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Annotated Bibliography


This book exposed me to a voice and style of writing I didn’t know was possible. The way Junot blended his wit, intellect, street language and perspective as a Latino man, was something I had never really seen accomplished before in fiction. The sparsity of his writing was also very influential and made me strive to make my writing more efficient.


The writing in this book was so distinct to me. Beatty, in general, is the sort of writer that is instantly recognizable by simply reading a sentence. I admired the high bar he sets. I also admire the way he is able to use comedic writing to get at tough truths and issues that can sometimes make readers uncomfortable when approached too directly.


This book is one of the first major accounts of life as a Nuyorican and the struggle balancing a native Puerto Rican identity with a new American identity. The gritty writing in here gets at the day to day realities for Latinos and African Americans in impoverished, neglected neighborhoods in New York City. The text has been an important reference to me over the years.


Similar thoughts as to what has been said above about Piri Thomas’ work. Brown spoke to the underbelly of New York City that was rarely written about in fiction in vivid, haunting prose.


This book taught me a lot about weaving voice driven, first person writing into an intricate plot. I also enjoyed the way Ernesto was able to set his book in a tight geographical area of New York City without making the reader feel stifled.


As my writing frequently deals with characters who have been in and out of prison, Pinero’s major play has given me more insight about life as a prisoner as a person of color, and in particular, as a young Puerto Rican. His writing is also inspirational for the way it depicts sometimes shocking scenes as common place, without dressing them up.


A great book that is funny but also helped me think a lot about the different ways you can approach one small geographical area in fiction. I love the way Jennine focuses in on this one particular part of Miami and uses multiple voices to show it in many different lights.

A great, educational book that gave me a lot of statistics and grounding on the problems with public education in the United States. A lot of examples tie directly to public system in the Bronx which was helpful to my development of scenes getting at some of the realities of life in public school.


A great theory book that helped tremendously with plot. Also helped me to think more about theme and identifying the larger driving forces behind my novel.


Same as above. Even though it is a screenwriting text, it helped me think a lot about the purpose of my stories as well as developing characters, dialogue and keeping scenes tight.


I loved this book because of how it was able to turn an entire genre on its head. The writing is very imaginative. The novel also taught me a lot about structure and was a unique example of arranging a first person narrative without a linear plot.


Patricia Engel has such a vivid, clear voice in this book that is very admirable. I also learned a lot from the way she describes youth with a keen, mature perspective, while still having her characters engage in recklessness.


Another theory book I revisit often. It goes through all the possible questions about writing you could have and also supplies many great examples of strong fiction and how it works. The sections about scene and structure were especially useful for me.


A great, handy book that is always of use when thinking about ways to make my writing as clear as it can possibly be.


Lavalle’s first collection is very important because of the frank, blunt way in which it depicted New York City through the eyes of youth coming of age in the late 90s. It is a model for the sort of writing I hope to accomplish about youth in the early 2000s.


This is a concise novel that I revisit often as a reference for the style of writing that I hope to achieve in my own work. It is a powerful book packed into less than 150 pages.

Similar to the work of Fitzgerald, Torres’ work has served as an important example of sparse, voice driven first person fiction. His subject matter is also particularly important as he deals with young Puerto Ricans coming of age in a chaotic environment.


I return to Coates’ writing here often to admire the way he weaves strong, direct sentences into melodic, almost lyrical passages.


Similar to Coates, I return to this text to learn from Baldwin’s dynamic prose. I believe he is as good a writer as any at the sentence level.


This novel was another that was helpful in terms of plot. Johnson creates a great conceit in order to use his novel to have a larger, more complex discussion about gentrification in New York City.


This book has served as a reference for creating a character who goes through dramatic periods of growth. It provided a real world example of a man who started life as a criminal and grew into a revolutionary and leader. Dwelling on the challenges and criticism Malcolm X faces in this text have been helpful in crafting the arc for a major character in my novel.


This book has long been an influence because of the energy Kerouac is able to cram into his sentences. The characters that he creates are also dynamic and inspired me to push my own characters.


Similar to other short novels on this list, Vasquez’s work has proved influential because of how much story he is able to cram into a book that is less than 150 pages. It is exceptional writing and inspired me to do more with less in my own work.


This book has been important during my research of the prison system in the United States and the mass incarceration of men of color. The statistics and anecdotes gleamed from this book helped inform Gio’s character.

This text has been important to draw from particularly for the way in which it tackles code-switching and a relationship between characters from very different socioeconomic classes.


Another book I admire for its sparse language and power-packing plot.


This biography written as journal entries during the prison stay of the rapper Lil’ Wayne has been useful to gleam an insight into life as a modern day prisoner.


This novel has been helpful when thinking about constructing a narrative set in one distinct community filled with Latino immigrants in New York City.


Another novel that has been helpful to dwell upon when considering how to make my work tighter. Also important for the beautiful language Helena weaves here.


I admire this novel for how much it packs into a short book. I also admire it for the way in which the narrator strays away from the plot from time to time and allows the reader to get deep into his mental space.


This book was very influential in helping me flesh out Javi’s character. It deals with the selfishness of the millennial generation and the obsession with one’s image and likeness.


This novel taught me a lot about structure in the latter revisions of my own novel. It is told in the third person from the perspective of various characters and shifts POVs every chapter. Reading it allowed me to understand how to create that rhythm in my own work.


