> <p>Just last night, in New Orleans's French Quarter, I sat alone on the balcony of a gay bar, breathing, absorbing the gentle breeze on a hot summer night.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">3 August 2021</p> <p>When they need breathing space, most New Yorkers flee to a park, but in a city so densely packed, one must find respite in the most unlikely places. Today I went to</p> |

Finback Brooklyn. Sitting alone under an outdoor canopy on a cloudy but temperate day, I found my idiorrhymy, a feature of my interstitial practice. There, while I observed and breathed, I wrote the following haiku:

Cars pass, clouds hang low,
And I alone breathe deeply,
Thankful for the day.

'[T]he *aeration* of the written form is part of the haiku's mode of being'.²⁹

A man's supple legs
Invite my eyes from afar,
Ah! distant desire.

Too seldom we pause
To hear our lungs fill with breath
And exhale with peace.

I breathe, I exhale;
I also watch and listen;
Cellphones interrupt.

I sit all alone
Under a large canopy;
I keep my distance.

The cool, gentle breeze
Caresses my arms and legs:
Welcome August respite.

Anacoluthon and Asyndeton

17 June 2021

Washington Square Park stirs up my thoughts. They no longer conform to order and logic. Instead, they succumb to interruption and discontinuity.

'The (cultural) body resists it ('to speak in fragments' E. D.); it requires transitions, linking phrases.'³⁰

24 June 2021

Barthes cites the asyndeton and the anacoluthon as rhetorical devices of interruption. As compelling as I find his discussions, those figures fly in the face of my long-held convictions about good writing. Take the asyndeton, for example. Barthes admires this figure because it defies the logical connections that Western culture expects between one idea and the next. For decades, whenever I've encountered my students' disconnected thoughts, I've advocated the judicious use of transitions. Considering my professional training, how can I cultivate a lifestyle that values discontinuity without leading a strange double life?

20 July 2021

Today I experimented with the asyndeton. On the subway to Finback Brooklyn and while there, I made lists of random objects and persons around me, connecting the items with nothing but commas.

'[T]o conceive of a co-presence without it being metonymical, antithetical, causal, etc.; a consecution without logic yet without it *signifying* the destruction of logic'.³¹

Written on the 2 subway from West Fourteenth Street to Atlantic Avenue-Barclays Center: curly hair, masks, asking for money, staring at the floor, guitar, fancy men's shoes, messages on my dating app, subway announcement, matching pairs of tennis shoes, blue seats, metal poles.

Written at Finback Brooklyn: plant, ice, bartender all in black, chairs and tables, IPA, conversations, music, tuna fish sandwich, particle board, extra napkins, customers and employees, concrete floor, twenty tap lines, coconut double IPA.

4 August 2021

'[A]nacoluthon: between the description of the posture and the cosmic evidence, the subject

The theme of one of Barthes's favorite haiku is laziness. Idleness, he explains, displaces the self. Betokening the self's dislocation, this haiku's anacoluthon obscures agency.³³ Intrigued by this discursive effect, I tried my

disappears: there is no self'.³²

hand at the anacoluthon this afternoon. My sentences, which follow, opened with phrases that logically demanded the subject *I*, which was missing, or were followed by the subject *I*, which was illogically placed:

- Hopping onto my lap and nudging me, I write an anacoluthon.
- Looking at the collages I framed and hung on the wall, my décor has suddenly become more personal.
- Weary from a bad night's sleep, my thoughts float from topic to topic.
- Walking on all fours across the floor, I admire my furry friend.
- Breathing deeply, the clouds hang low on this mild August day.

My goal had been to decenter my subjectivity, at least linguistically. Yet my sentences' predictable patterns ironically mitigated some of the anacolutha's disruptive potential.

Collage

6 June 2021

Two weeks ago, I took up collaging to enhance my interstitial lifestyle. So far, I've completed two collages and started a third.

Collage one: I began this collage with no plan and no theme. As I ransacked drawers and closets, I collected a wide array of fragments: a man's tie and a paper towel as well as a snapshot of me as a toddler and pictures from Montpellier, France. Then I assembled the materials one item at a time. It was only towards the end that I happened upon an old copy of Sartre's *La Nausée*. After I cut out an excerpt from the back cover, I turned to the book's first paragraph. Almost miraculously, a line jumped out at me: 'Ne pas laisser échapper les

nuances, les petits faits, même s'ils n'ont l'air de rien, et surtout les classer.'³⁸

Collage two: If the first collage began with no concept, the second one started with an inclination towards gray and brown, my favorite color combination. I still incorporated a variety of materials—chopstick, shoelace, coins, tissue paper, and baby picture—but this time I focused on keepsakes from a defunct romance. I incorporated excerpts from a funny card and a letter and added some lines from Sartre about past and future.

Collage three: Yesterday I started a collage devoted to the scraps of my everyday life. Until it's finished, I plan to collect materials, however mundane, from my comings and goings. For example, I've already incorporated a stained coffee filter and a CVS receipt as well as a sushi takeout divider and snack crumbs. Then this morning inspiration struck. As I strolled down the sidewalk, a large bird feather fell in front of me. Suddenly, I was reminded of a line from Barthes's essay on Pierre Loti. I plan to incorporate that line into the collage.

