What's in the Box?
How Mundanity and Terror Are Modulated in
the Blogging of Trauma

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Consider a teenage girl who likes cats. She keeps a weblog, which mainly consists of photograph after photograph, accrued over time, of kittens:

This parade of cuteness easily satisfies the stereotypical grounds upon which we might try to exile Internet self-publishing from the world of validity or credibility in public communication. Some online pundits consider blogging to be a petty outlet for *teenage girls* (!) and their trivialities, concluding that instead of ushering in an utopian age of democratic dialogue, Internet self-publishing has simply spawned a glut of pictures of people's cats and a disgorgement of other mundane symbols of domestic life. Indeed, everything about this "cat blog" seems to disqualify it in advance from the "proper" discourse of public rationality, and *this is precisely what makes it interesting*, and also why the very terms under which such a discourse of publicity operates might be unsuitable for thinking about recent forms of communication.

Besides my own interests in domesticity and "abject publics" as zones of importance in themselves, I was also drawn to this particular blog for another reason, which I think works well in concert with these other interests to create a fertile basis for cultural enquiry: this blog is named *Baghdad Girl* (Zaid), and it is kept by Raghda Zaid—a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl who, until recently, lived in occupied Baghdad. And in addition to the cats, she also occasionally writes about her everyday life in terms that unavoidably reference her home's macropolitical situation:

We Are Living In Hell

Hello,

It has been along time since I posted my last subject, the situation here do not help to write at all, the temperature is very high, no electricity, we have only 4 hours of electrical power in the 24 hours of the day, no security, no water, no peace and there are always explosions and bombcars, as an example, four days ago a big explosion happened near my house, it was done by abombcar, this bombcar cost people life's, broke windows, and brought fear.

Our windows were broken and so are windows of most houses in the neighborhood but thanks to God we are all fine but who knows in the next time we may get hurt, after the explosion we cleaned the broken windows so no one get hurt from it and so did our neighbors and some of them were out side wondering what happened, we were expecting that the American soldiers will search our house and the other houses in the neighborhood, but they didn't and that is weird because this is not the first explosion happened here, any way tings went back to normal few hours later but people died, Two of those who died were children about 10 years of age and they use to bring us fuel for our electrical generator...

Stay safe

Raghda

(Zaid, We Are Living)

What is going on here, with this arresting montage of "bombcars" against a stream of cats? In such a traumatic context, a neat psychoanalytic scenario beckons temptingly: *perhaps Zaid is overidentifying with images of cats as a symptom of melancholia!* But rather than succumb to that kind of symptomatology, which would reduce the complex intensities of expression here to their mere "functionality," my instinct is to approach this kind of vortex of affect on its own terms—as a productive assemblage of everyday joy, mundanity and terror, that creates effects in an immanent fashion, rather than simply being a symptom of a transcendent system. Thus, for me, Zaid's blog is emblematic of a wider question: how do people write online about their experience of daily life in the context of geopolitical trauma— situations in which whole populations are affected by the convulsions of sovereignties, markets and territorialities?

Another opening into the question: not long ago, I helped to initiate Storybox, a small, community writing project for young refugees living in Sydney, Australia. These refugees used weblogs as a medium to explore their lives, and also as a platform for learning about computers and the Internet in general. The workshops took place over several weeks, with different groups of teenagers, variously from Afghanistan, Sudan, Congo, Burundi and Sierra Leone. One group had been in Australia for less than six months, and most had never really used computers before. Over the course of the project, the participants experimented with ways to write about things like pop stars, or growing up dealing with systematic abuse in a refugee camp, or playing volleyball, or witnessing the murders of family and friends—these different experiences could all be described as "everyday" ones for many of these people. It was a rewarding experiment, but really tough going: there were so many issues through which to navigate that I'm still finding it difficult to write clearly about the experience. What follows, then, is a very fragmentary meditation that grapples with issues of trauma by avoiding the subject a lot of the time, and approaching it through a highly speculative, allegorical kind of labour.

