

Somatosphere Presents

A Book Forum on Todd Meyers's *All That Was Not Her*

[Duke University Press](#), 2022. 232 pages.

Contributions from:

Elizabeth A Wilson

Margaux Fitoussi

DeShawn Dumas & Maya Stovall

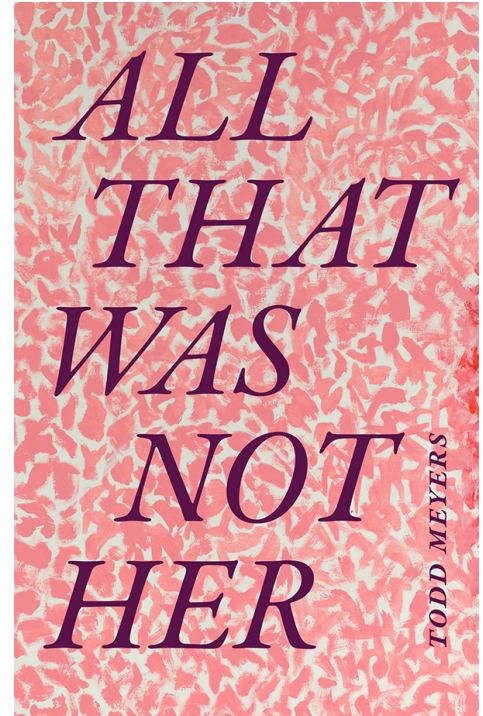
Anthony Stavrianakis

Aidan Seale-Feldman

Andrés Romero

And a reply from:

Todd Meyers



This book forum brings together seven scholars and artists to discuss Todd Meyers's [All That Was Not Her](#) (Duke 2022). A profoundly introspective and original book, *All That Was Not Her* traces a relationship between an anthropologist and interlocutor that equally verges on friendship and antagonism. Eschewing well-trodden anthropological approaches which focus on identity or suffering, Meyers delves into issues of loss, care, and illness as they emerge in the context of the politics of race and class in the contemporary United States. The book is equally a bracing meditation on the limits and failures of ethnography and on the always-incomplete project of representing a life. In often startling prose, Meyers melds ethnography, memoir, and cultural criticism into something altogether distinct. We hope that you enjoy these engagements with *All That Was Not Her*.



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Vandalizing Words

Elizabeth A Wilson

Emory University

Early on in *All That Was Not Her*, as he recounts the difficulties of writing about Beverly, there is a sentence that catches her eye: “I seek to write the negative without vandalizing it” (p. 10). *Negative* is one of her favorite words. It marks a condensed, indispensable, impossible conceptual space. But this time it is *vandalize* that gives her pause. It’s an unexpected and appealing lexical choice. The Oxford English Dictionary tells her that a vandal is a “wilful or ignorant destroyer of anything beautiful, venerable, or worthy of preservation.”

So at the beginning of *All That Was Not Her*, something curious is being said about the negative. He wants to not vandalize it. He wants not to be the destroyer of this splendid idea. He wants to keep it from injury or harm. She tries to figure out what this could mean, because she is writing about Valerie Solanas’s mad and beautiful writing, and struggling with similar quandaries of how to read hostility, destruction, and antagonism as psycho-political forces (creating “a record of how her milieu and her psyche were knotted together” p. 87).

What, then, is he trying to preserve? It isn’t the anti-Black racism, poverty, psychiatric debility, and illnesses that give shape to Beverly’s psychic and social life. These kinds of negativity are precisely what he is writing against: “the real threat of persistent, unrelenting chronic illness, is bounded by the reality of precarity and harm that derive from racism and other prejudices in the everyday world in which Beverly lives” (p. 9-10). The negativity that he wants to preserve is something else; something much harder to define than the social harms that organize Beverly’s world. Indeed, there are a lot of synonyms for negativity, especially early in the book, as though naming this other kind of negativity is giving him some grief. For a few paragraphs starting on p. 30 she finds: *dreadful, tedious, despair, regret, deformed, recriminations, untamable, heavy, opaque, savage, meager, weakness, erode*. And eventually the word

that much later will encapsulate the entire project for him: *failure* (“I sensed failure was my object long before I found the nerve to name it” p. 155).

Most often these synonyms for the negative refer to his own feelings or to the miscarriage that he contends his writing about Beverly’s has become. The whole enterprise seems to have been sickening and repetitive for him. In the final paragraphs, for example, he notes that he has written about Beverly before, in another language. *All That Was Not Her* however “is a different book than [that] one. Even when I return to a few of the same moments, I do so from a less stable vantage point, the book here is a record of losing ground” (p. 201).

She wonders whether one of the things that happens as *All That Was Not Her* unfolds is that Beverly comes to be a figure for the negativity that, intolerably, he wants to address, understand, and preserve. Beverly is a difficult person. She spoils his epistemological grounding: “I know less about Beverly now than I met her nearly two decades ago” (p. 41). He shows us that, alongside her care and love, she disassembles and lies (p. 76), she is prone to paranoid and distressing behavior (p. 92), she has enjoyed being mean to him (p. 193): “she passed bad checks in more ways than one” (p. 166). There is something in writing about Beverly that isn’t simply the depiction of a life contending with precarity, but a desire to think about what is most difficult about her (and the rest of us): a negativity that ought to be preserved intellectually.