This novel was very influential in helping me ground setting. It takes place in a fictional urban New Jersey neighborhood that is very similar to the Bronx. It also deals with some themes that I tackled in my own novel, such as how to come back to a home that scarred you as child.

This novel was influential in my writing style. Cortazar has a very wild and erratic style that leans into passion and whimsy. He does not care much for plot, but instead seeks to imbue his words with feeling. Reading him taught me when it is appropriate to throw plot away and lean into a scene.


Haruki Murakami has a very pragmatic style that incorporates elements of the absurd. His language isn’t especially pretty, but he wields it in a very succinct and powerful way. Reading these two novels was helpful in thinking about my own language and when and where to cut back. It also taught me about moving a story along and not spending too much time trying to describe events that happened in between scenes or chapters.


This novel has a lot of elements of horror within it. Although I do not have many instances of violence in my own novel, reading this one taught me how to execute a horrific scene. It taught me about what elements need to be there (suspense) and what elements aren’t always necessary (graphic detail).


This novel, about a child musician, was extremely helpful in the most recent rewrite of my own work. It deals a lot with modern celebrity culture, social media, and branding. It helped me rethink the character of Gio in my novel and also give more depth to Javi and his ideas for Gio’s career.


This novel was very helpful in developing the character of Anais in my novel. It centers on a woman in the art world trying to rise through the ranks. Reading it allowed me to center Anais in this world and give more thought to what her concerns and goals would be.


This is a Christian book about embracing obscurity in order to better connect with God. It was enriching spiritually, but it was also helpful in fleshing out Javi’s character and his arc in my novel. Ultimately, I am aiming for Javi to come to understand that his chase for fame and glory is futile. Although I don’t plan on him turning to Christianity within the novel, I do want him to turn to the values of the religion in that he begins to think less about himself and ultimately finds joy and contentment in his current life situation.


This memoir about incarceration, drug dealing and surviving family trauma was very helpful in thinking about the backstory of Gio and Manny in my novel.

This non-fiction book was crucial in illuminating the realities of mass incarceration. It was also helpful in thinking about how to create Gio’s fictional criminal history.


This memoir was helpful because the arc of the protagonist mimicked that of Javi and Gio. He starts out very selfish and immoral in some ways, and through getting closer to God, becomes changed in profound ways.


This slim novella was a very powerful read for me. It deals a lot with memory and constructing memory. The way that the narrator slips in and out of scenes and moments in time was also important in shaping earlier drafts of my novel.


This novel was very helpful in developing the character of Anais in my most recent draft. It centers on a millennial aged woman in New York City who is aimless in her life and provided a lot of interesting ideas for ways to make Anais’ character more relevant and believable.


This memoir about coming of age in prison was influential in shaping the character of Gio. It helped me think about the ways that Gio should change in prison and what his demeanor might be upon his release.


Reading this novel was very helpful in teaching me about structure. In particular it was helpful in teaching me that the connections between chapters and scenes do not have to be so obvious. They can be very delicate and, often, that can lead to a better story.


This novel was helpful with structure as well. It is told in short, crisp chapters. This style motivated me to not be afraid to have shorter chapters in my own novel.


This short memoir and novel hybrid was helpful in fleshing out the Downtown art scene of New York in the 1980s. Although my novel takes place in contemporary times, it was helpful to have an illustration of a previous period of artistic flourish in New York City.

Although this novel was a challenging and, at times, frustrating read for me, it was very helpful in my process. The novel suffers from a lot of the same holes that my own writing tends to suffer from—lack of scenes, lack of context, moving too fast, trying to cover too many themes at once. Reading and dissecting it in class was helpful to diagnose my own writing and become aware of ways that I fall into the same mistakes.


This novella was crucial for me in shaping the character of Gio as well as thinking about structure. It deals with men living in a halfway house and trying to get back on their feet. It describes the absurdity of living in a halfway house, which was helpful to think about when describing Gio’s living situation. It is also told in a very straightforward manner, which influenced the way I think about my own writing.
New School v. Old School [Poets]

I. The case against the contemporary avant-garde [read: liberals and poets of color].

In various mediums or genres of art, a dance tends to occur between the elder stewards and the young bucks who enter hungry and eager to challenge. Take, for instance, hip-hop. Old school hip-hop artists who cut their teeth in the genre before the commercial success, when it was about expression and stealing electricity from your local project building, tend to hold emcees like KRS One or groups like Public Enemy up as mantelpieces of lyrical dexterity. Meanwhile, newer solo acts and groups wildly popular with younger audiences, such as Drake or Migos, are looked at by these same old heads as self-absorbed posers who lack talent in the art of storytelling. In response, new school artists view the stewards as jaded, bitter artists mad they are no longer hot. In many ways, this same dynamic is playing out today in the realm of poetry.