Unintegrated Fragments

The aim of Storybox was to simultaneously play with and problematize certain objectives and their concepts of value: we challenged the conformist tendencies of literacy by encouraging the creation of new modes of expression; stood the concept of learning on its head by actively creating new knowledges about the world; and subverted the idea of writing in public by testing the border between public and private. The biggest issue, however, was the therapeutic value of communicating trauma. We chose blogging as a potentially interesting medium for refugee writers, partly for its relative anonymity, under which people might feel freer to explore traumatic memories if they so desired—for their own dignity and validation, and to tell "the world" about their experiences, as a more directly political and public intervention. But instead of a nostalgic idea of therapy—trying to rediscover a pre-existing, coherent subject, or to reintegrate fragmented selves back into

coherence—our approach to traumatic memory was always about leveraging the fragmentary potentials of the blogging medium itself, which drifts away from the assumption of unities, towards a more strategic, patchwork approach. This was borne out quite startlingly in practice, as evidenced in this visceral declaration from Little White Secrets, one of our Sierra Leonean bloggers:

> [T]he only image most children like me know are the images of atrocities, the misery from chopping of hands, limbs and other parts of the body; to rape; kidnapping and forcing young boys and girls into the army. most scenarios become all too familiar that it becomes too difficult to let them go. As a child i have seen my house burn down. i have seen people killed. i have seen people take their last breath. This trauma will never go away.

(Little White Secrets, Speech)

This generalized severing of bodily parts becomes an almost ecological trauma, a landscape of injury so pervasive that it forecloses the temptation to fall into the waiting arms of re-humanizing clichés. Despite the boundless energy on display throughout her blog, Little White Secrets betrays no illusions of eventual transcendence or pat resolution, invoking instead the promises of *vectors of change*, of perpetual contingency: "Life is like a temporary group, that dissolve when they achieve their goal … Sometimes we set a goal in our lifes, that we never achieve" (Little White Secrets, Life).

The tone isn't mournful—it's merely ambivalent, even hopeful. And by engaging with the blog form's serial open-endedness, such aphoristic fragments can be accreted into suggestive formations over time, allowing the writer to work through experiences towards a sense of agency, without an overarching framework that might erase the very specificities of those experiences. Little White Secrets offers no easy closure in describing her ecology of violence, precisely because, as Slavoj Zizek contends, the reintegration of one's traumatically fragmented parts into a linear narrative implies a forgetting of such violence, and of its victims. Both need to be remembered—hence the dilemmas of testimony. Zizek's point about *reintegration* is quite timely, because the question must be asked about refugees and the place of "integration" as it straddles the psychological and social domains: with the turbulence of migration in the current political context, how would the attempted resolution of migrant narratives be complicit, in a neo-assimilationist way, in a discourse of citizenship that attempts to create acceptably docile subjects? This certainly resonates in the Australian context, where asylum seekers arriving without papers are automatically detained in concentration camps, and other more "lawful" migrants can become Australians as long as they leave their traumatic baggage at the door in a sublimating act of civic allegiance, and conform to being, in a paraphrase of Australian Prime Minister John Howard, "the kind of people" that "we decide to let into this country." In this context, working through a multiplicity of fragments seems to be the preferable option.

The timeliness of the fragment also has a more general bearing. In their 2003 essay about narrative therapy and Australia's "Stolen Generations" (the indigenous people who were removed from their families to be bred into the white population during the 20th century), Rosanne Kennedy and Tikka Jan Wilson chastise Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's psychoanalytic readings of post-Holocaust literature (1992) for effectively locking traumatic experience in the unconscious, and finding its expression only effective in the non-linearity of high modernist literature—thus erasing more vernacular, social and accessible possibilities. Kennedy and Wilson cite Felman's and Laub's implicit "boundary-policing" of the forms appropriate to the expression of trauma as an erasure of the possibility of its vernacular narrativization, and note that such a limitation suggests that "vernacular testimonies are not 'truly historical'—a judgment that perpetuates cultural hierarchies of Euro-American/Indigenous, and aesthetic/vernacular" (125). This critique of narrative fragmentation might ring true in relation to Felman's and Laub's pre-occupations, but perhaps loses sight of the fact that the aesthetic fragmentations and non-linearities that psychoanalytic accounts favour as grounds for trauma's expression need not limit themselves to *literary modernism*, and that the backdrop of networked technoculture, which frames contemporary life, is perfectly suited to a non-modernist play of fragmentation, and much more attuned to the vernaculars at hand here—weblogs—than the return to realism in which Kennedy and Wilson reinvest.

