



Trans. Revista Transcultural de Música

E-ISSN: 1697-0101

edicion@sibetrans.com

Sociedad de Etnomusicología

España

Jane, Silent

Beautiful fragments of a traumatic memory: synaesthesia, sesame street, and hearing the colors of an abusive past

Trans. Revista Transcultural de Música, núm. 10, diciembre, 2006, p. 0

Sociedad de Etnomusicología

Barcelona, España

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=82201004>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative



Beautiful Fragments of a Traumatic Memory: Synaesthesia, *Sesame Street*, and Hearing the Colors of an Abusive Past

Silent Jane

Abstract

This paper tells the story of a woman who experiences sound-color synaesthesia, the involuntary ability to experience music as beautiful colors and luminous visual textures. As her story unfolds, so does the story of synaesthesia itself, a phenomenon most often understood in certain Western scholarly discourses to be a neurological deficiency or “cross-wiring,” but which also frequently takes on the role of a savant-like gift, a mysterious power associated with autistic mathematical geniuses and creative artists. Silent Jane’s synaesthesia story, however, is found to be crucially associated with her memories of being sexually abused as a child—memories that, as recent scholarly work on post-traumatic stress disorder theorizes, do not conform to typical causal, sequential, or temporal recollections, but exist rather as fragmented, sensorially-based visual and somatic flashbacks triggered primarily by the *sonic*: specific “colored timbres,” acoustic spaces, and the unique yet ubiquitous (television- and radio-based) sounds of one’s past. Silent Jane traces these sound-color somatics through a close acoustic reading of television shows and popular songs from her youth, materials that she believes were “witnesses” to the abuse she endured and became acoustic-spatial reliquaries of secrets that she was not able to assimilate as a young child. Her broken acoustemology of silenced sexual trauma demonstrates that repressed traumatic memories can often function within an unconscious system of sensory transfers and exchanges, a delicate cognitive cryptography that, in transforming atrocious details into beautiful fragments, can also transform the traumatic event from an experience that destroys us into one that reconstitutes us, heightens our sensory awareness of the world, and makes us who we are.

Resumen

Este artículo cuenta la historia de una mujer que experimenta sinestesia entre color y sonido, esto es, la capacidad de percibir la música como colores hermosos o como texturas visuales luminosas. A medida que su historia se desarrolla, también lo hace la historia de la sinestesia, un fenómeno que se entiende desde ciertos discursos académicos occidentales como una deficiencia neurológica o “un cruce de cables”, pero que también toma la forma de un don genial, un poder misterioso asociado con genios matemáticos, autistas o con artistas creativos. La historia de sinestesia de Jenny

Silenciosa, sin embargo, se encuentra profundamente asociada a sus memorias de haber sufrido un abuso sexual cuando niña. Como demuestran trabajos recientes sobre estrés post traumático, estas memorias no se limitan a recolecciones temporales, causales o secuenciales, sino que existen como fragmentos, como somatizaciones que aparecen como relámpagos visuales disparados principalmente por lo sónico: timbres con colores específicos, espacios acústicos y el ubicuo sonido personalizado (televisivo y de la radio) del pasado propio. Jane Silenciosa traza estas somatizaciones de color y sonido a través de una lectura acústica de los programas de televisión y las canciones populares que ella cree que fueron “testigos” del abuso que sufrió y que se constituyeron en el relicario espacial y acústico de secretos que ella no fue capaz de asimilar como niña. Su acustemología fragmentada de trauma sexual silenciado demuestra que la memoria reprimida puede frecuentemente funcionar como un sistema inconsciente de transferencias e intercambios sensoriales, una delicada criptografía cognitiva que, al transformar detalles atroces en fragmentos bellos, puede, a su vez, transformar el evento traumático que nos destruye, en uno que nos reconstituye, que aumenta la percepción sensorial del mundo en que vivimos, y nos hace lo que somos.

vorspiel

I have chosen to submit this paper under a pseudonym, in honor of the many women and men whose stories of sexual abuse have been silenced. My decision to conceal my identity is a political choice; in revealing my story, I am both renouncing my silence and retaining my right to decide if, when, and how to emerge as the author of these experiences. For now, my work stands as a monument to the fragmented identities of far too many.

The moniker “Jane” was inspired by Orson Scott Card’s bodiless character of the same name, a complex computer program that is later revealed to have a soul. Jane’s extraordinary powers of knowledge and wisdom are akin to the acute sensory adaptations of many abused children, who in order to survive become more precisely attuned and sensitive to atmospheric and psychic tensions than many of those around them (Herman 1992). It is precisely these incredible sensory enhancements—often resulting from psychological trauma—that concern the following work. Their charged position between epistemologies of “dysfunction” and “giftedness” is a tension that I hope will greater inform the idea of the traumatic experience as both a fragmenting and constituting event—one that both destroys us and makes us who we are.

The name “Silent Jane” has further resonance with the story of Congresswoman Jane Harman (pejoratively called “Silent Jane” by some of her critics), whose recent silence about the Bush Administration’s unconstitutional violation of the Federal wiretapping law has sparked debate about the complex line between “being silent” and “being silenced.” This liminal space where enforced secrecy, intentional silence, and threatened disclosure come together is another ghost that I hope will haunt this story.

This paper is dedicated to Suzanne Cusick and Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, with admiration and thanks for their brave and important work.

memory:

For as long as I can remember, I have been able to hear colors.^[1] That is, when I listen to music, my mind's eye is involuntarily flooded with immediate visual perceptions of intense and vivid colors that react directly to the sounds I am hearing. For most of my life, I had no idea that this was an unusual way to experience music. I assumed that everyone did this.

When I discovered that French composer Olivier Messiaen had what he called a rare and strange “gift” for hearing colors (Messiaen 1956), I realized that this sensory phenomenon was not a so-called normal experience, but has instead been constructed in Western philosophical discourses as a cryptic neurological condition known as synaesthesia.^[2] In the strange, exoticized world of the synaesthete, colors can be heard, but also tasted, felt, smelled; sounds can be seen; tastes can be touched; textures can be heard (what will they say?). There is little provision in Western thinking for these kinds of perceptions; they are the stuff of poetry, of metaphors and dreams. People who live this way are thought to be “abnormal,” their brains “deficient”; and on their behalf, scientists should work diligently to discover “why.” (Cytowic 1993)^[3]

Despite its current pathologized status, synaesthesia is far from rare—references to synaesthetic phenomena or perceptions abound in Western literature and music,^[4] and synaesthesia also underpins the perceptual thought systems of countless cultures beyond the radar of Western rationalism. What is most confounding to cognitive scientists who currently study this phenomenon (Cytowic 1989, Baron-Cohen 1997, Ramachandran 2001, Harrison 1997) is its highly individualized nature. Rather than opening up a single, shared perceptual world to a small percentage of the human population, synaesthetic perceptions are entirely personal, separate, and unshared experiences: no two synaesthetes see the same colored sounds, nor do they agree on what colors comprise the alphabet or what flavors are embedded in certain shapes or sounds. Synaesthetic associations are like personalized photo albums of images and sensations specific only to individual psyches and lives. Where Messiaen saw “[a] gentle cascade of blue-orange chords” (Messiaen 1956, 51) in his *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, I see silver and mauve; still others hear other colors, and see different tones. In Western culture, at least, this kind of solipsistic experience serves to further exclude the synaesthete’s experiences from the boundaries of “normal cognition,” and often engenders overly fascinated or even hostile reactions from non-synaesthetes, many of whom believe synaesthesia to be a “gift” or a “special power.” Yet while synaesthesia is certainly a powerful, often beautiful experience, its contours cannot be altered or controlled, and it can often impede traditional

modes of understanding or communicating with others. My musical colors are mine, but they also exist ahead of me, beyond me. They have their own secrets.