This is where failure must inevitably come to pass.

She thinks about putting failure in quotation marks—to give the word some distance from being a negative judgment of *All That Was Not Her*. But in a gesture of solitary with him, she decides not to vandalize the word. What has made his writing so compelling for her is that his ruminations gesture towards a negativity that isn’t simply coterminous with the reality of Beverly social conditions. He calls the latter “a low snarl of violences outside of her, folded into her” (p. 119). The other negativity breaches this epistemology of social reality. It might not be able to hold the distinction between the inside and the outside stable, for example. The other kind of negativity also runs athwart our words. This makes a coherent account of Beverly impossible, and not only because there may have been little coherence in Beverly’s words and actions to begin with (p. 160). Any account of this unnamed, unlocatable negativity is doomed to failure from the start.

What his account of Beverly gets her to think about, even though she can’t really grasp it, is the importance of reading for negativity even in those most crushed by the violences of late

liberalism. In such an enterprise, our politics will have to be vandalized, experiments in academic writing will need to be undertaken, and the failures depicted in *All That Was Not Her* will remain beautiful, venerable, and worthy of preservation.

Elizabeth A Wilson is a Samuel Candler Dobbs professor in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Emory University. Her most recent book, co-authored with Professor Adam Frank is A Silvan Tomkins Handbook: Foundations for Affect Theory (University of Minnesota Press, 2020). She is currently working on anger, madness, and the writings of Valerie Solanas.

Dot Dot Dot

Margaux Fitoussi
Columbia University

To find the right words to talk about Beverly is to find the right words to talk about silence. Years separated the moment of Beverly's death from the moment when Todd Meyers stood on her porch, stealing looks past the new tenants's shoulders into her home. Ten years of silence. He hadn't known she had died; nobody had called or written to let him know. Silence sutures Meyers's patchwork of musings about his relationship to Beverly, an unlikely pair brought together by her chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and his uneasy preoccupation with chronic illness. Not quite strangers. Not quite friends. He returned to Baltimore to search the spaces she had left behind, to work through the bristling realities of this complex relationship.

*"So, so, so in the absence of her I direct
my words at the hollow space of her." (197)*

This hollow space is not empty. If silence undergirds the grammar of their relationship, then images give form to Meyers's words and to Beverly's life.

All That Was Not Her is drenched in images. Meyers wrestles with the "images that surrounded her" (19), encounters that "get under the skin and get stuck in the image of thought" (35). Images of her burrow inside his body, his mind, his memories of his relationship with her.

When Beverly died, a silence settled upon those images.
These images become his alone.

The rest is silence.

Images do analytical work for Meyers. He thinks with the dissolve, a cinematic technique that emphasizes the passage of time and the lingering of the past in the present, and in terms of series — multiple images — images that stand alone, images that blur together, images that

speak to each other; he searches their contours for meaning with the acknowledgement that images are hyperkinetic. The past and the narrative present are woven together; it's not always clear where one image starts and another ends.

No photographs of Beverly appear in the book's pages, nor does Meyers include those of others he references, like Carrie Mae Weem's *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), photographs of a Black woman who sits at the kitchen table as others pass through the frame, and Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Seascapes* (1980), a series of near abstract landscape photographs that inspires a reflection on the ellipsis, the dot dot dot, the in between. For Meyers, the punctum (Roland Barthes defined it as the detail in an image that punctures or wounds us, an intensively subjective experience) exists between images; Images, he writes, "resist revealing themselves...[they are] hostile to knowing" (26): there is an integrity to the image that makes it more impermeable, less vulnerable to the analytical violence of the anthropologist and the "easy translation of the scene to the word" (17). The image, he suggests, offers a way out of the quandary of academic writing that foregrounds definitive conclusions rather than leaving a space for multiplicity; in short, images encompass presence and multiple temporalities: there is something more faithful to Beverly in image than in word.

I was moved by Meyers's reflections on the unfinished: the errors, failures, and obsessions inherent to the work of an anthropologist. They left me wondering about the incomplete images of Beverly in his sketchbook (Meyers studied art as an undergraduate), and how they might still linger in the world. Might these sketches, with their half-shaded forms, speak to the elusiveness of a subject whose form slips out of our grasp in our attempts to retrace it?

Margaux Fitoussi is a visual anthropologist. Her film work has screened at Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York, Director's Note, Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme in Paris, Cultural Pinacothèque in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, NYU Gallatin Galleries, in New York, and SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin. Her translations have been published by AUC Press, Archive Books, and Liverpool University Press. Before beginning her doctorate in anthropology at Columbia University, she studied religion at Harvard University and history at UC Berkeley.

