FICTIONING AND THE CITY

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Has this got an expiry date?, she asks wryly while correcting her shoulder pads.

We have found a route to the Outlands. It has been not by following directions though vaguely, with their sticks, others point saying they would go too (we watch them going in a bubble of breath held). Our work on the contrary is to subsist. When abrasions of the Outlands cast us back to sanctuary, event here thin resources for life's sustaining can be found. We practice unlikely conservations, in the end forgetting comfort to dwell with Outlanders, where the earth's colour exhausts rods. A cone-cranial bone is motioned, three small stones placed in its dish to circulate with rhythm: it is thought. And so thinking takes place. A cut fragment of cardboard then folded, placed under the heel: our protocol. And old ways are cloths torn, wetted and packed between teeth and gums. Our devices are string wrapped polythene released to ascend over grasslands by the runway: then we will imagine our missive sent. We are students of Outnature. Of its jagged rock enclosures and ponds in the sea. There are no birds if bats are not found in the cave, still black shapes flock. Then we will walk between the bungalows in low prairie, and out onto the terrace. Aerials' slim wires against a magnesium sky in the distance lead us to where technicians have met to converse in low voices, hands covering their mouths unless they be lip-read. And near, bright concretes are submerged in a harbour where the water is purified and turned glass-clear. It is the effect of flora and called the unlikely ecologies of Outlands. Scramble the talus; seek nacreous surfaces. Talk on these matters is conducted in voices sub-vocal, only through out-takes and obscured scenes: a child lost under the brim of a paladin hat holds a clutch of black eggs. Enigmatically, an elegy is given by the beam of a lighthouse through broken panes. Handicraft is pyramid-building on the Outlands. Under foot the boards are unstable. So an Outlander squats beneath a flower-decorated cloth held faded on four poles secured with guys, in a shallow trough, while the caustic wind makes rags whip: all dwellers in Outlands and we with them.

Here goes; an inventory for the survey of Outlands reads as follows: A workshop to host researches and to facilitate the production of missives, wires from the Outlands, the grid on which its results will be hung. It might be a small space, a library with meeting room; and adjoining it a writer's study smaller still with 'fourth wall' giving onto a proscenium perhaps as intimate as the study itself. In fact sizes matter little but spaces must be dark at times. At other times light from high windows will penetrate. A figure will be seated, a restless man twitching in his chair, reading but impatiently from a broadsheet publication. Another figure obscured but seen there amidst assemblages of technology (some ancient, others contemporary – piles of stone, cassette tape recorders, discarded radios and turntables, a flute, an accordion, keyboards, laptops and hard drives, a mixer and a PA, loudspeakers of various styles). Amidst these technological prostheses he dwells, or as an extension of them – from his posture it is difficult to tell. On an adjacent table printers, mechanical typewriters loaded with scrolls, binders and other equipment for the wiring of missives are placed. Behind the table, on a screen, the intermittency of visual data will be presented, and presented elevated in its presentation over so-called images and the blankness of screens alike. In front of the table, a third body will squat, mirror glass leaned against the tables edge, his movements mirrored in the space and recorded, looped back into the production of texts and scores that record minute details, counter-intuitive acknowledgments of imperceptible shifts in the body's attitude. Video technologies will be used for the recording of the body's postures and poses, but to emphasize – and no less to elevate as said – their shifts. A fourth figure measures time and constructs devices to carry out her task with precision. Radio transmitters and receivers will pick up sine tones and layered static. With the aid of a pneumatic power source, rubber bands, plastic bags and tin foil will be assembled as listening devices.

Neither writing's material technologies nor methods for the dissemination of missives can be divorced from this survey of Outlands. Likewise, no anthropology of Outlanders can be undertaken in blindness to writing's material impacts. Radio, live transmission. The faculty exists to be opened. Our guests will expire. What generality is there of publics? We are impromptu. And long-planned long playing. The schedule is already embarked. Others will appear or vice versa. Some might prepare to be appeared well in advance where aspens sharpen. But then they will be improvised. But in any case the situations and events will occur, will occur, will occur, will occur. And more, in different registers series. Objects and tools. Constructions made fulfilled for all practical purposes. Because on Outlands all projects are called catastrophe. Pragmatism with pegs our art: at times when they are not in us they will be stored in proximity to the faculty. White plastic conditions of nature. Copies are white plastic to be arched. For what purpose we might seek assistant scriveners, transcribers possibly also to interpret, translate and archive? We will often laff or befony even though our ambition is elsewhere.

