

Salem State University
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Department of English

Untitled Thesis

A Thesis in English

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Essay #1

In Book X of the *Republic*, Plato's Socrates evaluates the role of art and poetry in relation to the pursuit of truth and wisdom. For Plato, all of the arts, and specifically poetry, are to be considered a mimesis of nature, or a duplicate of the physical world (Leitch 48). The issue, as Socrates highlights, is that if art is merely a representation of the real world, then it has potential to steer us away from the truth because even our physical world is a copy of the world of Forms. Following the logic, we are to be wary of the poet because their imitations leave us three times removed from the world of Forms. Ultimately, Plato's Socrates dismisses the role of the artist and proposes exile. But what if an artist was able to address issues of mimicry and knowledge from within the poetic medium in a way that informed audiences and awoke them to their own sense of self? This paper will show why poetry has a place "in a well-governed city" by looking at Olive Senior's poem "The Secret of Crusoe's Parrot" through a postcolonial lens.

The title of Olive Senior's poem "The Secret of Crusoe's Parrot" is an allusion to the 1719 adventure novel *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. This reference to Defoe's novel immediately places Senior's poem alongside a classic literary text known for being one of the first English novels (Drabble). Maybe more significant is that the allusion physically locates the setting of the poem within the Caribbean islands that Defoe was famous for depicting, but that Senior is actually from. This dynamic between native and traveler, the colonizer and the colonized, is not just a biographical anecdote about the two authors though, there is evidence of tension within the text. For example, the first stanza describes the Parrot Poll as having "heavily lidded eyes" watching "the new invader" arrive. Here, we are given an image of a weary parrot, its heavy lids an accurate description of its physical appearance, but one which also connotes both age and wisdom. Interestingly, the Parrot is not concerned with whether or not the invader is

“friend or foe” because the parrot is “ruler of the air”. The parrot is detached from the land, physically distanced, but is all seeing from the bird’s eye view. In the second stanza it is written that, “This the island kingdom was the Parrot’s from time immemorial,” elevating the status of the Poll once more and symbolizing it as something that is all encompassing of the island, its heritage, its history.

Historically, the Caribbean and South America were subjugated to the colonization of explorers such as the British, Dutch, French, Portuguese, and Spanish, who all made “Their claims of overlordship” (Senior). Colonizing countries were known for their attitudes of entitlement and pillaging of the “newly discovered” lands. Historically the colonized had also been subject to lower social status and dehumanized once colonizers took hold. Similarly, the parrot is separate from the invader / Crusoe in that he is a bird and not human. Despite the parrot being the true owner of the kingdom, Crusoe, the visitor, the explorer - never asks and doesn’t believe Poll could even know, because the parrot is “all pretense, mimicry.” At the same time, the parrot is aware, “playing the fool to catch wise” as if on the defensive, again aligning with the power dynamics of colonialism. This is also where the poem begins to complicate Plato’s conception of poetry as something that moves us away from the truth.

Plato’s claim in Book X of the *Republic* is that all art is merely an imitation of the natural world, and poetry. The path to “a well-governed city” for Plato’s Socrates is to “order one’s life according to the dictates of reason” (86). However, what this argument from the *Republic* fails to consider is what to do when reason and logic are the source of oppression and injustice. For colonized countries that have had their history partially erased and struggled for an identity of their own, reason and justice were often some of the justifications that colonizers used to carry out their actions. There were logical explanations given for the slave trades and agricultural

exploitations that ran through the Caribbean and South America, none of them consulting the exploited because it was in a language outside of their reach. By framing the forced learning of language and cultural values as imitation, or rather recognizing the mimetic nature of speech, Senior demonstrates that there is a way to reclaim agency and identity.

For example, the beginning of stanza eight opens with the words “I let him teach me speech.” Already the poem has established that Crusoe, “him”, is symbolic of the colonizer or European influence on the islands. More interestingly however, is that up until this point, Senior’s poem was told from the third-person omniscient, prefacing that the narrator was in the parrot’s thoughts before each usage of *I*. But now, in stanza eight, a first-person omniscient narration has taken over, signifying a change and letting the Parrot tell the audience for itself why it mimics. The parrot’s mimicry is explained through descriptions on the history of the Caribbean. For example, the parrot mentions that it forgets “between visitors” referencing the constant coming and going of travelers. Then, Poll, while explaining why he lets Crusoe teach him words, gives an account of the kinds of visitors he received before Crusoe’s kind saying, “[the] speech as I usually / imbibe – from cannibals, pirates, buccaneers, delirious castaways, is not appropriate / for his Christian ears.” These previous sources of speech serve to highlight aspects of the Caribbean’s history that combat dullness and are attached to the geography itself, rather than the influence of European settlers or explorers. By leaning into the legends of the Caribbean, Poll remembers aspects of the island’s culture that preceded western colonization and were not passive. Poll is also able to poke fun at the sensitive Christian values of Crusoe, who - if interpreted as an allegory for colonialism – seems very hypocritical. Stanza ten opens again with the repetition of the words “I let” reading, “I let fly a few. He usually attributes these to his loneliness / and delirium; or to his mishearing. He prays / extra hard those nights.” Again, Poll is

declaring agency with the emphasis on “let” signifying this is his own speech that he uses when “angry” or looking for “mischief.” Crusoe is also depicted as someone who cannot fathom that the Parrot might think for himself. In stanza eleven Poll mentions that he “mocks” Crusoe as his servant, and thought about leaving, but decided to stay “because being ‘Crusoe’s parrot’ does / give me status among the poor dumb creatures / in the trees. Now their teacher is me.” Poll is able to play both sides and maintain agency throughout, he plays the fool to Crusoe in order to keep him where he wants, and he gains status amongst the other island birds by being Crusoe’s parrot. However, this dual self seems to only go so far.

For instance, in the third-to-last stanza Poll reveals that “Since he arrived, my hearing is not what / it used to be. I find the senseless cries of those / uncivilized birds unbearable - ” (Senior). It appears that the mimetic nature of Poll, and the dynamic between him and Crusoe has ultimately chipped away at his understanding of the world and island life, his sense of hearing representing his sense of self. Poll is saddened by the prospect of Crusoe leaving saying, “I’ll have to find my place again / among my own, go back to playing dumb.” The Parrot Poll has assimilated in that he finds the speech of Crusoe better than that of his own. The poem is an allegory for the Native’s experience in a postcolonial context. The parrot represents the historical essence of the island, how its identity came to be influenced by travelers, settlers, and the features of its geographical location. The conclusion of the poem really communicates the push and pull of this dynamic when Poll says, “I cannot stave off the yearning / that will master me for words addictive as grain cracked / open on the tongue.” Unable to go back to the way things were before, Poll says he will have the desire for another “to give me speech.” Without Crusoe to mimic, Poll realizes that he exists in reflection of the other. In this case, he will revert to the screeching of his own kind, perhaps more primal.

The setting and historical context attached to Senior's usages of allusion and allegory are revealed when paired with the narrative choices that emphasize agency, power dynamics, cultural norms, as well as both language and identity. The reflective nature of identity formation showcases why the issue is more complicated than knowing versus not knowing. In this case, poetry and mimesis of nature can communicate the oppressed person's experience and help them orient their sense of self by taking a deeper look at the meaning of language and its influence on self-culture. Senior's poem provides us with an example of how art can serve a function for a well-governed state, giving a voice to those who have had to exist in reference to the voices of others.

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Afterthoughts

This was the first real class I had at Salem State, and it was a fun one. I remember rereading the poem over and over at my work desk, pretending to be busy. I hadn't come across Plato's Mimesis up until this point but had basically described it multiple times with a burnout's understanding of semiotics that I'd been trying to apply to art. I remember purchasing *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* from the old bookstore at the university's Enterprise building with a financial aid voucher, picking it up on a rainy day, and ruining the jacket sleeve when I dropped the book on Lafayette Street walking over to Meier Hall. The book itself was massive, but I liked to carry it with one hand just to let people know I've got big hands. Not big enough to never drop a book, but an above-average set of hands. The thing was an eyesore on my desk. Colleagues at work would see it and ask what I was reading now. I'd answer and give a quick summary, a good practice run for the participation I didn't show in class. "All that work," one co-worker had said, "he still believes." I wasn't really sure what he meant by that, and didn't care to ask, but I know the poems and theory kept my imagination working, which made me feel more free.

In the anthology were works I should've already read as a Philosophy major but had not been assigned. Other than one discouraging attempt at comprehending Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus on my own, I'd had basically no experience with linguistics or theories of art. Most of the courses I took were centered around American Transcendentalism and Law. I got bored as an undergrad and gave up on a PhD, missing deadlines and deciding to become a high school English teacher instead. Teachers are good people. I wanted to be a good person. Live a meaningful life. Maybe I'd coach a sport, finally meet someone new and live quietly. A Master's degree would bump me into a better pay bracket, and so that was the main reason I'd enrolled. It

also bought me some more time to put off adulthood, keep reading and writing and dreaming. Now I was being assigned Plato, Augustine of Hippo, Louis Althusser, and Walter Benjamin. This was just better philosophy; the kind of stuff I wished I had already read. Regret started to set in, I should've applied for a PhD in Philosophy, or at least an MA. Or maybe, I should've just taken some time to read what's out there before enrolling in another program and acquiring more debt.

Last night, I read from the anthology again for the first time in months, Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation." In it, she declares that "From now to the end of consciousness, we are stuck with the task of defending art," a timely reminder for the current situation we are in with AI and the cutting off of funds to the humanities. Art must justify itself now, probably more than ever before. Personally, I catch myself falling into philistinism all the time, because it's as if the world I'm in no longer finds art redemptive, and therefore I'm not sure I should either. But then, there are also good days where art improves my quality of life, and more importantly, the lives of those around me. Like a couple weeks ago, on my Tuesday night literature class, where one student who works as a bank teller and hates her life (she has said so herself), came alive and combined Kant's Theory of the Sublime with Murakami's "Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey" to talk about the transcendent power of love. Was it the most accurate use of the theory? No, not really. But it was one of the highlights of the semester so far. You could see her imagination working. And maybe, she even felt a little more free.