New Ambiances

The blog-form's fragmentary tendencies also encouraged the Storybox participants, like most other bloggers, to deploy different registers of expression from post to post without any incongruity, to create new ambiances, to bricolage disparate parts together in a plane of consistency. Denis Sado, the only Storybox participant comfortable with blogging under his real name, would often outline memories and issues in resolutely logistical and institutional terms. Note, for example, his description of the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya:

> There are food distribution which usually done every forthnight, and this done by CARE Kenya logistic sector. UNHCR is responsible for keeping refugees security and protection. And GTZ-IS is responsible for health stutus in the camp while GTZrescue responsible for firewood and maintaining forest plantation around the camp.

(Sado, Denis From Camp Life)

But moments like these are punctuated by occasional, furtive disclosures: "I do remember and never forget what really happened to my dad when we were going with him to school, the bomb fell on the ground I didn't know what happened and at last found my dad laying down dead. I HATE TALKING ABOUT THIS!"

(Sado, Denis Life Background). (It seems almost obscene to quote this—*to reenact the making-public of this memory*. And Sado obviously found it obscene to write his story in the first place. But the problem of re-enactment leads to precisely the point that has made this essay difficult for me to write: despite my pains to go over this essay with Sado and ensure that he was comfortable with the context within which his words would be appearing, the "public" of a quasi-academic essay is incredibly different from the "public" to which Sado made this difficult disclosure. This practical negotiation of multiple "publics" is one of the main reasons this essay has been difficult to write: the act of contextual translation *hurts*. But this multiplicity also heralds an infinity of possibilities, and it is the witnessing of witnessing that leads to the undoing of positions, and hence, to critique.)

The blogging medium encourages an ambient approach, not just across separate entries, but also more molecularly, as a general prose technique. NaturallySweet, a young Afghan Storybox participant, recently visited Afghanistan after years of absence, and met with relatives and friends of the family. She decided to blog about the true story of a female friend in Afghanistan—recalling events that have recently passed, or which are even transpiring now, but in the seemingly timeless, almost allegorical, language of fairytale:

> Her great-grandfather was the leader of 6 Big Colonies. He used to own a horse which was very dear and used 2 wear a gold necklace which at the time no one at all could afford 2 have. He had 2 wives and from them two he had 5 sons and 5 daughters alltogether […] "A.H" (who's Aziza's- father) got married as well and had 2 sons and 2 daughters. They were very poor which resulted from draught and war; they couldn't plant their crops and had nothing to eat and survive during the war times….
>
> […] for a few years he struggling to do this till one day he gave up because he got sick and there was no way at all dat he could medicate himself or see a doctor at that time because he was very poor and no one else as well could help him because they were also very poor!
>
> SO HE DIED!
>
> he died of depression, poverty, post traumatic shock and heart attack!
>
> (NaturallySweet, Pearls and Beads)

The creeping use of numerical shorthand and the vernacular use of "dat" foreshadow NaturallySweet's utterly contemporary diagnosis of "depression, poverty, post traumatic shock and heart attack," which interrupts the spell—the sense of safety created by the virtual, temporal buffer zone of myth. This interruption is a clue that something else is going on, which is confirmed when Aziza's father dies—the children fall under her grandfather's care, and her sister is given away for marriage:

popular culture—not to be methodologically lazy, or to simply draw connections between unrelated fields, but out of a genuine desire to describe something I find difficult about which to write.