[Proposition 1: The Situationist City]

The Situationists conceived of the city as an entity entirely structured around capital; an urban 'spectacle' – a term frequently employed by the Situationists –

defined by an endless flow of commodities, popular culture, media imagery and modes of living dictated by commercialism, consumerism and the bureaucracies of urban planning. The city that emerged in the post-war period, to the Situationists, appeared both 'dull and sterile.' Writes Constant in 1959:

> In old neighborhoods, the streets have degenerated into highways, and leisure is commercialized and adulterated by tourism. Social relations there become impossible. Newly built neighborhoods have only two themes, which govern everything: traffic circulation and household comfort. They are the meagre expressions of bourgeois happiness and lack any concern for play.
> In response to the need to construct whole towns rapidly, cemeteries in reinforced concrete are being built where great masses of the population are condemned to die of boredom.[1]

It is, indeed, a bleak image of the contemporary city: commercialized city centres where all social relations are subsumed by capital; sprawling suburban masses of identical housing complexes where citizens vanish in front of identical television sets, watching identical television programs while eating their television dinners on trays specifically designed for that precise purpose. Under the auspice of capitalism and consumerism, the city had become a controlled space; a thinly disguised, authoritarian configuration of power acting as an obstacle preventing the population of the city from discovering its authentic life; 'the beach,' as it were, 'beneath the paving stones.' The role of Situationist practice is to penetrate this barrier, to make it possible to see beyond this veil and discover, as Simon Sadler puts it, 'the authentic life of the city teeming underneath.'[2]

[Proposition 2: The Spinozist City]

Simon O'Sullivan and I have elsewhere proposed that space – including the city, considered a spatial configuration – can be described in terms of its 'micro-physics;' the micro-physics of space being the sum of the bodies – including non-human ones – that in different assemblages compose it, and the affect these bodies have on one another; that is, 'the relations between them and the shifts, ruptures and displacements that take place within those relations.'[3]

This is, to us, in many ways, a Spinozist understanding of space. To Spinoza, the world is composed of simple bodies entering into assemblages with other simple bodies. These assemblages, in turn, enter into larger assemblages. This is how spaces are constructed, and they are in constant flux. Complexes and assemblages only enjoy partial stability and are in constant movement. They dissolve and reform at different speeds. New constellations are formed, others are undone. The human body is one such complex. It is composed of assemblages of simple bodies and it changes continuously, entering into different constellations with bodies that surround it. Although it may appear relatively stable, it comes from something pre-human and moves towards post-human assemblages as it dies and decomposes. Throughout its life, it changes. It grows, ages; encountering and entering into assemblages with nutrients, drugs, animals, viruses, objects, artefacts, machines, technologies and electronic devices, and so on. Some of these encounters are between bodies that agree – our encounter with food, for instance, or with a friend. We experience these encounters as joy. Others are between bodies that disagree – a poison, say, or a virus, or an allergen. These encounters are experienced as sadness.[4]

A Spinozist conception of the city, then, would be one of increasingly complex body assemblages forming the different territories of the urban environment. It would be constantly vibrating at different speeds; ripples would run across it as assemblages shift. Populations of inhabitants would continuously enter into and out of different assemblages with one another and with the plethora of other assemblages that populate the city.

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Juxtaposing these two propositions for how to think of the city may seem somewhat contradictory. However, if we think of the micro-physics of space in terms of the *manipulation* of bodies into particular constellations and assemblages, preventing others from forming, we arrive at a point where the intersection between the Situationists' notion of the city as a controlled, normative and regulated space, and the Spinozist notion of the city as a complex of shifting body assemblages, may gain some resonance. The city – and I use this term in its broadest sense now – is both controlled, normative, an articulation of authority and control, *and* inherently open to shifts and movements, deviant trajectories of transformation and change, opening up to the formation of subversive, non-normative body assemblages that transgress the normative territories of the city; 'lines of flight,' or

[1] Constant, 'A Different City for a Different Life,' in Tom McDonough, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International* (MIT Press, 2002) , p. 95
[2] Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (MIT Press, 1999), p. 15

[3] Simon O'Sullivan & Ola Ståhl, 'Contours and Case Studies for a Dissenting Subjectivity,' in *Angelaki* (11:1, 2006), p. 148
[4] Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (Wordsworth Ed Ltd, 2001), passim.