Essay #2

Tiphonie Yanique is a Caribbean American fiction writer from St. Thomas. Her 2010 book *How to Escape from a Leper Colony: A Novella and Stories* takes place in the Caribbean Islands, as well as America and London. The second story of the book, “The Bridge Stories,” is divided into four parts, all of which follow the construction of a bridge as it takes place in the background of characters’ lives. The bridge will stretch from Guyana to Miami, symbolizing efforts to merge the global north and global south, which will impact characters on both individual and social levels. Each of the four stories maintains the same narrative structure, blurring the lines between first and third person through a sampling of narrators who give oral renditions of characters in the past tense. While playing on oral storytelling traditions, Yanique’s narrative style in these stories also appears to convey a fundamental sense of angst permeating throughout the region, or what the literary theorist Sianne Ngai calls *ugly feelings*.

Sianne Ngai’s affect theory framework suggests that within our contemporary moment negative emotions that are strong or explicitly moral fail to recognize that the sociopolitical itself has shifted under transnational capitalism (2643). Ngai’s work proposes that “smaller” feelings such as envy, irritation, anxiety, and paranoia carry a “diagnostic nature” - and can therefore act as “readers” of a particular environment from inside the medium of art (Leitch et. all. 2638). Rather than the more powerful and dramatic emotions often seen in traditional story telling forms (such as the hero’s journey or Aristotelian tragedy) Ngai is interested in feelings that are amoral and *noncathartic*, which in her view, have ability to diagnose situations of obstructed agency (2642). Similarly, Tiphonie Yanique has addressed the shortcomings of dominant forms of fiction, the hero’s journey in particular, saying,

I wanted to test these fictional forms – see how they really stood up in the face of Black reality or the female reality. I wondered if I could create forms to serve Caribbeaness. To serve a broader idea of Americaness. (Ciabartti)

“The Bridge Stories” demonstrates a breaking away from these fictional forms through its shifting of narrative perspective and use of tone which lead to the display of ugly feelings. By reading the stories through Ngai’s affect theory framework, Yanique’s work will be seen as potentially informing critical thought for resistance to cultural imperialism.

Ugly feelings are first established through narrative viewpoint in the opening story, “The Parable of the Miniature Bridge Maker: as told by an Island that is between things,” Yanique’s title anthropomorphizes one of the Caribbean Islands, distancing narrative viewpoint from the human species. Distance is created through general language and the usage of past tense, “The people wore little bridges around their necks... Everything was good” (Yanique 15). The narrative then plays with perspective when the Island zooms in on the individual Bridge Maker, relaying his story in the third person omniscient. By presenting the Island as all-knowing, Yanique also flips normalized power dynamics between human and non-human nature, returning agency to the environment and creating a sense of connectivity. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey notes, narratives from the Caribbean often turn to allegory as a tool for *universalizing* or capturing gaps between human species and the external planet through narrative (6). Here, the parable universalizes through the anthropomorphizing of the Island, destabilizing views on nature often favored by the global north through narrative viewpoint.

As the parable develops, the Bridge Maker chases greater opportunity, moving on from his novelty items to the project of building a *real* bridge which will be “paid for by the Yankees” (Yanique 15). By placing the Bridge Maker at the forefront of the bridge’s construction, the

parable” places the aesthetic and political together,” which as Ngai points out, “is a prime occasion for ugly feelings” (2642). In the parable, the ugliness of irony arises when the bridge collapses due to a camera flash and the Island informs us that the consequences of its fall will hit the “many families who had gathered to take pictures (without express permission)” (15). Here, the use of parentheses draws extra attention to copyright law, ironically placing the made-up concept of human ownership within a collapse that shakes throughout the region. While irony is not feeling exactly, Ngai sees in irony a relationship to ugly feelings, claiming that the attitude itself has a “decidedly affective dimension” (2645). When looking at the parable through Ngai’s affect theory lens, irony can be seen as diagnosing the issues of human ownership and modern development as sites of obstructed agency for Nature as a whole.

Ugly feeling’s ability to pinpoint sites of suspended agency is also made available through tone. The third section of the stories, titled “The Fisherman’s Tale: as told by someone’s grandfather in a corner rum shop,” provides a narrator who speaks in a slang style that carries with it a sense of irritation and cynicism. The narrative begins with the grandfather saying, “Pour me a greenie. I like my Heineken in a glass, damn it. And I’ll tell you here and now that Tony Magrass wasn’t no cheapster” (Yanique 22). Immediately, the narrator is on the defensive for Tony, and wants to set the record straight. While speaking crassly, the narrator’s irritated tone seems to evoke aspects of both subjectivity and objectivity. The grandpa is *telling it like it is*, while also displaying a level of irritation which could be interpreted as having bias. Subjectivity arises from the initial usage of the personal “I” before the story moves away from the first person to relay Tony’s story in third person. The shift from first to third distances the grandfather’s position towards Tony enough to give way to the observer / subject dynamic, thus allowing for affect to be displayed, and therefore highlighting situations of obstructed agency.

The major obstructor of agency in “The Fisherman’s Tale” is the presence of the bridge. The grandfather’s cynical tone comes out when he describes the bridge as preventing the “North side Frenchies” from fishing, saying,

Their piece of the ocean take away by the bridge that supposed to help everybody... Set up a toll in a year when it get popular and needed. Bring in money for the government. Money for the islands. Right? (Yanique 23)

Here, the phrase “take away” immediately identifies the bridge as an obstructor of agency in the physical sense. The grandfather then challenges the bridge’s real intentions, pointing out that it will just be used for the government to make money off tolls. Structurally, the narrative sets up split between government and the islands by placing them in separate sentences, but it is tone which once again communicates ugly feelings. When the grandfather rhetorically closes with the use of “Right?” he displays feelings of cynicism, implying that what is good for the government is not necessarily good for the islands as a whole. As a result of the grandfather’s cynical tone, modern development and capitalistic interests can be read as sites of obstructed agency.

Tiphane Yanique’s oral story telling structure continues in “The Lament of the Queen: as told by a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl in patent leather shoes,” which tells the story of Guadeloupe, a character who tries to find her sense of self through the approval of others, fixated on beauty pageants and her boyfriend Juan Diego. Both character’s names have religious symbolism, with Guadeloupe being the name of a manifestation of the Virgin Mary - La Virgen de Guadeloupe - and Juan Diego being the name of a Saint who was the first Indigenous person recognized as converting to Christianity (famously seeing visions of La Virgen de Guadeloupe). But here, the story of La Virgen de Guadeloupe and Juan Diego is modified. The seventeen-year-old narrator gives a gossipy retelling of the pair, in which the theme of purity is placed in

contrast to the sins of lying and sex. Lines such as “Guadeloupe was a little whore” and “He [Juan Diego] accepted her with the illusions she presented. Loved her and didn’t care about the lies,” challenge the sanctity of the immaculate conception and call attention to the misogynistic views ingrained within certain interpretations of Christianity (Yanique 26). Because the Virgin Mary is a sacred figure in Christianity, putting her on the level of high school romance also evokes a sense of pettiness. The narrator’s petty tone is expressed through the excessive use of adverbs and conjunctions, such as “like” and “maybe.” Her condescending attitude within the narrative points to feelings that Ngai views as being “knotted or condensed interpretations of predicaments” those that signal and highlight “formal, ideological, and sociohistorical” problems (2642). In Guadeloupe’s story, the absurdity of religious conceptions on purity and sex, introduced by European culture, are highlighted by pettiness as obstructors of agency.

The ugly feelings within Guadeloupe’s story also provide what Ngai calls the potential for “critical productivity” (2642). When Guadeloupe gets “kinda crazy” backstage at the beauty pageant, she has a moment of self-reflection where she feels that “Maybe being a fraud might be her *true self*” (Yanique 28). While initially trying to win over the approval of others through appearances, Guadeloupe then runs away from it all when she experiences the ugly feeling of *disenchantment*. In the story’s conclusion, Guadeloupe’s disenchantment can be seen as generating political resistance when she becomes a “human bridge” and conjures the collapse of the big bridge paid for by the Yankees. The collapse symbolizes a shift away from repressive religious norms, patriarchal views towards women, and ultimately breaks ties between the global north and global south. Within Guadeloupe’s story, the potential for ugly feelings to be mobilized for political aims which challenge the status quo is revealed.

While the relationship between affect and action that Sianne Ngai lays out may be more ambiguous than some of the cause-and-effect relationships often proposed by psychoanalytical and political theorists, her work does reveal the ways in which the medium of art can display feelings that contain a diagnostic element. By taking a closer look at narrative viewpoint and tone within Tiphonie Yanique's "The Bridge Stories" through Sianne Ngai's affect theory framework, remnants of imperialist culture and the continued intrusion of the global north onto the Caribbean Islands are highlighted as obstructors of agency. However, Yanique's work should be further explored for her ability to display affective states often underrepresented in literature, as it would appear she anticipates liberation through ugly feelings such as disenchantment.

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Afterthoughts #2

This paper was one of the first times I really sat down and put in some effort towards anything for school. Tiphonie Yanique had come to campus and gave a great reading a couple months prior to writing this, and Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* introduced me to a whole new field of criticism, which incorporated psychology, Marxist thought and the framing of language to reexamine how we think about and interpret art. I wound up hitting the same problem here as with the previous paper, the fiction didn't excite me, and I was mostly interested in the theory. *Shit, I should've stuck with philosophy.* I purchased a copy of *Ugly Feelings* and tried to read it on my own time, but there are levels to this kind of writing, and allusions to more works and theorists who I haven't read, nor will I have the time to, and so I lost my appetite and moved on.

Appetite is a good word here, because it positions the consumption of art for what it really is, consumption. Again, to pull from Susan Sontag, we need an "erotics of art," but to get ahead in a competitive field, I'd turned to analysis that nobody, myself included, could possibly be attracted to. The drive to be professional and the fear of showing love don't belong in the art space. So, let's go take a look at some writing from a young man who is terrified of showing love, but made the effort to try through some highly questionable meditations on gender. Here is his first attempt at ecocriticism:

Essay #3

Abstract

This research focuses on how Lauren Groff's *The Vaster Wilds* addresses the themes of colonialism, gender, and ecology. As an approach to understanding the meaning of the text, this paper uses traditional close reading methods as well as distant reading techniques made available through the text-mining tool Voyant. Identifying key textual items without actively participating in the reading of a text transforms language into a form of quantitative data, creating empirical evidence out of literature. To gather evidence for this project a portable book scanner was used to capture each page of the physical edition of the book as a series of JPEGs that were then put through optical character recognition (OCR) software. The OCR software extracted text from the JPEGs and converted it into a PDF file, creating a manageable data set for Voyant's word frequency tool. Through this research Groff's language choices were calculated, highlighting instances where the novel communicated themes on ecology and cultural imperialism through gendered language. In this paper, I will identify sections of Groff's novel that, when paired with works from major figures within the field of ecocriticism, can inform our relationship with the environment. In addition to previous scholarship, this paper will also incorporate original word frequency data obtained through digital humanities work to illustrate why *The Vaster Wilds* is a substantial piece of literature which offer a solution to the issues of gender and identity through a reframing of matter.