'The incident [. . .] is simply *what falls* gently, like a leaf, on life's carpet; it is that faint, fugitive crease given to the fabric of days'.³⁴

13 June 2021

I'm on the verge of completing my third collage. What strikes me is that the vast majority of the materials come from food and drink: a stained wine cork, a beer-can label, and a chopstick. They hardly seem to constitute an incident. There are two exceptions, however. One is the feather. The other is an image of a beautiful, young man on the cover of an Hervé Guibert book. The image is vaguely reminiscent of a young man with whom I recently shared a brief moment of intimacy. He and the feather are, for me, 'faint, fugitive crease[s]': rare moments that occasionally arrive without expectation or replication.

17 June 2021

Earlier this week I began my fourth collage. Building on the previous one, I assembled materials invoking Barthes's definition of *incident*: falling and folding, leaves and fabrics, tissues and the like. The *début* fell flat, so I put the collage to the side. A couple of days later, having second thoughts, I cut out the parts I liked and attached them to a new background. So far, I've collected a decaying flower, a piece of folded paper, and a brown leaf from Washington Square Park as well as shredded paper and bits of a sock.

18 July 2021

'I proceed by addition,
not by sketch'.³⁵

Yesterday I completed my fifth collage. At its center is a campy turn-of-the-twentieth-century French postcard I bought in Paris in 2017. Employing a piecemeal technique loosely derived from Barthes, I encircled the postcard with flower stickers, pastel designs, a shoe string, tissue paper, and the words *love* and *feel* from a snack package. I even included a snapshot of me as a coy toddler.

2 August 2021

A few days ago, I completed my sixth collage. At its center is another turn-of-the-twentieth-century French postcard. It features a man holding a rifle, in front of whom are two cherubic children. Around the postcard, I adhered the phrases 'wild sage', 'love', and 'bon courage'. I also included wine and beer labels as well as a dried flower and part of a sushi container.

5 August 2021

I've long cultivated a sentimental streak. Since childhood, I've written journals, taken photos, and made scrapbooks. As much as they've documented my life, they've also become a burden. Everywhere I've moved, including into a small Manhattan studio, I've

lugged boxes of those items. Over the last few years, I've committed myself to discarding some of the artifacts—a bittersweet chore. Today I tackled mementos from trips as far back as the summer of 1989. These souvenirs are just so many fragments of myself. As I sifted through them, I salvaged some of the maps—of San Francisco, Halifax, Paris, London, Prague, and others—and cut them into pieces. I then superimposed each fragment partially on top of another. To date, this, my seventh collage, is my favorite. For it evokes layers of cherished memories.

7 August 2021

'It's (Painting is E. D.) an absolutely gratuitous activity, corporal, aesthetic after all, and truly restful at the same time, real laziness'.³⁶

This afternoon I started my ninth collage. When I'd exhausted my materials, I was astounded that an hour and a half had passed. There's something therapeutic about collaging while listening to music and sipping wine. Indeed, it's one of the only times I use my hands and mind to create with no goal and no audience. I simply create, and if I don't like the result, I collage right over it. (In truth, I started this collage on the back of my eighth, an abandoned attempt.) So far, this one uses remnants from past trips with a Far Eastern aesthetic.

15 August 2021

'[I]t (Subjectivity E. D.) has to be accepted in its mobility; not "undulating", but an interweaving, a network of mobile *points*'.³⁷

Today I discontinued my ninth composition, cut out selected fragments, and reassembled them. Is the final product a reincarnation of my ninth collage or a new one? Admittedly, my inclination towards precise enumeration conflicts with my interstitial aspirations. Predictable sequencing runs counter to creative flow.

18 August 2021

Last night I drank beer with Ian Swordy, local sculptor and dear friend, at The Anchored Inn. I requested this meeting because, a couple of months ago, he called

collaging a lifestyle and then dashed off. His provocative statement demanded elucidation.

Two months later, when our schedules finally coincided, Ian treated me to a two-hour art-history lesson. Passionately, he explained that, as we moved into the modern age, artists gradually abandoned the age-old belief in creation as the expression of inner genius and adopted instead the conviction that the self exists only in relation to the external material conditions of which it's a part. Collage is the artistic byproduct of that evolution. Given the conditions into which one is placed seemingly at random, how does one gather, arrange, and rearrange the fragments of one's existence? Although most of Ian's lesson focused on the historical, literary, and aesthetic influences out of which modern collage emerged, he occasionally dropped nuggets of personal insight:

- 'Let's explore the radical possibilities of collaging as lifestyle.'
- 'Any bag of trash can be arranged into a compelling composition with work.'
- 'We should use collage to find the other.'

20 August 2021

Yesterday I walked on the High Line. Taking my cue from Ian, I collected scraps on the park path. They included a brown leaf, a used Metrocard, and a piece of paper with the word *cuddly* on it. Today, with those materials, I began a new collage, another one devoted to the scraps of my everyday life.

25 August 2021

My current collage is challenging. Thankfully, my neighborhood's streets are relatively clean, so I've found very little trash. To compensate, I've started collecting my own trash, but I've used similar scraps in earlier collages. Ian would probably argue that, as long as I

arrange the scraps differently, I will have created something new. Still, I feel repetitious. Running out of viable options, I took the deep plunge: I rummaged through my apartment building's trash. Admittedly, I rifled through the paper recycling, so the task wasn't too distasteful. Unfortunately, none of the materials inspired me. Perhaps Ian was correct when he cautioned that one can make a collage out of scraps—but only 'with work'. Who knew that artful trash picking could be so arduous?