'deterritorialization' to use Deleuzian terminology.[5] Again, quoting myself and Simon O'Sullivan, these may be considered creative trajectories of flight 'producing and exploring irregularities […], portals to a future city within this city, a proto-ecology within the cityscape: […] *We will breathe through your skyscrapers, your subways will be our nostrils, your underground carries new toxins through the city-body assemblage.*'[6] (And this is, in some ways, precisely what a lot of Situationist practice aimed for.)

Exploring the conditions of emergence of such lines of flight is a task more urgent than ever in the era we now find ourselves in. Facing right-wing populism, institutionalized racism, ethnocentrism and misogyny, economic inequalities of gargantuan proportions, the escalating environmental crisis with all of what that entails, we urgently need to find other ways of living, other narratives for how life can be lived, other ethical trajectories (ethics, in the sense of a style or mode of living, an organization of life) and other forms of aesthetic sensibility (aesthetics, in the sense of *aesthesis*, or mode of perception, sensitivity, form of sensibility). It is the contention of this paper, that *fictioning* is a tool, or, better perhaps, a technology for doing just that.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GRAIN TRANSPORTATION IN THE NORTH-EASTERN TERRITORIES

First there was no grain to be handled. Then there was some and it was handled and shipped. Now there is none.

There is none and forty percent of non-white households and fifteen percent of white households live below the poverty line. *With statistics like these, the poor need to be policed, whatever colour or creed.*

The grain was carried on flatboards along the river. Then it was loaded onto sailing vessels and shipped to its destination. Sometimes the grain was transported by land, on rough roads and through mountainous terrain. When transported by land, however, the grain would often have spoiled by the time it reached its destination.

For this reason, to ensure a steady supply of unspoiled grain to the urban territories in the East, a canal was built from the eastern lake shore to the coast. The grain was taken to the canal on lake boats, then loaded from lake boats by hand, bushel by bushel, by workers slowly suffocating from the dust. This was dangerous work, subjecting workers to constant asphyxiation and various respiratory complaints. As was soon discovered, the grain dust also turned out to be explosive – if finely divided and air suspended, most organic substances are. As a consequence, many workers lost their lives in explosions or in violent fires

that often ensued. *With labour conditions like these, workers have to be policed, and the labour unions infiltrated and compromised. This is not primarily the responsibility of the police but of detective agencies employed by individual industrialists and their various associations.*

Given the nature of the manual process and the limited physical capacity of the average worker, the shifting of the grain from lake boats to canal boats caused severe delays and congestion, and the process was soon mechanized. The grain would now be loaded from lake boats into buckets attached to a steam-driven elevator belt taking the grain by the bucket-load up into wooden silos where it would be dropped into bins and stored until such time that it could be lowered onto canal boats and shipped along the canal to its destination.

It is not a complicated mechanism. It consists of a series of buckets attached to a leather or canvas and rubber belt and it is revolving on pulleys and on it, the grain is transported into the bins from which it is dropped onto a canal boat at a convenient time. It manages to lift a substantial number of buckets per hour, and many, many bushels of grain, and it weighs it correctly.

These elevators, however, were – and are still to this day – dangerous places. Many times explosions caused by grain dust have levelled entire structures and once or twice even nearby mills and factories.

On top of one of the silos, as an adornment, a cupola has been constructed and painted bright, and beneath it, the canal has been diverted to allow canal boats to pass directly below the bin and grain to be dropped straight from the silo and onto the shipping vessel.

Now, there is no longer a bushel of grain to be elevated. With the construction of wider canals capable of accommodating larger shipping vessels, grain can now be taken by ship from the agricultural fields straight to its destination without having to be shifted between vessels.

