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## **Photographic Non-Self**

### **Abstract**

Non-self has unsurprisingly featured very little in explanatory material-object-based contemporary art history. Buddhist nonself has contributed to subjectivity research (Albahari, 2006, Siderits, 2011, 2015) but non-self in photography is, perhaps appropriately, absent. This chapter will explore how the experience of non-self might differ from but overlap with emptiness in the 'history of art' specifically 'photography theory and practice'. My research in experiential non-self (Stephens, 2018, 2019, 2021a, 2021b) wrestles with the complexities of non-representation when articulating embodied affect, of childhood racial discrimination, for instance. Yet, embodied autobiographical non-self is an impossible category. This is a subjugated knowledge that disrupts self-hood, undermines historical artefacts -leaving us with no birth of photography- and ruptures socio-cultural identity. Can a contemporary secular Buddhist non-self function as liberatory? Photographic non-self might render 'writing on/and photography' disastrous, when indelibly marked by the failures of representation.

### **Keywords:**

*Anattā (not-self), Śūnyatā (emptiness), Aniccā (impermanence), Dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), Rūpa (matter), Epistemic violence, Subjugated knowledge, Buddhism, Dematerialisation, Cahun, Kimsooja.*

## INTRODUCTION

Roland Barthes (1981/2006) discusses how we “designate reality” through photographs, and summarily invokes Buddhism no sooner than to reduce it:

Buddhism says sunya, the void; but better still: *tathata*, [...] *tat* means *that* in Sanskrit and suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: *that, there it is, lo!* but says nothing else (p.5).

Likewise, Buddhist terms are easily misrepresented due to their ready appropriation. In talking about “detail” Barthes describes: “a tiny shock, a satori, the passage of a void (it is of no importance that its referent is insignificant)” (p.49). Here, he conflates “satori” with “void”, which explains neither whilst confusing both. A lack of clarity regards ‘the East’, the ‘naïve insight’ embodied in a child, are both problematic. Yet, Buddhist philosophy and cultural perspectives had certainly infused themselves into western social cultures, long before, but certainly visibly culminating in numerous examples from the arts from mid-twentieth century onwards (Fields, 1992; Westgeest, 1997; Baas and Jacob, 2004; Batchelor, 2011).

So, a hyphenated ‘non-self’ will be used in some contexts where a western perspective, biased towards the cognitive, is indicated, whilst the spelling ‘nonself’ indicates its Sanskrit/Pali derivation and more complex connotations.

Non-self seems to come into sharpest focus when considered in autobiographical, or photographic ‘self-portraiture’. Self Studies has been developing over the last two decades and addresses a puzzle, well summed up by Metzinger (2011) in *The Oxford Handbook of the Self* when he said: “...there seems to be no empirical evidence and no truly convincing conceptual argument that supports the actual existence of ‘a’ self” (p.278). I will ask: how is

the *Self* represented if the Self is, in fact, *empty*? This philosophically and experientially informed notion of Buddhist-heritage, *śūnyatā* (Sanskrit) emptiness, has arguably already added depth and insight in numerous curatorial readings of contemporary art of a minimal or ephemeral type (Baas & Jacob, 2004, Weinhart & Hollein, 2006). This is closely aligned to nonself, *Anattā* (Pali) but not synonymous. Its neglect may be due, as Metzinger points out, because: “many...automatically assume that an entity like 'the self' must actually exist and that a relevant and well-posed set of scientific and theoretical questions relates to this entity” (2011, p.278). This is especially complex when the ‘non-self’ in question is subjected to identity-based (racial) discrimination, or, a photographically enacted non-self disavows (its) identity.

This chapter’s strategy, therefore, addresses the problems of appropriation, epistemic violence (Spivak, 1999, p.266) and Buddhist nonself as a form of “subjugated knowledge” as expressed by Spivak (1999, p.267) from Foucault. Foucault (1980) defines subjugated knowledge as: “a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it” (1980, p.82). Childhood experiences, of wounds caused by racism, of deprivation, or equally of joy and connection with place, for example, of family and community identity, each seem to offer the longevity and solidity of memory that forms and maintains self-identity. Yet, if these very same experiences are realised later as akin to an experience of non-self; and are accompanied by the necessary failure of articulating “the Self” in writing, or through photographic art, can this provide insight into how an embodied subjugated knowledge of non-self is enacted? This line of research also stems from my recent contribution on Buddhism and race (Author in Harris, 2021 pp.346-351).

There will be a series of paragraphs, written in a strophic form, like verses or fragments, derived from Blanchot's (1986) example in *Writing of the Disaster*. Theories and practices appear in combination, in short narratives, or separately, emblematically. Each paragraph will be separated by a fleuron "U+2766 ☪ FLORAL HEART (HTML &#10086)".



Both Barthes (1967/1977) and Foucault (1969/1977), in the *Death of the Author* and *What is an Author?* respectively, enact the decentring of the author-self, and evoke forms of non-self by doing so. In these texts, Barthes concludes with the "birth of the reader" and Foucault "the author function", both become key features of post-structuralist discourse.



What is the "auto" that writes auto-biographically? I am not black nor white. Involuntarily, I find myself not identifying with my Britishness. Growing up in Birmingham in the 70s, meant racists insisted to my face that I "go home" or "back to where you came from" with every type of slur, despite my being born here. Fear forms a hollow in emergence. Soon, they said, we will be in the majority: the "mixed-race", the "coloured", the "half-castes". The "melting pot" metaphor proved untrue. Over three generations of skin tones; the same stories. Same questions, same looks. Across two continents functioning across British class and Indian caste, exists an invisible web of continuity of power relations, at least, between the 1930's to the 2020's. If epidermal positionality is thus remarkably consistent, then the "auto" is only temporarily afforded by academic administration. It is both *indeterminate* and determined. The skin is a surface, upon which a photo-graphic, non-self, is projected, inscribed and then deciphered.



Anātman (Sanskrit, ātman, self or soul) and anattā (Pali) appears in early Indian Buddhism. *Anattā* is a composite Pali word consisting of *an* (not, without) and *attā* (self-existent essence) and is considered one of the Indian roots of the meaning of non-self. In this formulation, non-self might appear as the opposite of self, and therefore one half of a dualistic concept. As if the self, or non-self, were truly real, whilst the other was mere illusion.



The painfully slow, yet dramatic, revelation of a photograph of the surface of water in Michael Snow's video *Wavelength* (1967) is associated with minimal art, structural film, and the "transformation" of "matter" into "energy and time-motion" in Lippard and Chandler's essay *The dematerialization of Art* (1968/1971). This title evokes the paradox of light being both wave and particle. Also, radio waves as sound, rather than music. A staged death seemingly occurs in the film's spare narrative. Yet, in this context, the photograph within the film stands as a type of photographic paradox, of both time and movement. It is present but invisible for most of the video and when it becomes visible, it is paradoxically a still-moving image. A sea in a photograph in the fiction of a film. The meta-paradox of photographic "surfaces". Nonself: neither existent nor non-existent.