Comparison

31 May 2021

Sometimes I judge others based on past experiences with individuals whose actions fit the same pattern. For example, a former student began one of my courses performing poorly. After I recommended that she withdraw from the course, the student insisted she could pass against almost all odds. Past experience predicted otherwise.

'This would be the reign of the irreducible: on the one hand, no individual would be reducible to another → absolute individuation; on the other hand, every individual being incomparable [. . .], no generality would be possible'.³⁹

22 July 2021

Fuming, I exited the subway at High Street in Brooklyn. During the ride, a man blared music on his cellphone, talked on his phone with the speaker activated, and conversed loudly with other passengers. As I fled the scene, I easily lumped him into a category of similarly rude passengers from past subway rides. Yet, in my haste to generalize, I never stopped to ask, for example, whether his call was urgent. My short sightedness fell prey to classifying, a cardinal misstep if I want to live interstitially.

6 August 2021

My life moves by way of patterns. For instance, some weeks ago, I encountered a guy on a dating app. When

‘Throughout life, all of love’s “failures” resemble one another [. . .]. [. . .] And yet X and Y are incomparable’.⁴⁰

‘About all these *fold*s of the body, I want to say that they are *adorable*. *Adorable* means: this is my desire, insofar as it is unique’.⁴¹

we later met, our date had all the appearances of what, back in the day, we would have called a one-night stand. However, it was clear from the first few minutes that our attachment was destined for more than a few sensual moments together. In fact, the next night he came to my apartment to sleep over. Nevertheless, he later told me he no longer desired me. Those few intense days reminded me of so many past amorous experiences: instant attraction, intense interaction, sudden letdown. Yet, as much as this man reminded me of other men from my amorous history, he nonetheless held for me something singular for which I couldn’t properly account. Perhaps it was the rich contours of his face, an emotional maturity beyond chronological age, or a certain something beneath his clothes that was, just for a few days, my all in all. I’ll never know for certain, but, every once in a while, I unexpectedly recall his body scent.

‘Controlled Chance’

12 June 2021

During today’s piano practice, I subjected Robert Schumann’s *Album of the Young* to my own version of ‘controlled chance’. Rather than ordering the album’s short pieces alphabetically, as Barthes would have recommended, I indulged my predilection for numbers. Starting with the first one, I played every odd-numbered piece until the end. I executed this exercise almost without pause even as I struggled to play certain movements. My experience was hardly pleasurable, but it nevertheless forced me to bypass favorite movements for ones I had all but neglected.

13 June 2021

This morning I experimented again with ‘controlled chance’ but this time with an approach truer to Barthes’s

‘Hence we have subjugated the series of figures [. . .] to a pair of arbitrary factors: that of nomination and that of the alphabet’.⁴²

own. I returned to *Album for the Young*, restricting myself to the first eighteen movements, whose titles I arranged in alphabetical order. Always eager to find a theme, I pondered the significance of beginning with the somber ‘Choral’ and ending with ‘The Wild Horseman’. Of course, Barthes would have discouraged me from excessive meaning-making. All the same, the new order offered fresh perspective on familiar pieces.

16 June 2021

Today I turned to Bach’s *Two-Part Inventions* for an experiment in ‘controlled chance’. Like my first experiment, this one depended on numeric rather than alphabetic sequence. I played first the odd-numbered inventions and then the even-numbered ones. The session yielded the following banal observations:

- I had previously played only two of the odd-numbered inventions.
- I had previously played all but two of the even-numbered ones.
- The experiment forced me to sight-read.
- I find two-part inventions challenging to sight-read.
- I discovered the E-flat invention, which I hope to learn.

20 August 2021

Today, using a Barthesian technique, I wrote a cut-up poem. I began by opening a collection of Emily Dickinson’s poems. Landing on one of my favorites, ‘I dwell in Possibility -’, I visually cut up the words and rearranged them in alphabetical order. I then reassembled them, respecting the original layout of three quatrains, ignoring most of the original punctuation and capitalization, and attempting to maintain some approximation of regular meter.

A an and as cedars
 Chambers doors dwell everlasting
 Eye fairer fairest for
 For for gambrels gather

Hands house I impregnable
 In more my narrow numerous
 Occupation of of of
 Of of paradise possibility

Prose roof sky spreading
 Superior than the the
 The the the this
 To visitors wide windows

Intermezzo

4 June 2021

'[T]here are only intermezzi: what interrupts is in its turn interrupted'.⁴³

Barthes's scattered discussions of the intermezzo give me the impression that life could be conceived as a series of intermezzi. To explore the concept, I ordered a collection of music by Robert Schumann, a composer of intermezzi. When the collection arrived yesterday, I sight-read through many of the movements in a hit-or-miss fashion. Today I focused on *Carnaval*, some of whose movements I played at slow tempi with many wrong notes. How can I imagine a life comprised of intermezzi if I struggle to play them? Do intermezzi require patience, practice, and, most of all, tolerance for ellipsis, experimentation, and failure?