Notes on *All That Was Not Her*

DeShawn Dumas
University of California Irvine

Maya Stovall
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

“The point is that here the issue of death is not one among many occasions to turn to anthropology but, with few exceptions, the only one.”¹

Todd and Beverly, co-subjects, somersault through text, careening toward undoing. To an extent, *All That Was Not Her* is a slow motion, smoldering reiteration of the (anti) human condition across abstracted chapters and sketches. For these and more reasons, an affective and structural conjuring creeps around and punctuates the equilibrium of the text. Within this narratology the codes of grace, reason, the abject, and death become the primary metaphors of *All That Was Not Her*, forming an ensemble of intuitions in space and time to comprehend the concept of a subject. When taken together, *All That Was Not Her* reflects what might be called a surrealist sciences ethnography in which Kant, Canguilhem, and Goldstein perfume “an esthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions—that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities draw from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious.”² When a child is learning to count, what is the first station? Getting from one to two. Arguably when she has reached two, she can count—albeit the adults in the room know well to count is to do so within larger structural units of measure, 10, 100, 1000: you can call it a social formation. The inevitability of the primordial two, the split subject of a dualism can be infinitely subdivided through all its states while knowing itself as itself; this is the foundation of life at a cellular level or a spiritual one. These relations make Beverly and Todd work in this monograph. Accordingly, my own intervention is to invite an interlocutor, DeShawn, to respond to this text with me. Henceforth the “I think” begins to speak as we: DeShawn and Maya.

¹ Fabian, Johannes. “How others die—reflections on the anthropology of death.” *Social Research* (1972): 543-567.

² Clifford, James. “Comparative Studies in Society and History.” *‘On Ethnographic Surrealism’* 23, no. 4 (1981): 539-564, p. 540.

The drive in *All That Was Not Her* in genealogy of Kant's philosophical-physical anthropology troubles a discursive image of the perfect and imperfect necessitation of the Western categorical imperative by letting the preconscious surreal hallucinations slide not only into the ethnographic discourse but practical consciousness – to respect the humanity in my own person and in that of other persons. The moves are deftly situated within the evolving statements, the modern enunciative field of the genre of Man within its inextricable dualisms, even— of modern science and myth. A descriptive (what is) and normative (what ought to) condense that which since Kant combines the repetitive statements of science with recursive critique of metaphysical narratives: free-will, god, immortality of the soul, into as Wynter suggests, a loop which is a new scientific master code. Reading Darwin through Wynter, the natural world is divided *a priori* into the selected rational life and deselected irrational.³ With careful skill, *All That Was Not Her* cinematically sketches the *longue durée* of the transcontinental ideal of a unity of consciousness above all others.

Now this unity of consciousness, the synthetic unity of apperception, think the unity of judgments on the narrative theme in a play or fable entails a semiotic crisis of anthropological researcher/subject relations; a relationship which at some point entails the entanglements of a/symmetric relation of the realization of research work in the world to that realization's resonance with the subject. The stakes of this specific relational crisis are high, insofar as among Todd's concerns is to turn attention to his reluctance to generalize, code, render, and print the personality of the subject in 360 degrees in a monograph—to construct the concept of subject that could be missed. Intensifying this issue is the fact that Beverly died prior to publication. Now Beverly's death before publication exceeds the criticality of the possibility of reception of this text or lack thereof. That is, Beverly's death is a precondition of not being the condition of all possibility or a consequential and real loss of life, a split, a break, a heartbreak in the unity of her community; the passage of a soul/human/body/flesh/woman in the dimension of space and things elapsing in space and marking time and the passage through to another dimension. Or perhaps *All That Was Not Her* stands on the side of an overdetermined dialectic – neither 1 nor not 1 insofar 2 is, as we know not really counting at all. Thinking against the grain of the text we experience a passage, as kind of speech which those reading the undisciplined discursive language of essay might not be touched by, comprehending feeling, a tense-logic in its totality and finality first-hand for themselves if attempting to think through the concept of Beverly. There is an odd multiplication of duty here which cascades along this sequence of crisis, action, and episteme.

³ Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument." *CR: The new centennial review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.

There is a recursive tension in the many spaces across texts where Lévi-Strauss describes his understanding of Man as his object of study, casting an epistemological wake for monograph futures. Separating tissues without the application of much force; a quiet teasing with forceps; a stepping off the plane of tissue; a fanning out of blades of scissors inserted into connective tissue; forgoing a cut before identifying structure; knowingly sacrificial cuts; cuts that elapse in a white space of the operating theater...Zooming out, the tension is at least in significant part a play between modern science and mythical thought toward surrealism. Almost in the moment in which Ishi is suspended, sacrificed, lost—Lévi-Strauss turns to contemplation of the sunset and the dawn. A man writing his memoir in middle age reflects on his younger self through filmic memory: “Nature put on a new show each morning”.⁴ Our attention is directed to the disproportionate sublimity of the sunset in relation with the dawn. The sunset is ‘a complete performance’ while the dawn ‘makes no promises.’ “Dawn is simply the day’s beginning; sunset the day run through again, but fifty times as fast.”⁵