Jeppe Hein's *Invisible Cube* (2006) consists of four video cameras, a digital video sensor and an alarm. This cube, 5m<sup>3</sup>, is installed invisibly, and only becomes obvious once a visitor steps into the sensor-defined cubed space, setting off a sound alarm. Viewers, therefore,

have to navigate their way past the invisible cube to walk from one side of the gallery in which it is installed to the other. Photographic lens-based surveillance is shown to be the arbitrary means to enforce space as either accessible territory or inaccessible enclosure; yet leaving both, visually unidentifiable: the non-space of non-self.



‘Non-self’, as used throughout this article (Pāli: *anattā*, Sanskrit: *anātman*) is a variation on the concepts ‘not-self’ and ‘no-self’ and is central to Buddhism. The distinctions between these two, or three, are subtle and oftentimes implicit in Buddhist discourse. One of the most common ways in which *anattā* (*not-self*) appears is as one of the three so-called ‘marks of existence’, as: *aniccā* (impermanence) *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness, or suffering) and *anattā* (not self). This situates not-self as a central tenet of Buddhist belief in the Theravada tradition. There is a variation of interpretation which replaces *dukkha* with *nirvana*, suffering with joy, but in all translations, not-self is a key concept.



The Taiwanese artist Charwei Tsai’s hand inscribed photographs are abstract, indecipherable yet ‘natural’ images, appearing as likenesses to certain textures and surfaces. Their titles enact a particular undoing of the artist-self and reveal an intention, or affect. Entitled *Compassionate Aspiration* or *Primordial Awareness* by 2016, in 2011 the series was simply entitled *Gone*.



In the field of HCP (Human Cognitive Processing) and studies on cross-cultural use of metaphor in particular:

Yu (1995) compared the metaphoric expressions for anger and happiness in English and Chinese, and noted that they are primarily based on common bodily experience, with surface differences across languages explainable from cultural perspectives. For example, Chinese tends to utilize more body parts, especially internal organs, than English in its metaphors for anger, happiness, and other emotional states (Wang and Dowker, 2010, p.105).

Non-self is one such term, but one that cannot return to the place of its articulation, once articulated, necessarily. So, is a concept left somewhat open...an aporia, a form of scepticism? We might assume it encompasses muscle, flesh, bone and internal organs, as well as the surfaces of skin.



Lippard and Chandler (1971) were able to reflect on the experimental artwork of 'disappearance' of the 60's, and cite the preponderance of exclusive attention to thinking in "ultra-conceptual art", increased involvement of professional craft-makers and the "studio...becoming a study". The scenario of "art as idea and art as action" they explain as transforming "sensation" into the conceptual and "matter" into "energy and time-motion". Whilst the influence of phenomenology here is apparent, this is more than psychoanalytic sublimation or projection. The essay narrative takes two clear explanatory approaches: 1) evolutionary-developmental narrative and 2) taxonomy and cataloguing. An extremely conservative and conservational approach. What might not "fit" into this largely modernist, western schema, thereby offers us contemporary reflection on outside forces, or allows us to

see what might be inevitable in social and institutional upheaval and political uncertainty i.e. moments of rapid change. A dynamic play between the disruptive (concepts) and the incorporative (statements) carried out by 'an actor, or subject'; indicates that: the post-aesthetic (Schillinger, 1948), entropy, the irrational, anti-formal, non-anthropomorphic art (1967), nothing, and ultimate zero are each the productive-disruptive concepts. There are a number of works that proliferate as simply iterative ideas/actions based on one or two simple axioms, akin to so-called instruction pieces. These de-centre the artist in place of operational devices. Incorporative statements as I call them, relate, interestingly, to three more far-reaching points about non-self *practices*, as failures of representational systems: 1) "the dematerialization of the object might eventually lead to the disintegration of criticism" 2) "if the object becomes obsolete, objective distance becomes obsolete" 3) "it may be necessary for the writer to be an artist as well as for the artist to be a writer". We can hear non-self at work then undoing both, *idea* and *action*. Leaving the artist, nowhere to hide.

One thing is opaque, the article wrongly asserts, in my view, that "dematerialisation" stems from Dada and Surrealism. One thing is clear, this essay insightfully pinpoints Duchamp's key influence as "pervasive". Drawing on Apollinaire's insights from 1913, Duchamp's modus operandi is primarily "detached from aesthetic preoccupations" and "preoccupied with energy" (1971, p.268). This has strong affinities with a broadly Buddhist or non-western attitude. Non-self, rather than emptiness, might be ubiquitous to the dematerialisation strategies of artists of this period.



The artist Keith Arnatt can be described as staging or enacting a disappearance of the Subject, in his *Self-Burial Series* (1969). Often reproduced in the form of 9 stills, the work is like a flick book of him progressively being submerged in the soil, broadcast in the



advertisement slot, for 2 seconds at a time, on WDR TV Cologne, Germany, curated by Gerry Schum, as art video. He is literally buried, image by image. He described it himself as a logical response to the various disappearances of the art object throughout the 1960s.



Donna Haraway describes a position, rather than identifying herself as a posthumanist, of the compostist (2016). This was a significant shift towards the earth; in her subtle use of languages.



Christopher Jones (2021) recently answered this question: “To what extent does Buddhism “deny the self”?” The term ‘deny’ is interesting as it suggests a rejection of sorts, a process of dis-identification. He refers to one of the most common references in Buddhist literature to what we mistakenly hold onto as a personal identity. This was considered as a meditation practice on the five *Skandhas* (Sanskrit) *Khandhas* (Pali) which translates as ‘heaps’ or ‘bundles’. They are rendered in Pali as: rūpa - form or matter, in early Buddhism associated with the four elements; vedanā - sensation or feeling; sannā - perception; sankhāra - mental formations; and vinnāna - consciousness. Jones says: “One might naturally think that our physical body, sensations, consciousness, ideas or attitudes are “us”, or that, within these, there is something that endures and so is either our self or a means of locating it” (p.100). These five bundles define aspects of Self-identity that can be loosened, let go of entirely, or where we might perceive the Self *does not permanently reside at all*. They, therefore, provide insights into five aspects of non-self.

It is not that these bundles do not exist. Rather that they are fundamentally changing and subject to transformation. A dis-identification process throws into clear relief the fundamental differences between cognitively-founded aspects of identity and experiential non-cognitive awareness. As Siderits (2011, p.299) puts it: “The most common Buddhist argument for the non-existence of the self is the argument from impermanence”.



Can art be made out of attention itself? Can art be the attentive performance of simple actions? Can art be the manipulation of attention itself, the bringing of greater awareness to ordinary things, thereby transforming our life and our perceptions of experience of the present, past, and future?

