

Artist's statement on "D/ /semod/ /ment"

"D/ /semod/ /ment" leaks from the fear-body. It is, as the title suggests, an attempt to encapsulate the confusion that enwraps the mind as one's consciousness detaches from the body. It is a project that evokes and is evoked from chaos: for a long time, this project has sat latent within me. A brief segment of my summer was characterized by the violence of dissociation, and while my flesh stores no physical traumas from this period, a pervasive fear of losing the self lingers in muscles like an ache. A particular line from Jillian Weise's "The Body in Pain" jostled this fear like a drumstick hitting a cymbal: "pain is simultaneously a thing that cannot be confirmed & cannot be denied." I know this to be true. Fear is simultaneously a thing that cannot be confirmed and cannot be denied.

The idea of a fear that not only stems from the body but is directed toward the body has remained present as I engaged with our texts this semester. This emotion, if one can even call it that, is a neurophysiological process. It is primal and often passing — but not always. The sustained state of fear entered my body this summer; I truly reckoned it during a conversation with Ariel, a brilliant friend, who was telling me about his medical anxieties. He, like I, had recently switched medications and had been reeling in side effects. His heart pounded, and each that time it did, he spiraled into a phantasm depicting his soon-to-be death. "Even when I feel fine I cannot stop thinking about how my body is failing. I'm lost in my own mind," he said to me. I understood. My new antidepressants were not seeping into my body well, and they had made the voice in my mind consuming. It was often that I could not tell whether I was speaking aloud or in my head. I would touch my skin, and I would feel the touch, but "I" was simultaneously far, far away from that touch. "I" was an intangible, incorporeal awareness, watching from a distance a left hand stroke a right hand. Numerous thoughts ran simultaneously,

stacking on top of one another: my mind was so loud I could not feel my flesh. This slipping between body and mind was catastrophic: who was “I”? What were my thoughts? Where were they coming from? What was happening to my brain chemistry that led this to happen? What was my body if it was not mine?

I witnessed this detachment in our poems on race and disability, where there is often a splitting of the self and a notion of disappointment in the body. The feeling of separation between consciousness and corporeality brought me to “Some years there exists a wanting to escape” from Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*. The poem is long and uncomfortable to read. The uneven line spacing, the rapid changes in pace, and the abrupt enjambment captures a volatility that describes my experience of dissociation. Even more importantly, the number of short lines and overwhelming white space due to section breaks make the speaker’s voice loud. One feels consumed by the voice. The intimate second-person narration draws the reader in, establishing an aural proximity between the speaker and the audience. Still, the overwhelming repetition of “you” makes the word lose meaning. Rankine often places it at the end of an enjambed line, and one becomes unsure of who or what the “you” refers to. She splits you, “a body” (47) from the you who knows “no memory should live / in these memories” (75-76); she splits the physical from the mental, and this is the essential quality I aimed to capture in my video.

Rankine’s poem, however, is about race. As I searched for my feelings of dissociation in our poems throughout the semester, I realized that there I sought a despair often unique to mental illness: a lack of understanding why or how or what is happening to the self. *Citizen* as a whole blends poetry, prose, and visual art to illustrate the impact of race on the American body. The fragmentation that occurs in “Some years there exists a wanting to escape” is Rankine’s

acknowledgement of how racism hinders the ability to experience a unified self. The body, the mind, and the soul are all “injured” from race violence, and each part splits from the others to avoid further pain. The tender lines near the poem’s conclusion highlight Rankine’s role as a mentor in this experience: “you’re not sick, not crazy, / not angry, not sad — / It’s just this, you’re injured” (92-94). The poem with reassurance, where Rankine reminds the Black American to not blame themselves for their state of separation.

Mental illness does not offer freedom from guilt. One’s body and mind are the very things that turn against oneself. I wanted to borrow Rankine’s illustration of a divided self but take away any “reason” for the separation, forcing one into the discomfort of confusion, anger, and guilt toward the self. I chose the form of erasure poetry because of the wide absence and disruption it can leave. Instead of cleanly blacking out or whiting out the words, however, I engaged in a hectic process of crossing out, circling, and underlining my printed poems. I headed into this act hoping to create a poem that retains a fragmentation of identity, amplifies a loud and misleading voice, and embodies the chaos of not being able to form coherent thoughts. These attempts certainly left my pages a disarray of scribbles and clauses, but they went too far in doing so. It was difficult to call them poems in which each word and space was still part of a larger body of work, and that is not reflective of my experience: even in a state of dissociation I maintained a knowing that I was contained in a singular physical body.