If the subject/anthropologist relationship is a distinctive allegorical representation found in such primordial dualisms of dawn-sunset, father-daughter, white-black, dead-living then a dead subject can be thought a particular narratological conception of the relationship where lack/loss is made visible, a first signifier of half the split of a universal dualism, a precondition of lack. Regardless of authorial strategy, Beverly’s death *a priori* to the publication of the ethnography in which she’s subject provides a means to an end. An end which is not merely the thematization of suffering, nor the ironic thematizing of Beverly’s ungrieveability. In other words, the surrealist ethnography of Beverly, a woman, a woman of color, living, living in Baltimore, a woman with disabilities, chronic illness, medical preconditions whose death is visualized alongside so many layers of emptiness, in no way detracts from the urgent importance of the monograph. Now what is important here is not how Todd describes or fails to describe Beverly’s humanity. Beverly, the chronically ill woman. The Beverly who we couldn’t possibly know through these pages is not the point here but the subject is merely the form. Life remains a condition of impossibility that vibrates through the monograph, consuming itself with the terror of its inevitable ruination. An urgent monograph that speaks: *All That Was Not Her* thematizes and innovates the anthropology’s self-reflexive turn by modernizing disciplined attunement to the birth of biopower. Just as “They wormed out...”⁶ with this sexy turn of phrase: all the little girls are in the hold held captive by the gaze and the

⁴ Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "Tristes tropiques (1955)." *Trans. John and Doreen Weightman. London: Penguin Books (1992)*, p. 52-53.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Meyers, Todd. *All That Was Not Her*. Duke University Press, 2022, p. 92.

rape-war-law culture machine that reproduces its sovereignty. It is uncertain whether it will be possible to worm out of this.

“She eventually ran out of things to pile on top of them,”⁷ (them being Beverly’s three grandchildren). We are drowning in a dream, a series of moments recounted by Beverly’s estranged adult grandson interspliced with the possibility that Beverly heard unseen voices who beckoned to danger or at least terrified the lives of her young when they were young by heaping mounds and mounds and mounds of soaked clothing over the mouth, nose, face, neck, entire body. Beverly’s murderous hypothetical is play, a dream, a nightmare, or much worse. We cannot know and yet those tiny little black signifiers glare back at the reader, devastating, insisting. “Beverly whispered not to them, (an unnamed them), never let them hear you breathing.”⁸ Unlike the formal means Beverly’s ungrievability offers the reader the real content is an exercised ability to internalize the realm of the monstrous in the extremes of the unconscious and beneath the realm of castration, in absence of revulsion.

In parallel, the anthropologist perhaps contemplates suiciding the burden and outrage in making live and ethnographically letting die. Todd’s breathless refusal to do just this is circular to his documentation of near-death. If *Anthropos* is that being whose suffering follows the plurality of its logos given as principles of a rational intelligence chained to the hold of reason and the logic of existence— then, an ethnographic study of Beverly and other authorial voices turns on the disinterested observation of suffering, namely dualist modalities of human possibility-impossibility/contingency-necessity of human worth. In reading Foucault’s government of the living through what Patterson calls social death,⁹ a regulating principle which Patterson observed to be the central hallmark in his two-thousand year comparative study of slave societies throughout the world—a medical anthropologist breathes new life into a complicity anthropologists have historically and culturally maintained in relation to a New World constituted on anti-human systems, and prepares for what Irvine and others call the sixth great mass extinction of life on earth.¹⁰ This is the affective content or tense-logic that *All That Was Not Her* artfully collapses, condenses, critiques. Navigating this tense-logic, the monograph scours the shit out of a relationship, as Beverly herself artfully described, and does so through universal tableau: abduction, taboo, castration, poison, soured relationship, suicide, death, return, resurrection.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and social death: A comparative study, with a new preface*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

¹⁰ Irvine, Richard DG. *An anthropology of deep time: Geological temporality and social life*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Now the ruination across body/flesh/ “I think”/ “I speak” marked in *All That Was Not Her* oscillates beyond the bounds of bare reason in the human sciences and beyond the eschatological conditions of possibility for an individuated anthropological subject: to question the logos and mythos under the hood would be to place the transcendental subject as such in question. (This anthropologist’s (her) father was a sixty-nine-year-old white Jewish man who successfully suicided October 30, 2019.) The urgency in *All That Was Not Her* is not its logical inability to symbolize and mentalize Beverly with those predicates humans reserve for other humans, i.e. care, love for their children, in the wake of Beverly’s unknown desires and drives outside of death. But rather it is that *All That Was Not Her* “cuts into” its subject as Kathleen Stewart wrote on the back jacket. Our own thoughts second that emotion in that the discursive mark of this cut and its teleology abstracts then deploys the critical function of the modern heuristics of the concept of race and its corresponding spatio-temporal intuitive-feeling object. The categorical imperative, the difference between good and evil to degree that the good is practical for us since the 16th century has been evolving steadily toward: feel nothing at all at all the deaths of all the others.