Buddhism, especially in its Ch’an and Zen forms, is more a way of living than a religion in the western sense. As an artist I choose to place myself in the middle of the debate over the distinctions between religious and secular, between art and life. (Jacob, M.J. interview with Lee Mingwei, October 2001/July 2003 in Baas & Jacob, 2004).



Kendall Watson (1984) argued for; “Photography’s remarkable ability to put us in perceptual contact with the world..it is this – photography’s transparency – which is most distinctively photographic and which constitutes the most important justification for speaking of “photographic realism”.” Photography’s transparency is always constituted at the expense of non-self.; if space is traduced, if space might constitute an element of non-self?



“When we emerge from nothing, when everything emerges from nothing, we see it all as a fresh new creation. This is ‘non-attachment’ ” (Suzuki, 1970/2010 p.67).



The Korean artist Kimsooja lies on the land in poses akin to Buddhist statues, yet, more vulnerable in their timing, location and scale. For instance, as *A needle woman* (Kitakyshu Japan, 1999) she applies a use of her Self, as a body, selflessly? Her nature reclining, clothed, on a limestone mountain captured on video; is enacting a realization from 1983, that: “the relationship of needle to fabric is like my body to the universe” (and she might stand, statuesque in an urban setting) here in a more formal looking posture: “like the reclining Buddha, at the parinivana” which is the moment of achieving nirvana after death. By 1994 she had: “recognized that my own body was a sewing tool, a needle that invisibly wraps, weaves and sews different fabrics and people together in nature”. What is important to her through her work are her “own experiences of self and awakesness”. During a performance *A laundry woman – Yamuna River, India* (2000), in which her state of mind is essential to her work as an artist, she says:

In the middle of standing there, I was completely confused; Is it the river that is moving, or myself? My sense of time and space were turned completely upside down...I finally realized that it is the river that is changing all the time in front of this still body, but it is my body that will be changed and vanish very soon, while the river will remain there, moving slowly, as it

is now. (Jacob, M.J. interview with Kimsooja, October 2003/July 2003, in Baas & Jacob, 2004, p. 213-219).

This reminded her of a dream of seeing the Han River from a hillside in Seoul, from her early twenties:

Then I started seeing the dancing and spinning stones touch and hit together, mashing and breaking them into pebbles and dust, which eventually will become part of the river itself: Stone is water, water is stone!...and woke up...as if my brain were hit by a strong metal bell (Kimsooja in Baas & Jacob, 2004).

(The photographic stillness of her photographs, like the stillness in her videos, the stillness of her body performances and the stillness of her mind settling into nonself, produces flashes of insight, realisation and awakening. This is as much her work as the artwork produced).



The power and capacity of digital photography are evident in Arago's famous speech given in 1838, that heralded Daguerre's invention, that Walter Benjamin presciently described, although not in these terms, as embracing *the temporo-spatial ambitions of research*: "the field of new technologies from astrophysics to philology: the prospect of stellar photography is adjoined by the idea of photographing a corpus of Egyptian hieroglyphs." (2015, p.64). A fear, or frisson, of non-self was nowhere more embedded in the "instinctual unconscious", as it was now visible, in Benjamin's phrase, in "the optical unconscious" (p.68). Digital, or techno-rational ubiquity, the domination of negation over memory, was Benjamin's

intimation, not the persistence of an aura of subtle aether. Photography is however productive of non-self, nothing like the “spirit” of self or times, which would be a return to “essences” more like a fragmentary method of instances.



Stuart Hall (1984/2021) states that there is no such “unitary” thing as photography. He is specifically talking about the ways the “black settlement in Britain in the post-war years” was being written, or rather, re-written. But he does not discount “documentary realism as Truth”, rather he says that there is a “post-structuralist, post-modernist deluge” that “Black historians, especially” have to carefully navigate their way through to preserve meaningfulness with these artefacts. The gap between these two positions he argues is “increasingly narrow”. He uses the wonderful phrase: “The photographs are essentially multiaccentual in meaning” (p.98).

For Hall (2021), “the intertextuality of all photographic representation as a social Practice” is a very subtle point. Documentary photographic practice does not become defined either via truth or interpretation. Non-self, if it means anything in this context, is the lack of an “essential, true, original” meaning. We are thus left in a distinctive non-dualistic position, one that aligns non-self with both symbolic interactionism in that meaning is mutually dependent on co-actors and a postmodernist inter-textuality of multiple perspectives; where photographs are constructively read alongside other texts. There are many gradations of black and white in this photographic archive.

When Hall applies this theorising to specific art documentary photography, for example with the work of Vanley Burke, he makes further comments that add to a sense of how non-self may operate: “Vanley’s subjects are absorbed in their lives, their activities, their troubles,

sorrows, joys, celebrations, griefs, struggles and resistances, not his...” Which is to say that the photographer: “metaphorically...disappear[s] into the subject photographed, not to intrude, not to “be there”; to erase himself/herself; simply to capture and distil in an image the “truth to experience” (1993/2021, p.115) Non-self might colloquially be termed an *erasure* but it is also a capacity, a type of *generosity* of attention. Hall thereby also treads that fine line in postmodern theory between truthfulness and accusations of relativism, by affording the photographer the *autonomy* to withdraw.



The JODI collective, aka collaborators Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans, have had their work, rapidly evolving from the 1990s finally incorporated into the Museum Collection, at the Museum of Modern Art, NY. Their ‘desktop performances’ ‘My%Desktop’ via projection into gallery spaces show our fascination with an invisible and ‘unknown’ user and the illumination of the glitches, errors, non-sequiturs, open-ended spaces and proliferation of commands that plague and both entrain and entertain us as digital actants. In similar incorporation, the Media Wall at the Photographers’ Gallery London, largely curated by Katrina Sluis (from 2011 to 2019), is now celebrating a 10-year archive of its expansive curatorial reach across the digital art landscape. A number of these digital photography exhibitions resonate with notions of non-self. For instance, the concept of the ‘networked image’, as a ‘multi-modal and transmedial’ phenomenon (Cox, et al., 2021) now has much traction in photography theory. It maps a thoroughly distributed “image” only existing when dispersed across sensory-socio-technical materialities. In this, I hear an essential related meaning of non-self, dependent origination, *pratityasamutpada* (Sanskrit), *paticca-samuppada* (Pali), or conditioned co-arising. It is one of the central concepts in Buddhism that no self-identity separately exists *in isolation*, its occurrence is inter-dependent across a multiplicity, a network of causes and conditions.

*Lend me your face!* was shown in early 2021, via the Photographers' Gallery Media Wall, London. Tamiko Thiel and /p collaborated on this deep fake recreation project, using public figures, speeches and involving some audience participation, where identities are exchanged and generated through AI. Is to borrow another's face, a vivid image of non-self...?