16 July 2021

'[T]his is the realm of the *intermezzo*, a rather dizzying notion when it extends to all of music,

Today I tried again to experience life as a sequence of intermezzi. Putting myself in the mood, I attempted to play a few of Schumann's intermezzi. While I found the movements designated as such too hard to play, I ironically found some of the movements on either side

and when the matrix is experienced only as an exhausting (if graceful) sequence of interstices'.⁴⁴

much easier. I suppose that if, as Barthes claims, Schumann's music is comprised of nothing but intermezzi, those outer movements also count.

Then I left the apartment for a brief intermezzo: a visit to Grimm Ales to drink beer and make notations. I suppose that if I were a model Barthesian, I would have walked as I noted, but today's heat index, which pushed 100 degrees, made strolling too hard to bear. On the subway to Grimm, I wrote two notations:

I board the L train and sit across from two young guys I assume are a couple. I wonder why I make that assumption and why one of them appears more attractive to me than the other.

Another young guy, also possibly gay, boards the train at Union Square, so I consider dubbing this train 'The Gay Train'.

When I arrived at Grimm, I was informed that customers wouldn't be seated inside until five PM. Heat adverse, I went to nearby Interboro Spirits and Ales, where I wrote the following:

It's a hole in the wall with exposed brick and peeling paint, but the temperature is cool, the beer is cold, and the sun is shining through the skylight.

An instance of idiorrhymy: I sit on a bar stool, musing and noting, while at a distance the cook quietly makes food, a staff member works at her computer, and another employee sits before his legal pad. Eighties music plays in the background.

Onto my second beer, I look, I muse, I breathe.

14 August 2021

Years ago, a friend quipped, 'You're a serial monogamist.' She was referring to my habit of falling madly in love at first sight and devoting myself

exclusively to that one person until our relationship dissolved a few days later. Then, after a hiatus, I would repeat the scenario. Although my friend's comment bore truth, I like to think of my amorous affairs as just so many *intermezzi*. No matter how brief, each love affair rips me suddenly out of my daily routine, compelling me to change sleeping patterns, listen to different music, eat new foods, travel through different neighborhoods, and learn new information. During those welcome disruptions, I glimpse, however briefly, another dimension of myself.

Interpretation

2 June 2021

'[T]here is a moment when language ceases'.⁴⁵

By profession, I'm an interpreter, of poems, films, and fiction. However, tonight, I resisted the temptation to interpret *Minari*, a beautiful film directed by Lee Isaac Chung. I simply put to the side the pregnant contrast between native and new land, old and young, growth and dryness. My unprecedented restraint, in a concerted effort to adopt a Barthesian posture, will surely not last long. But it was liberating for once not to make meaning.

26 June 2021

'For, in its perfect moments, literature [. . .] tends to make us say: "That's it, that's absolutely it!" [. . .] Interpretation makes us say: "It's not quite that"'.⁴⁶

Obtuse meaning, punctum, and similar Barthesian terms have fascinated me theoretically for decades. Yet I struggle to apply them practically. For example, I teach first-year writing students the Method, a step-by-step process outlined in David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen's textbook *Writing Analytically*. That process, designed to lead students towards interpretation, asks them to locate patterns of repetition, similarity, and contrast. It's true that the Method invites students to entertain anomalies, but the authors suggest that students may eventually connect those details to other

parts of the analysis.⁴⁹ In developing inexperienced interpreters, I reinforce that strategy. Yet, if I were an ideal Barthesian professor, I would encourage them to revel in the details' recalcitrance to interpretation.

10 August 2021

*'Everything signifies: by this proposition, I entrap myself, I bind myself in calculations, I keep myself from enjoyment.'*⁴⁷

Last week I decided to spend the day meandering through one of my favorite Brooklyn neighborhoods. As soon as I made the decision, I debated whether to inform an erstwhile lover, who lived there. On the one hand, I liked his company and missed him. On the other hand, I didn't want him to know I was still fond of him. Despite my ambivalence, I sent him a text inviting him to join me. Twenty-four hours later, no response. Did he not receive the text? I wondered. Or was he too busy to respond? Later I decided to postpone the trip and pondered whether I should alert him. After all, it seemed only the polite thing to do, so I texted him again. Hours later, still no response, and thus ensued the same stream of questions. The other's non-communication is for me a sign subject to endless, agonizing interpretation.

12 August 2021

Today I opened a large album of family photographs. As I leafed through the album, I was immediately drawn to children's facial expressions. In many cases, they were smiling at the unknown photographers, but that was not the case for my great-grandmother in a large family portrait. Around eleven years old when this photograph was taken, she poked her tongue barely out of her mouth just as the photographer snapped the photograph. What was she thinking? I wondered. Was she distracted, bored, or fidgety? I'll never know.

I was also drawn to some of the individuals' poses. Many of the photographs were taken in studios, where

professional photographers positioned their subjects. Those poses rarely interested me. However, the mid-century photograph of my grandparents and their three children drew my attention. My grandfather held his right arm straight down by his side but placed his left one around my aunt. However, my grandmother held one arm, the one closer to my grandfather, straight down by her side while bending her other arm behind her back. Knowing a little about my grandparents' relationship, I rushed to interpret her posture. It signaled impending marital troubles, I declared. On what grounds did I make that interpretation? Even if such an interpretation were plausible, my grandmother's posture could have just as easily stemmed from social awkwardness or body fatigue. Instead of assigning a biographical explanation to my grandmother's arm position, I simply turned the page.