All That Was Not Her thematizes the unity of white positionality on the edge of destroying itself from its repressed enjoyment of the suffering of every other mode of human animal existence that does not register as equal in space-time and discourse through the magnitude of appearances. In *All That Was Not Her*, the author masterfully foregrounds this clandestine structure just as decisively as Beverly’s real articulation within this structure never appears through the sensuous beyond the monstrous. Thou he doth protest, the anthropologist evaporates into missionary, physician, clinician, police; dissolving into power’s hold on life¹¹ while a series of dreams unravel. The levers skillfully pulled and the buttons carefully pushed cast scathing insight on *jouissance* during the global socio-ecological decline, the ruin circling the earth. In *All That Was Not Her*, ultimately Todd and Beverly are positioned at the advent of the Anthropocene consensually or non-consensually in the hold of what could be termed a long-term non-relationship.

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Maya Stovall is the author of Liquor Store Theatre published by Duke University Press. She is Assistant Professor at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

¹¹ Foucault, Michel, and François Ewald. "Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976. Vol. 1. Macmillan, 2003, p. 239.
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A Himpossible Tale

Anthony Stavrianakis

Université Paris Nanterre

[All] [that was not her]

[All that] [was not her]

[All that was] [not her]

[All that was not] [her]

Lists, he made, a kind of series.

When is a series a set?

To close a set, the all, requires the exception: her.

Beverly as exception.

A woman.

This woman.

She whose existence lodges itself somewhere between [all that] and [all that was.]

A writing after the fact that fails a second time to write that which was impossible to grasp the first time.

The impossibility of writing her: she floats in those spaces somewhere between the words that do not represent [her].

The enigma, the void, the empty set, the [not] in the [that] [that was] Beverly.

The emptiness as necessary to positing that she exists, even if he cannot tell us who she was.

Who would believe him?

The not-all: Beverly as singularity against the universality of a class (logic and socio-logic).

A universality necessary for (or consequence of) the mark of this One life, against the lure of the image; his two Beverlies: lies, and Believers.

The image is deadly. To bin it, to let it fall, may also indicate having traversed a threshold.

Hope is on the side of inaction. An act must be brought to the power of the signifier. Suicide or otherwise.

A response from the letter. Not a note.

A mark of the Himpossible. Not a Himmoral tale.

To write hurt.

Her *tuh*.

Anthony Stavrianakis is a researcher (chargé de recherche) at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, based at the Laboratoire d'Ethnologie et de Sociologie Comparative, Université Paris Nanterre. He is the coauthor, with Paul Rabinow, of a trilogy of books about the form, logic, and ethics of

anthropological inquiry, and author of Leaving (University of California Press, 2020), an inquiry into the practice of assisted suicide in Switzerland.

There Is Nothing Heroic About This Text

Aidan Seale-Feldman

University of Notre Dame

I read *All That Was Not Her* through the night on a non-stop flight from Chicago to Abu Dhabi, riveted under the beam of my single light in the darkened airplane cabin. I was on my way back to Kathmandu for the first time in three years, absorbed in a book about anthropological imperfection.

It is refreshing to read a book that dares to acknowledge the anthropologists' failure, but also, terrifying. *All That Was Not Her* revolves around Meyers's splintered, decade-long relationship with a black woman named Beverly who we learn was once a participant in his ethnographic study of chronic illness in Baltimore. But this is not primarily a book about Beverly's illness, or chronic illness; it is a book about the ethnographer's pain as he comes face to face with his own inadequacies. The story of an ethnographic relationship unfolds across a series of fragmentary thoughts and unsettling scenes: Meyers sitting in the purgatory of Beverly's downstairs room; Meyers holding Beverly's hand while her mother calls an ambulance; Meyers in the basement going through Beverly's belongings after she's died; Meyers carrying Beverly's disabled grandson up and down the stairs; Meyers in the car with suicidal thoughts, driving to see Beverly. There are many uncomfortable things that readers will confront in this book, but the moral posturing of anthropology is not one of them.

All That Was Not Her is in the genre of the confessional. It's short poetic ruminations supply a slow drip of ethnographic disquiet that never lets up. In its dive into the discomfort of the anthropological project, we are offered a critique of the discipline's performance of virtue. *I sensed failure was my object long before I found the nerve to name it.* This book is an ode to the discarded draft, the abandoned project, the unfinished work that operates outside the logics of finality and truth. Inexactitude becomes an ethic that extends both to the writing of the text and the writing of Beverly's life, never to be reduced to available tropes, categories, theoretical functions, or final conclusions. *In the end there was no wholeness, no repair.* Beverly's life is not deformed into an anthropology of suffering, nor is it warped into optimistic narratives of hope, endurance, or moral becoming. It is precisely the refusal to locate Beverly's life within the bounds of the available anthropological frames of suffering and endurance that Meyers creates an opening for something else to emerge. There is nothing heroic about this text; but that is, I think, exactly the point.