The fear of a photographic machine was not abstract for western European colonial powers, machinic force was both everywhere evident, and everywhere hidden. This appearance-disappearance code of Self's singularity, where selves of most value or importance are either most iconic or sequestered, mirrors the advent of regulated photographic production, ubiquitous power, and technology's capacity for making anonymous any mass of selves without selfhood. Tresch's (2007) analysis of Arago's speech of 1838 makes evident that photography was imbued with: "The very 'inhumanity' which made machines the model for disciplined conduct and the well governed state - uniformity, efficiency, lack of emotion – [that] also made them targets of fear and hostility" (p.446).



George Bataille's (1985) *informe* (formless) had a significant influence on surrealism and in later post-surrealist art practices:

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm [...]

affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit (1985, p.31).

When Bataille published this fragment, in the 1929 Surrealist *Documents* magazine, Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* including the notion of the "polymorphous perverse" had been published since 1905. Dadaist art and Surrealist photography were already deeply implicated in the expression of non-self-as-inform. Modern(ist) notions of Self, had an indelible quality of horror perhaps to the extent that it harboured a religious imagination. *The Modern Prometheus*, or *Frankenstein*, of 1818, was Mary Shelly's intervention in this same narrative. We can hear in Bataille's text the motilities of rapid generation and degeneration of certain established 'Selves' that early modernism was witness. Buddhist nonself might thereby reveal that it has an ethical demand against nihilism, which is not to diminish the potentially terrifying nature of the dissolution of the Self.



The auto-photographic work and texts of Claude Cahun however, quietly speak volumes from the non-place of nonself. Non-self appears more clearly in Claude Cahun's collaborative work with Marcel Moore (Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe), not least because there is more than one ego behind its production, and hence the principle of a decentred Self is already employed.

Jennifer Shaw (2013) in the first monograph on Cahun's obscure text *Aveux non avenues* (1930) says: "One of Cahun's central aims in *Aveux non avenues* is to reconceptualize subjectivity and in doing so to rethink relationships between self and other" (p.3). The 'text' in question is a radically inter-textual collage of photomontage from mainly created (rather than found images from mass media, as Hannah Höch) photography, letters, extracts from



essays, diary entries, small dialogues and poems, carried out with a spirit of Mallarméan wordplay and cross-reference. For instance, the title “aveaux” could mean “confessions” but “non avenues” can be translated as “null and void”, suggesting a refusal, negation or cancelling strategy at work, already suggestive of nonself.

Shaw explains how the work has been received: “most often [it has] been described as a self-cancelling “autobiography” (p.7). But, without such a concept as non-self at hand, her interpretations cannot go far enough. Shaw speaks of some of the qualities of non-self, missing perhaps what is encoded in the text itself, when she says: “the very form of Cahun’s work, with its variety of voices and poetic negations, leads not to the discovery of a self but rather the self’s unravelling” (p.7). I would argue that Cahun’s book is informed by non-self. However, Shaw does insightfully cite three processes that appear central to the book’s method: “exchange”, “superimposition” and “fusing” (p.23). Could these add insight to our concept of non-self, as not being wholly distinct and separate from self?

Cahun’s book was originally published in 1930, yet worked on for a full decade prior, from 1919 onwards. Here we find a systematic undoing of Self more likely to embody an attitude based on self-indeterminacy and the provisional notion of Self as both impermanent and dissatisfactory. Photographically their numerous dramatized portraits - already effectively split from the paradigm of single authorship- emanated from their love, partnership, professional and collaborative relationship and are largely mise-en-scene enactments by Lucy, as Claude, as actor, as mirror-image, as character (Aurige, for example), as mask, as photographic nonself, as one half of a couple, as identity collage, using theatrical cos-play. Also, in a process of becoming “otherwise” as appears in the text: “Post-scriptum : À présent j’existe autrement” (2011, p.19), “At present I exist otherwise.”(Shaw, 2013, p.1). This attentiveness to present-ness, and later use of the terms “Buddha” and “void” and such terms as “path” and “nirvana” are not picked up on by Shaw, yet strike me as obvious references for an extremely well- educated, and well-connected, artist. Cahun was intimately

participative in the surrealist movement. Furthermore, Cahun's great Uncle Léon was an Orientalist who was familiar with: "the translation of Buddhist and Manichean texts dating back to the fifth century" (Schluter, 2012, p.89)

and Cahun's Uncle, Marcel Schwob, was the famous symbolist writer and avant-garde author that had stayed and studied with Léon in his youth.

Drawing on Cahun's text, her interest in and basic knowledge of Buddhism is most clear in the section 'Psychological Portraits' where she effectively interviews the character and lead figure in Chapter IV Aurige. To each question, there are three answers (A,B and C), the first from Aurige, the second from Aurige's proprietor and the third from Aurige's lover, the poet. We learn immediately in this little scripted play that the Poet's "principle characteristics: [are] the need to get involved in everything, an inconsistent and easily squandered energy...[and, his] declared ideal: renunciation (de Muth, 2022, p.109). This clearly makes the poet a monk-like renunciate, a persona she was perhaps experimenting with:

What would you like to be?

[...]

C - Buddha... (p.110)

What would you like to know?

[...]

C - Real occult knowledge...

What do you like about yourself?

[...]

C - My equanimity...

What pleases you?

[...]

C- ...Sakya-Mouni... (sic)

What do you hope for?

[...]

C - Nirvana...

What do you fear?

[...]

C - The past beginning all over again...(p.110-120)

This is a fairly stereotypical but not inaccurate image of Buddhist belief. In the drama however, the Poet's character is more nuanced, has as many faults as virtues, being aloof, self-important, somewhat detached and so on. We cannot discount that this character is yet another side of the artist in the multiplicity of positions that Cahun plays out, and as such informs the dramatized auto-portraits of non-self, in general, that are so clearly and radically articulated. The Poet's voice can be heard in one of the introductory sections:

*No point in making myself comfortable. The abstraction, the dream, are as limited for me as the concrete and the real. What to do? Show a part of it only, in a narrow mirror, as if it were the whole? Mix up a halo with spatters?*

*Until I see everything clearly, I want to hunt myself down, struggle with myself. Who, feeling armed against her own self, be that with the vainest of words, would not do her very best if only to hit the void bang in the middle.*

*Only with the very tip would I wish to sew, sting, kill. The rest of the body, what comes after, what a waste of time! Only ever travel in the prow of myself (p.17-18).*

This image of the artists-body as needle is strangely prescient of Kimsooja's startling approach so many years later, indicative of perhaps a capacity of projective identification of the artist with their tools. Alternatively, this form of possible body-hatred or simple bodily subjugation, would be as common amongst Catholic mystics as it might be amongst Buddhist renunciates. Yet, it may also be the Poet speaking, with a voice of arrogant self-sufficiency, in the replacing of a transcendent God with this narcissistic "I", a position dramatized throughout the whole book, and this may also be a facet of Cahun's Judaism:

Shadow boxing.