Of all the photographs I viewed, the one that fascinated me the most included my great-great-grandmother, her siblings, and her parents. Taken in front of a house towards the close of the nineteenth century, this photograph might at first seem like an ordinary family portrait, but what made it strange was that one of my great-great-grandmother's brothers, seated in his mother's lap, was born after the photograph was supposedly taken. It looked as if someone later superimposed his likeness on the photograph. The result was a ghostly-looking infant nestled in his mother's lap with her distorted fingers wrapped around him. Although, by virtue of his family ties, my uncle arguably deserved a place in this photograph, from another perspective, he had no business making a pre-natal appearance. Perhaps a historian of photography would find this phenomenon unremarkable. But, for a novice like me, my uncle's likeness was the photograph's punctum.

'(I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture [. . .]; but in it, for you, no wound)'.⁴⁸

Interruption

26 May 2021

Most mornings I sit at my desk, where I write on my laptop. Unfortunately, every time I receive a telephone call, my computer exits the word-processing program and sends me to my desktop. In so doing, the laptop or the caller—whichever diabolical agent is responsible—interrupts my train of thought. Such is life in our digital world.

28 May 2021

‘Schedule: experienced as a manic apportioning, classification of the hours in the day’.⁵⁰

Every day I set a schedule. Usually, it’s a simple mental or hardcopy list. Currently, I wake around four thirty AM, complete a few minor tasks, and go to the gym at six. Early morning, I write, read, and study, and late morning, I practice music. In the afternoon, I shift to lighter work, usually relocating to a bar or a park for fresh surroundings. I devote the evening to recorded music or streamed films.

29 May 2021

‘Schedule involves regulated, authorized interruption = Rhythm’.⁵¹

Just yesterday morning I experienced the difference between sanctioned and unsanctioned interruptions. After I meticulously designed my schedule, a friend contacted me. He was off from work in the afternoon and offered to meet me for a drink. Of course, I wanted to meet him. After all, we hadn’t seen each other in months. However, for an hour, I fought my aggravation at giving up control over my schedule. Eventually, I relented and met my friend for late-afternoon drinks.

12 June 2021

I’m a list-maker from way back. In fact, just this morning, I created a three-column one. Two columns were devoted to tasks for friends to perform while caring for my cat in my absence. The third column

enumerated tasks for me to complete to advance their performance. Surely, a list is a fragment, but my lists don't interrupt the subject. Instead, they seek to manage my otherwise chaotic world. Thus, there must be two types of fragments: one content on finding a place among other fragments and another hellbent on controlling the others. Perhaps this is why, throughout my life, I've shuttled between a fascination with discontinuity and a predilection for management.

13 June 2021

Although I hate unregulated interruptions, I'm still drawn to them. In *The Queen's Throat*, Wayne Koestenbaum sheds light on my internal conflict. Like the diva, for whom interruption is both 'subject and method', homosexuality is conceived 'as a rip in meaning, in coherence, in cultural systems, in vocal consistency'.⁵³ While Koestenbaum is quick to add that '[h]omosexuality isn't intrinsically an interruption', he reminds us that our culture has nevertheless described it as such.⁵⁴ Perhaps that's why I give such care to fragments, the broken pieces that betoken my queer identity.

12 July 2021

'[C]e qui me plaît [. . .]
c'est l'interruption'.⁵²

If I ever hope to embrace an interstitial lifestyle, I must learn to bear unwanted interruption. To accustom myself to discontinuity, I contrived an experiment. I began by listing some brief activities. Then, employing 'controlled chance', I described each task in a short phrase beginning with an action verb and arranged the tasks in alphabetical order by the first word of each descriptive phrase. Next, I assigned each activity a number corresponding to the position of that word's first letter in the alphabet. If the number exceeded twelve, I divided it in half. The number became the length of time I would devote to that task. In sum, the

activities would take just under an hour, the amount of time allotted for this experiment. Finally, I set my cellphone's stopwatch for the first task and hit the start button. Once my timer sounded, I moved to the next task until I reached the end. My activities and corresponding times were as follows:

- Check citation one (three).
- Check citation two (three).
- Define *dictation* (four).
- Play the piano (eight).
- Reread Barthes's 'Dare to Be Lazy' (nine).
- Review catalog (nine).
- Scrape mildew off my shower surround (nine and a half).
- Verify my use of 'controlled chance' (eleven).

Despite my goal, my experiment's temporal constraints and mechanical predictability ironically reinforced the very organizational strategies I routinely implement to withstand interruption.

Laziness

19 April 2021

'[I]n a situation of idleness the subject is almost dispossessed of his consistency as a subject'.⁵⁵

I make most of my notations in Washington Square Park. It seems that only here, in a state of sheer idleness, I can combat my zeal to fill every moment with a task or a project.

13 July 2021

'In misery itself, I can, for a very brief interval,

Laziness is antithetical to every fiber of my being. I can't even take off an afternoon without turning each hour into an opportunity for productivity. Yet today, for just an hour, I tried to be idle. I designated a spot for my laziness (Finback Brooklyn) and selected a span of time (between noon and two). Paradoxically, my laziness was more contrived than spontaneous. Yet my exercise

devise for myself a *little corner of sloth*.⁵⁶

succeeded in many ways. After I arrived at Finback, I found my ‘little corner of sloth’ and spent most of my time making the following notations:

I sit outside, drinking a beer, savoring the gentle, cool breeze—a rarity this hot summer.