Aidan Seale-Feldman is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame. Grounded in ethnographic explorations of disaster, mental health, and mass hysteria, her research asks how to approach forms of affliction that are not bound within the individual but instead move across bodies, environments, and generations. Based on two years of fieldwork in Nepal, her first book project is an ethnography of the psychic life of disaster. Dr. Seale-Feldman's research has been published in Cultural Anthropology, Ethos, HIMALAYA: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, and South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies.

The Return of Contact

Andrés Romero

Rollins College

There isn't an easy way to synthesize this book. Sure, one can say that it's a literary ethnography about relations—their volatile and fraught nature. One can also say that this is a book about the return—about why previous worlds return to us, or why “we” return to sift through their broken shards. Or about how seemingly impersonal forces impel us to return to the injurious scene. Or how the space of the negative, of absence, is an elliptical space that boomerangs apparitions, afterlives, and presencing forces that refuse to be done away with. Or, that this is a book about the modes of contact sustained and lost between the author, Todd Meyers, and his interlocutor, Beverly. Yet, it is *so much more*.

The fieldwork for this book, we are told, began in the early 2000s as an attempt to follow the life of Beverly—a middle-aged Black woman living in Baltimore—to understand how social crises and comorbidity are managed in contexts of racialized violence and insecurity through a person-centered approach. But in that process, what grew between the ethnographer and Beverly became something much more expansive and elusive. *All That Was Not Her* is, in part, the result of these contingencies: an account of the convoluted nature of ethnographic relations.

So much is compressed in these pages. So many offerings held tenuously on the page. So many scenes hosting multiple worlds within and beyond the frame. It is an ethnography of impossibility, of that which cannot be explained away (loss, violence, volatile relations) and thus summons the elliptical return.

The Frame

Scenes

Images

Respiration

Pausing, breathing with the text

Aphorisms irreducible to fixed moral lessons

Petals

The language of flowers

The ellipsis

The elliptical

Prose as contagion

Indirect approximation to the object of inquiry

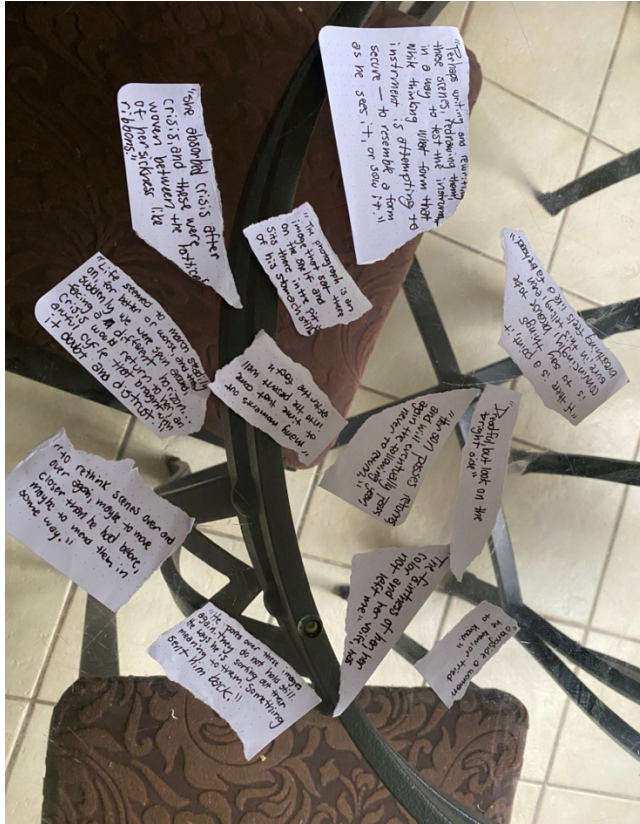
Digression and the adjacent as method

Visitations from intellectual kin

In *All That Was Not* there is no masterful authorial posture. No transcendental narrator to declare finality to the page and its conundrums. Only perpetual returns, cyclical relays in the form of “incurable” images that refute closure.¹² The reader is brought into its vortex where images work their way through the reader. The ellipses and gaps between each scene often dictate the tempo of engagement. You learn to breathe with the text, to synchronize to its rhythms. The form, the frame of the text, in other words, works through attention. Even the *flora* cover and the petals found in some of the pages aren’t merely aesthetic adornments but, for me, gesture to the imbrication of life and death that so much of the text tries to reckon with (see Bataille “The Language of Flowers”)¹³.

¹² See Elhaik, *The Incurable Image*.

¹³ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*.
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1 Photo by Kai C. (2022).

The prose is contagious. It demonstrates a serious commitment to writing through problems—of why we must continue to try thinking with and from within impossibility. During the summer of 2022, my nephew began reading excerpts from *All That Was Not Her* with me out loud. Like myself, they had been drawn to the prose, to the ways these short sentences traffic so much imagery. One morning, I found my nephew at the kitchen table returning to passages we had read out loud. They were copying down quotes into little torn pieces of paper. The dispersed aphorisms formed archipelagos. They kept reassembling the little pieces of paper as though these aphorisms opened new avenues for thought through their rearrangement.