The many vivid evocations of the “mysteries” of synaesthesia found in Western literature, poetry, and music—in concert with an equal number of ruminations upon the strangeness of dreams or of *déjà-vu*—suggest that within the complexities of the sensorium there lie hidden secrets, deeply embedded within the folds of our so-called “separate” senses. Synaesthesia smacks of *origins*, of an imaginary time when our senses had “not yet” separated; it speaks to yet-undiscovered histories and pasts that, if they could only be revealed, might unlock the ultimate mysteries of human consciousness (Ramachandran 2001, 3)—perhaps even the “meaning of life.” The Western establishment of sensory norms, rooted in Aristotle’s writings on sense perceptions as “alterations” (Aristotle 1986, 169) in which one thing is necessarily moved by another—an eardrum being vibrated by a sound, for instance—provides a context for our long fascination with sensory communications that appears to take place in non-normative ways, defying scientific laws (how can *silent* photons vibrate eardrums? How can *invisible* sound waves stimulate retinas?) and undermining the tenets upon which Western constructions of reality are so dependent. Unlike the Kaluli peoples of Papua New Guinea, for instance, whom Steven Feld describes as perceiving physical spaces as defined by sounds and smells (Feld 1996), or the Native cultures of the South American Andes and Amazon regions, whose musics, as Constance Classon demonstrates, are experienced as scents and flavors (Classon 1990), European and American cultures approach the concept of synaesthesia as a *mystery*; it is thereby made *mystical*, supernatural; that which exists beyond the pale of normative human experience.^[5]

It is ironic, then, that the rational, sight-privileging cultures of the West often produce narratives of memories that function as factors of other senses, and in ways that subtly but importantly intermingle them. While we *inscribe* and relate many of the experiences of our lives in filmic, visually- and temporally-driven sequences of events, we often *describe* our earliest and most impressive (childhood) memories sensorially, drastically, and out-of-time, as factors of our so-called “secondary” senses. It is through smells (“this cedarwood takes me back to my grandmother’s attic”), sounds (“this song takes me back to seventh grade”), tastes (“these mashed potatoes take me back to Thanksgivings on the farm”), and even textures (“this fuzzy sweater takes me back to a scarf I wore when I was a kid”) that our earliest and most fundamental impressions tend to emerge, in vivid and sense-driven detail. These neglected, non-visual sense modalities seem to exert a certain backhanded power over us; they “take us back,” often without our consent, and, as both Proust and Benjamin have observed, “drown years in the odor[s] [they] recall” (Benjamin 1968, 184).

We should note that these very experiences—being taken back to childhood with haunting, non-linear immediacy—are precisely those experiences that are *personal*, *unshared*, and *individual*; unlike the culturally-shared modalities for

remembering important (and usually tragic) moments “in history”—building monuments, broadcasting television specials, coining phrases like “we will never forget”—which perpetuate a temporal, retellable, history-book narrativity to nationally significant “collective traumas,” experiences of a *personal* nature—be it those of a child eating Thanksgiving dinner in 1979, or those of a worker who narrowly escaped Tower One on September 11, 2001—often take on a sense-driven out-of-timeness that stands in seeming defiance of the notion of history, or, perhaps most especially, to the notion of “the past,” whose actions, transgressions, and occurrences stand to be re-examined, reconstituted, recontextualized, and, at long last, *understood*. In his description of the “years that drown” in remembered odors, Benjamin implies that there is a crucial but *belated immediacy* between senses and memories, a sudden joining of the present with the past that can reprise a memory as an experience *in and of itself*, complete with the not-yet-figured-out, not-yet-understood nature of the current, present moment. Cathy Caruth observes this phenomenon in her description of traumatic memories, whose “very overwhelming immediacy...produce[s] belated uncertainty” (Caruth 1995, 6). In smelling, tasting, feeling, or hearing stimulants that reprise “past” experiences with just such immediacy—the taste of potatoes from 1979, the heat of jet fuel and the smell of blood from 2001—we find that our *personal* stories (be they precious childhood moments or drastic, formative experiences) seem to live in less tangible containers within our psyches, in places where the typical confines of causality, temporality, and other apparatuses of understanding delicately fall away, leaving behind a trail of tiny, glittery shards.

fr gm nts

memory:

I would like to tell you a story.

As I do this, I would like you to attempt to listen to me with senses other than your hearing, especially your sense of smell, your oldest and “earliest” sense modality. You can close your eyes, if you want to, or you can try to imagine the sound of my voice in a specific part of your body, a place other than your ears or the resonant bones of your face.

Close your eyes. Focus on the color of your eyelids, the color of the light that is being reflected from them, the color of your skin, the raw, bloody insides of your cheeks, the shadowed chasm of your mouth. Let color be the way you imagine your entire body, from lips to toes—let your imagination draw a virtual map of your physical self; let your limbs become richly colored phantoms; let the skin encasing them take on a luminous pallor; let every sensation imbue your body with splatters of colored light. Imagine all of your senses filtered through this one sensory concept of color.

Travel now to your brain. Try to imagine what its central core might look like, and what its colors might be. Try to envision it as a sensual Q-sounding curve. We’ll

call this beautiful curve your hippocampus, and trace its delicate, sensual stripe around your graceful, almond-shaped amygdala, and give this entire region a name: the Limbic System. Think of the colors of your limbic system now, and try to taste them.

This is a very old place. It is a place where personal histories, past experiences, and present hopes and emotions live. This is also where we create and store [memories](#)—working, procedural, and declarative memories that record the images, sounds, smells, and tastes of things that have happened to us throughout our lives. The limbic system, as the work of Robert Zatorre and Carol Krumhansl suggests, is also the region of the brain that experiences music in the most fundamental and emotionally intense way.^[6] While the limbic system is often referred to as the “nose brain,” Paul D. MacLean described it as “an emotional keyboard,” and Joseph LeDoux claimed that “when the elements of the sensory world activate these cells, the tunes they play are emotions” (Swallow 2002, 47). In simply talking about the brain, we seem to find ourselves in the realm of the synaesthetic—a place where sights become smells, and music becomes memories; indeed, Richard Cytowic has called the limbic system the “seat of synaesthesia” (Cytowic 1993, 152), a place of subtle, delicate exchanges among sensory, emotional, and physical modalities of existence. Perhaps a synaesthetic way of thinking is almost a prerequisite for understanding this part of our minds. Perhaps we must check our sensory boundaries at the door.

In a limbic system that is functioning normally, our sense of smell and our perceptions of music have similarly powerful influences on [memory](#) formation and recall; in a brain debilitated by encephalitic conditions, such as Alzheimer’s disease, the relationship between music and [memory](#) can become even more profound, in some cases representing the only connection a person has with their former, fully-functioning self. Oliver Sacks discovered this in his 1982 study of an encephalitic woman who claimed that her brain disease had “unmusicked” her, and that in order to walk or perform menial physical tasks, she had to be “musicked”—that is, exposed to the sounds of the music she had most loved in her youth, which literally made her body remember how to move according to the musical patterns of unconscious motion (Sacks 1982, 60).