Touchy Feely Filth

Consider Grant Morrison and Chris Weston's comic book, *The Filth*. Their (anti-) hero is Greg Feely, an ordinary, "sentimental" cat-lover who leads a double life as Ned Slade, a trans-dimensional agent for the psychic police-cum-waste-disposal agency of the world, known as The Filth. Middle-aged, balding, and sporting both a tasteful comb-over and a porn addiction, Feely finds that his lonely life with his cat, Tony, is apparently a deep-cover "personality safe house" for Slade. Pressed back into service, Feely/Slade tries to negotiate his traumatic imbrication within the system. While he's battling giant flying spermatozoa or navigating the sewer of the world, Feely/Slade will wonder aloud if he's forgotten to feed the cat. It is truly touching, and not pathetic. What the Morrison-Weston narrative achieves is the realization that amid struggles over the fate of life itself, "I Love My Cat" narratives *are amongst the best narratives there are*. And yet this touchy-*feely* mundanity of cat-love is neither an authentic origin for Feely, nor is it a "fake" but necessary refuge for the "real" Slade, despite its proven worth. As the book progresses, it becomes clearer that the cat scenario is neither the "real" story, nor one valid segment amongst several—it is, in fact, one of several occult media dialects: the killer sperm, the cat, and the zombie "anti-persons," all enunciate or *channel* through each other. In the end, we learn that cat-love can be generated by a sentient nanotech infestation, but is still valid.

The Filth can thus be read as an allegory of the way bloggers can deterritorialize geopolitical commentary and mundanity into a neveryday plane of consistency, and can also be an answer of sorts to the elitist, phobic disavowals of blogs like Raghda Zaid's. In *The Filth*, cat-blogging allegorically retains its nobility as an exemplary effect, but with the realization that its vocabulary is a partial medium (in the occult sense), sometimes sharing storytelling techniques with narratives of genocide. The capacity for such writing is always there. *We have the technology*. And *The Filth* highlights technologies of writing, if noticeably of an "old skool" era: the head of The Filth's communications division is "La Pen," who sports four huge fountain pens as appendages, and Feely/Slade discovers that The Filth's mysterious origin, based on something called "the Crack," which "runs through everything … [a]nd everyone" (209), is actually a mining operation that extracts supernatural ink from an island-sized fountain pen lying at the bottom of an inter-dimensional sea,

perhaps abandoned by God after the act of Creation. Telling a story is not the unfolding of some whole narrative, it's a shapeshifting, territorial resource grab that is founded upon trauma.

The Box and the Real
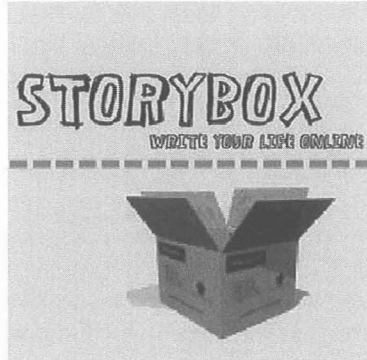
The process of naming the Storybox project negotiated a range of expectations; before it had begun, I was expecting the project to be critical and therapeutic, and to deal metaphorically and sometimes explicitly with packing and unpacking—the labour of migration. The "box" suffix somehow felt appropriate. It also felt very ambivalent, lacking a positive, empowering flavour. The name has continued to resonate with me after the fact, as a kind of tool for engaging with trauma.

Cue another allegory: recall the incredible scene which splits David Lynch's 2001 film, *Mulholland Drive*, in two: the appearance of the blue box in Club Silencio. The lovers, Betty and Rita, in an attempt to uncover the truth behind Rita's amnesiac past, end up in an old theatre called Club Silencio, where they are regaled with seductive but simultaneously alienating stage acts that are mimed to taped music. The miming, however, is not initially apparent—it is deliberately revealed at the close of each act. "*No Hay Banda*," announces the MC—"There is no band." The show climaxes in an incredibly moving Spanish rendition of Roy Orbison's *Crying*, complete with actual tears. At the peak of the song's emotion, the singer collapses and the prerecorded voice sings on. At this very moment, a strange blue box somehow appears in Betty's handbag, ready for the mysterious blue key that Rita has had all along. They rush home and open the box. At this point, the film's narrative universe is utterly dislocated, and we are offered a jarringly different, yet strangely similar, story.

