

ALVIN ONG

Body and blood

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Incoherent bodies by Joel Tan

*The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.*
— T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Although not, ostensibly, a poem about queer desire, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" finds itself painting, in the stanza above, a precise picture of queer interiority: the incoherent, shapeshifting, yellow fog that peers enviously from the cold, wet street into the cozy interiors of warm rooms, lit with fires, where "women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo".

This roving, sensate cloud is a familiar queer sensibility; it brings to mind the closet: this anxious subject lingering constantly on the threshold between inside and out, included and not, queer or not. The emotional life it produces is a bittersweet one: longing, envious, melancholy. It finds itself peering into other interiorities, seeking a flash of something common, a shared queer predicament. Until it is let in, it cannot become a full person, but must remain, flickering between fog and street creature, grazing tepid pools of rainwater.

What happens though, when this queer sensibility is ultimately let inside? When they are allowed to cohere into a subject, to articulate an "I", possess an identity, to find language, to penetrate and be penetrated, to hold and be held? This is a joyous experience, a ritual of naming, a formative process. Many narratives of "coming out" focus on that (mostly Western) ritual of self-declaration: to one's closest circle, usually family. A brave act, risking vulnerability and rejection. It is understood as a first step towards living life authentically and honestly.

Yet there is often a more charged and constitutive "coming out," which is the process of asking to be *let into* queer circles and their complex cultural and sexual economies. This process is a lot more charged because it is from this network that one seeks very elemental forms of acceptance: romance, sex, friendship.

But queer life presents new thresholds, in spaces like the club, the bathhouse, the hook-up app, or imaginative spaces like art, porn or social media, where queers must navigate complex games of desire and rejection, inclusion and exclusion.

Often, one finds that in the face of these thresholds, one remains (or reverts to) a yellow fog of unmet desire. One cannot cohere, cannot curl oneself around another body; remains, instead, lingering in the margins—of a club, of a screen—watching a beautiful dancing body, watching a beautiful fucking body, wanting to be let in.

In many cases, especially in gay male spaces, the solution turns out to be visual, and involves aestheticizing the body. To cohere into a recognizable subjectivity, messy flesh must be pulled together into hard lines; the body must be disciplined; flesh becomes raw material that one fashions into the mirror-image of desire.

For gay men, the yellow fog must become one of the boys before it can be let in. In this way, the gym becomes a ritual space of coming out through the body, of identification and articulation of self. The eye (and "I") concentrates around discrete fragments of gay selfhood: arms, chest, cock; while other properties—softness, fat, femme-ness—become properties to remain hidden, or burnt away. One develops new forms of cruelty, forgets the closet and becomes a bully. At the heart of this is, of course, a deep loneliness, but when on parade, in a club-full of uniform toned bodies, one is let in.

Arguably, this can be read as an ideological process. The body has been digested by capital, it has become a site of consumption, an industrial project. Gay men's participation in these frantic body projects marks a moving away from a history of shame and marginalization, towards the heart of the current neoliberal nightmare. Flesh becomes a surface on which to co-sign neoliberalism and its creation of idealized subjects: masculine, high-functioning, optimized, properly-regulated and disciplined. One is *let into* the psychic centre of this dark and terrible time: liberation through consumption, identification through exclusion. One leaves behind the shame of the closet and becomes an idealized body. Nevermind that to remain here, one censors the body, and disciplines the bodies of others.

In light of this, perhaps the folly is the desire to be let in at all, because surely thresholds abound everywhere we turn, each with their own rules of entry, their own aesthetic and moral codes, some more distorting and cruel than others. What would it mean to release the body from these external meanings, to retain a sense of the inchoate, to remain fog-like?

Certainly, there are pleasures there: a shape-shifting potential, a gaseous openness to difference, a freedom to wander between categories, to exist in the margins of form and language which claim to be all-encompassing but can never really account for the full range of bodily and spiritual experiences.

What would it mean for our bodies to refuse to cohere? To relax into, *dissolve* into the messiness of our interiorities, to let the body say "I am hurting" or "I am lonely", and for the solution not to be discipline, but a kind of efflorescence, for the body to be held in community, shared queer interiorities aligning.

What a dream, to be held in a community built on predicament, joy, and compassion, not aesthetic form, for the body to shrug off the grime of ideology and social history... To live in an embodied way, not an aestheticized way. In this meditation, the aestheticized body reveals itself to be a mirage, a trick of the light, a partial manifestation of a deep well of interior feeling, utterly fleeting and only momentarily satisfying...

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