Recent psychological research has shown that emotionally traumatic experiences, especially those experienced in childhood, can also have a profound physiological impact on brain function. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman observes that “traumatic events produce profound and lasting changes in....emotion, cognition, and memory...The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion” (Herman 1992, 34-35). This cognitive fragmentation, replacing clearly defined memories with disembodied sensations and seemingly bizarre, inexplicable behaviors, is crucially associated with contemporary American customs of ignoring, repressing, or eschewing atrocities, often in favor of heroic and/or romantic narratives that displace the complex experiences of the individual

with generic, oversimplified public hysterias (the child-abuse/stranger-danger hysteria of the 1980s in the United States)^[7], staged performances of public mourning (the annual televised 9/11 vigil at Ground Zero), and bootstrap-pulling notions of “getting over it and moving on” so familiar to American narratives that *do* invoke personal tragedy (the character of the mother in Dorothy Allison’s haunting memoir *Bastard Out of Carolina*, or the mother in Pat Conroy’s *The Prince of Tides*).^[8] That which is initially unacceptable and/or unassimilable quickly becomes *unspeakable*, and eventually, as Herman demonstrates, *incomprehensible*, through a complex system of highly evolved cognitive structures designed to protect the fragility of the psyche. It is our desire to forget traumas, Herman posits, that initiates the painful cycle of *memory* fragmentation and behavioral compulsion so familiar to victims of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet as is obvious to anyone who has experienced trauma, forgetting is hardly the outcome: “when high levels of adrenaline and other stress hormones are circulating, *memory* traces are deeply imprinted...[resulting in a]...*traumatic engraving*.” (Herman 1992, 38-39). Rather than resulting in clear, visually based memories, this ‘traumatic engraving’ process, as Bessel A. van der Kolk speculates, causes the inactivation of “linguistic [*memory*] encoding” (that which renders an event “speakable” or “relatable”), and also “[causes] the central nervous system...[to revert] to *the sensory and iconic forms of memory that predominate in early life*” (Herman 1992, 39). As both Herman and van der Kolk suggest, our limbic system-inspired modes of remembering experientially, through smell, taste, sound, and sensation, seem to be key to understanding memories of trauma. Rather than fitting into assimilable histories and narratives, traumatic memories take on the same urgency, immediacy, and mystery as the transporting sensory memories of our own distant childhoods. This cycle of fragmentation, then, is one of *regression* as well as repression; by struggling to forget, we seem to *childhoodize* the unspeakable, dismantling its intellectual efficacies in exchange for sensory provocations, for strange, vivid, inexplicable flavors and echoes—for distant half-remembrances. As Herman also suggests, our folkloric forbears shared in this cycle as well; ghost stories whose protagonists “refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told” (Herman 1992, 1) are the ancestors of repressed memories, of silenced crimes and unspeakable secrets that, in our attempts to bury them, become transformed into frightening specters whose existence confounds us but whose very presence has the power to completely overwhelm our senses. Ghost stories, as Herman reminds us, represent the irrepressible knowledge that in spite of our best efforts to silence or repress the unspeakable, the unspeakable will eventually find some way to speak—even if this involves communicative modalities that are non-normative, unusual, or uncanny.

I have already mentioned that synaesthesia has been constructed as a “psychological aberration,” something suggestive of brain malady, deficiency, or stunted development. Richard E. Cytowic’s controversial work *The Man Who Tasted Shapes* proposes that synaesthesia occurs when “parts of the brain get disconnected from one another,” observing that synaesthetic perceptions are accompanied by a “stunning shut-down of the cortex” (Cytowic 1993, 163, 152).

Many testimonial accounts of synaesthetic experiences include descriptions of accompanying illness, discomfort, or suffering. Leon Ginsberg's personal account, "A Case of Synaesthesia," notes that "[I] was first cognizant of the phenomenon [of my synaesthesia] during the year 1918...During that year [I] was physically run-down and nervously unstable" (Ginsberg 1923, 582). A more famous example of synaesthetic unrest can be found in the work of Charles Baudelaire, whose poem *Correspondances* meditates on the "confused words" and "long echoes" of "a forest of symbols...[with] perfumes...sweet as oboes, green as meadows." In his essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, Benjamin describes Baudelaire as having been a "traumatophile" who "placed the shock experience at the very center of his artistic work," (Benjamin 1968, 181) and Ulrich Baer described Baudelaire's famous collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*, which includes *Correspondances*, as an exploration of the "trauma of the everyday" (Baer 2000). Given both Baer's and Benjamin's claims, it is not difficult to read Baudelaire's "long echoes" of *Correspondances* as ancient, terrifying memories being revisited ("man goes through forests of symbols which watch him with familiar looks"), the "confused," intra-sensory language of which suggests that these memories, ostensibly bizarre and unsettling, can only exist in the obscured and sensorially-driven memories typical of childhoods, distant pasts, and unspeakable recollections.

As we can see, Western constructions of synaesthesia are not only concerned with its beautiful mysteries, but also often equate it with illness, or with events "beyond the pale" of normative human experience. Trauma, too, shares in this exterior—as recently as 2005, the traumatic event was defined by the American Psychiatric Association as that which occurs "outside the range of human experience" (APA 1987, 250). The seeming elusiveness of trauma, as well as the fragments and holes that characterize many testimonies of synaesthesia—the ineffable experiences which defy logic, which are simply *there*, divorced from the equations of cause and effect, and resistant to linear, teleological description—reprise the fuzzy terrain of the limbic system, with its mysterious, museum-like, dust-ridden halls of echoes, histories, and *correspondences*. Perhaps the limbic system can be re-imagined in terms of Baudelaire's traumatic "forest of symbols," a place where memories are stored as smells and sounds rather than straightforward, narrative, film-like images. Perhaps synaesthesia occurs when the limbic system fails to "move on" and translate its pools of multisensory reactions into relegated, differentiated compartments of "image," "sound," "taste." Perhaps Cytowic's "stunning shutdown of the cortex" implies a refusal of the brain to assimilate a certain kind of experience—perhaps the brain is saying "this is an experience that cannot be adequately represented by separating sound from color, or taste from texture"—in other words, this is an experience that demands a different language, that falls outside of familiar epistemologies. But just what *kind* of an experience would cause such a showdown? What sort of experience reduces not just *us* but our cognitive faculties to helpless, pre-linguistic children? What lines are being tangled here? What codes are being scrambled here?

Perhaps synaesthesia is in some way a negotiation of *trauma*—a delicate process

of fragmenting, enfolding, and forgetting atrocities by transposing their contours into beautiful, confused, Babel-ized shards. Perhaps synaesthesia is so mysterious to us because it is keeping our secrets—the very secrets we seek to keep from ourselves.

i c n't

r me b r

(The unspeakable will find a way to speak.)

i c n't

r me b r

I want you to think now about something in your own life history that is unspeakable. Something that is a secret.

i c n't

r me b r

I am curious about how much of this secret you can remember. Chances are you don't want to think about this right now. Chances are you spend most of your waking life trying hard not to think about it, because it makes you feel physically uncomfortable. Chances are it makes you feel as helpless as a child.

i c n't

r mem b r:

I know this feeling. I spend most of my life avoiding this feeling. I have devised highly specialized mechanisms for defending myself against it.

But my ghost is resurrected. I am ready to speak.

r e mem be r:

I propose that my ability to see music in color—to experience the world synaesthetically—is less an unusual and inexplicable neurological gift, and more a response to a traumatic sexual experience I underwent as a child. I do not have a clear linear recollection of these events, but rather a series of intensely arresting physical and visual flashes that lay in disorganized fragments on the messy floor of my **memory**. I believe I have kept this event from myself as much as I possibly could—struggling to forget, to push down, to repress—but many traces remain, and most of them can be linked to my reactions to music and color. I cannot say with any certainty where these traces “begin”—that is, I cannot locate their origins

with any precision. For me, there are many beginnings.

My story of synaesthesia begins in a world deeply rooted in visual cues accompanied by sonic responses. This is my world, a culture of radio and TV and magazines and billboards, a place in which memories and experiences are built upon the supposition that information will be apprehended by the eye *first*, then trailed by the ears, the nose, the mouth, the body. Yet the experiences I will be talking about are those for which clear, vivid, seeable (and therefore *knowable*) memories are for one reason or another unavailable. These are memories my mind seems to want to circumvent, yet my sensorium cannot. As Luce Irigaray writes: “your body remembers” (Irigaray 1985, 214). My body remembers.