It was ultimately in crossing out pronouns that I broke apart the coherent voice of Rankine’s poem while also building on the uncertainty of the self. The removal of personal, possessive, reflexive, and demonstrative pronouns meant that every occurrence within the poem suddenly lost its subject. Things were happening but to no one in particular: “Time opens out to ... opening” (20). The preposition “to” remains to signify an evident incompleteness of the

thought. Time is supposed to open out *to* somebody, but that body is out of reach, dissipated into nothingness. Yes, the traceable physical body disappears while the rest of the poem — and world — persists. I then went further to take away definite and indefinite articles to compound the feeling of ungroundedness as one detaches from their senses. Rather than being “the body” that receives “the nothing gaze,” the speaker is “body of ... receiving ... nothing gaze.” Without articles, objects lose their sense of place — and with it, their sense of meaning. “The body” feels recognized and purposeful, but “body” is a floating clause attached to nothing.

I also knew that it was only through a visual-audial medium that I could portray the overwhelming multiplicity of voices, thoughts, and images that raced through my body simultaneously. Losing control over one’s mind and thus body is a cycle that builds on itself: I became disgusted and anxious with my helplessness, which contributed to an emerging voice of self-hatred. Through the video, I could overlay the initial erasure poem that told a disjointed, unrooted story with a second erasure poem that narrated a loathing of the self. At this point, I had also begun piecing together the film’s visuals. I divide Rankine’s original poem into segments that filled the screen so the viewer could witness an inconsistency between the aural and visual senses. For the second erasure poem, I selected exactly eight words within each segment to repeat during the recitation of the first erasure poem’s respective segment. This consistency was aimed to depict the methodical, seemingly inescapable, nature of mental illness. There is volatility that arrives with depression and anxiety, but there is also a stability in the fact that such illnesses remain. Fear is constant and rhythmic during a state of dissociation. The repetition of demeaning language never goes away in the video; even if one cannot make out the words at times, the whisper that condemns the mind remains.

Almost nothing else in the film remains consistent. The video footage rarely aligns with audio, and the overlaid audio itself is discordant. My voice feels internal and the images external, just as how my mind's thoughts felt distant from the reality my eyes observed. Still, one's eyes do not fail to function even in a state of dissociation, so a stream of images continue to compound the chaos of the film. At times I add sounds of rain or chatter to blur the barrier between the internal and external world. The ticking clock reminds of a grounded reality, but it comes in and out of one's awareness as certain sounds grow louder. The piano plays a dissonant tune — even the vibrations of the sounds evoke discomfort. Clips fade into one another, and it is uncertain when one image stops and the other begins. I often superimpose one clip over another to prevent identification of any one thing. One should not sense rootedness: sooner or later another clip will arrive and whisk the last away; it should feel that the confusion will go on forever. Just like the erasure poems, there is lack of directionality: a lack of knowing where each phrase or clip will open to. I chose a long poem for this reason as well. There were several moments during editing that I grew frustrated with the endlessness of the video, but this is ultimately what I needed to convey about mental illness. One feels forever trapped in the swirl of their thoughts and the confines of their physical body despite the two things existing separately.

I begin and conclude the film with an eye to allow the screen to act as a mirror. The eye of the film closes in the first few seconds, and the succeeding scenes are witnessed within its eyelids. The viewer is thus transported within the film's body. One sees the same images as that body does; one enters their experience of dissociation. The eye continues to appear briefly but frequently throughout the film to remind of the self that is trapped, unable to surface above the chaotic voices and images. Notably, both this essay and film contain loose threads because I cannot describe through language nor images what the self is trapped in or what the self is

trapping. What I know is that the self, the body, and the mind are drowning in the video, but they are also the agents that construct and observe the dissociation. The final clip of the film depicts the eye looking around as if trying to break free. With this movement I aim to instill a sense of incompleteness in a medium that must definitely end: the video closes into darkness, but the viewer's eyes remain open, looking. One must confront the fear-body — the anxiety that sits the flesh, or perhaps the flesh that sits in anxiety — that is capable of stripping them of control.