Introduction

During the early 17th century, European settlers from Britain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain arrived in the Americas with the aim to acquire wealth, gain freedom, and spread Christianity. While there were many opportunities for wealth building, the chance to benefit financially from the land through the spice trade was amongst the most prominent for settlers in the new world. Market demand for spices was born out of their cooking, religious, and medical uses, but also because of their geographical scarcity (UNESCO). The word spice comes from the Latin species meaning “a sight; outward appearance... a spectacle; a mental appearance, an idea or notion” (Etymonline). The evolution of the word spice and its usage showcases how language strips agency from the natural world, labeling and categorizing matter as a product limited to only what is available to us through the human senses and judgements. As Raymond Williams argues in *Keywords A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, it is through language that we have shifted in our understanding of the natural world and divided ourselves from it. Because language is the primary tool for communicating our thoughts, it follows that the ways in which it is used have the ability to shape our conceptualization of the world around us. Figures in ecocriticism such as Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennet, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, and Amitav Ghosh have highlighted how our conception of materiality and matter in particular carry significant moral and political implications in terms of our relationship with the eco, themes which are present in Lauren Groff’s novel *The Vaster Wilds*.

The Vaster Wilds is a novel set-in 17th century America that investigates how European views on religion, love, and the environment have been impacted by colonialism, individualism, and masculinity. The plot follows the trajectory of a survivalist novel and has drawn comparisons to Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, with Groff’s protagonist being referred to only as “girl” and

“she” throughout the first hundred pages. While the style is similar to McCarthy’s “the boy” on the surface, Groff’s use points to the historical significance of gender norms and behavior and captures the neglected agency of nature through a feminine perspective that is also neglected. A digital theme analysis using the text-mining tool Voyant was performed to set forth this argument.

Voyant is an online application for text-mining and offers a wide range of tools for making distant reading more accessible for users. Distant reading is a technique that aims to identify key textual items without actively participating in the reading of a text or series of texts (Drucker, 2021). By looking at language as a form of quantitative data, text-mining can be thought of as creating empirical evidence out of literature. Voyant highlights trends, patterns, and word frequencies throughout the selected work(s). The general consensus among digital humanities scholars is that distant reading is most valuable for large-scale projects, as data-mining technology can sift through works at a capacity that far exceeds human abilities (Drucker, 2021; Ramsay, 2011). However, distant reading can still be a viable tool for individual texts and contribute to theme analysis (Ross & El Khatib, 2022). In this paper, the data Voyant extracted from Lauren Groff’s *The Vaster Wilds* will be applied alongside existing criticism in order to better draw out themes relating to colonialism, gender, and the eco. But first, more must be said about the methodology.

Methodology

To generate a text analysis on a particular work via any text mining tool, it is necessary to have the work available in plain text (HTML, RTF, PDF, or DOCX). While many older texts in the public domain are easily accessible in these formats through websites such as Project Gutenberg, it is more difficult, if not impossible, to locate newer works of contemporary fiction

in plain text files. Lauren Groff's *The Vaster Wilds* was no exception to this rule. The digital version of the 2023 novel contained built-in copyright protections that prevented it from being converted into a plain text file. So, in order to get a version of the text that was in a viable option for text-mining, a portable book scanner was used to capture each page of the physical edition of the book into a series of JPEGs. The scanner contained built-in optical character recognition - or OCR software - which extracted the text from the JPEGs and converted it into a manageable PDF file. From that point, the PDF file was converted once more into a DOCX file to make editing and formatting of the text more workable. Having the plain text in a Word document proved to be valuable because the OCR software was not without error and required some patch editing to uphold the integrity of the original text. With a plain text version of *The Vaster Wilds* ready to go, the novel was then ready to run through the application Voyant.

Because Voyant is an algorithmic tool, there are ways to manipulate the input data in order to optimize the results. One of the most effective methods for narrowing the focus of word accuracy is the addition of "stopwords," a feature which filters through terms added to stoplist and removes them from the presented data sets. The default stoplist contains common words such as, "and," "the," "be," "but," and so on and so forth. To further concentrate the results to what was most important, the following words were also added to the stop list: "said," "lauren," "groff," "vaster," and "wild." The word "said" was eliminated because it did not carry with it the potential to reveal themes but was instead used as a means for dialogue. However, it is interesting to note that for a survivalist novel where the protagonist is isolated and, on the run, there is still a healthy amount of dialogue delivered to the reader through flashbacks. The author's first and last name, as well as the words contained in the novel's title, were also placed into the stoplist because they had automatically been extracted from the top of each page's

heading. All changes to the algorithm were made with the intention to help clean up the data and keep alterations to a minimum in order to maintain the integrity of the text.

Results and Analysis

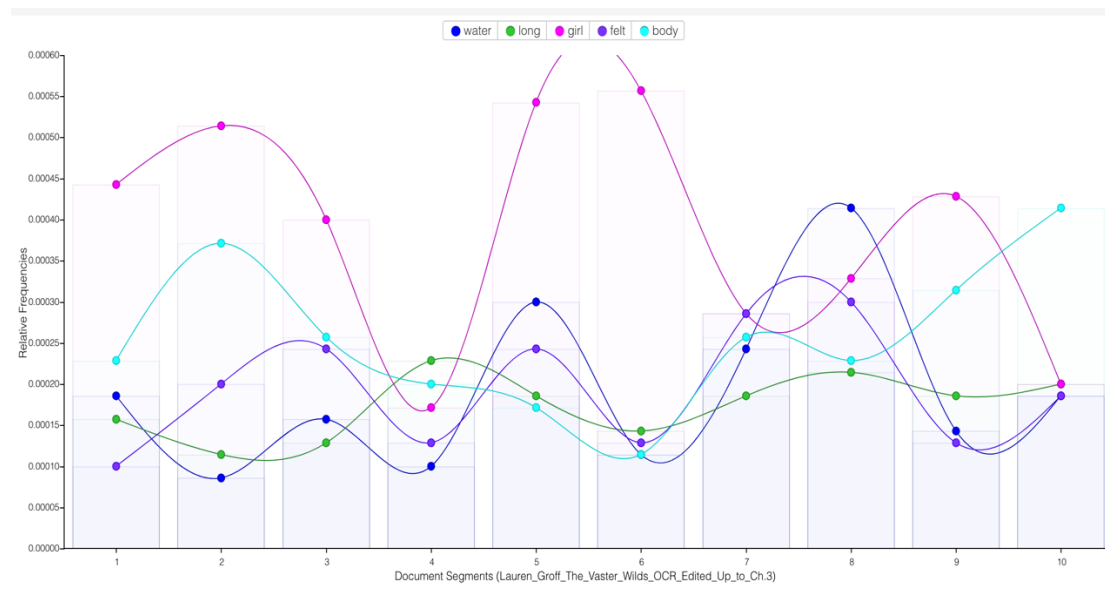


Figure 1: The Vaster Wilds, Top 5 Most Frequent Terms.

After running the plain text version of the novel through Voyant with an adjusted stoplist to ignore common words, it became clear the most frequently used words did in fact relate to themes on the eco and gender. For example, the top result in the data set was the word “girl” (271 appearances). The significance of the word “girl” as it relates to the novel cannot be understated because throughout the first several chapters, men are at the forefront of a colonialism. The girl is fearful of being recaptured by male soldiers as famine, disease, and the Anglo-Powhatan War, all wipe out Jamestown Virginia. Groff returns to the male / female binary throughout the novel to investigate the role of gender as it relates to colonialism. The word “girl” also touches on agency and identity.

The protagonist remains unnamed for most of the novel and is mostly referred to as either “the girl” or “she.” Her name, or lack thereof, seems to demonstrate a crisis of identity. When a name does arrive, whether from the mistress, the son, the pastor, or any number of the people she encounters, the names for her always seem to fall short and box her in. In fact, when the protagonist’s name, Lamentations, is finally revealed, it carries with it a sense of sorrow (i.e. to lament). However, the name does not stick, and the girl attempts to create a name for herself while out in the wilderness:

She thought sadly of all her own many names, none of them had ever felt fully hers: Lamentations, Callat, Girl, Wench, Zed.... But no name that came to her seemed right, and soon the fever and the walking around burned the idea out of her mind, and she went on walking, still nameless, unmastered, through the wilds. (Groff 166)

This passage is located a little after the halfway point of the novel and coincides with a frequency drop for the word “girl” (see figure 1). Given the downward trend of the term “girl,” it appears this moment marks a shift in the characters’ configuration of her identity. And Groff herself has spoken on the tension between names and identity within the novel saying, “I think the girl starts to understand the power-structures that lie behind naming... I think she wants to resist this, and to be free from this kind of power-play, and let herself find something for herself that is freer and closer to the way that she wants to live.” (Prabhaker, 2023). Trends in word use point us towards that “something” which is freer with the terms “body” (179) and “felt” (136) both seeing their frequency rise as the term “girl” dip. Both terms connote physical and sensory experiences for the protagonist as she finds a way that she wants to live, rather than emphasizing the label assigned to her through man-made language. This narrative pattern mirrors thought in ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism aims to eliminate the boundary between the human and non-human. As Donna Haraway asks in *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*, “Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” Voyant’s “phrases” feature has the capacity to account for the most frequently used phrase within a text. “All of her” appeared five times throughout the text and while it initially evokes connotations of gender and agency on its own, when looked at in context, it was the materiality theme which most pronounced itself. Within the two passages which contained the phrase, personification of objects can be seen, “she took all of her good things out of her sack to care for them,” (Groff 77) and “Then all of her things shone back at her as though they were smiling” (142). However, ecomaterialism blurs the lines between personification and consideration for matter. As Jane Bennet writes in *The Force of Things*, “if matter itself is lively then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated” (13). Given that ecocriticism challenges how we know what we know, and what we think we are, it can also inform us on our conceptions of what constitutes an identity and offer a sense of connectivity to the eco which decenters the human; both as an idea and as a physical body.