Like most American suburban children of the 1980s, I was raised in front of the TV and in the backseat of the car, where the radio—an object outside of my control—would inundate me with sounds and accompanying sensations. Songs that were popular in the early 1980s would blare from the speakers to my body, vibrating my eardrums (and perhaps other body parts) and speaking to me through a far more intimate and direct conduit than could many of the communicative dealings I had with other people, even my parents. As an only child, my world was primarily solitary, and these songs on the radio—along with the sounds and images on the TV—comprised the psychic architecture of my universe. Some of these songs seemed to have a particular control over me, to the point where I would, upon hearing them, immediately feel sick and nauseous, or would begin tearing up and crying, or would wriggle and moan with the sudden urge to pee. An intense and acute ache would erupt in my bladder, my legs would become rubber, and between them would blossom an invisible, trembling scar—something *wrong*, something *bad*. The worst offender of these songs—what I sometimes call my “sad songs”—was Chicago’s *Hard Habit to Break* (Chicago 17, Full Moon/Warner Bros. Records, 1984). If you can, [turn this on and listen with me](#).

As I listen to this emotionally overwrought 80s hair band, crooning one of their requisite “power ballads” that became compulsory for American hard-rock groups at this time, I am immediately transported to my childhood, when this song would assault me in the car or in public and I would be reduced to sudden, inexplicable tears and the overwhelming urge to fold my shamed body into a tight little ball. As this happened, I would also consistently see (and still see) shades of deep, intense reds juxtaposed with rivers of silvery-white. Why on earth does this sappy synthesizer and its F-sharp-major ostinato unearth such terrifying sensations in my body?

Listening closer, I realize that I have always inexplicably attributed the timbre of the synthesizer in these opening bars of *Hard Habit to Break* with the texture of “drippiness,” that is, a watery quality that made me feel like I had to cry and urinate at the same time. Its timbres would seep from the car speakers of my parents’ grey-gold Buick like the Freon dribbling from the slats of its air conditioner vents, soaking the seat of my corduroy overalls with imaginary liquid, and causing my body to freeze and tremble and tighten. The chorus filters applied to keyboardist

Bill Champlin's synthesizer, coupled with the breathy quality of Walter Parazaider's flute and the reverberation applied to Peter Cetera's falsetto voice, combined to unwrap within my own mind a tight package of seemingly unrelated associations: the physical need to urinate, the emotional need to cry, and the inexplicable images of the colors yellow, reddish mauve, and silver. Similarly, I felt myself gravitating toward and mentally looping certain timbral aspects of the song which are decidedly not in the foreground, but which seemed to have an intense impact on me: the echoey reverb of the voice, and the high-register vibrations of the synthesizer.

These simple motives would get stuck in my head for hours, and I could taste their cool, silver pinkishness in the sack of my jaw. But why the drippy, watery sensations? Why the silver, red, and mauve? Where do these perceptions come from? Are they simply bizarre byproducts of the so-called neurological disease of synaesthesia, the "rare condition" that I share with only 10 % of the population? Or is it in some way possible to trace these colors and somatics to a personal fabula, a story of my life that I cannot remember in clear, linear, filmic sequences but whose details, like the deeply-seated personal memories we explored earlier, are only available to me through my "secondary" senses?

It is currently unfashionable to view synaesthesia as resulting from a tangle of childhood associations and memories; as V.S. Ramachandran and others adamantly assert, synaesthesia is "not an effect based on [memory](#) associations from childhood...but a genuine perceptual phenomenon" (Ramachandran 2001, 3). Ramachandran's need to distinguish childhood memories from "genuine" phenomena is disturbing in itself, but I am also suspicious of the pathologizing tack that swiftly and cleanly dissociates the "specialness" of synaesthesia from the messy subjectivity of personal experiences and life stories, despite the fact that synaesthetic perceptions are unfailingly individual and unshared. While I cannot deny the possibility that my synaesthesia occurs as a byproduct of a mental disorder, I will suggest that the *disorder itself* is inextricable from the experiences of my childhood. The way I perceive these colors—these sounds—these sensations—are as fragments, violently shattered, that comprise a jagged, luminous mosaic of my history that I cannot ignore or ever escape. These events and their many outcomes have permanently imprinted themselves on my ears, my mouth, my skin, my body. For all that I do not know about them, I know this.

Let me begin again.

Like most children in the 1980s, I was addicted to the television show *Sesame Street*, a wildly successful collaboration between puppeteer and musician Jim Henson and the Children's Television Workshop. Focused on learning and the building of social skills, tolerance, and holistic well-being, *Sesame Street* imparted these concepts to young viewers using a unique marriage of music and images, the fusion and "catchiness" of which were designed to help children learn by [memorization](#). Pertinent messages were contained within musico-linguistic

gestures that could be ‘played out’ by the children even when they were away from the television. In addition, *Sesame Street* adopted a rather controversial format—the main storyline of each episode was interspersed with at least fifteen or twenty short cartoon vignettes structured like commercial breaks; to frequent viewers, most of these ‘cartoon commercials’ became very familiar, as they were consistently recycled and replayed for many years’ worth of episodes. This was one of the few programs that my parents approved of—indeed, most parents did, as its infectious musical games helped countless children remember and musically recite their letters, numbers, colors, and shapes well before kindergarten or first grade. Some of the cartoons imparted social messages as well: the importance of sharing, how to deal with anger, or how to keep calm in a crisis.

I watched this show constantly; it was my ritual, every afternoon, while my parents were at work and I was at home with my babysitter. There was one part of the show in particular, a musical cartoon-vignette, that stayed with me always, even in my dreams; it attached itself, with the stickiness of DNA, to my brain, my body, my world. This cartoon, which aired frequently on *Sesame Street*, was with me while my babysitter and I ate snacks, played games, and did other things, too. The cartoon watched me experience things that I can’t completely remember: games that my babysitter and I played, games involving the bathroom, and peeing, and private parts. The cartoon was with me when I become suddenly and inexplicably phobic about the bathroom, and my bedroom, and of peeing—it was there when I became a chronic bedwetter, when I displayed inexplicable, rageful behavior, when I started wetting myself in school, when I became silent and dissociative and withdrawn and self-destructive; when I purposefully slammed my head against the wall in hopes of fainting, when I ripped my bedroom door off its hinges to escape being locked inside by my bewildered parents, who didn’t know how to deal with my behavior other than to punish me—the cartoon was there for all of this, underscoring and coloring these senseless (and senseful) experiences; it followed me everywhere; like the Police, it “was watching” me.

These events in my life—the babysitter, the bedwetting, the rages—are things I remember only in brief flashes of intense physical sensations, colors, lights, sounds, smells, and tastes that have become inextricably woven into the contours of the cartoon. Some of these events have been corroborated by my family, but most exist as secrets, as things I can’t tell—both because they are unsavory and suggestive of crimes that must not be revealed, and because I do not have a clear narrative language in which to tell them, outside of *Sesame Street*, outside of Chicago’s drippy ballad. The best I can do is to show here that their true luminosity, their secret agency and power, lies in the TV show that witnessed them for me: the brief, three-minute cartoon that aired as part of *Sesame Street* around the years 1980-1988. (If you can, [turn this on and watch with me](#)):

“BEHIND YOUR FACE”

(a cartoon from “Sesame Street”)

A young African-American **BOY**, perhaps eight years old, is riding his bike in a dreamy, cloud-ridden landscape. He is utterly alone. A few lonely, hauntingly chromatic chords are played on a guitar and synthesizer. The background of the landscape is mostly silvery-white clouds, upon which a series of bizarre, surrealistic, semi-urban images pass swiftly by (or does the boy pass them by?), like traffic:

- *A bus shaped like a gigantic, upside-down green fish with yellow gills. Through the windows, we can see that the bus is half-filled with silhouetted people.*
- *An enormous female hippopotamus bouncing on a pogo stick, wearing bright red lipstick, dressed in a purple gown, high heels, and nightcap. Beneath her skirt, as she bounces up and down, we can see her frilly white underpants.*
- *A noisy **STREET CLOCK**, almost like a cuckoo clock. It stands upright like a grandfather clock, and as the boy stops to look at it, it jangles and dithers, ending its strange little cuckoo-clock routine with a high-pitched bell.*

BOY

I think I'm lost.