I am (the "I" is) the outcome of God multiplied by God divided by God:

God x God

\_\_\_\_\_ = me = God

GOD (p.67)

The principle of the absence of God, behind the mask of a God, might get close to the sense of absence inherent in non-self. A continual play between Self/Non-self is a drama of constant re-appropriation in the creative process of self-creation that disavows the

Religious:

1928

I want to change skin: tear the old one from me

GET RID OF GOD I REMAIN (p.415-6)

'selflessness'!... I, Jewish to the point of using my sins for my salvation, of putting my by-products to work, of always surprising myself, my eye hooked over the edge of my own waste-paper bin. (p.61)

Shaw insightfully points out the demands that the work itself places on us, as readers, when she says: "I would argue that Cahun's book is never merely about unravelling and negation. It is, rather, about reimagining the self in a process without closure, on a journey undertaken not only by Cahun, but also by her readers (p.7)." This lack of closure, of a trans-historical inter-mediary readership, perhaps speaks of nonself.



Bois and Krauss (1997) describe "the formless" as the kind of avoidance of "symbolic value" they saw in Bataille's work of the 1920s and that is emulated in contemporary arts' methods since. They emblematically describe the formless as: "Nothing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative...The formless is an operation" (1997, p.18). This may be very revealing of a facet of nonself at work in contemporary art, the operational and iterative device found in the analysis of Lippard and Chandler's (1968) 'dematerialization' essay. Might this be equivalent to an auto-photographic mechanism; an archetypal camera, productive of non-representational, non-photography.



There are many ways to describe how non-self elements, materials and contexts, constitute "the image" without being of the image. As the theorists of "the networked image" put it:

This is the paradox of the image as it is based upon a non-representational socio-technical system but is made humanly understandable through representation, in which the representational and non-representational are mutually dependent and cannot obliterate each other, as representation becomes cannibalised and operationalised by computation (Cox et al., 2021, p.42).

Numerous instances of non-representational theory may nevertheless be obliquely inspired and influenced by Buddhist philosophy. Post-structuralist concerns with presence and absence run through Derrida's entire oeuvre. One of Derrida's 'resolutions' to this problem for metaphysics appears in his book *Specters of Marx* when Derrida (1994/2011) describes how Marxism is "conjured" by commentators, both positively and negatively, through contemporary media. Derrida's description of this media is:

the medium in which it is instituted, namely, the medium of the media themselves (news, the press, telecommunications, techno-tele-discursivity, techno-tele-iconicity, that which in general assures and determines the spacing of public space, the very possibility of the *res publica* and the phenomenality of the political), this element itself is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call, to save time and space rather than just to make up a word, *hauntology*. We will take this category to be irreducible, and first of all to everything it makes possible: ontology, theology, positive or negative onto-theology (2011, p.63).

Hauntology secures a space for the nonself, without allowing nonself, but by allowing the negation of identity that precedes it. Hauntology creates post-identity.



For the monotheistic desert religions, or Abrahamic cultures of the Near East, God was a protector in troubled times (Armstrong, 1999, Holland, 2009). Holland echoes Armstrong's reference to Otto's (2018) description of the power of the Holy, from 1923, as 'mysterium tremendum et fascinans', mysterious, of terrible awe-inspiring power and fascination, and they agree it was his bias towards the interior religious experience that was highly influential in shaping how the spiritual experience in the west has been described. The blindspot of ultimate absence, projected outward or inward, positively or negatively, is intensified by photography's ability to seemingly picture anything but itself, or as Benjamin put it: "God's image cannot be captured by any human machine (1931/2015 p.62)." Western cultures, which project non-self upon an Other, might do so more prolifically with mechanistic photography, and thereby prove their impotence, powerlessness and superficiality, as the opposite characteristics of Otto's notion of the Holy (1923/2018).



My own *Tar Pool and Gravel Pit* (1966) proposal makes one conscious of the primal ooze. A molten substance is poured into a square sink that is surrounded by another square sink of coarse gravel. The tar cools and flattens into a sticky level deposit. This carbonaceous sediment brings to mind a tertiary world of petroleum, asphalts, ozokerite, and bituminous agglomerations (Smithson, 1968/1996, p.102).

Smithson may be described as creating a large-scale experimental macro-photography, making a representation of his mind, with trays and graded minerals, that he increasingly

began to call his *Non-Site* works. Like many conceptualists, he was turning the light of attention upon materiality, working outside of the known, here, in the hope of re-animating base material. He re-imagines his mind as matter. Yet, on reflection, are these not the ploys of a patriarchal God-like entity, of woundedness and vulnerability perhaps, attempting to instantiate itself? Or are these the minor, ephemeral gestures of land artists, that simply mimicked the actual oil and mining extraction of multi-national corporations over the same period? More so, if we consider Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) where: "a pair of cuts fifty feet deep in facing cliff edges of Mormon Mesa in Nevada, [were] made by removing 240,000 tons of sandstone and rhyolite".<sup>1</sup>

A wholly negative, or, as Heizer perhaps describes it, an accentuated or emphatic negative concept of non-self appears in work around this time. This would seem indicative of the Dadaist and surrealist legacy. The land has to be reduced to the non-self of ooze, dirt and nothing, so that the value within it can be articulated. Especially if that value is considered as the contiguity of the emptiness of sculptural and photographic space. We now know of course these interventions were minor because of the photographic work of Burtynsky, who also instrumentally utilises absence in the service of Self, rather than non-self: "Photography is about light conquering darkness" (2022). He visually realised through the *Quarries* project, from 1991, images of Vermont, Carrara, Makrana, Xiamen and Iberia that hundreds of quarries extract millions of tons, using millions of workers, allowing for hundreds if not thousands of deaths, for the harvesting of building or sculptural raw material considered most pure and fit-for-purpose. These spaces then appear marginal next to the *Mines* project, where billions of tons of indeterminate matter are chemically processed for copper or gold for instance, in some of the largest mines on the planet. Inevitably, photography's parasitic nature allows Burtynsky poetic licence. In his descriptions of the *Mines* project, "dreams", "desires" and "ambitions" are hypostasized. And as if to make clear the epistemic violence to non-self, "voids" are celebrated as "testament" and "monuments" rather than visible aspects of destruction.





“You are only made of non-you elements” (Nhat Hanh, 2013). In ordinary terms, in his love letter to the earth itself, non-self is concisely phrased thus, by the Vietnamese Zen monk.