One thing is clear: Poetry is having a moment of resurgence in the mainstream eye. Rupi Kaur sold 2.5 million copies of her first book of poetry Milk and Honey after first finding an audience for her words on Instagram and helped pioneer a genre of poets called the “Instapoets.” In Lemonade, Beyoncé’s latest, critically acclaimed album, she leaned on the words of Nigerian poet Warsan Shire to narrate the one hour visual component to the album that set the internet on fire in April of last year. Under the nose of the tired and true literary magazines and anthologies
that traditionally berthed new poetic voices, there has been an explosion of online magazines and literary journals providing new platforms for publishing, as well as a thriving small press market. In addition to there being more publishing avenues than ever, our digital first, social media culture is ripe for poetry as we seem to want more information to be distilled. Go to your local bookstore and check out the new titles in any genre and notice how slim they are in comparison to the tomes people were publishing just a decade ago. The field is moving toward short and direct and there isn’t any sort of writing that fits that mold better than poetry does.

However, with this popularity comes the age old debate about what poetry is worthy and what poetry is not. What poetry is avant-garde—breaking new boundaries, teaching us more about the human condition—and what poetry is nothing more than self-loathing spittle thrown up by any poor sap on a blog. In the opinion of some of the established guards (old heads) of the poetry avant-garde from generations past, like Tony Hoagland, what we see today in the genre isn’t thoughtful, soul-searching art. It is merely “identity politics.”

Identity politics has become a catchall phrase often used to explain an increasingly divisive American society. A division only furthered by the election of Donald Trump. Identity politics has also been used as a critique of the fall of liberalism and the rise of the sort of right-wing rhetoric that Trump’s supporters tend to espouse—particularly the controversial political scientist and historian, Mark Lilla. However, Hoagland, in his essay “The Fear of Narrative” speaks more of the propensity of contemporary poets to constantly look inward and discuss themselves instead of their society at large. To prove his stance, he points to the lack of narration in contemporary poetry and the unwillingness of poets to use the word “we” in their poetry to refer to the larger, American populace as opposed to a relatively small segment of it. In Hoagland’s view, the modern poet skirts this responsibility to write about the common interests
and human experiences of whole swaths of people in an “organized narration” by deeming this sort of writing oppressive, exclusionary, authoritarian, and patriarchal.

Not only is organized narration considered inadequate to contemporary experience, its use is felt by some to be oppressive, over-controlling, “suspiciously authoritarian.”

Because narrative imposes a story upon experience, because—the argument goes—that story implicitly presents itself as the whole story, some readers object to the smugness and presumption of the narration. “Whose narrative is this?” they cry; “Not mine!”

(Hoagland)

Hoagland believes poets today are making a mistake by sticking to writing about their own experiences, ethnicities, sexual orientations, regions, social classes and other particularities they feel comfortable presenting themselves as an authoritative voice on. In exchange, they are missing out on the larger challenge of attempting to explain the unexplainable to society as a whole. He believes these poets take too much solace in writing from a position in which they know they cannot be challenged.

It [contemporary avant-garde poetry] hesitates to enter a point of view that cannot easily be altered or quickly escaped from. It would prefer to remain skeptical, and in that sense, too, one might say that it prefers knowing to feeling. (Hoagland)

Mark Lilla similarly makes this case, though he is not writing about poetry. In November of 2016, Lilla made headlines for his critique of the “fraying” Democratic Party in a New York Times piece and later released a book expanding on the piece entitled The Once and Future Liberal. In his view, Republicans won the 2016 election because they offered an image of what our shared way of life might be (however skewed and racist it is) while the left has not. Instead,
he posits that since the election of Ronald Reagan the left has, “threw themselves into the movement of politics and identity, losing a sense of what we share as citizens and what binds us as a nation” (Lilla, 9). Lilla writes that this fragmentation has given way to a pseudo-politics of self-regard and increasingly narrow and exclusionary self-definition, driven largely by race and ethnicity.

The reason the Democrats are losing ground is not that they have drifted too far to the left. Nor, as the progressives are already insisting, is it that they have drifted too far to the right, especially on economic issues. They are losing because they have retreated into caves they have carved for themselves in the side of what was once a great mountain.

(Lilla 11)

If poetry was a great mountain, I would argue Hoagland is essentially making the same argument about today’s avant-garde poets—and, I would say, particularly those of color or other marginalized communities. Sure, he doesn’t call out these poets in particular in his piece, nor does he quote from them. But it is interesting that he wrote the piece during a time in which poets of color and those from other marginalized communities have arguably had more visibility in the genre than at any other period in time. According to Hoagland, the contemporary avant-garde, “in their effort to circumvent linearity, or logic, or obviousness, they have eluded representing anything but Attitude—one of the familiar problems of modern American culture.” Other poets of the past avant-garde have come out in agreement, such as Mark Edmundson, whose essay “Poetry Slam” in Harpers touches on the same thread. The only difference being that Edmundson points the finger not at the lack of a narration or an over reliance on attitude, but contemporary poets prioritizing “voice” more so than anything else.
They strive to sound like no one else. And that often means poets end up pushing what is most singular and idiosyncratic in themselves and in the language to the fore and ignoring what they have in common with others. (Edmunson)

All three men seem to be circling around the same sort of discourse, while also looking back to a wistful time when things like voice, attitude and your social, economic, and sexual particularities did not need to be so evident on the page.

II. But really though: How avant-garde was the avant-garde?

We are in a day and age in which we will likely see white people become the minority in America soon. A day and age in which Spanish and Chinese are becoming more important languages to know than English. A day and age in which a black man with the last name Obama can be president, and a Muslim woman can be a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives. New voices are demanding to be heard, and many white people are getting anxious. The election of Donald Trump and the narrow defeat of Roy Moore just this month prove this point. Many contemporary poets, critics and scholars of poetics, particularly those of color, see the arguments of folks like Hoagland and Edmundson for something else: the same old whiteness at work, fighting to maintain its supremacy.

