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*Sleeping, Hiding, Dropping Out – Coordinates for a Poetics of Evasion*

By Matt Longabucco

*When one becomes “someone” out of not-being, one is no longer the All, until one leaves the not-being behind. – Plotinus, *Enneads*<sup>1</sup>*

My dentist’s office is full of feelings. My hygienist, Victor, had a hard year—tales of a break-up with his longtime partner have supplanted once-magnificent iPhoto slide shows of winter trips to Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, Jerusalem, and Istanbul. He knows I’m separated, we commiserate a bit, though I just want to space out and bow down in dizzy worship before one of the fantasmatic icons of my obsession for twenty minutes, with the whirr of the electric polisher for hysterical keening and the periodic stab of the hook a note of frenzy. But no, I’m expected to follow his narrative and grunt assent to prove it. When Victor’s through, he disappears down the hall, I spit and reel. After some endless interval, Dr. D’s enormous pink head is there, very close, nose hairs wave hello. He gives me a once-over, “Hey cutie,” followed by a squeeze on the arm. A rub on the head, “Love those blue eyes. How are you baby?” He’s by turns gifted, aloof, inappropriate, useless, a comfort to patients and a tyrant to his staff, and keeps telling me I’d better straighten my teeth or the two front top ones, pushed ever-backward by their neighbors, “won’t even be there” when I smile. I keep telling him I don’t have the cash.

<sup>1</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 8, 6, 1.

I mention Victor's breakup and Dr. D rolls his eyes. "You have to watch out for that midlife crisis," he says. "My partner had one that went on for ten years. Mine took six months. I just accepted that now I was invisible and then moved on with my life." This seemed so categorical that I didn't follow up, but later wished I'd probed and learned more about the partner's decade spent thrashing against an apparently inevitable erasure. What had that meant? Wearing the tight, flashy clothes of a much younger man? Acting out on social media? Affairs? In the recent film *Birdman* an aging Michael Keaton pounds his body as if to make sure it's still solid, screaming "I'm disappearing" as he faces the prospect of the very public failure of his play and his last-ditch effort to realize artistic seriousness after a career spent acting in popular but hollow superhero films. He's repeatedly humiliated, most spectacularly when, smoking outside and losing his robe in a door, wearing nothing but tighty whities, he winds up high-tailing it around the theater and into the thick of a gawking 42<sup>nd</sup> Street throng. The incident, captured on video by members of the crowd, becomes instant fodder for Twitter and YouTube. He thinks it's a disaster but, his daughter assures him, publicity in the form of viral presence is the new form of power.

It's hard to care much about Keaton's dilemma in the film. A wealthy older white man—or, in my dentist's case, a successful middle-aged white man, albeit a queer one—has a very different relationship to visibility than most. The world is full of those who have visibility they *don't* want, after all, in the form of surveillance, incarceration, detention, and targeting, as well as those who fight for visibility at the level of, for example, the right to marry or the right to live and work in a nation whose higher standard of living makes it necessary to enter, despite taking on the status of an "illegal" to do so. The cultural formation in which a dominant class establishes the terms of a visibility so specific and predicated on systems of exclusion, that even they themselves cannot tarry long in the light of its merciless inquisition, can hardly be dismantled to serve those subjects' dawning recognition of that system's totality when it eventually claims them, too.

That light isn't just a trope. Bright windows in midnight office buildings. A stretch of interstate where a road crew toils in a pure white halo once reserved for movie sets and UFO landings. Days without end in the artificially-lit underground cells of extra-legal prisons whose inmates are being intentionally sleep-deprived and barred from natural cycles of time, the better to degrade their selfhood into madness and surrender (twenty-hour long interrogations are documented).