Roy DeCarava was a misunderstood photographer in the specific sense of being marginalised repeatedly. We misunderstand his photographs if we dwell exclusively on their depicted subjects, not social documentary and not realist reportage, although that may be how some of his best-known work from Harlem in the 40s and 50s was read. He is known instead when we hear what it is he felt, as he put it, and bring formal attention to his work as a *personal modernist*. Despite his early Guggenheim fellowship and late in life Cooper Union Hall of Fame membership, offered in 2009, the year of his death, he talks openly about the ways himself and his work were continually negated (Miller, 1990) . What should be remembered then are these years, in which a recognised black photographer remained *unpublished*, and whose work was thus silenced. The non-self gesture here, is enacted by the machinery of photography’s publication, exhibition and curation; its circulatory administrative mechanisms that suppressed an artwork *for almost 50 years*. His photography and poetry collaboration with Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955/2018), is again receiving attention, now from a younger generation of contemporary artists such as writer and photographer Johny Pitts, but it is DeCarava’s *The sound I saw* (2001) that expresses his extraordinary photographic voice in my opinion. Nonsself appears first in its synaesthetic title, where senses naturally re-combine. These continually striking black and white images, and his own words, were put together in a prototype publication, by hand, perhaps imitating the form of Jazz. DeCarava says: "This is a book about people,

about jazz, and about things. The work between its covers tries to present images for the head and for the heart and, like its subject matter, is particular, subjective, and individual" (2001/2019). It is likely that the sensitive-intelligences of particularity, constitute nonself. Nonself might consist *solely* of instances and not continuities, which are considered too particular, personal, or excessive that is here, "non-white", different, or Other(ed), and thereby become subject to an act of erasure, by those with the power to enact this absence. Pitts is also working consciously in this radical genre that has lineage, and one he is very much aware requires cultivation and continuity, as shown in his work *Afropean* (2019) and *Daffodils: A Meeting with Caryl Phillips* (2017) both, fortunately, published.



What is a photograph? Niépce's view from a window haunts photography not simply as the first surviving photographic image, but also as a potential perception; of a *subject who is absent*. The building structures and rooftops represented in the image, the object-material in view, are made concretely material through the bitumen of Judea, or Syrian asphalt, as it is known, smeared onto the photographic plate. What was called asphaltum, a word that comes from the Greek ἄσφαλτος *ásphaltos* is that highly viscous, and light-sensitive, tar-like material, often used, ironically, for roofing. There is a literal building of the image out of the matter of building, whether we think of tar as roof or road.

That this material is ancient is well known. Other magical purposes for asphalt have been found. In the Judean Desert is the Nahal Hemar Cave in which six skulls were re-discovered in 1983, likely from the Natufian culture, where the asphalt was forming both a thin layer and threads of a cross-hatched and pressed 'net' or 'headwear' onto the back of each skull. The Natufian were a middle stone age hunter-gatherer people who settled in the ancient groves around what is broadly known as the levant region, often described as the earliest permanent dwelling builders. Long before agricultural cultivation, yet, using pestles and

mortars, they offer evidence as the first inventors of bread and were domesticators of dogs, thus making numerous cultural contributions. <sup>ii</sup>

The simple picture of a view from a window, or door-aperture in a building, is thus equally possible to have been seen up to 12,000 BCE. Niepce's *View from a window at Le Gras* might intimately refer to perceptions, or memories, that we hold in consciousness as very early memories, both personally, and collectively. A non-photograph: *a bright patch of light*. A view locates a space 'outside' of ourselves that forms a striking image of what structures our self-containment. Photographic self-portraiture does not necessarily demand images of a self.

As such, this photograph, or view, is subtly provocative of a reassuring *vedāna* (Pāli, feeling tone), *of being inside*. It is not that the feeling tone of interiority is pleasant necessarily. The poet Mary Oliver says bluntly, "I don't like buildings". Rather, "I went to the woods a lot...I also liked motion" (2015/2022). <sup>iii</sup> Simply by being evocative, photographs describe containment, stillness or movement as photographic *autonomic* affects, without necessarily defining a subject, so much as a percept or sensation, a pre-conscious and non-rational subject.

Of the five skandas; only forms persist in something like human time; feelings, perceptions, memories or consciousness evaporate unless objectified. A self is not found, moment to moment. In the same interview, Oliver mentions how "*all things*" transform into something else. Reflecting on Lucretius, and atomism, she says: "there is no nothingness" (2015/2022).



The notion of epistemic distance, coined by theologian John Hick (2003), to explain or stand in for the problem of the apparent choice of knowledge of God by humans, through faith, and to amplify that God is not necessarily disclosed, or knowable, even to those that believe in God's existence, is corroborated by Holland's *Gods in the Desert* (2009):

In a monotheistic system [...] god is the source and creator of the cosmos, but not subject to its laws or limitations [...] The distance between this god and creation is not just a physical and substantive distance, but a moral distance as well.

An emergent argument then, appears to be that Buddhist non-self is one method of reducing epistemic distance, and by analogy this is enacted in photographic non-self, perhaps emphasising, foundationally, the valuing of space as presence, rather than absence.



"Take my face and give me yours!" This is from the Masarwa of Botswana, San /Xam people, Kalahari and Southern Africa. This astounding first line, image, appeared in a poem named *Prayer to the moon* in *African Poetry*, edited by Ulli Beire (1966).

When I incidentally came across this as a teenager, it struck me as extremely profound. It was taken by Beire from the German linguist and anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt's work *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* of 1933. It was probably taken by Schmidt from Bleek and Lloyd's (1911/2001) research. However, Schmidt, a German Catholic, whose extensive notes and research of early and indigenous religion is well known, is also known for his arguments for monotheism as the earliest form of religion, and in this poem, even the idea of resurrection appears. This first line is an image taken from a traditional poem, song or saying, perhaps, in dialogue with the moon, part lament, part plea. But what we can know

about its meaning to the peoples that sung, told and embodied it through millennia is only available through living memory and embodied knowledge, both forced into extinction by systemic violence. There is a possibility of course that “memory” can be transferred across generations. Because I was also compulsorily schooled in Catholicism, I hear the poem’s kinship with a sky-God who offers hope or redemption, that I therefore distrust. But I also hear a cyclic rhythm, and the first line of the poem touches me as something I do not, and cannot, know. Beire was the German Jewish founder of *Black Orpheus*, one of the first literary journals in English in Africa, and a collaborator with many Nigerian writers, before and after independence, through publications celebrating Yoruba culture and gatherings for literary performances promoting Nigerian novelists, poets, playwrights and culture. He even adopted a Nigerian pen-name "Ọ̀bótúndé Ọ̀jímèrè" for some of his works, and his extensive contribution is well documented, (*Túbòsún*, 2020).<sup>iv</sup>



Prayer to the moon

Take my face and give me yours!

Take my face, my unhappy face.

Give me your face with which you return

When you have died,

When you vanished from sight.

You lie down and return –

Let me reassemble you, because you have joy,

You return ever more alive,

After you vanished from sight.

Did you not promise us once

That we too should return  
And be happy again after death?  
(Beire, 1966, p.23)



A less Catholic reading of the moon poem from the earlier Bleek and Lloyd (1911) archive, is further contextualised by Wessels (2012). Also, the problem of what is clearly “forced appropriation” in the extensive interviews of the three /Xam “informants” carried out at the time. Indeed, Wessels takes a post-structuralist position and allows us to see that these are a form of “literature” and one subject to “interdiscursivity”, with evident incorporation of other’s narratives brought “from around the world” (Schmidt, 2001 in Wessels, 2012, p.43) This literature from the /Xam peoples, whilst deeply colonised, has an added resonance, knowing as they did at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century their way of life was increasingly untenable. The memorialisation function of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century photographic imagination, which is closely related to ethnographic documentation in this colonial context, thereby brings us closer to an aspect of non-self as an intimation of our actual extinction, and potential renewal, in the present.