Take Cathy Park Hong for instance, a Korean-American poet, whose essay “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde” reads as a response to the sort of wistful ideals Hoagland and Edmundson write about. In Hong’s view, the criticism waged against contemporary poets, particularly those who are not white, or at least who don’t appear to be outwardly white, has to do with the fact that avant-garde poets, just like the leaders in politics or corporate business, have been predominantly white.
From its early 20th century inception to some of its current strains, American avant-garde poetry has been an overwhelmingly white enterprise, ignoring major swaths of innovators—namely poets from past African American literary movements—whose prodigious writings have vitalized the margins, challenged institutions, and introduced radical languages and forms that avant-gardists have usurped without proper acknowledgment. (Hong)

In Hong’s view, the attacks waged on contemporary avant-garde poetry have less to do with a wistfulness of a time when poets adhered to more narrative forms that laid out a shared vision of life and has more to do with the fact that those who were allowed to be part of the avant-garde often lived one sort of existence. This existence just so happens to be drastically different from the existence of an African-American woman in the South, or a gay Asian man in the North, or an undocumented Mexican woman in the West. The latter voices have largely been left out of the genre of poetry as a whole for decades, as a result of the safeguards put in place in the form of prestigious conferences and anthologies that were traditionally the only ways for a poet to find an audience. That is, before the internet opened up the floodgates.

Poets of color have always been expected to sit quietly in the backbenches of both mainstream and avant-garde poetry. We’ve been trotted out in the most mindless forms of tokenism for anthologies and conferences, because to have all white faces would be downright embarrassing. (Hong)

As an example of this exclusion, Hong points to Donald Allen’s classic 1959 anthology The New American Poetry 1945-1960 which is taught in many schools and universities across the country. Among the dozens of poets whose work is on display, only one poet of color, Amiri Baraka is present. “Tokenism at its most elegant,” Hong writes, commenting on this fact.
According to Hong, what poets and critics like Hoagland and Edmundson are really advocating for, are more contemporary poets willing to fall in line and mask their particularities, instead of magnifying them and the institutional reasons why they exist. Failing to do this and instead leaning into their particular identities only makes the largely white audiences they read in front of extremely uncomfortable.

Mainstream poetry is rather pernicious in awarding quietist minority poets who assuage quasi-white liberal guilt rather than challenge it. They prefer their poets to praise rather than excoriate, to write sanitized, easily understood personal lyrics on family and ancestry rather than make sweeping institutional critiques. (Hong)

According to Hong and others who defend the current wave of contemporary poets whose voices are diverse in race, ethnicity, language, and sexual orientation, the problem for poets of the old guard like Hoagland and Edmundson is not the fact that the contemporary avant-garde are writing too insularly or only about themselves, the problem is they aren’t writing about the experiences they know and understand. But instead of acknowledging their discomfort, or the fact that the ways in which poets have been celebrated and published in the past have excluded voices from the conversation, Hoagland and Edmundson find it much easier to throw shade at the entire genre itself, in the way that white writers like Mark Lilla criticize the party of which he has been faithful to, but perhaps no longer sees a place for himself because the voices demanding to be heard are very different from what he is used to.

III. A comparison: avant-garde of yesteryear v. contemporary avant-garde.

Now that we have drawn the line in the sand, let us do a brief comparison of two writers. A literary death match if you will. To simulate this, I’ve chosen two poets (old school and new
school) who one can make an argument were, or currently are, among the poetic avant-garde.

Denise Levertov v. Natalie Diaz. To begin, I'll look at a piece of Levertov’s 1953 poem, “Beyond the End” which seeks to describe the end of life and what lies beyond it.

Flowers

swing their heads in the wind, sun & moon

are as they are.

But we seem

almost to have it (not just

available death)

Here Levertov seems to be talking generally about the whole of society of people, in a way that would seemingly make Hoagland wet his pants with joy. She is writing about life. Writing about the will to live. About the ways in which “we” the people live.

It’s energy: a spider’s thread: not to

‘go on living’ but to quicken, to activate: extend:

Some have it, they force it –

with work or laughter or even

the act of buying… (60)

Levertov is not talking about the way she lives. She does not once use the letter “I.” She does not invoke the particularities of her Jewish, German, Welsh, and English background. She speaks about us. All of us, ostensibly.
In comparison, take the writing of Natalie Diaz. Diaz was born in the Fort Mojave Indian Village in Needles, California to a Native American mother and Spanish father. She was a collegiate and professional basketball player. She is gay. She has her own poem about life and work, call “The Facts of Art.” But it has less to do with general thoughts about life, and land, and work. But here, Hoagland and Edmundson might argue her poem focuses squarely on the life and work of Native Americans—her voice and tone excluding everyone else out.

Diaz’s poem begins with italics that read like a description you might find in a natural history museum underneath a basket in the Native American section; a description of a relic from a tribe white Americans conquered and killed and then put their things up for display in the name of a history that conveniently overlooks those actions. In the poem, Diaz narrates the history of the basket and how it was made by the Hopi people in what would later be renamed Arizona.