He continues to bicycle in the same direction, passing more bizarre images:

- *Two monkeys, one dressed in a dapper light blue suit with a top hat, the other in a yellow dress. They hold hands, bow to each other (the male monkey removes his hat gallantly), and look as though they are about to start ballroom dancing.*
*The **PLASTIC HOUSE**. It has a small staircase and seems more like a commercial building than a residential one. It could be a kind of bizarre train station, since it has a sideways-pointing chimney that exudes puffs of smoke. Yet it could also be someone's home, since there are quaint little curtains in the window and mushroom-shaped Tiffany lamp at the foot of the stairs. It, too, reacts when the boy stops to look at it, by lighting up, puffing smoke, and making a funny electronic upward-glissando noise that ends with a cacophony of high-pitched train whistles.*

BOY

I'm lost, I know it, I'm really lost.

He continues on, coming upon another monument:

- *The **ANIMAL FOUNTAIN**. This is a lot like a public fountain in a big city, with a circular shell-like birdbath pool out of which several sculptures emerge: two frogs, one on either side, whose mouths are open and pointed heavenward; two disembodied elephant trunks, complete with tusks, pointing upward; between the elephant tusks there is a yellow flower, which holds up a disembodied human torso in a tuxedo shaped like a heart; this then holds up two disembodied swan necks, heads, and bills, out of which water pours down into the elephant tusks. On either side of the elephant tusks, little mice are sticking out, pouring water into the frogs' mouths below using what appear to be horns of plenty (again, another disembodied animal part). The fountain also performs a little rhythmic routine; the various parts shift and pour water*

in different directions, again in reaction to the boy.

BOY

I don't like it here.

The boy leaves the **ANIMAL FOUNTAIN** and emerges again into a blank white space. He doesn't notice it, but to his right, a hand playing with a yo-yo appears out of thin air, bouncing the yo-yo up and down expertly.

BOY

I must really be lost good.

From the string of the yo-yo, a paunchy, bizarre-looking **MAN** steps out, feet first. It almost seems like he is trying to sneak up on the boy, but the boy turns around just in time to see the rest of the man appear "magically" from "behind" the string.

BOY

Wow!

YO-YO MAN

(in a deep, Barry White/soul-singer-type voice)

How'd you get here?

BOY

Oh, well, let's see. First I passed the street clock...

*[behind the boy's back, the **YO-YO MAN** turns into the **STREET CLOCK** and makes its jangly cuckoo noises]*

...then I passed the Plastic House...

*[**YO-YO MAN** becomes the **PLASTIC HOUSE** and makes its electronic glissando noises]*

...then I passed the Animal Fountain...

*[**YO-YO MAN** becomes the **ANIMAL FOUNTAIN** and makes its splashy water noises]*

...eh, and then you came along. Can you help me get unlost?

YO-YO MAN

(as major-key "reassuring" music starts playing on an electric piano)

Well, you should figure it out for yourself, little guy, but I'll give you a hint.

BOY

(with well-mannered politeness)

Oh, thank you!

YO-YO MAN

Try to remember everything you passed. But when you go back, make the first thing the last. HA-HA!
(he disappears into the yo-yo)

BOY

(bewildered, amazed)
Wow!

YO-YO MAN'S VOICE

(from "beyond," with a very echoed, booming, almost sinister voice)

YEAH....!!!

BOY

(thoughtful, with his finger to his lips)

Try to remember everything I passed...but when I go back, make the first thing the last! I get it! I just go back past all those weird things again until I'm home. That's it!

The BOY jumps on his bike and begins riding home in the opposite direction, heading to the left of the TV screen. A harp glissando signals the entrance of the final musical theme, a vaguely 70's rock refrain in which the **YO-YO MAN'S** voice sings the following:

YO-YO MAN'S VOICE

Behind your face
There is a place
That's called your brains or your mind!
If you could sneak a peak inside,
Oh, what wonderful things you'd find!

*As the YO-YO MAN sings this song, the BOY rides home, passing the following images in order: the **ANIMAL FOUNTAIN**, which stays quiet; a man dressed up like a butterfly, holding a set of wings above his head that are flapping and keeping him an inch or so off the ground; the **PLASTIC HOUSE**, which seems to be asleep—it does not light up or make any noise, even when the boy looks at it pointedly; the hippopotamus, who is now sitting placidly and sucking on what appears to be a pipe, though without any smoke; the **STREET CLOCK**, which is also dormant and silent; a fox dressed in an 19th century tan suit, who stares up at the clock face and compares its time to the time on his pocket watch; a skinnier hippopotamus in a powder blue frilly-trimmed leisure suit playing a banjo whose music we cannot hear; and finally, the entrance of an urban residential brownstone with a stoop, outside of which the boy drops his bike and runs inside.*

BOY'S VOICE

(as he runs inside the building)

Hi, Mom!

Boy, was I lost!

END OF THE CARTOON [91](#)

The cartoon appears to have a clear and simple message: if you somehow get lost, don't panic, just try to use logic, common sense, and your [memory](#) to find your way back. The boy is even offered a clever rhyme: "Try to remember everything you passed, but when you go back, make the first thing the last." Let us note, however, that as the boy turns around and bicycles home, the strange sites he had seen before are actually not in exact retrograde, and not all of them reappear. We also see that he ends up going back to the exact same place from which he started, which somehow brings him home, and yet when we first met him there at the beginning of the cartoon, he was seemingly not home at all, but in a vacuous, white open space on which richly-colored but fragmented images are superimposed. We cannot rely on this boy's [memory](#)—somehow he has forgotten certain key things, and is able to shuck off the entire experience as soon as he arrives back to safety. The music indicates this as well: the unsettling chromatics of the opening phrase eventually resolve to a friendly cadence in C major. The overarching ethos of this cartoon seems to be the following: if something scary happens to you, stay calm, get through it, and then never think about it again.

I cannot remember how old I was when I first saw this cartoon, but even as I watch it now, my body clenches with a strange physical mixture of horror, fear, and utter loneliness. I can remember countless times in my childhood hearing the opening chromatic phrase of the high-pitched guitar and damp-sounding synthesizer and literally sucking in my breath, knowing that this two-minute television clip was going to be painful to experience. This brief, sad little story of a boy lost in a confusing landscape of frightening sounds and images (a "forest of symbols") seemed to have the power to speak directly to me, as though I had lived this exact same experience myself. Yet it certainly was not the surface constituents of the cartoon that would have contributed to such a feeling: where the boy was obviously living in an urban environment, most closely modeled on New York City, I was living on a quiet, tree-lined street in California; where the boy was black, I was white; where the boy was free to roam around on his bike, I was locked in the house, not allowed to go outside by myself or escape the watchful eye of my babysitter; where his "older friend" was a man, mine was a teenage girl. Why, then, did I feel so profoundly connected to the story?

I see this entire cartoon as a crayon-like representation of the disturbed [memory](#) process of a child who has just undergone something sexually traumatic. The bizarre carnival of images are deeply erotic: the movements of the street clock are like beckoning hands, and its opening doors and maniacal, laughing birds suggest the shape and behavior of a trenchcoat-enrobed flasher. The watery, toilet-like

sounds of the animal fountain, with its disembodied bird-heads out of which water freely pours, have both phallic and orgasmic characteristics, and also conjure sonic images of urination, enacting Freudian theories of excretion as a childhood gateway to sexual satisfaction (Freud 1962, 52). The man who helps the boy “get unlost” in the cartoon appears from thin air: like the grin of the Cheshire Cat, his hand appears first, and from the yo-yo string the rest of his body materializes, revealing him to be a chubby, middle-aged ‘dandy.’ The Yo-Yo Man reveals his reprehensible nature when, as the boy describes to him the three things he remembers, the Man “secretly” turns into them—suggesting that he is already well aware of where the boy has been, either because he has been following him, or because he was the one responsible for making him “get lost” in the first place. The displacement of the boy’s house as seemingly right under his nose the entire time suggests that the “getting lost” took place perhaps more within the confines of his psyche than it did outside on the street, and yet the very trajectory of this cartoon is eerily similar to the goals of psychotherapy, insisting that one must “go back” in order to move forward. The fantasy of moving on and coming full circle is certainly what is being performed in this cartoon—if you could just remember what happened to you, you would be able to heal.