Take my face yonder! Thou shalt give me thy face yonder! Thou shalt take my face yonder! That which does not feel pleasant. Thou shalt give me thy face, (with) which thou, when thou hast died, thou dost again, living return, when we did not perceive thee, thou dost again lying down come, that I may also resemble thee. For, the joy yonder, thou dost always possess it yonder, that is, that thou art wont again to return alive, when we did not perceive thee; while the hare told thee about it, that thou shouldst do thus. Thou didst formerly say, that we should also again return alive, when we died. (Bleek & Lloyd 1911, pp.57-59 in Wessels, 2012, p.33)

In socio-cultural or historical contexts where survival is not a given, minor literature on the hugely diverse forms of existential non-self, in which non-self becomes re-born as post-anthropocentric might be possible. Objectivity, or epistemic distancing, sometimes simply affords clarity, not necessarily understanding. Especially where, as Bleek and Lloyd noted, albeit using the alienating language of Othering: “The Bushmen's letters are in their bodies. They [the letters] speak, they move, they make their [the Bushmen's] bodies move. They [the Bushmen] order the others to be silent...” (Bleek & Lloyd, 1911, p.331 in Wessels, 2012, p.25). However, in discussing the important differences between symbolic interactionism and poststructuralism, Denzin (2001) agrees with Stuart Hall that “race is not a biological truth”, this has been proven repeatedly. But Denzin cites Hall’s work in *New Ethnicities* (1996) when he says that: “we tend to privilege experience itself, as if black life is lived outside of representation...instead, it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are” (Hall, 1996, p.473 in Denzin, 2001, p.244). Any romanticised image of the San people’s thereby denies them the right to an imaginative auto-biography, the space and capacity they have been denied by repeated colonisation, indeed we might never imagine ‘space’ as they do.



Donna Haraway explores her term “chthulucene” in an online interview, a term that might follow or replace the Anthropocene or capitalocene. This takes the emphasis away from a Self, toward a relational making and being. Her elaboration of the idea takes a detour via the mythic projections of the destruction of the Gods of the Olympiad to chthonic deep earth dwelling creatures, snakes, spiders and beasts, which “the world’s great monotheisms in both religious and secular guises have tried again and again to exterminate” (Haraway, 2016: p.2). The chthulucene borrows, burrows, into being “simultaneously about past,

presence and what is to come” and is thoroughly affirmative “not the already defeated...[and neither] embracing life over death...not transcendence...[but is] a big enough story...not as an answer to the anthropocene or capitalocene...” [but as] “...a thick kind of ongoingness...”

“In the chthulucene”, she says, “we are at stake, we are at stake to each other”.<sup>v</sup>



Some of Gabriel Orozco’s work might be read as varied attempts to authenticate non-self, especially in terms of its apparent uselessness and vulnerability. These works sometimes appear singular and far from empty. The well-known photograph of, and an actual, ball of plasticene – weighing the same as the artist’s body mass, imprinted by various bits of dirt, and photographed evocatively by a drain at the side of a road; becomes *Yielding Stone* (1992). The work is known as *La DS* (1993), the sleek mid-20<sup>th</sup> century iconic Citroën car, with the middle third removed, has a similar quality, of *redundancy*? These concrete and substantial objects are not the ephemeral sculptures or performances sometimes associated with Buddhist-inspired emptiness. Yet, where is the Self in *Yielding Stone*? The artist’s body is playfully and replaced by the metonymic gesture of ‘clay’. The car has had one of its key identifiers, the engine, removed. There it sits, sleek and impotent, in a gallery setting.

That Orozco’s photographic work celebrates *the* multiple is also clear. The 40 colour images of *Until You Find Another Yellow Schwalbe* (1995) shows his collection of determined yet coincidental appearance of the two yellow scooters in Berlin. Made over 3 months of riding around the city, at each existing scooter he found, he left a note to the owner to meet and mark the anniversary of Deutsche Einheit, the reunification of Germany after the fall of the Berlin wall. *Watermelons and Cats* (1992) achieves the multiple, also with humour. Multiple cats eyes, stare out from multiple tins of cat food, placed on multiple watermelons. In Orozco’s many worlds; of circularities, and others, such as the world of singular objects, the



world of pairs of objects, and the world of scattered multiples, it appears that identifiable beings share the space of their identity. The Self is punctured, 'multiaccentual' to borrow Hall's (2021) term, with neighbouring part-objects, echoed or reflected, and thereby deflated in its singularity. This seems to be indicative of nonself as a shared being, that underlines the non-oppositional, and interdependent meaning of non-self.



How might non-self be inhabited, is also to address directly the question: What is racism? How it is one can embody the contemporary human, depends to a certain extent on what human-ness is permissible and authenticated, by whom, and in what circumstances. When Stuart Hall discusses Vanley Burke's documentary work, starting from Birmingham in the 1970s, he uses Burke's term "histograph" (2021, p.114) a first layer of presentness occurs in the historical process of representation. Then follows the inhabiting of a much-desired representation of "black people's lives in Britain" for Burke. This correction of an exclusion Hall describes as creating, "an indigenous black space – a place for themselves" as a space within the frame and within the urban context. He contrasts Burke's work with DeCarava, in that Burke will "explore deeply, voyage into, the variations of "blackness" many of his images have an almost "black interior" in their "form" "(p.117). Whereas De Carava's world he describes as: "the infinitely shaded and discriminated "grey"-tones, as if for him black and near-black must be avoided" (p.117).

In my own family, as in many multiple-heritage and families of colour, there is an acute awareness of skin tones and forms of darkness and lightness, changes in tone at different times of year and differences between us. To be brown is not to be black, and almost any level of pigmentation is to be discounted as white. But it is Hall's US/UK distinction that is

significant for the changing contexts of perceptions of skin colour and the self-representation that photography allows, which creates a thesaurus of possible expressions of black culture.

If non-whiteness correlates with a negation of Self; then in a British secular Buddhist context, I am sensitive to the endemic illiteracy amongst the Buddhist community of these dynamics (Author, 2021). Non-self is doubly invisible if black and non-white experiences of meditative insight are diminished by the unwitting authority of dominant epistemic positions. In largely white Buddhist sanghas in the UK, non-white practitioners have largely been absent, or silent, although awareness of this issue is slowly changing and a new diversity is becoming apparent.