Hopi men and women—brown, and small, and claylike
—peered down from their tabletops at yellow tractors, water trucks,
and white men blistered with sun—red as fire ants—towing
sunscreen-slathered wives in glinting Airstream trailers
in caravans behind them.

Here we have Diaz setting up the Hopi people versus the white men and their sunscreen-slathered wives and shiny trailers behind them who are coming to invade their land. They represent the Department of Transportation that will give them jobs because that is what they need now to survive, their old ways of living no longer enough because of how their civilization changed as a result of these people.
…hired to stab drills deep into the earth’s thick red flesh

on First Mesa, drive giant sparking blades across the mesas’ faces,

run the drill bits so deep they smoked, bearding all the Hopi men

in white—Bad spirits, said the Elders—

This is an experience of work and of living that Diaz is describing, but it is one that is at odds with white mainstream life for it forces all Americans to reckon with the truth that our entire nation is built on the raping, pillaging, and murdering of Native Americans who called this land home first. While poets such as Hoagland might write off this piece as one that focuses too insularly on one experience, one that isolates and refuses to be challenged, I would agree with critics like Hong in arguing that Diaz is entering a new voice into the space of poetry that has long been neglected.

By weighing on her own marginalized experience in order to write a poem about work, Diaz is in fact doing double duty. To those of Native American descent or descendants of generational slavery and forced labor, the poem is about a way of work we can identify with. It gets us inside the head of a collective of people, in the way Levertov’s poem does. However, this collective of people are looking at things from a far different vantage point. As a result, those who do not resonate with the experiences described, who may never have had a family member enslaved or their land and resources stripped away, can actually learn from the reading experience. One could argue that reading such a poem that could be more fruitful than reading a poem which seeks not to ruffle feathers and leans on bland generalizations.

IV. Conclusion? It’s time for the old school to pass the mic.
The changing faces of those who hold the mic when it comes to poetry and the response by those who held the mic previously are quite similar to what is happening in American politics. It is also a symptom of changing the guards. When you are in power, or when you have an outsize influence (relative to others in your field) it can be hard to let go of that seat, to hand over the mic to someone younger than you, someone who speaks in a different manner, perhaps carries themselves in a different way. Someone whose work you may or may not like, but who is being celebrated in the ways that you once were.

I was born in the early 90s and, bringing this back to hip-hop, you can’t tell me Jay-Z, Big Pun, Tribe Called Quest, or any of the other artists that emerged in that era aren’t better than any of the artists out now. I will debate any 16 year old who disagrees. However, this sort of reaction is only natural from me. The 90s is my era and the sounds and the ways in which hip-hop music was produced then has a certain special place in my heart that is different from others who may have been born in different eras. However, it would be wrong of me to assume that just because my taste is different from that of a 16 year old hip hop fan, the genre as a whole is in shambles, or “dead” as many like to proclaim. No, the genre is changing, just like our country is changing, and just like poetry is changing.

While Hoagland, Edmundson and other poets of the established old school generation shake their fists at the youngsters who they believe are too self-involved, too unwilling to speak for their entire generation or be a unifying voice rather than a singular voice, they should recognize themselves in these youth. They should recognize that same energy to change things and break walls that they brought to the genre. They should also remember that times were different then, as times are different now. Today, all white poetry anthologies and conferences and poems just won’t fly. We’ve moved beyond that as a culture, thankfully. It’s time for
Hoagland and the rest to move forward, too. It’s time for them to stop their finger-wagging, take a step back, and pass the mic.
Works Cited


Javi pulled one end of his tie over the other, looping it through the hole and pinching. He adjusted his suit jacket onto his shoulders. He picked up his phone from the tangle of sheets on his bed, fixed a smile, and snapped a photo. After swiping through three filter options, he landed on Sahara, which accentuated his tanned skin. He captioned the photo: *Another day, living the dream.*

He let five seconds go by before he pulled his screen down with his thumb. Once, twice, three times. His shoulders, which were stiff and square in the photo, sank in real life when no red numbers appeared.

In the kitchen, light streamed through the window bars and doused his rusted stove. Javi held his phone camera up. A black and white filter hid the rust and accentuated the small plant near the window. It made his cheesecake colored fridge look sleek and trendy. If the frame were real life, he could’ve lived in a Brooklyn apartment near the L train. He could’ve had a roommate who was a barista by day and a guitarist for a progressive punk band by night.

—Ay dios mio! Watch where the fuck you going, someone yelled downstairs.

—Mira, watch where the fuck *you* going.

A car horn shrieked. A hood was pounded with a fist.

—You want some, papa?

Javi pressed hold on the fantasy.
He twisted the three locks on his door shut and queued up *Reasonable Doubt*. He ignored the feeling of the staircase enclosing in on him as he walked down the cracked steps. He focused on the sound of his recently purchased leather shoes. A stretch buy. The sound of their firm clacks meshed with Jay-Z’s aspirational wealth raps and created a sonic sensation that convinced Javi he was going somewhere; moving higher toward some unseen plateau he’d long been reaching for.

After five flights, Javi reached the landing. Near the exit of his building were mailboxes that would open with a whisper in the wrong direction. Leaning on them was a young man filing his nails.

—Molly, molly, molly.

It could’ve been a song.