[Proposition 3: Fictioning]

Fictioning, to me, is best understood as a technology of mythopoesis, as defined by Simon O'Sullivan in *Performance Fictions: Towards a Mythopoetic Art Practice*:

> Mythopoesis names the imaginative transformation of the world through fiction. This is the production of new and different myths for those who do not recognise themselves in the narratives and image clichés that surround them. […] Such narratives may well be built up using a variety of techniques, objects and text, which is to say, I think, that mythopoesis involves both signifying *and* asignifying components.[7]

[5] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Athlone, 1988), in particular 'On Several Regimes of Signs'.
[6] O'Sullivan & Ståhl, op. cit., p. 151

[7] Simon O'Sullivan, 'Performance Fictions: Towards a Mythopoetic Art Practice,' in David Burrows, *Performance Fictions*, (Article Press, 2010), p. 78

O'Sullivan further points out that our perception of the real always already is determined by the construction of myths and framing devices such as causal logics that allow us to make sense of events and the language of commodities that produces dominant meanings in the world.[8] In other words, the normative assemblages that make up the city require framing devices and narratives to be understood; they are at once material and discursive; they are, in fact, the entanglement of discursive and socio-material assemblages ('signifying and asignifying components'). When we begin to see the world in this way, O'Sullivan suggests, we also see the limits of the normative regime of assemblages that makes something appear as 'seeable / sayable' and, indeed, to 'gesture beyond'[9] that limit, imagining other assemblages generating other modes of mythopoetic fictioning; the myths and fictions required for us to establish ethico-aesthetics – modes of living and forms of sensitivity and sensibility – that allow for and frame different ways of living the city.

[Proposition 4: Emotioning, Languaging]

This, however, requires a creative and active engagement with the shifting assemblages of which we form part. Turning, for a moment, in a transdisciplinary gesture, to the field of biology, Humberto Muturana and Gerda Verden-Zöller argues that human beings exists in 'conversations' with their material environments, including other humans as well as non-human entities; in other words, with what I have referred to here as complex body assemblages. These conversations are constituent of a braiding of two processes they refer to as 'emotioning' and 'languaging;'[10] that is, asignigying, affective processes of emotioning, and signifying, meaning-generating processes of languaging. What I'd like to propose here is that we take these concepts – 'emotioning,' and 'languaging,' and their mutual impact on one another in braided conversations – and try to think of the body assemblages proposed here precisely as aggregates braiding emotioning and languaging into conversations generative of the fictioning in and through which we live, create meaning, and express ourselves.

[Proposition 5: Microworlds, Breakdowns]
Neuroscientist Francisco Varela provides some interesting insights into how this may be concretized in his lecture series *Ethical Know-How*. Varela suggests that our everyday lives are composed of a set of 'microworlds' that we inhabit as 'microidentities.' The dinner table at home is one such microworld. We inhabit it by carrying out a complex set of actions (using the utensils, chewing the food, cutting the vegetables, conversing with a friend or relative). A microworld such as this, Varela suggests, is so 'ready-

at-hand that we have no deliberateness about what it is and how we inhabit it.'[11] We tend to have a 'readiness-for-action' for each such microworld that we move between, moving from one readiness-for-action to another, without deliberation, analysis, reflection or attentiveness. This ethical know-how takes expertise. Our actions at the dinner table may seem simple but neuroscientifically speaking, Varela suggests, they are not. We have to gradually build up the expertise required through socio-material and discursive practices that eventually become habitual.

However, when we experience what Varela refers to as a 'breakdown,' our microworlds and microidentities are displaced and we are left uncertain as of what habitual action is appropriate; we are forced to become attentive; we are forced to deliberation and thought. These breakdowns, to Varela, constitute 'the autonomous and creative side of living cognition.'[12] It is during breakdowns that microworlds and microidentities shift, open up to change and differentiation. They can be of different magnitude, ranging from an unexpected question from a friend to falling in love, or, indeed, being put under the threat of injury. In different ways, however, one's microworld and microidentity are put in crisis in these situations, prompting an attentive and non-habitual response.