For me, a young child who was all too well acquainted with scary, physically shameful experiences, this cartoon epitomized the impossible. It was impossible for me to think clearly and normally about the sexually abusive things that were happening to me, and it also was impossible for me to not think about the scary things that had happened to this boy, even when he was safe at home. At the threshold of the impossible and the all-too-possible, in front of a screen whose non-reality seemed more real, more acceptable, and more assimilable than my own, I somehow literally transferred my identity as a sexually violated child onto his—a bluntly-drawn cartoon figure whose predicament was one with which the musical instruments of my limbic system sympathetically resonated. Although it frightened me terribly, I was obsessed with this cartoon; my desire to watch it over and over again had the intensity of what Bessel van der Kolk calls the “compulsion to repeat [the trauma]” (van der Kolk 1989), and indeed my obsession with it happened on multiple sensory levels: its colors would burn my eyes in a sloppy, fuzzy clash of silvers, reds, and yellows; its language, specifically the word *peek*—“if you could sneak a *peek* inside”—became the center of an unspeakable fear I developed about my bedroom at that time (when my parents demanded to know why I wouldn’t go in there, all I could reply was that I was “scared of the *peek*”); and the music, the most frightening aspect of all, would get stuck in my head and haunt my dreams in reverberant echoes and endless, repetitive janglings. My fragmented history lived only in this cartoon, a container whose poisonous contents were so voluminous that they could not help but eventually spill out over the edges, into the cracks and crannies of repetitious pop songs that in any way resembled the music and imagery of the cartoon itself. The opening motive would stay with me, in a teasing, hypnotic loop—for hours and even days afterward—setting the stage for the equally repetitive way in which I would hear the Chicago song later on. As the repetitions of this creepy, watery music continued to resound and echo in my mind,

they took on an almost muscular, kinetic energy, a slow, burning build of an intense somatic feeling that would begin in my bladder and eventually unfurl throughout my entire body; a strange, cold, liquid, shameful sensation that I began calling, secretly to myself, the “Babysitter Feeling.” It was a feeling without reason—akin to what Judith Herman describes as “image without context” (Herman 1992, 38)—a bodily sensation that I was aware was horribly familiar to me but the actual details of which I could not retrieve. This feeling has been with me for as long as I can remember; I still experience it, often in reaction to colors and sounds that resemble the contours of the cartoon. Indeed, the cartoon has completely infiltrated my musical brain, finding its way into my perception of entirely separate musical entities, ones that I hear and have heard in a completely different contexts—the Chicago song, and, to list a few more of my “sad songs,” *These Dreams* by Heart; *A Whiter Shade of Pale*, by Procol Harum; *Open Arms* by Journey; or *Sailing* by Christopher Cross. I hear any of these songs, with their slow, mysterious tempos, their reverberant, dreamy synthesizers, their whispery, echoey flutes or percussive brushes, their chromatic harmonies and distant modulations—and I see silver, red, yellow, and mauve; I feel the “Babysitter Feeling,” that strange, watery, creepy sensation initially brought on by the cartoon.

Perhaps this can all be traced to stylized similarities between these songs and the cartoon: for instance, I hear Chicago’s high synthesizer moments and reverberant vocals, and I am immediately reminded of the glissando whistle from the Plastic House and the echo of the Yo-Yo Man’s voice. But what, then, is the significance of the colors silver and red? Again, the truth lies in the cartoon: the boy’s red T-shirt, the yellow of the Street Clock, and the silvery white background are, to my eyes, its most enduring visual aspects; the generic versions of these colors are fuzzy remnants of my very early [memory](#) of the cartoon that has since been sublimated into a tight synaesthetic [memory](#)-package, and inextricably attached to certain characteristic musical sounds. When I hear the drippy, opening synthesizer of the Chicago, it immediately conjures the color palette of the cartoon. While I am not immediately or consciously reminded of the cartoon, its representative silvers, reds, yellows, and mauves seep into my mind’s eye. These are the colors that mean: *Bad. Sad. Trapped. Pee. Abuse. Secret. Babysitter. Don’t go here. Don’t stay here.* Their meanings do not fit into sentences, narratives, or logic. They simply *are*, as suddenly and vividly as the colors themselves, just *there*.

To this day, when my “sad songs” come on outside of my control—on the radio, or in a public space—I am assaulted, and I must leave or fight against the disorienting, time-travel effects of these sensory memories. It is difficult for me to distinguish where these songs and images end and I begin. They are pieces of me, fragments of my life, floating out in the infinite invisible tapestry of a shared popular culture, stitching together lanyards of experiences and identities that never actively or consciously speak. This continues to be the case, even for pieces of music that I came to know only in adulthood, such as the sixth movement of Olivier

Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, entitled *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes*. If you can, [turn this on and listen with me](#).

When I first heard this piece several years ago, I could not understand why it made my body feel like it was convulsing inside. The familiar watery, urinary, “Babysitter” sensation overtook me, as well as the urge to cry, and everywhere I looked in my mind’s eye, I saw pink, red, white and silver. I felt like I was coming home to a very old and fundamental part of myself. Then I realized it: this music, like the other sad songs, is incredibly similar to the music of the cartoon.

If we examine all three of these pieces of music—the Messiaen, the Chicago song, and the music of the cartoon—in more detail, we find that all three of them are centered in some way around the pitches F#, A#, and C; the Chicago song starts in F# major and eventually modulates to C major; the atonal Messiaen piece is constructed from a semi-octatonic loop with an F# final; and the music for “Behind Your Face,” while eventually ending in C major, opens with an F# diminished triad in the synthesizer. All three make use of modulation to keys related by a tritone, a semitone, or major second, and the timbre of all three pieces is also related, either through the use of similar instruments, or through stylized gestures, all of which bring to my mind the sound effects of the images from the cartoon. Both *Behind Your Face* and the Chicago song use chorus effects on a synthesizer, and the use of the flute in the Chicago song is reminiscent of the unison combination of clarinet, violin, cello, and piano employed in the Messiaen. I also notice that the Messiaen sounds like a continuation of the initial musical impulse of the cartoon, and therefore more truthful: unlike the cartoon, which departs from its chromatic gestures as quickly as they appear—thus glossing over the problems they suggest and cheerily resolving itself—Messiaen’s similarly chromatic line continues in a spiral formation, visiting and revisiting the initial idea the way an obsessive thought or feeling circles and spirals endlessly in a nervous or frustrated mind. While I cannot argue that these pieces are fundamentally “the same,” they all possess tiny but poignant qualities that seem to be speaking directly to an intensely fused music image package buried deep inside the complex folds of my limbic system—the place where my fragmented memories of sexual abuse theoretically live.