Javi checked his watch.

The young man stopped filing and blew nail dust that twinkled in the sky.

—What up boss man? Want some? For your white friends? That hoe, Kirsten?

—How you figure I have white friends?

The young man shimmied his shoulders like they could summon a genie.

—You a banker or something? I bet you get all the white bitches, bro. Specially ese freakytona Kirsten.

Javi smiled.

—See? Come on. I got that for you. What you need? Weed?
—Can you do an eighth for less than forty?


The super of the building appeared the small nook in the lobby where shopping carts and the forgotten bicycles of hipsters who moved out were kept.

—Mira nene, sal de aquí. Stop bothering tenants.

The young man sucked his teeth.

—I ain’t bothering nobody, Papi. I’m doing community service.

#

Javi waited for the Downtown A at Dyckman. He thumbed his screen down: seven likes. He swiped to a photo of his manager with his arms around an older man and woman, behind them was the Brooklyn Bridge. Caption: Grateful my in laws are cooler than me.

He swiped to a post by his old college roommate, Josue. A woman’s delicate hand overshadowed by a diamond the size of a peanut M&M. Caption: The woman of my dreams said YES! Javi could only vaguely remember the girl’s name—Cristina, Jocelyn? But he did remember how Josue met her at an LUL party. How they rode cheeks for three straight songs. How as soon as they were official on campus, everyone knew they’d end up making some smart ass brown babies one day—every escaped hoodrat’s dream.

Javi scanned the platform. He landed on a white woman who looked to be his age wearing a floral skirt. Red glasses. Pulled back hair. Tattoo of an open book on her inner wrist.
Javi guessed editor. Two years removed from the Midwest. A bookshelf in the room she rented, no doubt. But could she also throw back a mean perreo? Would he ever find someone who could juggle both extremes?

He settled into a seat near the train doors. The perfect seat, since it only meant he had to sit next to one person, which gave him a fifty percent less chance of sitting next to a babbling homeless man, a bible touting Jesus fanatic, or a compulsive leaner. The train careened. Whenever signal appeared, Javi tugged his phone screen. He saw red at 145th street and tapped, but it was only a follow from a username with too many numbers to be human.

By 59th street, the train lightened in hue. Men who wore nicer suit jackets than the one Javi purchased from Men’s Warehouse flooded in. He noticed their winged tip shoes and folded copies of the *New York Times*. He sometimes thought about buying a copy himself some mornings, just for the clout. But the price point was still too high.

At 42nd street, Javi got off and walked east. The bodega which sat in front of his station back in Washington Heights, with the green crates of rotten fruit and windows plastered with beer and cigarette ads, was replaced by a gleaming Walgreens. The corner bank, whose floors needed sweeping and housed an unarmed and perpetually asleep security guard, was replaced by a TD Bank with a mammoth lobby. The vape shop on the corner, whose sidewalk turned into a private patio for the owners, their friends, and their hookah sets, was replaced with the marble tables and subway tile walls of a café.

As Javi approached the glass doors of his office, he removed his headphones. He patted down his jacket for New York City debris. He thumbed his screen. One new like from his mother, and a comment: *That’s right my rockstar! DTB!*
Tito manned the front desk. He was one of the only other people who looked like Javi, aside from the janitors. Javi was certain that he himself was the only one who actually took the elevator up, instead of greeting or cleaning up after those who did.

Tito read the *Daily News* while the *New York Post* sat nearby. The paper of simpletons, Javi thought.

—Buenos dia, Papo.

—Good morning, Tito. How are you?

—Ya tu sabes. Pa’lante como el elefante.

—Can I ask you something?

—What’s up, Pa?

—Why Spanish people say DTB online instead of writing out dios te bendiga? Who created that acronym? Was there an announcement at the last meeting?

Tito put the paper down. He looked both ways and inched forward.

—Mira, we’re not Spanish. Ellos son los conquistadores, okay? Don’t get it twisted. Somos Latino. That’s number one.

Spanish, Latino, Nuyorican, Gringo, Black, Hispanic, Taino, American. Javi could never keep up with the labels others gave him. He wished there could be some sort of council to convene and decide on one.

Tito winked and pounded Javi’s fist, forgetting all about point number two.

—Have a good day alright, nene? Representa.
Javi nodded back, feeling a sense of pride. Most days, he thought of Tito as a cardboard cutout for his vanished father. Someone superficially proud of who he was and how far he’d come.

Javi’s shoes created echoing thwacks as he continued through the lobby. Before he ever laid eyes on the afternoon beer cart, or the snack station, before he learned about the retirement package specs and the expense account, this sound alone intoxicated him.

He stood in front of the elevator and watched the numbers. Next to him was another man in a slate gray suit—ocean blue pocket napkin tucked in his breast. Javi looked at the leather satchel he held. Tough and tanned cow hide. Javi’s own satchel was made of synthetic material with a Velcro strap. He made a note to go shopping for a better one as soon as his next paycheck came.

The elevator doors opened to lime green paint on the walls and orange lettering that spelled out: Content Factory. Tinashe sat at the glass front desk, half typing, half chewing on a sesame seed bagel.

—Good morning, welcome to…

She looked up.

—Oh, what up Javi?

Javi looked both ways.

—What up, T? How you livin’?