I have taken cues from my nephew. I'm summoned to return to so many lines from the text, to reassess and reassemble what these scenes offer.

Returns

The Negative

What grows out of absence

Omnipresence-absence

Non-linear narratives

The spiraling of images that beget more images, reeling you in-too-deep

Forbidden psychogeographies of suicidality

The unshakable thereness of Beverly

The work of time

The life of the phantasm

Return as wounding and insulation from the event

Life

Afterlife

Life-in-Death and vice versa

All That Was Not Her is about showing not telling the ethnographic scene. It is about the author returning to snippets of fieldwork almost two decades ago and looking back through a “distorted lens.” But the author’s returns, I should caution, are not about absolute retrieval, nostalgic wandering, or even quests for truth. *That world*, or that past as somehow untouched and pristine, is forever gone we are told. Instead, the returns derive from a franker and more beclouded place where memory, sparse fieldnotes, and phantasms, seem to mush together. These things moments lingered after I put the book down. I found myself entering ethnographic scenes again and again—scenes of abduction, of potential truth-serum poisoning, of hospital escapes, of suicidality, of loss and grief in the aftermath of death, of days of fieldwork that seem insignificant in the moment, of the monotonous as indiscernible from the disastrous, and so on. As an ethnographer, this book resonates deeply.

Contact*Mutual intrusion**Touch from afar**Necromancy**Scent-images**Dream-images**The act of writing**Resuscitation**The charge of objects**Contamination**The undoing of selfhood*

All That Was Not Her makes you query the nature of contact. Can one even begin to discern contact from its traces?¹⁴ When contact is made, why do some things remain with us and not others? What kind of forces and images spiral uncontrollably through the work of time? What does it mean, in other words, that the waxing and waning of contact is not necessarily reliant on physical proximity? In the book, contact becomes a *happening*—what contact does, how it operates, remains a question. Take for instance a scene of care and touch when Beverly loses consciousness as they wait for an ambulance to arrive. Contact *remains present* long after the fact. Within the lacuna of time stopped as the author and Beverly waited for the ambulance, he held her hand, wishing her back to life—a tactile-memory that is *still here*. It's as though that lacuna of time *then*, that instant of suspension, that threshold where a *life death* is felt in its immediacy,¹⁵ lives on forever in the *now*.

¹⁴ See also Desjarlais and Habrih, *Traces of Violence*

¹⁵ Derrida, *Life Death*.
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All That Was Not Her demonstrates the force of affective contamination between ethnographer and interlocutor. It is a deeply personal account on the corrosive nature of fieldwork, yet, one that escapes the trap of liberal sentimentality. It is an unsentimental yet vulnerable reckoning of fieldwork. An ethnography of ethnography, in a way. So much of ethnography seems to take for granted the *accident of contact*, how certain relations are forged through instances that at the time seem insignificant. And then before we know it, the traces of previous encounters not only cling to us but also become part of us too.¹⁶ This is the work of mutual intrusion.¹⁷ And even as asymmetrical as ethnographic relations might be, they also imply a zone of affective contamination where the ethnographer becomes impacted by the shared and tenuous world brought into being by these very relations.

Opacity

Unmastery

Overwriting narratives

Re-tracing the loose contours of the self

The multiple selves of selfhood

The multiple layers of a scene

The multiple temporalities that intersect

The trap of narrative

The refusal to pin down the subject once and for good

The refusal to bridge the gap between life as lived and life as told

The trap of analytical closure

¹⁶ See Desjarlais, *The Blind Man*.

¹⁷ See, Elhaik, *The Incurable Image*.

The trope of resilience and other titanic signifiers that obfuscate more than describe

The punctum that pierces us in-between images

Non-knowledge

The impossibility of images

There is serious commitment and justice for the many selves and afterlives that constitute Beverly. We are told how the author “helps with memory,” how he and Beverly, scourer her life over and over. How some returns to the past are welcomed, while others remain forever fenced off. What is also forbidden for the ethnographer is to reiterate what was said before. Beverly did not want to hear previous narratives she shared; *she did not want those versions of her to be read back to her.*

All That Was Not Her is told through multiple and often incommensurate layers of narrative that are left unresolved, mostly because what seems to fuel inquiry is not the ethnographic quest to pin down the subject once and for all; nor is it the usual paranoid skepticism in academic inquiry to put the house in order and resolve contradictions. Something else is at stake.

The author seems to take cues from Beverly; to learn the art of overwriting, of revisiting previously outlined sketches—faint traces where the subject is left open-ended, never fully defined, even at the end of life. But the many shades of Beverly, the many opaque qualities of Beverly are not hurdles to overcome, but the very grounds from which any type of bearing on her life can emerge. This is also about embracing the singularity of the subject, of refusing to flatten and hallow out the subject, of not cannibalizing the ethnographic subject into fixed portraitures and caricatures. Opacity, we learn, *is vital to ethnography and its limits.*

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What Others See

A Reply

Todd Meyers

McGill University

I don't know if I've ever written anything I felt less sure about. I know there's nothing new about drawing attention to the uncertainty that accompanies the act of committing thoughts and encounters to the page in the form of ethnography. I'm sure vanity plays no small part in this. But for me, the question of reception feels unavoidable in my time with Beverly. How she received me, and I her--when and in what form--was never straightforward. And even in the record of our time together, entries got scrambled.