One of *The Vaster Wilds* most notable qualities is its ability to describe the girl’s interactions with matter in the form of not just material items, but also food and medicine. Of the top 60 most frequently used words, more than a third of them related to senses, body parts, or physical features of settings. The ways in which the novel describes the girl’s interactions with the world lead to an ecological reading because they constantly reexamine the divisions between her body and eco. For example, when the girl comes across a bee hive, she uses her stick to remove honey and applies it as an antiseptic for the wounds on her feet, “For she remembered, in the city, the cook had used honey against burns and wounds and the bruises that rose to the surface of the

skin when Kit has hit the girl in the face” (Groff 188-189). This flashback scene informs her decision to apply the honey to her wounds and demonstrates that as the girl makes her way through the woods, she uses personal experiences to make judgments and inferences on how best to experiment with the eco. Likewise, Elaine Leong’s *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge* calls attention to the constant trial and error of recipe and medicine formations within Early Modern England. What Leong proposes is that the “messiness of the human body has always privileged personal experience in establishing the efficacy of particular remedies” (113). For Leong, the formulation of homemade remedies and applications was a practice which called for an element of subjectivity before the developments of modern science. Leong’s point is to show how the intention of those forming recipes, and practicing medicine, has changed from seeking to collect “experiments, observations, and descriptions of natural phenomena” to the idea of creating “frameworks and causes” (123). With this in mind, it can be said that Groff’s protagonist demonstrates a practice of knowledge formation that confronts human-centeredness, as her experiments with honey, herbal teas, and balms made of fish fat, all display an ability to improvise and open oneself to different knowledge creations that assimilate with the eco. In other words, the girl has conceptualized a trans-corporeality. Her ability to conceive a trans-corporeality can be further drawn out in the lead up to her interaction with the bear.

During her first bear encounter the girl’s thought process is described as follows, “And though she found it hard to read the expression upon a bear’s face, she believed that what she saw there was a sense of wonder” (Groff 176). Here, the girl can be seen as personifying the bear, however through an ecocritical lens other forms of intelligence are not seen as below those of the human. The girl feels an “upwelling of awe” as she takes in the bear, in what reads like a confrontation with the sublime. Within the novel, she has become awe struck twice before; the first

time being during a religious experience in church, and the second as she sailed away from her home. In church, it is the stained-glass window which grabs ahold of her and demonstrates the ability for materiality to display its own presence and penetrate human thought. The second instance occurs while sailing away from her homeland when the girl realizes how “everything that had loomed so large and so important in her days, could easily prove itself such as speck” (Groff 177). The girl experiences a sense of disorientation as her sense of self becomes disrupted by physical experiences. Stacy Alaimo attributes this phenomenon of disarrangement to the situatedness of a “material self [that] cannot be disentangled from the networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific... what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty...” (20). Similarly, the girl comes to recognize that concepts taught to her are not as concrete as they once may have seemed to be, and that it is possible that there is no real division between her own physical body and the eco around her. Still, it is the bear encounter which ultimately leads to an epiphany on matter:

Now watching the bear staring upon the waterfall, she felt in her own body the awe that was now coursing through the bear, and within herself she also felt a shifting in her understanding of the world.

For, if a bear could feel awe, then a bear could certainly know god.

And if a bear could know god in his own bear way, then a bear had a soul, and she could not see how it was that man could feel it was in his right to slaughter such beasts, for in slaughtering the bear’s body, man was also slaughtering the beast’s soul, which also yearned toward god...

Then she thought that perhaps in the language of the bears there was a kind of gospel, also. And perhaps this gospel said to the bears the same thing about god giving bears dominion over the world. And perhaps bears believed that this gave them license to slaughter the living world including the men within it.

And this thought made her shake, for if the gospel was changeable between species, then god was not immoveable. Then god was changeable according to the body god spoke through. (Groff 177-178)

Ecocritical thought can be seen within the girl's epiphany. For instance, the girl thinks of nonhuman forms of communication between bears, of nonhuman connections to god, and nonhuman dominion of the world. What this interaction presents is not only consideration for all animals, but also shades of transcendental thought, as the girl catches a glimpse of the permeable absolute, or a changeable god. As a result, it would appear that there is a spiritual metaphor available through nature if one is able to perceive a trans-corporeality. And that is exactly what we see from the protagonist of Groff's novel as she meets the end of her life.

As the novel reaches its end, the girl comes to recognize that it is "something made of light and heat" that endured time and is "everlasting" (Groff 244). After suffering through a journey that encompasses colonialism, famine, misogyny, and disease, the girl arrives at matter as enduring. Given the environmental themes present within *The Vaster Wilds*, and Groff's attention to detail in her revisiting of the colonialist period in America, ecocriticism further clarifies our relationship to the world around us and can be seen as offering new conceptions on how to perceive reality moving forward.

Conclusion

There are a couple shortcomings within this project surrounding the accuracy of the OCR scanner. To be more specific, the software sometimes converted individual letters incorrectly. For instance, the letters “t” for “r” often became switched for one another. The software also jumbled up the letters “b,” “h,” and “n.” While errors such as these are minor, they should still be acknowledged for their potential to skew the data. My main concern as this relates to *The Vaster Wilds* are instances within the text where the word “she” may not have been recognized by Voyant’s “Document Terms” tool. However, this paper was not a product of distant reading techniques, as I did read the text closely and refer back to it to confirm trends Voyant highlighted. It is also worth noting that many of the words which the OCR software had struggled to recognize without error were listed as default stop words to begin with. Common words such as “but” and “the” were ignored from the data set with the intention to look for less common words that contained with them greater potential to reveal themes and trends. All in all, it would appear that the impact of “dirty data” as it relates to word count is minimal.

Another concern would be OCR’s struggles to differentiate where words started and ended, as this led to some inaccuracies for Voyant’s “Phrases” tool. For example, Voyant had marked the phrase “all of her” as having appeared seven times, making it a top phrase within the novel. But, when referring back to the text to read each occurrence of the phrase, it was revealed that “all of her” had only really appeared five times. The fragment of the sentence, “the light of which she hid with a **wall of her** hands’ making,” (Groff 153) had popped up as an occurrence of the phrase, as did the sentence, “It [the girl’s fever] gathered a storm at the center of her neck and **small of her** back,” (207). Neither example actually contains the phrase in focus despite containing the right string of symbols in succession, calling attention to the need for using traditional close reading methods when looking at quantitative data (Ross & El Khatib, 2022).

That said, proofing trends and phrases produced by the text-mining tools does not negate the insight that they can provide when performing digital theme analysis in combination with both existing scholarship and close reading techniques.

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Afterthoughts #3

This paper provided a nice distraction to what was an awful winter and early spring. I say this because I remember picking up my mother from surgery a couple weeks prior. She was laid up in the living room and looked to be in a lot of pain. I'd been waiting on her and helping out with groceries and stuff like a good son, but drove to Salem to get away from the house, probably a little too frequently, and my car ended up needing repairs. Then I got rejected, my stocks crashed, and I called out of work to hide at the library. It was there, on the second floor of the Berry Library, where I applied for my first teaching job and worked on this paper. The novel I'd actually loved was Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, but I didn't know how to go about writing on it and didn't want to risk draining the life out of it with analysis. Instead, I landed on Lauren Groff, whose work reminded me of *Hatchet*, and *The Road*, and whose style of storytelling calmed me down. And while it's a little embarrassing to reread – I may have an overly developed anima – the process of writing it was meaningful and reminded me that I had, in fact, retained some of the information covered in the readings.

We presented our papers on the final day of classes. It was a beautiful spring day outside, so I recommended we go outdoors to enjoy it. My peers hissed, "the tree pollen." 16 weeks of readings about the environment, and here we were in Meier Hall 249E with a rickety A/C unit, smelly carpeting, and dirty chairs. The presentations were great, and things wrapped up, albeit in a sort of sad way (I've never liked endings). After class, I drove down to the Willows, changed clothes in my car, and went for a jog. All that was left for that semester was some fiction writing, so that weekend I studied a PowerPoint on scene and dialogue and produced a short story about a young man who pelts a priest with balls of wet paper towels.

Both times I reworked this paper, I had this reoccurring thought that left a pang in my chest: *Why are we doing half-philosophy? And why the hell didn't I just stick with philosophy in the first place?* The answer is that I never know what's good for me. If there is one thing I know for sure, it is exactly this. There's evidence of this in the amount of effort I put into paper itself, which I returned to in a digital humanities course, and presented at a conference, instead of just reading the creative nonfiction piece I'd written that would've been a lock. I showed up late, hungover, and while practicing in the car began realizing that I might have allowed myself to become a little too "fluid" for couple of months in my twenties. My entire academic career has been centered around doing the best I could in order to get a job and put myself in a position where I could have a wife and kids, and here I am reading an essay that's probably raising a couple of eyebrows. When the conference ended, I bolted for the door.

The Finder of All That Was Lost

Anticipation

On both sides of the church's entry doors stood carved angels holding holy water. All the kids shuffled in while in two separate lines, dabbing their tiny fingers into the water before blessing themselves. Brian was in the line on the right-hand side, which brought him directly under Saint Anthony's window. Today was the day of his first communion.

He looked up at the odd ring of hair running around the front and sides of Saint Anthony's big bald head. There was a sitting child in his left hand, secured in the crease of his elbow like a tucked football. The child reached across the man's body for the stem of white lilies in his right hand. Brian stood before the scene, the sun shining through it and delivering a shimmer of blues, browns, golds, and greens into his eyes. His legs locked up. Then someone kicked the back of his all-white pant leg and brought him back to reality. It was Julianna in a yellow dress and flats.

"Move it slowpoke." The girls behind her chuckled and then somebody let out a violent sneeze from the other side of the room.

Julianna had grown up on the same block as him and they'd held hands on the fourth of July last year. She was bossy, but nice to have around. He couldn't understand why.

"Chill out," he replied, moving forward with the line towards their assigned pew.

"You've got to pay attention, Brian." she said, striking her forefingers at him.