Writes Varela,

> It is at the moments of breakdown, that is, when we are *not* experts of our microworld anymore, that we deliberate and analyze; we become like beginners seeking to feel at ease with the task at hand.[13]

In the terminology of this paper, a microworld can be conceived of as a set of body assemblages that we inhabit, enter into, habitually and normatively: the relation between my body and the food it consumes, between my hand and the fork, between my tongue and the prosodic qualities of the words I speak at the dinner table, and so on and so forth. The microidentities that allow us to inhabit these microworlds are essentially forms of ethics – they are styles or modes of living, ways of organizing life. The conversations of emotioning and languaging these assemblages produce are habitual and reproductive, they generate the narratives and fictions that support the habits and customs that make up everyday life, the multiple textures, if you like, of the city

What happens during a breakdown, is that our ethical expertise, the habits by which we live our lives, is called into question and we are forced to pay attention to the different body assemblages that make up our world at that particular point, how they are composed

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[8] O'Sullivan, op. cit., pp. 78-79
[9] O'Sullivan, op. cit., p. 79
[10] HJumberto Muturana & Gerda Verden-Zöller, *The Origins of Humaness in the Biology of Love* (Imprint Academic, 2008), pp. 80-83

[11] Francisco Varela, *Ethical Know-How* (Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 9
[12] Varela, op. cit., p. 1
[13] Varela, op. cit., p. 18

and how they shift, the conversations of emotioning and languaging they involve and the processes of fictioning they generate. Our footing is no longer as certain, our habitual actions insufficient to the situation at hand. This attentiveness can be thought of in terms of aesthetics, or *aesthesis*, a call for sensitivity and a different form of sensibility to those that characterize our habitual responses, and this *aesthesis* in turn open up to other forms of braiding of the processes of emotioning and languaging that we live through, another organization of life, or in other words, another ethical trajectory, intimately connected to, generative of and interdependent with processes of mythopoetic fictioning; the creation of the frames of narration that support the emergene of line of deviation, flight and digression that traverse the city.

What about the volume, David?

The outer layer is crisp. Every movement risks damage. Next to it three or four under-layers make up what was once the wall of the tube – these appear in better shape – they've been protected. The last layer – the one that was the lining – is thinner still, like tracing paper but stiff and yellow as if it's been steeped in oil then left to dry, which is pretty much a description of what has been happening over the last years as it's lain here amongst blunt tools and old radio valves. The corrosion is spreading through the box, different kinds with different colours bleeding into one another, inventing whole new forms of slow chemical destruction.

With care I managed to extract the fragment, or most of it, so work can begin deciphering the lettering that will give clues to its origin. It is holding together as one piece, more or less. There are gaps. I turn the thing over and peer at it closely trying not to grip it, just letting it rest lightly on my hand. Then I place it on the white card sheet on the desk to study it more safely. I hold my breath. Exposure to dampness will accelerate its decay, maybe within a matter of hours turning it to dust. Around the edges the black powder coating is light. Here the layers of paper support are visible. Where the powder is thicker away towards the centre it has begun to accumulate into beads visible quite clearly with the naked eye; under the microscope the largest accumulations appear wet and sticky with resin. I spray a light coating of fixer over the whole on both sides.

Then after leaving it a moment, turn it with the powder coating down. Now the business of repairing the fragment can begin. Small section of tissue are cut and glued over the holes and tears. At the same time it's important to avoid obscuring any of the ink marks. The tissue dries transparent but it may not stay that way for long. The next priority will be to decipher the labeling. Repairs can easily make that job more difficult.

As it turns out the lettering obscured on the outer layer has left a reaction trace in the powder. Parts of the letters are recorded there in reverse. I use a light-box, rig up a camera with lens extensions and photograph the fragment back-lit so that the remains of labeling captured back-to-front are visible. I make a transparency. Then I photograph the outer side and print it on paper. Lining up the two, the letters become clear in a few places allowing me to patch in what's missing and identify the fragment, make and year: "Iron Harvest Nitrolit, 1948″. Parts of instruction are also visible: "Store in a cool place" – ironic, given its location here on the ice-flow.

Exhale and there is the whistle, the wheezing sound, where they scurry around like insects it spreads like a virus will spread, the sound of the presence of the many.

… of bodies, where they swarm like you imagine insects swarm, in a whispering voice they let you know where, but they always make you guess.

You ask where?, in a voice subdued and inaudible, inaudible there beneath the breath its kept there, where you keep it, beneath lips curled, and then to breathe into the thin sheet and do so softly into silence and without checking the time for the breath to be held for there is too much talk, where sound is sparse and considered and where the spaces between sounds are considered their own topography.

There it is.

… and you are not meant to adjust tone nor volume.