If then, within the identification boundary of Buddhist communities, families and inter-national identities, stark differences in interpretation and inclusion remain, how do we define racism itself? Fanon's (1967) approach, as described by Grosfoguel (2016) was to precisely: "conceive of diverse forms of racism...marked by colour, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion" including "multiple power relations such as class, sexual and gender" relations as all reducible to either the "zone of being" or the "zone of non-being".

Fanon's presentation we recall, of non-self, is accomplished in clear terms:

There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born... Man is not merely a possibility of recapture or of negation... Man is a yes that vibrates to cosmic harmonies (1952/2008)

The zone of being/non-being distinction allows us to posit race as the characteristic and historic difference that allows the zone of non-being itself to become visible. The "abyssal line" (de Sousa Santos, 2007) offers explanatory power for the persistence of violence and

inhumanity acted by those 'above the line', which is well confirmed by those experiencing a 'below the line' reality. Thus, inhumanity, non-being, the extension of nihilistic worthlessness to planetary systems and other beings, either remote or unacknowledged life forms explain the starkest inability of racism, and this most extreme duality, to be witness to its own destructiveness.

The solutions de Sousa Santos (2018) proposes are more radical forms of post-abyssal thinking. Hall sums up that Vanley Burke's work is motivated by "love". DeCarava says of his qualities that: "My work is about what I consider to be essential things. The sun, time, patience, about caring enough to wait" (Miller, 1990) and also that: "There is a continuity and a sense of place in my work, where people belong within a context, where past, present, and future meet." (p.855). All three positions seem to settle into a complementary set of differences.



Why dwell *within* when we can dwell *across*? Donna Haraway's neologism *Terrapolis* speaks for a Self outside of traditional, and modern, subjecthood in necessarily innovative ways as: "an *n*-dimensional niche space", "not the home world for the human as Homo, that ever parabolic, re- and de-tumescing, phallic self-image of the same; but for the human that is transmogrified in etymological Indo-European sleight of tongue into guman, that worker of and in the soil". She adds: "Terrapolis is a mongrel word composted with a mycorrhiza of Greek and Latin rootlets and their symbionts" (Haraway, 2016: 11). Metaphors captivate because they are poly-sensory and to read them, explode the lexico-graphic into a poly-sensuous embodied experience. What is reading, then?



“Shell will pay a Nigerian community \$111m (£80m) over an oil spill more than 50 years ago to mark the "full and final settlement" to the Ejama-Ebubu community over a spill during the 1967-70 Biafran War” (Source: BBC News August 2021). Yet, wider claims of Shell-BP fomenting the Nigerian Civil War itself and distorting governance through bribery hang over the conduct of the corporations (Warren, 1979). The use of the term ‘primal ooze’ by Smithson at that time (1968) is indicative of engulfment, the terrifying, a misnominal necessity to delimit entropy. Against which, relentless and voracious acquisition and accumulation of common natural resources are familiar strategies, played out at grandiose scales. Shell settled the legal claims only after some 50 years of denial, legal counter-claim and extremely sophisticated administrative defence; the type of administrative prowess honed by colonial regimes the world over. The same type of administrative defence, educationally internalised, regulates photographic non-self and the liberation of nonself from Self.



Conclusions weave key strands within an embroidered narrative. And always fail to complete an academic text. Perhaps because the conclusion is all that can never arrive, at least, through fragmentary writing, which leaves writing open, like nonself, to sound, like a bell. Introductions and conclusions are disastrous acts of finality. “The disaster is related to forgetfulness—forgetfulness without memory, the motionless retreat of what has not been treated — the immemorial, perhaps. To remember forgetfully: again, the outside” (Blanchot 1986), p. 3).



In the house where I grew up, there were few books with enough pages to net an imagination, pressed between the heavy pages of a Reader's Digest Global Atlas, was one. There was a collection of vinyl records. There was a thick purplish jug and tall stemmed black bowl, both in glass, some horse brasses, on leather. Boxing gloves and fencing foils in an alcove, hiding the kinds of schoolboy memories, belonging to my father, of having grown up in India, that we were left to re-imagine and were probably captured in the cries we uttered when we fought with this oversized, and lethal, equipment. Yet, there was also stationery. Stationery was intoxicating. Its fumes of latent expenditure, lie unspent, freshly pressed, secreted in drawers, in boxes, on a higher shelf. Fumes of ink, tabula rasa, unwritten stories on headed *Shell Oil* foolscap, with its red and yellow scallop shell logo. Pristine folders, diaries and notebooks, staplers and staple gun, a bottle of black Quink ink, reminiscent of the smell of spring grass, fertile buds and flowers, mixed with what I imagined were the refined fumes of thick underground oil, I doubly imagined, had to be refined to become this odour of learning. In my childhood imagination Oil = ink. I was wrong of course. My father, being a clerk, an administrator, an office worker, having regional authority, close to kerosene supplies for the airport, for Shell Oil, was therefore a company man. Yet, one we sensed was always ambivalent about the stratified layers within which he was so yearly buried. Tightly compacted, always between; his dark skin made darker with carboniferous centuries of rage; oozing restrained violence; sometimes sparked by accidental interest, in the wrong place at the wrong time; a skin-melting flare, that left every hope ashen white. That to open the ink, was a dare. To write something, or spill a drop, demands a forensic investigation.



Hélène Cixous (2011) opens her contribution to a publication from a Conference, '*Postmodernism, Culture and Religion*' held in 2007 at Syracuse University, by referring to

the unpublished commentary on one of her early books by Jacques Derrida, as being the first text he wrote on her work. It is she says: “a key, the heretofore unpublished remains of a secret”. And this chapter, if not this book, is somewhat about the nature of secrets. It came about, she tells us, because: “I used to write “things”, literary larvae, that came together one night under the roof of a book called *Le Prénom de Dieu*, or *The First Name of God*”, which I entrusted to Jacques Derrida to read”. Their shared interest in an unnameable God was as: “We the two French, Judeo-marrano half-Jews” (Cixous, 2007 p.179 in Alcoff & Caputo, 2011, p.10) and is itself indicative of what it is to not-identify in an identity. She also discloses in her chapter in *Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of Religion* (2011) entitled ‘Promised Belief’, derived from the conference event, that: “I myself believe in Literature”. And, in the written up, roundtable discussion from the conference itself that: “I feel very close to the reflections of Buddhism, if it is a religion, but it is more like a philosophy, more dialectical, more open to contradictions.” The literary, the unnameable, the larvae, the ‘prénom’, in French more indicative or ‘prior to’ than first name, but, the ‘I’, the problem of God, Buddhism and contradiction, these are all akin to my concerns in this chapter. To locate photographic nonself, all of these efforts, and concerns have been required. To experience nonself is an entirely different matter, possible at any moment.



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<sup>ii</sup> <https://factsanddetails.com/world/cat56/sub362/entry-6006.html>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-i-got-saved-by-the-beauty-of-the-world/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2020/03/ulli-beier-at-the-british-library.html>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.youtue.com/watch?v=1x0oxUHOIA8>