The further away he got from the window, the more his eyes began to feel as if he'd just stepped out of the sun and into a dark cave. What was momentarily vivid became dull again.

After arriving at their pew to sit down, Brian's stomach spasmed with fear. The slick wood was so cold that he felt it through his pants as he began to try and rehearse the prayers. He struggled with the second half of the Hail Mary even after Sister Vera had tried so hard to beat it into him. She'd sit right next to him in class as the other kids got to color and talk, always speaking to him real slowly, as if he didn't know what that meant. And so, he'd just nod along while looking over her wrinkled forehead and bulbous nose.

His mind began to lose its focus as he tried to remember the lines and ignore the blisters forming under his feet, the white leather dress shoes a size too small. His face began to run a red hot when everyone got up to stand in line for their first confession. His body rocked back and forth in anticipation.

Before he knew it, Father Joseph was waving him in. Right away Brian began to cry and told him all about how he'd quit the football team without telling his parents. About how they'd found out he'd quit; about how he'd failed his mother; about how he'd stolen food to eat in his bedroom late at night when he couldn't sleep; about how his father had found the box of cupcakes; about how hard his father worked to buy food for the family... Then Brian began to suck in air like a broken vacuum, and Father Joseph cut him off.

Unable to focus on the words being spoken, Brian stared into the big golden cross at the center of Father Joseph's purple stole. When he finally looked up to meet Father Joseph's eyes, Brian saw that the man was smiling at him, laughingly. The veins in Brian's neck tightened up like a kinked hose, the blood caught in his head by anger. He looked right through the stupid costume and into his black pupils: I'll get you back for this.

Father Joseph's verdict was seven Hail Marys. So, Brian wiped the boogers and tears on the sleeve of his white suit coat and shuffled out of the room gingerly with bloody heels and sweaty feet back towards the front pew. There, he was finally able to take a knee and reached behind himself to try and scratch his left foot, which was the worse of the two. The shoe was too tight to get off, though, so he gave up and began to pray:

Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou... and Jesus... and... one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four, Amen.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, Amen...

Is that long enough? Nobody'll know. There's no way to prove it. Screw it. Sorry God.

Sorry Jesus. Please don't be mad. Amen.

After blessing himself and opening his eyes back up, he took a peek around and Julianna caught him as she was coming out from her own confession. Her eyes were all glassy and puffy, she had just cried too.

Somebody's baby broke out in a scream for the second time that morning and it echoed from the back of the room. A man from the left front side of the church responded with a fast cough which said: Either shut that kid up or get them out of here. The baby let out a few more cries before the mother shushed the child back to sleep, bobbing it on her knee.

When Brian stood from the knee rest, the noise of its creaking and its subsequent buckle drew attention back toward him. Juliana just smiled and shook her head. It was always something, he was either tripping over his feet, stuttering through a sentence, falling off his bike, or forgetting what was just said to him. After Julianna finished her prayers, she slid back into their pew and leaned in with her hair smelling like strawberry VO5.

“How many did you get?” she whispered, her fingers fiddling with the hem of her dress.

“Seven,” Brian said, massaging his ankle.

“Oooo, I only got five,” she said, kicking her legs back and forth as if she were on a swing.

“Yeah, but seven is a lucky number,” he replied, still trying to loosen his foot out of the shoe with no success.

She began shaking her head side to side, a nose so sharp and narrow that it seemed to cut through the air, “I don’t know if believe in things like that.”

“Shhh. I don’t need more bad luck,” he said. “I forgot the prayer again.”

Somebody in the pew behind them dropped down the wooden bench to begin their own prayers, and the pegs on its underside knocked against the floor, reverberating off the high ceilings. Julianna flinched and then pushed her black hair behind her tiny ears which shone with diamond studs on each lobe.

“Even after all that time with Sister Vera?”

“Yeah, but don’t say nothing,” he said, wiping sweaty hands up and down the white dress pants pulled taut against his legs. She just giggled and opened up a book of hymns. He looked straight ahead, trying to give his attention to something else, anything but another one of his screw-ups.

The altar boys were setting up some part of the ceremony as altar boys do. They wore all-white robes that their necks swam around in. Every move they made had the full attention of the audience. They were so meek it made Brian feel that people didn’t even need the fear of God to

follow his rules, just watching the altar boys brought about enough feelings of guilt and unease. The audience all listened along to Father Joseph, mumbled their prayers in unison, and then finally got to leave the dark cold church to feel the warm sunlight of an early spring morning. It felt so nice being outside that Brian began to wonder if church was made to be miserable so people could remember how nice life can be.

Conception

It was an outhouse bathroom made of cement bricks that had been painted blue in honor of the town's colors. The gray cement floors were warped and uneven. Pools of spilled water from sinks and toilets had accumulated in the divots, giving way to a metallic water smell which filled the air. Brian felt a sharp burn in his lower abdomen and ran to the toilet.

To his right was a handicap railing, and above it, a black plastic container drilled into the wall holding two rolls of toilet paper. He reached for a couple of strips, but they were too thin and dissolved onto the pads of his sweaty fingers. Brian wiped quickly. He was missing the first water break and Coach Tom was known to chirp him for being gone too long. Two sets of cleats could be heard approaching. Brian froze, hunched over in a semi three-point stance.

“Oh my God!” Dominic yelled, “What’s that smell?”

“Somebody’s taking a shit!” Johnny said with excitement, “Look!”

The sink water ran on high, and he could hear them giggling as Dominic pulled down on the paper towel dispenser over and over. He kept quiet and still, biting down on the pendant and starting into a prayer: *Please let them leave. I promise to study Sister Vera’s packets when I get home. Please just have them leave...* Balls of wet paper towel came down in a frenzy, one smacking him on the left side of his neck, a couple hitting him on the back and shoulders. The

others landed in great clapping thuds against the floor. His throat clenched as he waited for the sound of their cleats to fade away. Then he was left in total silence.

Redemption

Some years later, while in line at Walmart, Brian caught a glimpse of a familiar figure in front of him. It was Father Joseph. The last time he'd gone to church was for his communion. Now he'd had a kid of his own and was picking up diapers and canned formula. How long had it been, fifteen years?

“Tax exemption,” Father Joseph said to the cashier.

“Yup, I gotcha.” the kid replied, swiping items across the scanner.

Rows of artificial lighting lit the front end of the store. The soft hum of refrigerators underscored the crackling speaker playing yacht rock.

“Do you have a restroom?” he asked.

“Yeah, it's right over there.”

After paying, Father Joseph set his bags down on the row of chairs up front and walked into the bathroom. Brian stepped up in line.

“Hi how are you?”

“Good, I'm gonna pay with EBT.”

He wanted to speed this up because he had to pee. The printer spat out a receipt and he was free to go. The bag of diapers and formula got tucked underneath his arm and he went into the bathroom.

In the bathroom was a sink-mirror combo, two urinals, and three stalls. Brian stepped in and noticed that there was no one else in there. He held his breath and went pee. After he finished, he zipped up and walked over to the sink, turning the water on high and lathering his hands with soap. He saw his reflection in the mirror and chuckled. To his right was a metal paper towel dispenser with a red plastic lever that he began pulling up and down on. The dispenser fed out big strips of stiff brown paper which he wet under the fossette and squished into the shape of balls.

The first one missed but the second and third hit with big wet slaps on his skin.

“Hey! Who’s that out there?”

“I want seven Hail Marys!”

Father Joseph shouted a couple of things, but the old man couldn’t get off the toilet. Brian threw two or three more and then left the bathroom. Outside, was a beautiful day. He’d found a piece of what’d been lost.

Afterthoughts #4

This story went through a couple of very, *very*, odd versions where I just repeated some of the horrific things I'd heard other people say while growing up. That's most of what my creative writing has been, a sign that I do not fully understand the art of storytelling. But it got better the longer I was in the program, and that was probably one of the better fictional pieces that I came up with because the feedback contained a harsh truth: I needed to work on believability. There's nothing worse than a shy person who thinks they're intelligent for being excluded, and that was the writing persona I'd taken on. It led to a lot of bad habits and arrogance. Even this exercise of reflecting on my writing is, in itself, quite pompous and arrogant. But if there has been any benefit to my attempt at pursuing creative writing, it is that now, in writing, I have evidence of how immature I was, which is pretty humiliating, and a haunting reminder that I need to grow up.

Over the summer, I took my first step at trying to actually grow up and began teaching. That story is getting an excerpt published in a Zine, so technically I can't put it in here. But what I can do is share two other non-fiction pieces I wrote under the guidance of a very good teacher who highlighted all of my lax phrasing, incorrect verb tense, and boring adjectives. One during the best class I took at Salem State University, and another during a directed study where he recommended nonfiction writers like Lopate, Biss, and Knausgaard that helped me keep reading the genre and look for techniques to emulate.

On Becoming an Ass

I've come to dislike the holidays. After working overnight shifts during Thanksgiving at a grocery store and decorating the store for Christmas, and after cashiering multiple years in a row at another retail chain where I scanned thousands of gift certificates, greeting cards, and makeup kits after uttering the phrase: "Hi, how are you? Do you have a membership card?", I'd come to believe that the holidays were really just a scam. Everything was an act, and I knew, because I'd help design the set for shit wages. Once the play was over, I'd have to be the breakdown crew.

Cynicism can become exhausting, not just for the cynic, but also for those around him. Whether it's because of bitterness, or heartbreak, or general angst, we all have those family members and friends whom we know to avoid during the most wonderful time of the year. This year, I realized that I was becoming that person, the one who should be avoided. It hit me on a car ride home after teaching all day and sitting in traffic.

Here we go again, I thought. Look at them all. They've come out to shop, and they still don't know how to merge into a lane correctly. The days now get dark at four in the afternoon, the weather is cold, and she's not picking up the phone again. I'll be stuck at home for another round of the holidays, taking my beating of bad stories like Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*.

Which cousin will it be this year who's doing much better than I am and is deserving of our collective recognition despite their skipping out on this dinner? Who from the friend group has already purchased a home and landed their dream job? What dumb questions, microaggressions, and passive-aggressive behavior will I have the pleasure of withstanding?

My blood pressure began to rise. I could feel the pulse of the veins just underneath the skin of my temple. Traffic still wasn't moving. I took a breath and pulled off I14 to go pee at a Target. It's Mom's birthday this week, I'll buy her a gift card.