In his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), Jonathan Crary considers this phenomenon in its acceleration and ascendancy: the store is always open, the workers are always working, and everyone is expected to be always available and accountable. Crary writes of a “contemporary imaginary in which a state of permanent illumination is inseparable from the nonstop operation of global exchange and circulation”.<sup>2</sup> The eponymous phrase represents an ominous shift in our material experience of time, “...a generalized inscription of human life into duration without breaks, defined by a principle of continuous functioning” dependent on the “eradication of shadows and obscurity and of alternate temporalities”.<sup>3</sup> The result is a perpetual present-time without variation, thanks to a “sweeping abandonment of the pretense that time is coupled to any long-term undertakings, even to fantasies of ‘progress’ or development. An illuminated 24/7 world without shadows is the final capitalist mirage of post-history, of an exorcism of the otherness that is the motor of historical change”.<sup>4</sup> Crary locates the experience of 24/7 in the everyday and in our status as members of a global system linked by a set of relations whose unfathomable complexity and apparent imperviousness to change is hardly the accident it would like to pretend to be. This system’s most flagrant triumph is that it is both overtly brutal—the police, the military, the prison system operate in broad daylight—and terrifically subtle, enjoining those it doesn’t physically master (yet) to administrate for themselves a distracted preoccupation at every waking moment, in unquestioning thrall to “an array of forces that esteem the individual who is constantly engaged, interfacing, interacting, communicating, responding, or processing within some telematic milieu”.<sup>5</sup> Yes, us. Even an “us” that cuts, if unequally, across divisions of race, class, gender, nationality. The implication, for Crary, is the loss of even the possibility of a consciousness that could imagine otherwise. “24/7,” he writes, “steadily undermines distinctions between night and day, between light and dark, and between action and repose. It is a zone of insensibility, of amnesia, of what defeats the possibility of experience”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8,19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Sleep is a notable casualty of this shift, but it can also offer, in its stubborn biological necessity, a respite from it. The unambiguous message of a 24/7 society is that “sleeping is for losers”.<sup>7</sup> But the “stunning, inconceivable reality [of sleep] is that nothing of value can be extracted from it”.<sup>8</sup> It’s with sleep that I want briefly to investigate the first of three recent poetic incursions into 24/7’s hegemony. The history of poetics that valorize sleep and dream is, obviously, extensive. Anne Carson’s recent *The Albertine Workout* (2014) consists of 57 propositions, and appendices, that circle around the character of Albertine, the young woman at the core of the narrator’s obsession in volume 5 of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. That volume, *The Captive*, tells of the period when Albertine lives in the narrator’s home and at his pleasure.<sup>9</sup> They are lovers, sometimes, but not exactly a couple, as the narrator is mostly bored and repulsed by his social inferior except when he is—often—driven mad by jealousy and desire when she lies to him (poorly) about what he suspects are her lesbian affairs and when, he fears, he is unable to penetrate the hidden truth of her desires. The flat, quasi-scientific character of Carson’s propositions alerts us to the absurdity of the situation:

3. Albertine herself is present or mentioned on 807 pages of Proust’s novel.
4. On a good 19% of these pages she is asleep.

And later:

27. a) Sometimes in her sleep Albertine throws off her kimono and lies naked.
27. b) Sometimes then Marcel possesses her.
27. c) Albertine appears not to wake up.
28. Marcel appears to think he is the master of such moments.

Carson pokes fun at Marcel—who is and is not Proust—for being so fully the dupe of a game that, at the same time, expresses the grim, confounding logic of possession. Yet Carson doesn’t fault Marcel for this, noting, “There is no right or wrong in Proust, says Samuel Beckett, and I believe it.”<sup>10</sup> She is also quick to complicate the implicit gender dynamics of the text by providing details of Proust’s real-life affair with his chauffeur, Alfred, who shares many traits with Albertine.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Carson, *The Albertine Workout* (New York: New Directions), 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

More than drawing a moral, then, Carson might ascribe to Proust a poetics of Albertine as much as we might assume he expresses a poetics of Marcel who, for all his acumen and fine distinction-making, is always in thrall to the literalness of his desire, so long as he is trapped inside of time rather than transcending it. Albertine, however, seems to know how to play the game. She *bluffs* (you can't play without doing so). And, she tells us: *you can pretend to sleep*. Just as you can pretend to be depressed, sick, working at your desk, or enjoying yourself. You can hide in plain sight, and, increasingly, you must. And you must at the same time be bad at this: bad at faking, bad at lying, while somehow at the same time managing to hint that this poor performance is itself a bluff meant to conceal an even deeper deception that defends a still more fundamental truth. To do this well is to bend, deform, and potentially even dismantle interpretive and investigative structures by forcing them into incapacity and exhaustion. Agents of surveillance, information, and repression shine their light everywhere, but a pinprick of darkness, if bottomless enough, can cost those agents more than they have to spend, and reveal their limits.