A "coherent" reading of *Mulholland Drive* identifies the narrative up to this point as the desperate, glamorous fantasy Diane, the "real" version of "Betty." In a fit of sexual jealousy, Diane has had her girlfriend, Camilla (the "real" "Rita"), murdered by a hitman. This violent act and its disavowal lies in the box of repression, and the entire fantasy is spun around it, only to come apart when Betty confronts her guilt and loss in Club Silencio. This interpretation is satisfying in that it feels like we are getting to the ugly truth, but it ultimately replays a bunch of hierarchical and voyeuristic impulses. Timothy Takemoto suggests that the film isn't divided between fantasy and reality at all, that Betty and Rita and their doubles are all effects of the one other woman, and that neither of the two narratives of the film are more real than the other. We can push this even further: yes, the box is indeed

an allegorical marker for trauma, but one which operates as a channeling nexus for different vocabularies of affect—the different fragmentary narratives of the film—which do not have to be organized hierarchically in such an obviously psychoanalytic scenario because they are actually vocabularies of a neveryday imaginary. What if the box is a way of marking what happens when a blogger like NaturallySweet describes life at school in Sydney or life under the Taliban as "soooooooooo bor[ing]" and "sooooooooooooooooooo devastating?" At the site of trauma, narratives and their registers interlink to channel each other in a way that produces actual, ambivalent *effects* rather than simply betraying symptoms—the shift from Betty and Rita's story to that of Diane and Camilla is analogous to the slippage of NaturallySweet's "soooooooooo," and the setting of Club Silencio merely underscores the idea that neither thread is more authentic than the other.

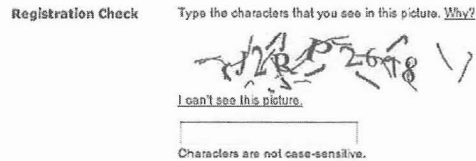*The Box and the Real 2: Legibilities of the Human and the Apparatus of CAPTCHA*

David Lynch's traumatic box first appeared as a resonating gate-keeper of "humanity" in his 1984 cinematic adaptation of Frank Herbert's 1964 novel, *Dune*. In an early scene, our protagonist, Paul, tested by a visiting "Reverend Mother," is forced to put his hand in a dark green box. "What's in the box?" he asks. "Pain," is the reply. Premature removal of his hand from the box means instant death. Paul's hand experiences an ever-heightening burning, but he keeps his hand in the box to the end, fighting his instincts and thus proving his "humanity."

As noted above, one group involved in the Storybox project had little prior experience with computers and the Internet, so it seemed sensible to start at a point before blogs, with email. During one of our first workshops, everyone signed up for free webmail accounts. Interestingly, it took more than *three hours* for this process to yield any workable results. At Hotmail, and at the gates of most social software services, prospective users are presented with a dizzying array of form-fields, all of which are mandatory: occupation, date of birth, etc. The last question—the signing of the user agreement—strangely requires the user to fill in their last name for a second time. The Storyboxers would ask why such information was necessary, and would often enter it in a way that wasn't acceptable to the system; the practice of (machine-readable) textual consistency—especially for usernames and passwords—was a particularly troublesome factor for them, a seemingly meaningless reduction of language to dotted *i*'s and crossed *t*'s.

But the kicker was the penultimate question presented by the CAPTCHA—Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart. Such tests are commonly used by web services that involve social communications, including Blogger, the blogging system we were using. They act as a gateway to prevent *inhuman communication*, stopping automated scripts from procuring accounts for transmitting spam.

Registration Check   Type the characters that you see in this picture. Why?

I can't see this picture.

Characters are not case-sensitive.

"What does this mean? Why do we have to answer this … question?" the young people would ask me when confronted with an avant-garde-looking CAPTCHA. "To… prove that you're human," I'd reply in a whisper, recalling the actual wording used in some of these kinds of tests, and realizing the gravity of the situation—many of the people in the room had experienced processes of attempted dehumanization. And as it turned out, *few of the participants could pass this test*, even though most of them had a fairly workable grasp of written English. Many seemed understandably frustrated by this in a way that implied that the test was unfair and insulting—yet another challenge to their humanity in a history of such challenges—and some seemed upset by its implications, although they were cheered somewhat when I failed the test a couple of times in a row. (To be fair to Microsoft, the Hotmail CAPTCHA did offer a speech recognition test for blind users, but in our lab environment, our computers' tiny, built-in speakers made this, too, completely unintelligible.)