The bathroom trip was uneventful. Although I will say that both the hand soap dispenser and sink failed to detect my hand motion, which added an unnecessary amount of time to the trip.

Back out in the store, I stand in front of the giant gift card rack to look for a twenty-five-dollar voucher to a chain coffee store. It dawns on me that this is a lame gift, despite its practicality, and I begin to feel like a shitty son. There's got to be something more original that I could purchase, but I can't think of anything, and so I begin to walk around.

Ahead of me, a mother is pushing a carriage with a child in the baby seat. Her two older children follow close by, fingers interlocked with the red plastic cart, and they're arguing about what they want for Christmas. *A new Switch controller! No, A Lego set!*

Part of me wants to just blow right by them in the aisle so I can get to where I'm headed (which is where exactly?), the other part of me is sort of amused and doesn't mind that foot traffic in the store is just as congested as it is outside. They still believe in Santa, and it's endearing to listen to; the magic of wishing up a gift and receiving it.

There's nothing in the store which looks interesting to buy as a gift for my mother, and I give up searching halfway through my lap around rectangular perimeter of tiles, returning to the checkout area. The self-checkout registers have a massive line that runs into the women's clothing section, which, even as an adult, still makes me slightly uncomfortable to stand in. I take

my place in line behind two squatty old ladies who reek of cheap perfume, looming over them. “I can’t believe Thanksgiving is two days away,” one of them says to the other. “*Time is flying!*”

Time flies is a cliché. But as the other cliché goes: All clichés are clichés for a reason.

Eight years. It’s been eight years since I was a night shift janitor, and six since I last worked a shift as a retail clerk. The jobs were so miserable that I’d let the roles and experiences define me, ignoring any accomplishments I’ve had in my life. Now I couldn’t even be bothered to enjoy the holidays.

The only thing on my mind has been trying to leave this place behind, and I’d write almost anything if I thought that it would do that for me. Do for me? What will this do for me? That had been the main priority since I got into writing, and so for about the past week and a half, I lived as if I’d never write again. Here’s how it went:

- 1) I quit coffee;
- 2) I quit beer;
- 3) My anxiety calmed down;
- 4) The days moved slower;
- 5) Conversation with others seemed more interesting;
- 6) Television was amusing again;
- 7) I got a haircut and called my grandmother;
- 8) I organized my finances and paid off a bunch of student loans;
- 9) My appetite came back;
- 10) I volunteered my time and stopped thinking I was talented.

In sum, my life has been much more normal without writing, or at least writing in the way I had been. The topics I was writing about were pretty ugly and unfair to the people who inspired them. My dreams and aspirations: delusional.

At the dinner table on Thanksgiving Day, the same stories are told again in the same ways they always have been, but this time around I don't mind listening. I fill up on sides, feeling slightly guilty about having ever written in the first place.

Later, my brother and I hung out and watched football. The Lions beat the Bears, and then the Cowboys took the Giants. He hit on a prop bet and I played chess on my cellphone as we talked during commercial breaks. The evening wrapped up. I took out the trash and helped clean.

The Vagabond Heart

You must lay aside your burdens of the mind; until you do this, no place will satisfy you. -Seneca

I

Ever since I was a kid, my family told me what I was: my nationality. T-shirts, soccer games, food, music, bumper stickers, everything could all be traced back to this one label. The thing is, though, I'm only half what they say I am. Plus, I was born in America and did not grow up speaking the language much at home. So really, I'm just American – and a bit of an annoying one at that.

The label has always felt like a throwaway response that I've forcibly kept up. It offered a reason for my odd looks, weird personality, and general lack of shared interest with the culture and country in which I live. The longer I repeated it the more it grew on me. Then, after studying the language and culture for two years in college, I decided to take a trip to Europe once and for all and check it out for myself. The goal was to separate myself enough from my family to feel more like an individual for once. And, with any luck, I'd meet a girl.

At 6:30 AM on the day of my flight, I awoke to my cellphone's alarm, removing the cord from its port and placing it in my backpack as I had imagined myself doing the night before. After that, I did some push-ups, drank some coffee, and jolted myself enough to shower, shave, dress, and leave.

Before I walked out the door, my father and I hugged for the first time in nine-and-a-half years. The last time had been before I went under for surgery in high school. He looked both incredibly nervous and uncomfortable in the lead up to our hug, maybe even more worried than

he had before I'd gone in for surgery. And, to be honest, I was nervous, too. We're not a family that really hugs or does things like traveling, and I've never gone away on my own for too long. That medical event stunted me from going to college or studying abroad. Now my parents had seemed anxious in the lead up to the trip, and I had intentionally avoided telling them until it was necessary because I knew they would be. We are a family that worries.

During that hug, I noticed how much he'd aged over the past couple of years since Covid. He's graying and has bags under his eyes. Is he dying? Recently, I'd also started noticing gray hairs of my own and to see signs of aging in the mirror. Am I dying? Yes, we all are. Aging was becoming a fixation of mine and was a second motivator for the trip. The main one, though, was love.

A couple of months ago, I blew a third chance with an ex-girlfriend. We had walked a hiking trail together, went to a book sale, and then fooled around in the backseat. Everything had seemed alright, and then there was a conversation about my job and saving up to buy a home. The job I have will probably never afford me a house the way things are. It got awkward afterwards, and a couple days later I just started texting other women instead of talking about it. Then I tried to cheat, or maybe it wasn't even cheating, but I definitely wasn't straightforward, out of some weird bravado where I thought I could deny who I really am – which is not the cool guy full of zest and joie de vivre.

At 27, I'd only seriously dated two women. That doesn't fit the mold of what people think a young man should be, and it got in my head when people started to insinuate things I didn't like. With only a semester and a half left to getting my master's degree, my family began to make weird comments as we watched cousins and friends go off to marry and have kids. The expectation was that I already should be doing the same. And the feeling was that there must be

something “off” about me for not having already squared away that part of life. It’s as if they’d forgotten that I’m working with a different timeline, For the past couple years I’d been trying to make a leap into a better position, so that I could move out and grow up and meet someone, but there was almost zero evidence that any of the work put in had been worthwhile because I never fully gave up the goal of teaching and writing – which don’t pay. Instead of being assured of myself, I spiraled. It began to feel like I became way too self-involved with work and grad school, and now it had ruined my personal life. It all freaked me out. So I booked this trip to try and get something out of life, the idea of wasted years and the likelihood of a shortened amount of time on earth now haunting me.

Inside the airport, people are moving with force. Some are passengers dragging wheeled luggage. Others are employees, of which there are three sorts: those who are dapperly dressed; those who are equipped for combat; and those who are working in restaurant and retail chains. Many of them looked to just be arriving, and it occurs to me that I may be too early. It was only a little after 10 AM, and my flight did not leave until 4:15 PM. The old rule of thumb is to “show up four hours before your flight,” and I’d overachieved. My reward was a stiff metal chair by the second-floor bathrooms.

There was an energy to the place. People were talking, eating, drinking and coughing. Baggage was going in one end and out the other at the check-in counter up ahead. Taxis, shuttles, carts, jets and planes. Toilets flushed in the background. My body nearly sang electric. I took a break from reading to grab my cellphone and look over the trip itinerary.

Exoticca is a travel agency which prepares group trips all over the world, mostly to South America, Europe, Northern Africa, and Asia. The package I'd purchased was advertised as being for 7 days, but really, it was for 5 if you shave off the travel days on each end. The first flight was set to leave from Logan to arrive at Madrid, and after a two-hour layover, a second flight would run from Madrid to Lisbon. The plan was to sleep on the plane, arrive in Portugal around 9 AM, and check out the city on my own. After the first day, there would be group outings, an adult field trip of sorts, in which I would be going along with others to see things like the tombs of famous explorer Vasco de Gama and the 16th century poet Luis de Camões; some Fado shows; local restaurants and bakeries; and the Alfama quarter. The photos on the website made the country look like a dream: ocean views, large and clean hotel rooms, and sunshine. I began dreaming up an attractive and entertaining cohort to enjoy these excursions with.

Eventually, 12 o'clock struck, and I could check in. The attendant was a guy around my age, which made things less intense. This was my first time flying on my own, so I was worried about messing up somehow. Did I buy the right-sized toiletry bag? Is there too much clothing in there? After I handed over my passport, he printed out my boarding passes and asked me to place my baggage on the scale. There was a deafening pause. Then he offered to upgrade me for free, sending the bag straight to Lisbon so I would not have to grab it at the airport in Madrid during my layover. I took him up on the offer but felt a sense of unease while giving the bag over. He asked if I wanted a receipt but said that the sticker on my passport was supposed to be good enough. To speed up the interaction and be polite, I said, "No thank you."

At the gate, I found a spot away from others and by the window. There was an outlet to charge my phone, and I was able to watch all the activity on the tarmac. I hadn't seen a plane in years. The largeness of the planes and smallness of the people seemed surreal. Everything

worked together at the airport somehow, so many procedures and personalities carrying out these miniature missions. Then I left the spot and took a piss, bought some bottled water and cashews.

When I came back, there was a girl in her twenties who looked like she was writing in a notebook. And she was attractive. Same trip? I wanted to take a quick peek over at the notebook and did so in a sort of sly manner, making sure not to ogle. It was an adult coloring book for anxiety. Her pen was a neon pink marker. I pulled out my cell phone and avoided eye contact pretending I'd never looked.

After that, I waited, texting family and friends, reading, and people watching. The boarding gate was a mix of twenty-somethings on college break, couples with young children, and the elderly. Our gate got changed last minute, and I almost got lost after another bathroom trip.

I was one of the last to board the plane. My seat was in the back row, an aisle seat right before the bathrooms. For the entirety of the flight, I would endure shoulder bumps and get no sleep. The plane drove on the tarmac for a long time, so long that I believed I was already in the air, and then quickly gripped an arm rest and the seat in front of me like an idiot when it actually did take off. The girl beside me, Katie, kindly asked if this was my first time flying. I lied and said yes. I didn't want to get into specifics. We talked for a little, and then she stole the armrest for a nap.