The other day, as I jaywalked across the intersection of Eighth Avenue and West Fourteenth Street, I came almost shoulder-to-shoulder with a man holding a slice of pizza. Eager to reach my destination a few seconds sooner, I crossed over to his left. Suddenly, with no warning, I felt an object hit my body. As I turned around, I saw the man’s pizza hit the ground. Then he said, ‘Get away from me, you demon.’ I swiftly exited the scene, mumbling, ‘Are you crazy?’

Four teenage guys make a film on the sidewalk. One of them limps as his only part.

21 July 2021

I’m a failure at laziness. Nevertheless, this afternoon, I endeavored to be lazy. Because of my deficiencies, I turned to a leading expert: Ruskin, my cat. For the last fourteen years, he’s excelled at laziness, so I hoped he could coach me. As I sat on the couch, he predictably crawled up on my lap, and we cuddled on and off for about forty-five minutes. Being lazy was easier than I thought. Only on a couple of occasions did I grab my cellphone to check my email.

14 August 2021

Throughout my life, I’ve encountered individuals who’ve said something so remarkable, even if in passing, that I still recall it today. Such was the case with a friend who came by my apartment one afternoon. Playing the customary role of planner, I listed a series of options for our time together. We could listen to music or eat an early dinner, I suggested. Then

‘True laziness would be at bottom a laziness of

“not deciding”, of “being there”.⁵⁷

he casually remarked, ‘Or we could just not decide at all.’ I was stunned. How could we proceed without a plan or a task? I asked myself. Yet, for those few hours, this man taught me simply how to be.

19 August 2021

I orient my life around time: when I must leave the apartment, how long a task will likely take, and what time I should wake up. In truth, however, I rarely follow my schedule to the letter. For, along the way, I make small adjustments and entertain brief diversions. This morning, as I worked, I recorded my deviations:

‘These days, idleness probably consists not in doing nothing [. . .] but in cutting time up as often as possible, in diversifying it’.⁵⁸

- I started my work fifteen minutes late because I needed to dash off an email.
- I wrote another email to a colleague.
- I looked up *Naked Lunch* on *Wikipedia*.
- I grabbed pen and paper to document my interruptions.
- I poured a second cup of coffee.
- I checked the height of a stool.
- I checked a dating app.
- I cleaned the coffee pot.
- I checked the dating app again.
- I unloaded the dishwasher.
- I shaved a hair off my neck.
- I petted my cat.
- I checked my email.

Notation

19 July 2021

Today, taking up one of Barthes’s favorite activities, I made notations while ambling in my neighborhood. Before I left the apartment, I designated three ground rules:

‘[J]e ne me laisserai pas détourner [. . .] de ce que je veux vraiment faire,

- I would not set a destination.
- I would try to get out of my head.

me promener dans la vie
en notant'.⁵⁹

- I would avoid checking email on my cellphone. Surprisingly, I roamed for two hours when I expected to walk for only one. During that time, I wrote the following fragments:

I walk through the streets of Greenwich Village, a gentle breeze hitting my cheeks, a welcome mid-July respite.

I stop by Les Merveilleux de Fred to look at the array of fresh croissants and pastries.

I pause to sit in Jane Park, a Village oasis, and listen to the chirping birds.

I marvel at the number of small parks tucked away here and there.

I'm astonished at the treasures left on the sidewalk for the trash. I select a beautifully framed and matted piece in shades of gray.

I'm ashamed at the contrast between the homeless man across the street and me: while he sleeps on the sidewalk amid scattered food crumbs, I sip a cold beer and look out into the neighborhood.

In Washington Square Park, I listen to a two-member percussion band. Its stark, improvisatory rhythms suit this gloomy, windy, cool day.

I sit on a park bench under a tree. Unexpectedly, it begins to mist. I have no umbrella. Yet I don't move. The mist feels so cool and refreshing.

17 August 2021

This afternoon I sauntered through some of Greenwich Village's labyrinthian streets while making notations. After ten minutes, I became disconcerted because I had still not written a single notation. Then I realized that, instead of directing my attention towards the world, I'd been silently rehearsing the morning's problems. Soon I refocused and wrote the following:

'[T]here would be a time for rambling around, [. . .] cruising for memories, sensations, incidents'.⁶⁰

I look above and spy architectural treasures I've never noticed before.

Two trees, one on this side of Morton Street and one on the other, touch in the middle of the street, providing natural shelter.

Fire escapes superimpose upon buildings a diagonal design.

The City is full of gardens that, while not strictly secret, nevertheless exude a clandestine ambience while lending their grateful guests a few moments of respite.

The cool breeze wafts over my body, a deceptive intimation of the fall to come.

Nuance

8 June 2021

'I want to live according to nuance'.⁶¹

'[H]yperconsciousness of the affective minimal, of the microscopic fragment of emotion = filings of affects'.⁶²

Today I was attuned to nuance. On a midday errand, I heard a truck's brakes and the subway's rumble, singing birds and honking cars. I wondered if those random urban sounds composed their own composition, one I'd never heard before and will never hear again. Later, at home, I played a recording of piano pieces by John Cage and opened a bottle of wine. The music put me in the mood to continue my third collage. After I completed today's installment, I reread Walter Benjamin's 'Hashish in Marseille', which Barthes cites for its reference to nuance.⁶⁵ Not long afterwards, I shared an intimate moment with a young man—a brief encounter that made me fully alive to every sensation.