—Another day in paradise.
She looked around, then swiveled her screen to show Javi what looked like a *New Yorker* length narrative feature in her inbox.

—Peep this.

—Let me guess. Politics?

—Pssh, no.

—Stolen food from the fridge?

—Come on now, you know we the only two broke motherfuckers that actually bring leftovers.

Tinashe swiveled her screen back around and cleared her throat.

—I am certainly not the one to make a big stink about things, and I hope my message does not get interpreted in the wrong manner. However, it is ridiculous to me that our pantry continues to stock the off brand Kombucha from Trader Joes when their premium organic offerings are clearly superior and only marginally more expensive.

—Strong lede.

—Yes. From there we get a surprisingly thorough ass cost-benefit analysis. Say what you want, but Linda from finance knows her fucking shit.

—Do you know what Kombucha is?

Tinashe shook her head.

—No. But it tastes like grape juice with bubbles and is kinda delicious. I get why they take it personal like—
The elevator doors dinged and both Javi and Tinashe straightened up. Ricard, Javi’s manager, exited. A small man, thin and wiry. His suit jacket was flaming yellow. His hair, salt and pepper, yet thick as if he were an 18 year-old lacrosse player, sat perfected in a wave that could resist hurricane force winds. When Javi first got the job, he bought eight different hair products to achieve the same effect—to no avail.

Tinashe’s voice went up six registers.

—Good morning, Mr. Larson. How are you today?

Javi matched her.

—Morning Ricard, everything going well?

Ricard removed his sunglasses.

—My husband’s in laws are in from Palm Beach, so, you know, the world is shit.

Javi injected force behind his chuckle. He thought about the photo on Instagram.

—I can only imagine.

Ricard drummed on Tinashe’s desk, focusing for a second on the bagel crumbs.

—Speaking of hellishness, Tinashe, were you able to grab those Hamilton tickets?

Tinashe handed Ricard a manila folder. Javi fixated on the word, grab.

—Orchestra seats. You’ll have a wonderful time.

Ricard winced.

—I hope I make it through the night. What was the damage?
—A little over thirty two hundred.

Javi scratched the back of his neck. Ricard nodded as if she’d said thirty two dollars.

Ricard picked up the folder and patted Javi on the shoulder with it.

—The writer, he’s, uh, like you right. A Puerto Rican?

Javi leaned into his smile.

—Yes sir, one of us.

Ricard a-hummed.

—He’s lighter skinned though. Didn’t get enough sun?

Javi kept his smile in place. He thought about his black grandmother. About slavery.

—We come in all sizes and shades, sir.

—Very well. Hey, stop by my office after you drop your things? I have an update on Organic O’s. We may need to, uh, push the deadline up a bit. Grab coffee first.

Ricard pushed through the door leading into the office. When it closed, Tinashe and Javi relaxed their faces.

#

Javi walked down a hallway lined with framed tweets and Instagram posts. Ricard dubbed it the wall of fame, meant to celebrate viral hits. Each time he passed it, Javi stopped to stare.

There was the post Ricard produced for a fast food chain on Valentine’s Day. A photo of a juicy burger and fries. Caption: *We’d never ghost you*. There was the post for the online pillow
company that promises a full fluff for up to three years. The photo showed a flat pillow that looked like the one that Javi grew up using and next to it a fluffy white one plucked straight out of a five star hotel room. Caption: *There are two types of people in the world. Which one are you?* The most recent success was a post for a soap and body wash company. It featured a lime green background, the small company logo in white in the corner. Bright orange text that read: *Ads are soooo 20th century.*

Ricard leaned back in his chair when Javi walked inside.

—What’s up?

—Hide me. Lock me away until my in-laws leave.

—I know how you feel.

—You aren’t married.

Javi called in reinforcements to hold his lips up.

—Well, no.

Ricard looked at his watch.

—Anyway. I got a frenzied email from the head of Organic O’s. They want to move up their campaign and need that copy I told you about.

—Monday, right?

—Tonight.

Javi could not hold back a gulp. He licked his lips, gave the workers some relief, then sent them right back with a crack of his whip.
—I see.

Ricard’s small eyes peered through his clear rimmed glasses. Outside the window, the sky was a dense fog. The sounds of cars jockeying for lanes became suddenly clear.

—Last minute, I know. But if anyone can knock it out the park, it’s you.

Ricard’s smile made Javi feel like a dog. You’re a good boy. You’re a good boy, aren’t you?

#

Javi cradled the box of chocolate chip cookies doused in hues of earth green and cardboard brown. Organic O’s was spelled out in vines and the O was an image of the earth. On the back of the box, was a statement: Our products are committed to providing solidarity to all disenfranchised people of the world.

Javi stared at what looked like an anemic Chips Ahoy in his palm. He bit. He did not taste the acceptance of transgender people, reparations for the ancestors of slaves, or the acknowledgment that Puerto Rico is a modern day colony. He tasted a rather shitty chocolate chip cookie.

He typed out the first option of 20 he was supposed to present: Organic O’s: Pretend to save the world and eat a real cookie at the same time.

He cracked his knuckles and looked around for an excuse. He settled on Sasha, laughing at her screen two desks down. He rolled over and dangled a cookie before her eyes until she removed her headphones.

—What is that?
—A solution to world hunger, the answer to our tenuous gig-economy, freedom for all my homies up north.