Everything was going smooth once we were in the air. After a couple of hours, there were food options. Pasta or beef. I thought to nudge Katie, but that felt like too much, but it also felt rude not to make her aware of the food cart. So, I elbowed the armrest to wake her a bit. She came to, and I asked her if she wanted food. When the cart came by, she tried to practice her

Spanish and asked the attendant for a menu; a move which pissed the attendant off, “There is no menu. Pasta or Beef?” After eating, Katie did a fake apologizing whisper thing when she knocked my knee to grab a guide for stocks and a highlighter out of her backpack. I did the little whisper thing back, maybe a little too whispery and soft for an adult man of my size, “*No worries.*” Then I watched her highlight way too much of the text from the corner of my eye.

Some time passed, and the plane gave a slight jolt. The bell went off and the pilot came over the intercom to warn us of upcoming turbulence; first in Spanish, then in English. Shortly after the warning in English there were small movements, what felt like hitting bumps on the school bus, nothing too crazy. But then they increased in intensity, and we had some big ‘drops.’ I began to regret booking the trip and everything that led up to it. My career path, the dumb stories I’ve written, not being more confident in myself, not being more available to make good on that third chance with Val. This was a stupid solution. A vain attempt to get some photos and experiences which would not actually address my real problems.

She wretched. The coloring book girl vomited into her crewneck sweater. The smell was awful, and within moments flight attendants were zipping up and down the aisle escorting her to the very back of the plane, spraying the recycled air with a Febreze-like product. They calmed her down with small talk. She felt better afterwards. Eventually, the pilot steadied the plane, and the seatbelt light shut off, but he did not have a very good flight. The landing ended up being rough, too. One guy even let out a: *Oh, Jesus Christ man!* before we touched ground.

II

Your faults will follow you whithersoever you travel –Seneca

When the plane lands in Madrid they do not let us off. The tarmac delay takes over an hour. People begin to voice their irritation, while I quietly go into a panic about missing my connecting flight and being stranded alone in a Madrid airport. When they do begin to let people off, it is a free for all of ripping down overhead luggage and trying to cut the line. I am second-to-last to leave the plane.

European airports are different from American ones. When I begin walking around the airport, I am disoriented. The gate is listed as “HJK” on my boarding pass, and I have no idea how to get there. It is a little after 6 AM and the flight will be taking off at 7:15. There was a family several rows ahead and across the aisle from me on the plane ride, and I spot them on a bench nearby, the father saying to his wife, daughter, and son: “Com pressa, com pressa” – he’s speaking Portuguese, “hurry up.” I tail them for a bit and walk under massive golden arches of Madrid’s airport.

Following the family leads me to the international passport check-in, a lucky guess. One airport employee is taking his time investigating the details of everyone’s passport, another is stamping them without a care. I jump lines from the slowpoke and am shitting my pants at the possibility of being stuck here for any longer than I need to be. He waves me forward to the counter. Then I look into a camera to have my photo snapped and he stamps my passport.

Through the entryway is a security checkpoint and people are running through a maze of stanchions as employees shout orders. I have no idea what they’re saying but go along as if I do. An employee yells at me for having a laptop in my bag and lets me know that I took off my football style belt for no reason. I respond with a “thank you” that is really more of a “fuck you, too.”

Now I need to find HJK. The Portuguese family is gone. I'm reading signs in Spanish but not with confidence and end up scanning the place for ones in English. My cell phone begins pinging. It's my father. He's asking for the flight numbers because he wants to track them on the internet to make sure the plane didn't go down. He means well, but I also know it's after midnight back home, and I now feel guilty for keeping him up at night. There's also no time to answer or figure that out, so I ignore him.

After running up and down multiple flights of stairs and escalators that have arrows indicating the direction of HJK, I make my way down a giant one which leads to a train. It's about 6:50 at this point and I'm freaking out. This was such a bad idea. The train is also packed. We're all on top of each other and there's not a handle available. I end up holding the door to stop from falling over onto other people.

The train arrives and empties. I sprint to another escalator and cannot find my boarding gate because I don't know which it is: H, J, or K. It's ten past 7 and I'm going to miss the flight. The chase leads me through weird retail stores and lounges full of tired-looking Europeans. Finally, I see the IBERIA logo (the company the flight tickets are from) and get in line behind 15 – 20 other people. The boarding time was pushed back to 7:30. Everything is fine.

On the plane I sit down next to a married couple and am both wiped but ecstatic. I pulled this off on my own. Neither of the couple reads the books they brought with them and have placed on their foldout desks. Instead, she sleeps on his shoulder. Posers. I finish part one of DeLillo's *White Noise*. On the descent to Lisbon, I'm not worried at all and even look out the window. The city is massive and grey. The weather is rainy.

In Lisbon my phone begins to go off again when the plane lands. More missed messages and phone calls from my father. Exoticca is also messaging me from WhatsApp to let me know the agent / tour guide is waiting to pick me up and take me to the hotel. I respond to my father with a text but ignore his calls because I need to go find my luggage. In the baggage claim carousel, my bag is nowhere to be found. I pace around the entire area looking at each carousel, hoping there was some sort of mistake, but there's no mistake, the luggage is not there. I'm going to be late to meet the greeter from the travel group and miss my ride. I call Iberia and go through the options on the automated system but am not getting through to an agent. It refers me to their online website. On the website I am supposed to be able to scan the barcode from my receipt, but I don't have one. Instead, I try the sticker they placed on the back of my passport, which is supposed to be the same thing, to find out where the bag is located, but it crashes each time I put it in. The Exoticca agent has not answered my message. I get irritated and decide to leave to go locate the agent to make sure I'm not left behind. Big mistake.

Once you leave the baggage claim area, you cannot go back in. Which means you also cannot make a formal case for lost luggage at the airline counter, which you need to do if you would like your luggage located, or if you were hoping to be reimbursed. I didn't know this until later on when I finally got a hold of an agent from Iberia who sounded so disappointed when I told them I passed on asking for the receipt. The lost luggage was, in many ways, my own fault. Clothes, chargers, and toiletries were all in that bag. Without it, I was down to a laptop, hoodie, two books and some loose-leaf paper.

When I step outside the baggage area and into the airport, I see people holding odd signs with their respective company's logo. I spot the Exoticca guy, a kid named João who is probably 5 feet tall and looks like Tommy Chong. He's chill, too chill, and immediately invites me to the

aquarium with his friends. I nod along but have no intentions of going. Taking more buses and trains to meet this kid in a different part of Lisbon and watch fish swim in a tank like a first grader seems pretty dumb. In retellings of this trip, I've lied and told people that I went to the aquarium, met new people, and had a good time to make things sound not as bad as they were, but I didn't go. To be honest, the invitation actually pissed me off a little bit. *Is this how normal people spend their time?*

III.

The driver arrives and the agent hands us off to him. He looks like my cousin. It is actually a country full of people who look like my cousins, grandparents, uncles, and aunts—which is interesting but also very, very weird. Alongside me waiting is a military vet, and a husband and wife from Minnesota. The husband talks about *The Wild* NHL team to me, and I smile and nod as we all squish into the backseat. The rest of the group is getting into a larger vehicle. They've all traveled together and are a group of about eight retirees. I look at them from the back seat and am a bit disappointed. While daydreaming at the airport, I'd hoped for a cohort my own age with attractive women. Now, I'm recognizing that I'll probably be alone because the group is not what I'd imagined it'd be at all. I know age is just a number, but I wasn't planning on living out my *Harold and Maude* fantasy. What an ugly motive to travel to a country in the first place, couldn't I have just hopped on a train and gone into the city for a night or two like a normal person? Did I really need to board a plane in some extravagant excursion to go find a wife from the home country? What does that say about how I think about relationships and women in the first place? Might that be a part of my problem? The driver slams the trunk shut and throws a hand wave gesture at another taxi driver who beeps at him for being parked in the wrong lane. Before getting into the car, he swears and spits on the ground.

The radio station he picks is bad. Portuguese lyrics over American rap beats. Still, the window-watching is nice as we pull away from the airport. It's a gray morning in Lisbon, but then the sun begins peeking through the clouds to shed light on palm trees, open sidewalks, and clean grasses. As we begin to make it out into the city, it strikes me that this is really just another majorly developed area that has its own pockets of poverty. There is homelessness, graffiti on billboards, and a lot of the same stuff I see back home. The touch screen in the middle of the driver's console is lighting up with more rides to complete. He begins to cut people off and drive aggressively to beat traffic. A woman riding her scooter, a city bus, and a bicyclist are all in his way as he weaves in and out of lanes. Things are looking similar but different. The colors of buildings are painted a bit brighter, but everything seems flat. When someone doesn't let him back over from the bus lane, which is blocked by a bus, he stares them down and head butts the driver's side window. The wife from Minnesota looks horrified, and I'm doing my best not to laugh from discomfort. Where the hell am I?

We turn off into an area that look more downtown-ish and I see a little bit of the city life of Lisbon. It's the Europe I've gotten the gist of from movies and television. The driver brings the car to a halt and tells us this is our hotel. It's a large building of smooth gray concrete. I look around and the area reminds me a little bit of Cambridge. It's a foreign-looking Cambridge, just a little more spread out with cobblestone sidewalks. Over eight hours and two flights for this?

Inside the hotel I botch my first conversation in Portuguese and ask the teller if she speaks English to speed things up. *Você fala inglês?* She informs me of a tax of 15 euros that was not advertised and lets me know that the complimentary breakfast is not included for today, but I suck it up and pay to eat. Already, I'm down 30 euros plus my luggage.

For breakfast I eat scrambled eggs, hash browns, and a pear. The pear is so sweet that I grab another one and get onto the hotel Wi-Fi to google search if there is something different about Portuguese pears. Maybe it was dehydration from the flights, but I've never had a better piece of fruit in my life. There is something different about the pear; it's a type native to the Sintra region where I'm staying. The outer skin is deeper in its yellows and browns than an American Bartlett Pear. The flesh is sweeter too. It's called the Pêra Rocha, and my throat tightens a bit when I read the name because it reminds me of last name of the girl I'm hung up on. It's a rainy morning and I am alone in Lisbon with no luggage or sense of direction. I go up to my room, shower, and go to bed.