23 July 2021

'[O]ne of these (nuance E. D.) exercises: inventory

While I was at a local beer bar, I made lists of closely related words. I selected two adjectives (*interesting* and *good*) and one verb (*like*) with which to create 'micronetworks'. The exercise was more difficult than I expected. Of the three, I found *good* the easiest word for which to generate synonyms. Predictably, that list

of micronetworks of words that are very similar but a tiny bit different'.⁶³

included words describing my New England-style IPA, one of my gateways to relaxation and creativity. What this exercise taught me is that it's all too facile to say this or that is good or interesting or I like this or that. Yet those words fail to express precise shades of affect.

good

- pleasant
- tasty
- appetizing
- refreshing
- drinkable
- crushable
- mouth-watering

interesting

- intriguing
- provocative
- stimulating
- enticing
- appealing
- fascinating
- riveting

like (verb)

- admire
- desire
- need
- want
- love
- appreciate

26 July 2021

Today I repeated the exercise with opposites.

bad

- unpleasant
- displeasing
- evil
- immoral
- awful

- disagreeable

boring

- uninteresting
- bland
- dull
- insipid
- charmless

dislike

- hate
- loathe
- detest
- despise
- abhor

This exercise again proved that my colloquialisms often miss the mark. Such is our quotidian language, a discourse often unfit for describing persons, things, and experiences with care and precision.

15 August 2021

This weekend I devoured Wayne Koestenbaum's *Hotel Theory*. I read the book with an eye to what it could teach me about nuance. By the end of the book, I had collected the following citations:

'Now, there is a teacher of nuance, literature; try to live according to the nuances that literature teaches me'.⁶⁴

- 'I push the book away from its proper identity.'⁶⁶
- 'He contemplated his irreplaceability.'⁶⁷
- 'To hotel is to modify, to alter, to move against habituation, against stale precedent.'⁶⁸
- '[T]he envelope that hotel theoretically opens contains an invitation to be callous, stupefied, and [. . .] newly curious about existence's niceties and shades'.⁶⁹

Coda

30 August 2021

Yesterday I picked up my last piece of trash from the sidewalk. I'm not the young man that Ian Swordy was when he walked across country, daily rummaging through a bag of trash for collage materials. Even if I've abandoned the trash-picking method, I've envisioned a new format for my collages. Lynne Huffer provided the inspiration. 'Every few days I tack scraps of myself to the bulletin board next to my desk', she writes, 'removing old fragments to make way for the new.' 'Autotheory starts here', she declares, 'with "I" mirrored by a collage on a wall'.⁷⁰ Last weekend I mounted a rectangular piece of foam to a wall in my studio. To it, I adhered my current, incomplete collage, the one comprised of trash. I'll continue to build that collage, augmenting it and eventually replacing it with new fragments that come in and out of my life—with, indeed, the fragments that are my life.

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Notes

¹ Barthes, Roland, *Empire of Signs*, Richard Howard (trans.), New York: Hill and Wang, 1983 (9). It goes without saying that, with this citation and the ones that follow, the references are not exhaustive but rather the ones that most inspired this project.

² That work included 'The Pianist's Fingers: Fragments of Desire', forthcoming in *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies*, no. 14, 2021, as well as 'Another Shore': Mourning Roland Barthes in the Year of Pandemic and Protest, a play co-written with Becky McLaughlin and currently unpublished. Those pieces address Barthesian topics developed differently here.

³ Barthes, Roland, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Richard Howard (trans.), New York: Hill and Wang, 1977 (94).

⁴ Barthes, Roland, *The Neutral*, Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978), Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (trans.), New York: Columbia University Press, 2005 (11).

⁵ Barthes, Roland, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Richard Miller (trans.), New York: Hill and Wang, 1976 (7).

⁶ Barthes, Roland, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, Notes for a Lecture Course and Seminar at the Collège de France (1976-1977), Kate Briggs (trans.), New York: Columbia University Press, 2013 (19-20, 134); Barthes, Roland, *The Preparation of the Novel*, Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980), Kate Briggs (trans.), New York: Columbia University Press, 2011 (32-33); Barthes, Roland, 'Twenty Key Words for Roland Barthes', in: Linda Coverdale (trans.), *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1986, 205-32 (209-10); Barthes, Roland, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Richard Howard (trans.), New York: Noonday Press, 1990 (6-8); Barthes, Roland, 2005 (11-12).

⁷ Barthes, Roland, 'Twenty Key Words', 1986 (209).

⁸ Barthes, Roland, 2013 (20, 134); Barthes, Roland, 1990 (8).

⁹ Barthes, Roland, 2011 (90-91); Barthes, Roland, 'Dare to Be Lazy', in: Linda Coverdale (trans.), *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1986, 338-45 (343-44); Barthes, Roland, 1977 (94).

¹⁰ Barthes, Roland, 1977 (93-94).

¹¹ Barthes, Roland, 1990 (103); Barthes, Roland, 2005 (11, 36, 51-61, 83, 130); Barthes, Roland, 2011 (43-48, 83); Barthes, Roland, 1977 (43).