Now, the problem with the encounter between refugee participants and the gatekeeping registration form was not so much a question of literacy or its apparent lack, nor simply that mainstream software's usability has a long way to go—for example, after I told this story at a design symposium, someone used it as an example of regrettable "neglect" in the sphere of design practice. While (perhaps debatably) accurate in a descriptive sense, these perspectives, like the mystifying terminologies of "social capital," leave our terms of reference within this whole game of informatics intact—when in fact, what a story like this can do, is *crack that game open*. This crack recalls the Voigt-Kampff test of Ridley Scott's 1982 film, *Blade Runner*—a psychometric "empathy test" that can supposedly weed out androids from humans. Unlike the novel on which it was based, *Blade Runner* enacts the collapse of any underpinning taxonomy of the human; it is an *anamorphic moment*, similar to the desubjectifying shift in perspective applied to the two noblemen in Hans Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors*:

The large grey smudge at the bottom of the painting is a skull, a *memento mori*—the sobering spectre of Death's head, of mortality itself, draped behind the human potential for hubris—and to see that properly, the viewer must approach the painting in a way that does away with its conventional framing, so that its coordinates (which, in this case, provide a representative grid for wealth, spatial territorialization and masculinist power) are completely distorted.

I would therefore like to approach this encounter between young refugee bloggers and the apparatus of CAPTCHA in social software, as an anamorphic event, a traumatic manifestation of the limits of the entire framework upon which our notions of literacy, usability—and indeed, "the user" and "the human"—are founded. It haunts the whole enterprise of the writing of difference in a software-mediated environment. This rupture, this *crack*, means that it's not *really* a matter of identifying new goals for informatics literacy so that users can better conform to software's expectations of them, or indeed, of making software more usable for more people, even if those things could be practical outcomes—because the invitation contained in such an encounter can yank the carpet from underneath the bureaucratic, managerial hoops of literacy, or the impossible idealization of a yet-more-universal user. Similar possibilities were present in 2005's Cornelia Rau incident, in which an Australian resident with mental health issues was mistakenly incarcerated in a detention centre for asylum seekers. Do we use this as an opportunity to be outraged that an *Australian resident* is "treated like an asylum seeker," and demand better "screening procedures" to avoid such seemingly obvious injustices (thus leaving our assumptions about mandatory refugee detention intact)? Or do we accept it as an invitation to anamorphically problematize the very ground—citizenship, security, the nation—upon which such a system rests?

Collective Agency

If the aporia of design and literacy crystallized in the CAPTCHA cannot be *solved* through an extension of the dominant logics already at play, perhaps returning to the Morrison-Weston "Crack" as the traumatic limit point of subjectivity can suggest an alternative to simply calling for the abolition of those logics. To put it bluntly: if the Storybox participants can generate occult, neveryday vocabularies in a wayward negotiation of their personal conditions of trauma, *perhaps "information design" can, too*. The apparent totalities of design informatics, then, *also* require a productive negotiation of their own traumatic limits via an occult and productive channeling of the spectacular and the mundane towards the creation of different, non-teleological kinds of agency—in this case, the agency of design to *make a*

difference, the agency of users, and perhaps, a collective, transformative, and networked agency that is neither.

This seemingly abstract task can be seen as an important part of the Storybox participants' concrete experiences through the pain of "training." I originally phrased the project's interest in training in terms of self-determination, but it should now be clear why I prefer the term *agency*. We are witnessing a collective, co-implicating encounter amongst blogger-authors and more impersonal, sociotechnical apparatuses. The embodied specificities of the Storybox bloggers' journeys call for a particular kind of focus and care, and yet there is also a kind of subjectivity and trauma in this wider encounter that cannot be privatized in the author, suggesting an impersonal context that still depends on its bloggers as participants. This context is not a "public" in the sense of a communicative sphere of rational, informed citizens participating in democracy as the sovereignty of a people, but something far more occult.

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