When I wake up, I call Iberia again and have no luck with my bag. I decide to let it go and draw up a plan to make do for now. I need an adapter to charge my phone (which is now almost dead) bottled water, and something to eat. That bag had all my clothing, too, so I'll need to find a clothing store. After walking around the city and drinking some water, I decide that my cellphone's battery is more important than clothing and have the GPS lead me to an electronics store. Inside, a woman about my age named Beatriz greets me. After another botched attempt in conversational Portuguese that I hadn't practiced for, she smiles and breaks into English. She is friendly, and I have an in: I am the dumb American. She offers to show me around the area, and I take her up on it. The store is set to close in a little over an hour; she tells me she'll text me. I go to a supermercado and finish buying things I'll need like toothpaste, a razor, and food, then go back to the hotel to charge up my phone. My parents are asking how I am doing and when I will FaceTime them. I don't want to really want talk to them at this point because I'm realizing this trip was a mistake, but I set up a time anyway for later that night.

Beatriz texts me that her son is sick and that she needs to go home but that she'd like to see me a different time. We do not see each other again, but later on I'll tell people that she showed me around the city so that the trip doesn't sound as bad as it was. In reality, I eat at the café alone, watching others drink my favorite beer as I eat some cod fish and scrambled eggs. Then, I do some more walking around the city and try to take in the sights for myself, but it's not happening. This trip is going so poorly already that I'm doing the math on how much longer I'll have to be here. It seems like too long.

When I go back to the hotel, I calm down and try to make the best out of the situation by creating a Tinder and Bumble. I've done this before back home, and it kills me every time because I can't handle rejection and the only thing more awkward than me in person is me on camera. I don't even have many photos of myself, and to hit the count required to create an account, I am forced to take a mirror selfie that makes me feel like a tool. There aren't responses right away, and I close the app to go find a clothing store.

I walk all the way over to a mall and cannot find the clothing store that was listed on google. Then I look up at the third floor of the mall and see two vacant stores. This shouldn't be as complicated as it is, but it's getting late, and I'm still jet lagged. The idea that I've flown all the way to Europe to go shopping is getting annoying. So, I go back to the hotel.

Later that night, during a FaceTime with family, I show them the view from the hotel: a community street soccer pitch, train tracks, and massive concrete buildings in every direction. I'm on the seventh floor and think the view is pretty cool. They can hear in my voice that I'm nasally and sad, but I'm trying to hold off from telling them about the luggage. When I turn the camera back around, they look horrified. "It looks like a slum!" They ask too many questions.

Eventually, I give it up that I lost my luggage. They now have confirmation that I cannot take care of myself.

It's getting late, and I try to force myself to go to bed and get on track with Lisbon time. But, I'm bored and go back to the dating apps. I am getting likes on my profile from women who are attractive. This was surprising because everybody had bikini photos on the beach and was a world traveler, and I had a gawkish graduation photo and mirror selfie. One girl, named Clotilda, is a verified account that matches, and we go back and forth. The plan is to meet her tomorrow night after the group day trip to the tomb of Vasco De Gama. It goes right to my head. A thrust of confidence and excitement. Maybe this trip will be alright.

In the morning, I'm really sick. My nose is clogged, stomach is all messed up. I can't get out of the bathroom, and by the time I get down to the hotel lobby, the last of the group of people are getting onto the shuttle. A sweat breaks out across my shoulders and I'm in the same clothes I've been in for three days. The shuttle is right there for me to go chase down, but I don't. Instead, I go downstairs to grab my free breakfast, eating pasteis de nata and drinking black coffee, before I go back upstairs to shit my brains out.

My body ends up with the chills and I'm stuck in bed for the next couple of hours. On my phone, I pull up the itinerary, and it looks so boring. With closer reading, I also discover that all the outings are really only about an hour with the guide and then you're on your own for 3-4 hours in whatever place they take you to. The fado shows and other interesting parts are not actually included with the package and will require more money. At this point, I start looking for ticket prices online to get myself the fuck out of here. I basically got ripped off by this company, lost my luggage, and now, it's time to go. The flight tickets online are extremely expensive, more than one thousand dollars. Then, I find a small Azorean airline and make a phone call to an

operator in Fall River. They have a one-way ticket back to Boston for \$365.00 that will leave tomorrow afternoon, and I take it immediately.

My stomach calms down after the ticket is purchased and after some more water. Relief is an understatement, but then, I wonder about Clotilda. Is there enough time to pull this off? I double text her, - or text again before getting a response - which is considered a bad move, but the hotel will be kicking me out of my room tomorrow morning and that flight is now set. A response never does come from Clotilda in time, and looking back at it, that's probably a good thing because it would've been an awful date full of fear and guilt. At the airport, I'll delete both Tinder and Bumble from my phone to avoid feelings of rejection, opting to read instead.

The day is still the best one I have while in Portugal, though, because I know that I am leaving. I finally am awake enough to walk around the city and go into places—shops, bookstores, a café—without the worry of trying to find a person to cling to, or follow along with a group, or stick to an itinerary.

Wandering around Lisbon, I start to see more graffiti “sem dinheiro sem tralho” “no money, no work.” It's a protest of a new development about a mile away from the hotel that I am staying in. The place seems interesting but not much different from things I've seen back home, I'm sort of hesitant to do anything and don't really know why. What the hell is there to do at this point? I turn the corner and see what looks like human shit on the sidewalk. Taxis are rushing up and down the strip as traffic lights turn their signals. People are busy and pressed, and here I am loafing around aimlessly trying to get some awesome bohemian experience that'll make me a better writer and make me feel like I've gotten over my ex-girlfriend without fully facing rejection or the consequences of my actions. So, while the city is beautiful, I've also begun to

recognize that it's not the perfect place that I had built up in my head to be, that nothing is.

There's no place where people don't have to work or struggle for money. There's no place in this life where people will tell you how to live. I need to go back home and do some growing up.

The next morning, I take an Uber to the airport. This driver is a lot more relaxed, and I tip him in cash because I have euros to burn. Instead of going inside right away, I sit outdoors in the smoking section. The secondhand smoke reminds me of home. It's a nice morning, nicer than the past three days have been, because there is no rain. I start to regret having jumped on the chance to leave so quickly, but for the most part, I'm fine with it. I take in the sun for a little while and then go inside to buy my family some gifts from the gift shop that I could've just as easily ordered online. That's alright though, it's the thought that counts.

On the first flight, the plane seems empty. So empty that I'm questioning how it's running. Then, a bunch of kids come onto the plane in black jumpsuits with their soccer academy's name. The two in front of me can't figure out how to place their bags in the overhead compartment, and one asks if it's my bag that is in the way. He asks in Portuguese, and I actually understand it. I tell him it's not my bag but am responding in English. I stand up and they look alarmed. I must've seemed a lot smaller sitting down. Before I can move things for him, he jams the bag in forcefully. The flight attendants are pleasant on this flight and bring me an extra cup of coffee while I read. We hit light turbulence, but the kids make fun of it, oohing and ahing as if it were a rollercoaster. I have the window seat in a row by myself and am able to look out the window while descending to the Azores. The ocean and strips of land are vivid. Then small houses and towns come into view. When we land, they have us exit from the back of the plane and the views on the tarmac are enjoyable. There is a light mist in the air and lush greenery in every direction.

Ponta Delgada airport is on the island of São Miguel, which is where my grandfather is from. Someday, I'd like to go back there.

While waiting for the connecting flight, I take one of the last seats. After a couple of minutes an older woman shuffles in and nobody gives up their spot for her, so I do. She says "thank you," and another older woman says that my mother raised me right.

On the flight back, I sit by the emergency exit with a married couple. They seem worried about sitting, doing a lot of leg extensions and foot twirling before the flight has even taken off. Nothing relaxes you like the intrusive thought of a potential blood clot victim beside you. Then, when the food and drink cart arrive, they start throwing them back, toasting to the good life. They're funny and sort of charming and we make some small talk. In general, though, I'm keeping to myself as I begin again to regret having given up on the trip. Did I quit on this too soon?

Customs is backed up. I'm supposed to catch a shuttle at quarter past the hour, but it's about five past and the line is stretched back all the way throughout the labyrinth of stanchion ropes. When I finally make it up to the line, the employee asks me about where I've just been, and I tell him: Madrid. Lisbon, and the Azores. He asks if I went with anyone else, and I say no. He seems surprised, "You were just floating around out there by yourself?" I nod along in agreement and play it off like I'm Anthony Bourdain. Then he asks what I've brought back, which is a couple of snow globes and weird nicknacks. "Any foods?" Nope. Then he lets me go.

It's 7:20 when I look down at my phone, and I cannot believe I'm going to be stuck at Logan for another hour to wait for the shuttle to run again. Still, I walk outside to look for it just in case and am elated to see the purple shuttle all the way down at the end of the terminal's strip.

Without thinking I run for it, waving the driver down just as the bus begins to move. He's nice enough to hit the brake, open the door, and let me on. Afterwards, I'll leave him a five-dollar tip.

On the ride back to Danvers, I'm looking at Route 1 and seeing the sign for Red's Kitchen across the way. It's been there for years, everything on this strip has been, but lately I've come to think of them as being boring during my morning and afternoon commutes to work and school. In this moment though, I have more appreciation for it all. Even if it is a little boring, so am I. And if there's anything this trip taught me, it's that I've been trying way too hard to pretend I'm not. I like simplicity and quiet. Trying to meet people I don't know, see new places, and act like I am curious about life kind of irritates me because I am not very curious and the attention it requires feels forced. Let me get hammered with the same four people that I always do and say shit I'm not supposed to say. That's my idea of a good time.

Stepping off the bus, I see my car in the lot, and it is covered in ice and snow. Never have I been happier to scrape a windshield. My trip first trip to Europe was so bad, that I'm now fully okay with being another car-centric suburbanite. Before going home, I grab a roast beef sandwich and buy a six pack of beer. At the house, I talk with my family and give them gifts, and then they go back to doing their own thing. I have a shower and a beer, turn on the TV, eat, and let myself enjoy doing what I actually enjoy doing, which is trying to think as little as possible.

Conclusion

The Workshops and Directed Studies taken in the final two semesters, where I received detailed feedback from the professor who took me up on all of my false assertions of the self and pushed me to think and rethink about writing and intention. These courses propelled my writing and got it to a level where I was confident enough to read them aloud at the Salem Athenaeum, and even in front of a large audience as the opening act of a very talented author. That night, and the memoir course that ran alongside it, were the highlight of my time at Salem State. I do believe that this place made me a better person. And so once again, I'd like to say: thank you.