In his discussion of the “harmonic” and “contrapuntal” relationships between film and its sonic accompaniments, Michel Chion coined the term “synchresis” to describe the compulsion to forge and marry the simultaneous occurrence of sonic and visual stimuli in film and television, such that their relationship is made to seem immediate and necessary, rather than contrived and arbitrary (Chion 1994, 5). For me to automatically marry the boy’s red T-shirt and the milky, silvery-mauve background of his imaginary world to the chromatics of the guitar and the reverb of the synthesizer (which I have since described as the “damp chromatics” and “drippy reverb,” undoubtedly also attached to the watery sounds of the animal fountain and the bathroom-related sexual games I was forced to play) is a clear example of this: what Chion calls *synchresis*, I call my *synaesthesia*, and because of this, I have not since been able to hear chromatic F#-centered lines or

reverberant synthesizers without seeing red, yellow, mauve, or silver, or—more importantly—without suddenly and inexplicably experiencing the “Babysitter feeling,” in all its creepy, shameful horror. In fact, the more familiar with these musics I have become, the more readily I have heard them as mirrors of my own spatial experiences in the world. Chion writes:

The eye perceives more slowly because it has more to do all at once...the ear isolates a detail of its auditory field and it follows this point or line in time. If the sound at hand is a familiar piece of music, however, the listener’s auditory attention strays more easily from the temporal thread to explore spatially (Chion 1994, 11).

As Chion suggests, my relationship to these three pieces of music is just as spatial (that is, visual) as it is sonic—that is, I relate to them as multi-sensory spaces, or what I have identified as synaesthetic [memory](#)-packages, that suggest an architecture of fragmented, sensorally vibrant memories and experiences. My spatial perceptions of these songs happen within their first few seconds—rather than experiencing my memories along with the temporal experience of the Chicago song, for instance, my memories are deeply embedded in the timbral contours of its initial drippy synthesizer sounds, its breathy flute, and its milky, falsetto voice. It is not what the music does or how it eventually develops that speaks to my memories. It is the spaces it suggests, through its room sounds, echoes, and sonic/visual resonances with the cartoon, that have allowed it to become a literal container for the somatic experiences that I cannot contain on my own. My sad songs are chambers, reliquaries of secrets that I have kept hidden even from myself. Their echoey, reverberant spaces recall the claustrophobic, tile-walled bathroom prison in which I was once abused, and the white, empty spaces of the world occupied by the boy in the cartoon—a space upon which, many years ago, I found it easier to transfer my own experiences and memories. The boy’s world was my refuge, because it was not mine, and because it “confused” my story, it “blurred” my senses, and it hid from me the details of my traumatic memories to the extent that I could somehow survive them, even with their liquid, watery details spilling over the edges of my life in the form of squishy, sonic colors and vibrant musical timbres. The fact that I see all of my sad songs in the same shades of red, yellow, mauve, and silver—the colors of the cartoon that have remained with me all these years in an unusually vivid fashion—suggests that these colors represent beautiful, seemingly innocuous versions of objects in my psyche that, if somehow glued back together, could potentially comprise a clear [memory](#) of my fragmented, traumatic experience. Perhaps my synaesthesia is protecting me.

fragments

shards

pieces,

sudden, bright beams of

light, sound, smell, touch

(fragments)

In this broken acoustemology of trauma, I have tried to impose my own desire to go back, to understand and reconstruct my own shattered experiences in the hopes that their reconstitution could metonymize—no, *catalyze*—my own. I have tried, like the composer I am, to finish this piece, to resolve and move on, to sound the last chord of Messiaen's sixth movement and move slowly, dreamily, bravely, to the next (*Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps*)...(if you can, [put it on and listen with me](#), one final time).

But I can't leave you with much more than fragments. I cannot say, with any certainty or conviction, that my experiences and the colors they have left me with can offer any greater truth than the knowledge that these experiences are still with me, watching everything I do, coloring everything I hear with utmost brilliance and luminosity. Perhaps this is the gift of trauma: these meaningful fragments, these reverberant spaces and sheens. I am reminded of Philip Pullman's children's trilogy *His Dark Materials*, a saga based upon John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which scientists and theologians in a world parallel to ours are studying the strange effects of a beautiful, mysterious material called "Dust," or "Sraf." This luminous golden matter, apparently connected with human consciousness and will, is discovered to be prevalent around children, suggesting that whatever it is—consciousness, life force, marks of individuality, or even *memories*—it has an intrinsically ephemeral quality, a time-sensitive finitude, and is perhaps, like synaesthesia, an elusive, suggestive remainder of forgotten knowledge and faded pasts. Pullman's age-old themes of immortality, innocence, and dangerous knowledge—themes indisputably central to narratives of trauma—ambulate around the central figure of this Sraf, whose intangible, fuzzy, ungraspable, and spellbinding haze provides us with an astounding image through which to visualize the sensory-based workings of the limbic system. Perhaps the "long echoes" and "forests of symbols," representing our most deeply buried memories, can now be re-imagined as glittering clouds of intermingled, indivisible sensory impulses, silently surrounding our psyches and making us who we are.

For many children who are traumatized—or many adults who have survived such a childhood—these multi-sensory impulses are the only language through which their experiences can be approached or related, much less understood. For the survivor of trauma, this Sraf-like place must be a place beyond understanding, a fragmentation that is at once the remains of a shattered existence and the glittering promise of a subjectivity built anew, a personhood outside that of pain and suffering. Perhaps the Sraf that speaks for trauma—what in my case I am calling synaesthesia—is a mark as well as a doorway, an echo as well as a song, a trace as well as a transcendence. Perhaps it is only a beginning.

memory

Acknowledgements

Notes

- [1*] Note from the **Editorial board** of TRANS: Due to the fact that the present article has considerable importance for the present volume and due to the reasons explained by the author in her introduction, the **Editorial team**, with the support of the **Advisory board** of TRANS, has agreed to accept this collaboration with a pseudonym. This acceptance of an article with the use of a pseudonym is exceptional.
- [1] I am grateful for the assistance, suggestions, and insights of AMO, SC, JM, AR, EH, BD, and MK. I also thank my colleagues JS, MW, MG, AC, RM, PKM, SP, and MQ for all of their comments and suggestions, and for their amazing work that continually inspires my own. I must also acknowledge my parents, who have, knowingly and unknowingly, been there for me through all of this and have shown me the kind of love that transcends description or understanding. Finally, I could not have done this work without T, whose love, support, and brilliance anchors me, challenges me, and keeps me feeling alive and excited. Thank you.
- [2] See Simon Baron-Cohen and John E. Harrison, eds. *Synaesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997; Richard E. Cytowic, *Synaesthesia: A Union of the Senses*. New York: Springer-Verlag, New York Inc., 1989; John E. Harrison, *Synaesthesia: The Strangest Thing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; Lawrence E. Marks, *The Unity of the Senses: Interrelations Among the Modalities*. New York: Academic Press, 1978; and Charles S. Myers, "Two Cases of Synaesthesia." *British Journal of Psychology* 7 (1914): 112-117.
- [3] For further reading on the topic of synaesthesia as possibly related to brain malady or dysfunction, see any of the above references (Cytowic, Baron-Coehn, Harrison, Marks, and Myers) or Richard E. Cytowic, *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*. New York: Putnam, 1993.
- [4] Although there are dozens of good examples, see especially Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondances*, in Robinson, Christopher, trans. *French Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. London: David & Charles; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978, 129-30; Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, trans), New York: Vintage, 1982; Alexander Scriabin, *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*. As James M. Baker has demonstrated, Scriabin's *Prometheus* was composed via a system of associations between colors and musical keys later revealed to be based on intellectual and metaphorical ideas, rather than resulting from neurologically synaesthetic perceptions.
- [5] It is worth noting here the etymology of "beyond the pale," as defined by worldwidewords.org: "A *pale* is an old name for a pointed stake driven into the ground to form part of a fence...a safeguard, a barrier, an enclosure, or a limit beyond which it was not permissible to go...another famous one is the Pale in Ireland, that part of the country over which England had direct jurisdiction—it varied from time to time, but was an area of several counties centred on Dublin. The first mention of the Irish Pale is in a document of 1446–7. Though there was an attempt later in the century to

enclose the Pale by a bank and ditch (which was never completed), there never was a literal fence around it...the expression beyond the pale, meaning outside the bounds of acceptable behavior, came much later.” Available online at <www.worldwidewords.org>, accessed October 16, 2006.