Sasha rolled her eyes. Her hair was that actress mix of blonde and brown and her cheeks were dotted with pink freckles. During the office party the year before, the two of them made out while waiting for the bathroom in a dark hallway and never mentioned it again. Javi thought about the kiss sometimes.

Sasha took a bite.

—Do you taste non-gender binary dominion?

She smacked her lips a few times.

—No. But it’s actually delicious.

Javi sighed.

—I keep wanting to believe you aren’t basic. But you always prove me wrong.

He looked over her shoulder at her screen open to a YouTube video.

—How are you bullshitting this fine afternoon?

Sasha clapped her hands together and Javi immediately regretted the question.

—I have to show you the most amazing thing ever.

She turned to her screen and rewound the video.

—DaTraveler, the YouTube guy with the drug habit?
—Yeah, she said. He’s pretty okay. I don’t know why he has such a following but whatevs. The important thing is how he gets played sooo hard.

As the video opened, Javi zeroed in on the number of views—one million four hundred thousand and thirty six.

On a circumspect city sidewalk shaded by a dirty scaffold were pieces of artwork hung from pipes or pinned to the green covering that hid a construction project.

—Swag, swag, swag, said DaTraveler, with a cartoonish voice that shot itself into the sky.

Added carnival music played in the background while his shaky camera passed the scene: Zoinks and goinks and gongs and bongs. In the footage, Javi glimpsed scrap pieces of wood—pallets, dresser doors, table tops, and plywood shards nailed together—painted in deep blues and blacks with spots of yellow, green, red and pink. There were surrealist prison bars, doves, men with tattoos, and light towers, but also, fixtures of Javi’s childhood—Doug, Hey Arnold, the Ninja Turtles, Donkey Kong, Stone Cold Steve Austin, honey buns, Bubbalicious gum, and barbecue potato chips.

—Even though it’s not the main thing, the art is pretty damn good, said Sasha.

Javi peered at the signature in the corner of one painting that DaTraveler zoomed in on: Inmate X37662.

—Inmate? Woah. Gang, gang, gang, DaTraveler said.

Where do I know those numbers, Javi thought.
The video panned from the art work and onto the throng of people on the tight sidewalk, some pushing to get to where they were heading, but many others stopping to stare as if the sidewalk was a gallery wing at the Met.

—Oh snap. Traffic jam! DaTraveler said.

The camera continued pushing through and landed on a man sitting in a blue beach chair with sunglasses. He had a frayed Yankees cap coated in paint, a black sweater that seemed bleached by accident, and baggy blue jeans. His beard was wild and rangy, with patches around the cheeks that looked like craters. Javi got closer to the screen. Sasha, confused, backed away from her desk. DaTraveler focused in on the man.

—And here he is ladies and gents, the artiste himself. What up my bro, how you doing today?

The man in the video gave a little nod. His lips remained sealed shut.

—Anything you want to say to the people?

—No.

DaTraveler turned the camera on himself, exposing his pasty face and highlighter green hair.

—This man probably doesn’t have YouTube now does he TravelHive?

DaTraveler turned the camera back on the man in the chair.

—Sure you don’t want to say something? Tell us who you are? Lots of people are going to watch this.
Javi was fixated by the man in the chair. His jaw, his pockmarked face. No, he thought. Couldn’t be.

—Nah, not really, son, the man said.

Those four words were all it took. The rasp, the tenor, the inflection of the o in son. It was Gio. Javi was certain.

—Well, alright buddy, not much of a talker, eh? How about where the good people can find you? Twitter, Instagram? Myspace?

The camera spun back to DaTraveler’s face as he smirked and a toy car honk sounded. It spun back to Gio, who spit on the ground.

—They can find me right here.

DaTraveler craned the camera down so it faced the sidewalk. Off camera the conversation continued.

—Listen, bro, I have a pretty large following. On YouTube? Just trying to help out here, you know, also do a little something for my fans, too. Maybe you could be a bit more energetic? I promise it’ll pay off for you.

—I don’t do cameras and I don’t do questions, aight. And you ain’t my bro. So stop calling me that.

—Chill, chill. It’s all good, bro.

—What the fuck did I just say? You annoying the shit out of me. Matta fact.

The camera jerked around then landed on Gio’s paint splotched boots.
—Get the fuck outta here.

—Hey. Bro. This is a public street. I can do what I want.

—Motherfu—

The camera did a cartwheel and landed on the ground, facing a fire hydrant and a piece of dog shit. Across the street, Javi made out the name of a bar.

DaTraveler scooped up the camera, huffing and puffing as he turned it to his face, which were reddened at the cheeks.

—Fuckin’ crazy hobo! Did you all see that?

Off camera, Gio’s voice carried over the people continuing to move on the busy street, oblivious to everything.

—Fuck you called me?

—Oh shit.

The camera fell to the DaTraveler’s shoes as they kicked away and down the street.

—What a punk, right? Sasha said. Golden content right there though.

Javi rolled back from the desk with the name of the bar turning in his mind. He looked at the views. The title of the video: DaTraveler vs Crazy Artist Hobo.

—What a guy, Sasha said. Talented. But jeez. Imagine, the notoriety. DaTraveler shouting you out? Blew his chance and didn’t even know it.

Javi stroked his chin.