This kind of leveraging finds a companion in Lisa Robertson's recent *Cinema of the Present*. The book-length poem stages a dialogue between two voices. Though oblique, the poem's concerns—the nature of address, the sources of sustenance, everyday time and its manipulation, the persistence of obscurity—are nevertheless audible throughout, as in the final lines:

What if there were a life that sustained life?

*What if you press the quotidian all over its surface?*

You've been also women.

*What we have is a mix of improper disclosures of partial information mixed within accurate information and then drawn into unfounded conclusions, you said.*

You're in the part of the night where it's quietest.

*Now only time is wild.*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Robertson, *Cinema of the Present* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2014), 105-106.

Robertson read this poem in its entirety at the Poetry Project in November 2013. Afterwards, she explained the thinking behind its composition. In her comments, citing Pierre Hadot (who provides the epigraph to this essay), she discusses the notion that early Hellenic philosophy was a practice for “amplifying the present to dispel suffering in daily life” before it later became focused on discursivity and its attendant sociality.<sup>12</sup> This makes her ask, replacing philosophy with poetics, “What if the poem’s not written to fulfill a discourse or to address an institutional formation, but to open new living and thinking? How much privacy would this poem need in the making? How much time? How much silence? Does the poem have, in Denise Riley’s words, “The right to be lonely”? I’m trying to think about solitude as an organ or an ornament of the social, not its opposite. Can the poem become the space of that solitude?”<sup>13</sup>

For Robertson, “freedom” and “pleasure” are found by moving through loneliness, not in fleeing it. Paradoxically, this is a social gesture, though not, she says, the sort of sociality that the avant-garde, always too literal, translates into meetings and collectives. She describes moving away from her social network in Vancouver—“endless nights in bars arguing”—to living “solo” in the French countryside, in an isolated “house at the edge of a field with my dog.” The change in the material condition of her life was difficult—“it’s often sad,” she laments, to be solitary. But this led to a new protocol in her writing practice, a “charged solitude” she associates with Epicurus’s injunction to “live in hiding” not as an evasion of the political, but rather as a preferably “inefficient sociality,” a way of dwelling in “a place where the social can evade instrumentality.” Robertson cites Hannah Arendt, who asks “Where do we go when we think? We go into an inconspicuousness.”<sup>14</sup>

Robertson moves deftly, in her comments, between a dialogue with a train of thought leading from the atomists and Epicurus through Arendt and Barthes and Denise Riley, in which a practice of solitude opens up a more true sociality in writing, and a consideration of the way in which seeking solitude might also be an effect of aging—“you just don’t want to go to meetings anymore”—or a reckoning

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Robertson, “Reading at the Poetry Project,” November 2013. Poetry Project.

<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1978. Quoted in Lisa Robertson, “Reading at the Poetry Project,” November 2013.



with the realities of illness and other conditions that enforce a retreat from communal life. She quotes Carson: “Loneliness doesn’t matter. It might seem difficult, but it doesn’t have meaning.”<sup>15</sup>

Wonderful claim that means, I think, that the affect loneliness undoubtedly contains cannot signify as such—it only marks the difficulty of the meaning-making to which a solitary mind can best attend. Because loneliness hurts and collectivity often doesn’t—“Who doesn’t want to party together?” Robertson asks—we mistakenly choose community as a site of production. But in her “cinema of the present,” Robertson experiences herself as if at the movies, alone with others in the dark, alert to the moment unfolding.