- [6] See Kristin Leutwyler, “Exploring the Musical Brain.” In *Scientific American*, 22 January 2001. See also Isabelle Peretz and Robert Zatorre, eds, *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [7] See Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.; Debbie Nathan, “The ritual sex abuse hoax,” *The Village Voice*, January 12, 1990. Available online at <<http://www.ncrj.org/Nathan/index>>; Katherine Ramsland, “The McMartin Daycare Case – The Crime Library,” available online at: <http://www.crimelibrary.com/criminal_mind/psychology/mcmartin_daycare/3.html>.
- [8] See Dorothy Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina*. New York: Penguin Group Publishing, 1992; see also Pat Conroy, *The Prince of Tides*. New York: Bantam Books, 1987.
- [9] “Behind Your Face,” *Sesame Street* Episode 2432, 1988. Transcribed by Silent Jane.

Bibliography and Works Cited

- Allison, Dorothy. 1992. *Bastard Out of Carolina*. New York: Penguin Group Publishing.
- American Psychiatric Association. 1987. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd edition. Washington, D.C.: APA, p. 250.
- Anderson, M.C., Ochsner, K.N., Kuhl, B., Cooper, J., Robertson, E., Gabrieli, S.W., Glover, G.H., Gabrieli, J.D.E. 2004. “Neural systems underlying the suppression of unwanted memories.” *Science*, 303, 232-235.
- Aristotle (Hugh Lawson-Tancred, trans.). 1986. “Sense-Perception.” In *De Anima (On the Soul)*. London: Penguin Books.
- Baer, Ulrich. 2000. *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Baker, James M. 1986. *The Music of Alexander Scriabin*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Baron-Cohen, Simon and Harrison, John E., eds. 1997. *Synaesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Baudelaire, Charles. 1978. “Correspondances.” In Robinson, Christopher, trans. *French Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. London: David & Charles; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978, 129-30.
- “Behind Your Face,” *Sesame Street* Episode 2432, 1988. Transcribed by Silent Jane
- Benjamin, Walter “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” In Benjamin, Walter; Zohn, Harry, trans. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books,

1968.

- Card, Orson Scott. 1994. *Speaker for the Dead*. New York: Tor Books.
- Card, Orson Scott. 1992. *Xenocide*. New York: Tor Books.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. 1995. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chion, Michel (Gorbman, Claudia, trans). 1994. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Classon, Constance. 1990. "Sweet Colors, Fragrant Songs: Sensory Models of the Andes and Amazon." In *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 722-735.
- Conroy, Pat. 1987. *The Prince of Tides*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Cytowic, Richard E. 1989. *Synaesthesia: A Union of the Senses*. New York: Springer-Verlag, New York Inc.
- Cytowic, Richard E. 1997. "Synaesthesia: Phenomenology and Neuropsychology." In Baron-Cohen, Simon and Harrison, John E., eds. *Synaesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp.17-42.
- Cytowic, Richard E. 1993. *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*. New York: Putnam.
- Danielewski, Mark Z. 2000. *House of Leaves*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Feld, Steven. 1996. "Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea." In Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds., *Senses of Place*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 91-136.
- Freud, Sigmund (Strachey, James, trans). 1962 [1949] "Infantile Sexuality" in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 39-72.
- Gibson, James J. 1966. *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Ginsberg, Leon. 1923. "A Case of Synaesthesia," in *The American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 582-589.
- Harrison, John. 2001. *Synaesthesia: The Strangest Thing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Herman, Judith. 1997 [1992]. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books.
- Howes, David. 2003. *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Hubbard, E.M. and Ramachandran, V.S. 2001. "Synaesthesia—A Window into Perception, Thought, and Language." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 12, pp. 3-34.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985. "When Our Lips Speak Together." In Irigaray, Luce (Porter, Catherine, trans.). *This Sex Which is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 205-218.
- Jackson, Michael. 1983. "Thinking through the Body: An Essay on Understanding Metaphor." *Social Analysis* 14, pp.:127-48;
- Leutwyler, Kristin. January 2001 "Exploring the Musical Brain." In *Scientific American*, 22. Accessed on line at http://cogweb.ucla.edu/ep/Music_Leutwyler_01.html, May 12, 2006.

- Marks, Lawrence E. 1978. *The Unity of the Senses: Interrelations Among the Modalities*. New York: Academic Press.
- Messiaen, Olivier. 1956. *Technique de mon langage musicale*, 1st Volume: Text. Paris: Alphonse Leduc.
- Messiaen, Olivier. 1941. *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. Durand S.A. Editions Musicales, United Music Publishers Ltd. Londres.
- Myers, Charles S. 1914. "Two Cases of Synaesthesia." *British Journal of Psychology* 7: 112-117.
- Peretz, Isabelle and Zatorre, Robert, eds, 2005. *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Proust, Marcel (C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, trans). 1982. *Remembrance of Things Past*. New York: Vintage.
- Pullman, Philip. 1995. *The Golden Compass (His Dark Materials, Book I)*. New York: Random House.
- Pullman, Philip. 1997. *The Subtle Knife (His Dark Materials, Book II)*. New York: Random House.
- Pullman, Philip. 2000. *The Amber Spyglass (His Dark Materials, Book III)*. New York: Random House.
- Sacks, Oliver. 1982. *Awakenings*. London: Pan.
- Stoller, Paul. 1989. *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Swallow, Michael. 2002. "The Brain – its Music and its Emotion: the Neurology of Trauma." In Sutton, Julie P., ed. *Music, Music Therapy and Trauma*. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 41-56.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel A. June 1989. "The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma: Re-enactment, Revictimization, and Masochism." In *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* Volume 12, Number 2, pp. 389-411.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel, A., McFarlane, Alexander C., and Weisaeth, Lars, eds. 1996. *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Discography

- Chicago. *Hard Habit to Break*. Chicago 17. Full Moon/Warner Bros. Records, 1984.
- Messiaen, Olivier. *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. Albert Etard, Claude Desurmont,
- Daniel Barenboim, and Luben Yordanoff, performers. Deutsche Grammophon, 1990.

C Synaesthesia was first documented in the early 19th century by German physician Georg Sachs, who dedicated two pages of his dissertation on his own experience with the condition. It wasn't, however, until the mid-1990s that empirical research proved its existence, when Professor Simon Baron-Cohen and his colleagues used fMRIs on six synaesthetes and discovered that the parts of the brain associated with vision were active during auditory stimulation, even though the subjects were blindfolded. D What makes synaesthesia a particularly interesting condition is that it isn't an illness at all. To that end, researchers in the Netherlands have already begun developing a web browser plug-in that will change the colours of certain letters. They are traumatic experiences and the memories are fragmented; some bits are vivid and some bits are clearly distorted. A smart barrister would say, "So you can't tell me what he was wearing, how can we rely on your claim that he raped you?" Clearly remembering only fragments of a traumatic event, whether it's a train crash or even a sexual assault, can present problems. "The police always want to get a coherent story, whereas the truth of the matter is that when you remember something from the past, you remember it in fragments, often out of order," says Conway. Insurance claims or even requests for asylum rely largely on memories of past events. As Conway says: "Our memory is not a record of reality, it's a record of our experience of reality. This page contains modern English translations of the lyric poems, epigrams, fragments and quotations of Sappho of Lesbos. Sappho was perhaps the first great lyric poet of antiquity. She is known especially for her "Sapphics" love poems and songs some of which are considered to be bisexual in nature, or lesbian (a term derived from the name of her island home, Lesbos). But was Sappho just another love poet, or was she the Love Poet? According to Margaret Reynolds: "Certainly Sappho seems to have been an original inventor of the language of sexual desire." Unfortunately, the