Despite all that I still find uneasy about my relationship with Beverly, I feel like the book's intervention is direct: writing about another's experience of illness and disorder--a life colored by suffering and struggle and love and wholeness and change, in other words, *a life*--should be an elusive and uncanny endeavor. I worry about the impulse (mine, others) to domesticate the complicated and evolving realities of this thing called illness experience and medical anthropology's preoccupation with capturing it. I don't think we should ever age-out of this worry as a discipline. I am heartened to know that the book raises other questions as well (about doing ethnography, about the dimensions and limits of the encounter), and given the highly personal approach of the book, that it's possible to set the author aside for a time.

What am I trying to say? Readers do not need a second, more tedious account by the author of what he has already said. Is it okay to remain a little lost in the imprint of one's work? --to lack the clairvoyance to envisage another's interpretation? --or to settle for gratitude that a work resonates in some way, for someone, or that it comes into being at all? Right or wrong, for me that's where things stand.

I'm grateful to Andrés Romero for pointing out the haptic dimensions of contact in the book. All I can say is that these moments of "tactile-memory" should not be underestimated. As Andrés says, they're tenacious. I also love what Andrés says about the trap of assuming that contact holds some kind of guaranteed potential energy in full reserve: "*That world*, or that past as somehow untouched and pristine, is forever gone we are told." Both of these insights share a sense of wordlessness--touch without speech, the past not made whole through its retelling. I feel that Anthony Stavrianakis recognizes this dilemma only too well in his beautiful and provocative commentary. His question, "Who would believe him?" is *the* question. No one

would, surely, and yet. As Anthony illustrates in the beginning of his commentary, “All” and “her” are slide rules, tests applied, measuring and revealing through their repositioning.

I sense that Aidan Seale-Feldman and Elizabeth Wilson share a question, “what then?” *What then* fills a space that virtuous self-satisfaction might otherwise occupy? *What then* is wrangled and preserved by the negative? Aidan and Elizabeth make me hopeful that the project of anti-humanism hasn’t exhausted its utility or necessity. I find so much kinship in what Elizabeth describes in her recent work on Valerie Solanas, “struggling with similar quandaries of how to read hostility, destruction, and antagonism as psycho-political forces.” I was also moved by Margaux Fitoussi’s attention to the “errors, failures, and obsessions” of the book, and I take seriously the question she poses at the end of her commentary: “Might these sketches, with their half-shaded forms, speak to the elusiveness of a subject whose form slips out of our grasp in our attempts to retrace it?” In our attempt to draw a figure from memory, even with the benefit of ethnographic thumbnails, we might think we’re retracing lines when in fact we’re conjuring them, or better, giving form to our faulty memories now further clouded by a desire to realize the image.

I’m overjoyed by Maya Stovall’s intervention to invite her interlocutor, DeShawn Dumas, to respond to the book with her. I have admired Maya’s scholarly-artistic practice for a long time; her *Liquor Store Theater* (2020) is a testament to how relationships between people and place (Detroit) can be wholly reconfigured through movement and performance—and in her case, in the face of (a response to? a reckoning with?) a tendency toward sociological flattening. Maya and DeShawn’s double voiced (“co-subject”) intervention raises so many questions: I don’t know if there is a salve for the “a long-term non-relationship,” but their unswerving approach to the intervention—“attempting to think through the concept of Beverly”—is to me an opening the demands grappling with the horrors of non-thought and the specter of wrongness. I hope the book does that.

Finally and especially, I am grateful to Eugene Raikhel for coming out of *Somatosphere* retirement to edit and introduce this book forum. His quiet, intense work on this site for well over a decade should be lauded at every opportunity for at least the next couple decades.

Last thought: For the past year or so I’ve been returning regularly to two books, *A Primer for Cadavers* (Fitzcarraldo, 2016) and *Old Food* (Fitzcarraldo, 2019), by the artist Ed Atkins. The books are dense and wordy; they are books that at once invite and repel readers, and I love the challenge of Atkins’s prose—audacious, radiant (Joyce-Artaud-Melville-Bataille) and crackpot. But what I love most are moments in Atkins’s writing when through his scrawl we find the

bluntness of unsettled feelings after the loss of a father and a register for that grief that is totally undecided. These books are after all about cadavers and things that decay (of course the books are about so much more), but when these moments come, I ask, “Does he know he just let us in? --to have a peek?” Or has this been the point all along, to write in circles around these slippages, to allow these moments to form a center, plain and revelatory? I doubt that things are so simple, but I’ve decided whatever we think our readers see, or whatever we think we show, we show more than we could know or intend, and that exposure makes something different possible.

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