This brings us to a final set of coordinates: another recent book: Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer’s description and investigation of Lee Lozano’s *Dropout Piece*. The book takes a timely interest in Lozano’s act of “life-art,” begun around 1970, which involved the artist’s self-imposed exile from the art world’s social and economic universe. Lozano, whose pieces were in dialogue with similar work of the period, effectively disappeared, ceasing to exhibit her work or take much care of work she made subsequently, at the same time withdrawing from the social life of her circle—all of this is deemed the piece. In her extensive notebooks, the artist enjoins herself to “fight programming to work, to ceaselessly make \$, to feed daddy his ret’n, to achieve, to compete, to win,” and in her characteristic all caps declares a goal of “JOYOUS FREEDOM.”<sup>16</sup> She wants to “DROP OUT FROM WORLD, NO CALLS NO WORK NO OBLIGATIONS NO GUILT NO DESIRES, JUST MY MIND WANDERING LAZILY OFF ITS LEASH.”<sup>17</sup>

I WILL MAKE MYSELF EMPTY TO RECEIVE COSMIC INFO.

I WILL RENOUNCE THE ARTIST’S EGO, THE SUPREME TEST WITOUT WHICH BATTLE A HUMAN COULD NOT BECOME ‘OF KNOWLEDGE.’

I WILL BE HUMAN FIRST, ARTIST SECOND.

I WILL NOT SEEK FAME, PUBLICITY, OR SUCKCESS.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Robertson, “Reading at the Poetry Project,” November 2013.

Poetry Project.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece* (London: Afterall Books, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



It's challenging to assess Lozano's determination, or stubbornness, in carrying out this program through the rest of her life. As Lehrer-Graiwer writes, "The inaccessibility of her practice after *Dropout* connotes freeing and paranoid aspects, utopian and self-destructive impulses. In fact, self-destruction is twinned to the awful bliss and horrible rush of transcendence. Beyond practical problems of poverty and loneliness, there was the risk and reality of non-recognition. In retrospect, from the context of our over-exposed present, the idea of choosing non-recognition, invisibility, and anti-success is downright exhilarating". Lozano's silence leaves us to find this exhilaration in contemplating her act. We might equally consider its failures and terrors. Reading Lehrer-Graiwer's book, I deeply admired Lozano's principles and thought, but also found it devastating to read of the artist's final years, estranged from her family, facing financial difficulties, losing track of work, and finally dying of cancer in 1999, with few options for care or support. And wondered if she reconciled with the consequences of what might have been, for her, either a triumphant gesture or an artistic dead end.

Lozano was 40 or so when she conceived her *Dropout Piece*, which Lehrer-Graiwer refers to at one point as "an epic midlife crisis".<sup>20</sup> We shouldn't make too much of this "personal" element, though I'd argue that for Lozano, as for Robertson and, for that matter, Proust, midlife and the urgency of lost time is crucial to their thought and practice. Solitude is aging's gift and curse, but more importantly, for Robertson, per Epicurus, is the site of a heightened confrontation with a death ever more manifest on the horizon. Lozano wrote that choosing and securing that

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece* (London: Afterall Books, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

solitude—carrying out her project—was the most difficult thing she’d ever done. It would be even harder now. Crary points out that, following the social resistance of the sixties and seventies, “‘Dropping out’ was more fundamentally disturbing on a systemic level than many are prepared to admit”.<sup>21</sup> The system, he goes on to claim, responded by demonizing poverty and itinerant ways of life, while magnifying and honing the far larger forces that destabilize and flatten the contemporary subject by establishing 24/7 labor and sociality as a norm anything but neutral in its insistence on production and competition.

The world Crary conjures—our world—discloses no exit. We shouldn’t be sure that sleeping, hiding, and dropping out are even possible, even for those to whom such actions are available. Can a poetics of dream, bluff, and silence posit real alternatives to the consciousness imagined by capital and coercion? For Crary, sleep’s power is its recalcitrant naturalness (though he dutifully historicizes it). Aging has a similar status—in the end, we’re all alone, we all disappear. For the three artists considered here, a moment of agency, however difficult, arises in a confrontation with questions, global or mundane, of visibility and erasure. And yet to make the choice of solitude is still only a beginning: practice for a practice: the eyes’ adjustment to darkness that promises nothing but to shroud an encounter we might be lucky enough to withstand.

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013), 113.

*Photograph pg. 35*

Toulouse Lautrec, "Le Lit", 1892

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