¹² Barthes, Roland, 'The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Several Eisenstein Stills', in: Richard Howard (trans.), *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, 41-62 (41-44, 51, 54-57, 61).

¹³ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard (trans.), New York: Hill and Wang, 2010 (25-28, 40-43, 49-51); Barthes, Roland, 2011 (73).

¹⁴ Barthes, Roland, 'Twenty Key Words', 1986 (211); Barthes, Roland, 1983 (69-84); Barthes, Roland, 2011 (45-48, 78-81).

- ¹⁵ Barthes, Roland, 1983 (81).
- ¹⁶ Barthes, Roland, 2013 (6-8, 38, 72-73, 131-32).
- ¹⁷ Barthes, Roland, 2011 (43-44); Barthes, Roland, 2013 (7-8, 19).
- ¹⁸ Barthes, Roland, 1977 (93-94); Barthes, Roland, 2011 (32-33, 76-77); Barthes, Roland, 'Dare to Be Lazy', 1986 (342); Barthes, Roland, 'Loving Schumann', in: Richard Howard (trans.), *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, 293-98 (295-96); Barthes, Roland, 'Rasch', in: Richard Howard (trans.), *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, 299-312 (300).
- ¹⁹ Barthes, Roland, 'Dare to Be Lazy', 1986 (339-42).
- ²⁰ Idem, page 342.
- ²¹ In addition to the earlier discussions of notations and haiku as fragments, see the following on journals and incidents: Barthes, Roland, 1977 (95); Barthes, Roland, 2011 (101-03).
- ²² For my inspiration (excluding the fragments' chronological order), see Barthes, Roland, 2005 (10-12); Barthes, Roland, 2013 (19-21, 133-34); Barthes, Roland, 1990 (3-9).
- ²³ Barthes, Roland, 1990 (9).
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- ²⁵ Macé, Marielle, *Façons de lire, manières d'être*, [Paris]: Éditions Gallimard, 2011 (182-268 *passim*). I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to Macé, whose work helped me to refine some of my piece's autotheoretical stakes.
- ²⁶ 'Phrases are [. . .] less objects than directions and calls, promises of a practice to come; they are *for citing*' (my trans. E. D.). Idem, page 216.
- ²⁷ Barthes, Roland, 2011(26).
- ²⁸ Barthes, Roland, 2013 (7-8).
- ²⁹ Barthes, Roland, 2011 (27).
- ³⁰ Barthes, Roland, 2013 (20).
- ³¹ Barthes, Roland, 2011 (33).
- ³² Barthes, Roland, 2005 (185).
- ³³ Barthes, Roland, 'Dare to Be Lazy', 1986 (342).
- ³⁴ Barthes, Roland, 'Pierre Loti: Aziyadé', in Richard Howard (trans.), *New Critical Essays*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1980, 105-21 (108), *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/newcriticalessay0000bart/page/n7/mode/2up>, date accessed: 21 June 2022.
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- ³⁹ Barthes, Roland, 2005 (59).
- ⁴⁰ Barthes, Roland, 1990 (103).
- ⁴¹ Idem, page 20.
- ⁴² Idem, page 8.
- ⁴³ Barthes, Roland, 'Rasch', 1991 (300).
- ⁴⁴ Barthes, Roland, 'Loving Schumann', 1991 (295-96).
- ⁴⁵ Barthes, Roland, 1983 (74).
- ⁴⁶ Barthes, Roland, 2011 (80).
- ⁴⁷ Barthes, Roland, 1990 (63).
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- ⁵⁰ Barthes, Roland, 2011 (248).

⁵¹ Idem, page 247.

⁵² 'What pleases me [. . .] it is interruption' (my transcription and trans. E. D.). Barthes, Roland, *Fragments de voix*, Jean-Marie Benoist and Bernard-Henri Lévy (interviewers), Les grandes heures Ina, Radio France, Amazon Music, 2015.

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⁵⁴ Idem, page 129.

⁵⁵ Barthes, Roland, 'Dare to Be Lazy', 1986 (342).

⁵⁶ Barthes, Roland, 1990 (64).

⁵⁷ Barthes, Roland, 'Dare to Be Lazy', 1986 (342).

⁵⁸ Idem, page 341.

⁵⁹ '[I] will not let myself turn away [. . .] from what I truly want to do, to walk in life while noting' (my trans. E. D.). Barthes, Roland, *La préparation du roman*, Cours au Collège de France (1978-1979 et 1979-1980), [Paris]: Éditions du Seuil, 2015 (258).

⁶⁰ Barthes, Roland, 'Dare to Be Lazy', 1986 (344).

⁶¹ Barthes, Roland, 2005 (11).

⁶² Idem, page 101.

⁶³ Idem, page 130.

⁶⁴ Idem, page 11.

⁶⁵ The English edition of *The Preparation of the Novel* (Barthes, Roland, 2011) speculates that the citation comes from Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (417, note 2), but the French edition (2015) correctly attributes it to 'Hashish in Marseille' (138, note 2).

⁶⁶ Koestenbaum, Wayne, *Hotel Theory*, New York: Soft Skull Press, 2007 (13).

⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸ Idem, page 60.

⁶⁹ Idem, pages 150-51.

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