When Characters Lack Character: A Biomythography

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The Letter's Destination

[O]ne must put the biography of the Negro in parentheses if one wants to free the picture, and prepare it to receive its signified.

—Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

Why does deconstruction have the reputation of treating everything obliquely, indirectly, with "quotation marks," and of always asking whether things arrive at the indicated address?

—Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law"

I OPEN WITH TWO PHILOSOPHICAL GESTURES THAT POINT TO THE two quandaries that motivate this paper. First, the (im)possibility of biography—an account of some *one*'s life—a documenting that usually, for better or worse, takes the lives of individuals as exemplary to the community, thus setting them apart from, rather than making them part of, the community of counterparts. And second, the problem discourse itself creates: When saying what we mean, does the message always reach its "indicated address" or audience? In critical theory, discourse often seems to circumvent rather than "treat" the material at hand. In keeping with the purpose of this special issue—to speak to comparative racialization—I would like to begin with a brief challenge to this project. I find "comparative racialization" an oxymoron: a promise to render the "races"—bundled into their minoritizations—separate but equal to demonstrate the effectiveness of the happy colored folks' companionability. Good racial feeling, after all, comes in twos (think Lone Ranger and Tonto, Amos and Andy, Sonny and Cher, etc.). My critique here is not meant to be facetious

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or disrespectful, since I intend to follow the rigorous investigation that I am charged with: bringing pressure to bear on the "comparative" in association with "racialization." To understand what is being examined here, it is necessary to challenge the possibility of doing anything here. The minute we grasp that two racialized entities can be compared, does a set of proofs—such as, but not limited to, ideas of belonging and community and, more generally, ideas of a literature or literatures, a culture or cultures—then confront us? What if the subjects we choose to engage with are not subjects at all? What if we begin our query with some attention to what makes the subject work? Or, better yet, what tale would we tell about it, if we could? Could we provide a series of ontological proofs about its being that would ground itself in the happy narrative of place, space, and race?

But first a little about the problem of community. "Community" has had so many dangerous and fruitful liaisons in American letters that it is difficult to know what we mean by the word. Even as the United States attempted to define itself against the "Armageddon" of 1877–1919, to borrow the historian Nell Irvin Painter's term,[1] it desperately sought to class the individual out of a particular community—ethnic, regional, "foreign"—while erecting strict boundaries—some legal, some extralegal—around the kinds of community that it would tolerate and that one could inhabit. Since the solidification of United States identity in the post-Reconstruction period, known by southern historians like Joel Williamson as the "Second Reconstruction," we have thought of our "American" selves (writ large) as members of a free society made up of a community of persons. In the last half of the twentieth century, scholars working under the rubrics of feminism, political theory, and cultural studies attempted to interrogate this model of United States identity formation. By noting the universality of the white, propertied, and male citizen and the particularity of everyone else (blacks, women, chattel), they arrived at an understanding of belonging to community as the province of the particular, not the universal. Of course, the brutal histories of Indian allotment, jim crow segregation, and the Chinese Exclusion Act have shown that this idea of "one nation . . . indivisible" is a unique, powerful fantasy. In fact, "indivisible" entities in the United States popular imaginary are always already individuals who pull themselves up by their bootstraps and become the persons—usually wealthy persons—they want to be. In this ordering, the community ceases to be imagined as real—it is of no real consequence. One could say that the idea of the community has faded away in the light of the individual's compelling biography. By focusing on biography, the third-person account of one life among many, we transform community into something that it is not and never has been: a solid, viable, and working structure for the articulation of the self.

When we think about minority cultures, the pressure of the community-versus-individual paradigm becomes even more fraught, since minority persons have to move *from* communities of origin to discover themselves as citizens. This is also true of the typical queer United States bildungsroman, where the flight from family, home, and sometimes nation is ever present, such that it becomes a goal in itself. The subtler individual-versus-community problem for those who are visibly recognizable as members of a community outside the majority or the mainstream is that this perceived belonging is just that: a perception, often false. If one appears to be African American or black or to be Asian American, it is usually assumed that one enjoys privileged membership in and the comfortable embrace of the subgroup. This privilege of belonging elsewhere is held in suspicion or, less often, envied by those who are identified as belonging to the larger group. This suspicion produced both the feeling that the emerging nation's Irish immigrants were

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indebted to the pope and therefore owed him their allegiance and the even more pernicious belief that because the United States was at war with the Japanese, United States citizens of Japanese descent should be interned in concentration camps. Belonging elsewhere can be a blessing and a curse in a "free" society. In its more contemporary permutation, this attitude about what I call "the belonging of the other" means that you cannot belong to the larger group or be trusted by it because you are clearly marked as a member of someplace else. In essence, you truly become an individual; you have no larger community to which you can belong, and if you do have a community, you speak solely for that group of maligned others who are, frankly, always wanting something from the larger group—something it is loath to part with.

But let's complicate this scenario with a larger set of questions: What if this minority group—which you secretly belong to and covertly operate for—sees your queer and/or female body as quintessentially anathema to its collective project? You can never tell the larger group of your predicament; no one would believe that the outside of the inside has such complexity, and the shame of disclosure would surely kill you, wouldn't it? At this point, in the dream life of difference in Toni Morrison's novels, you become absolutely free—but you have paid a high price for your freedom; your belonging is always already negotiated for you by someone else, for whom the idea of community is fixed and static. Enter the biographer, whose ability to name your experience is a kind of silent interpellation. In this case, you become what I would call the perpetual individual, neither-nor instead of either-or—your orbit restricted to your condition. In this condition, interpellated subjects have no chance of autobiography, or if they do, it is for their eyes only. But the biography is a different story, since your racialized self staves off the possibility of its having any place in your own narrative—it is already written for you and known to everyone, right? For a more engaged articulation of what I am driving at, I need to return to the epigraph from Roland Barthes.

In his classic semiotic study of myth, Barthes discusses a photo on the cover of *Match* magazine of "a young Negro in a French uniform . . . saluting." Having informed us that in the realm of mythmaking, where meaning is present, there is no difference between the verbal and visual, Barthes writes, "We shall therefore take language, discourse, speech, etc., to mean any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual: a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something" (1). I take the first epigraph for this paper from Barthes not to foray into the depths of semiotic discourse but because I find his explication of the photograph's play of signifier ("a black soldier is giving the French salute" [4]) and signified ("a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness" [4]) fascinating for what it reveals about the author—(now and then) dead, but living yet through a mythical and timeless (?) explication.

The soldier's blackness is irrefutable, because it figures as a quintessential sign of a lack of Frenchness—in both descriptions, the soldier's blackness appears before his Frenchness—but, most importantly, we have yet to see the word *man* or even *hu-man*. Is it possible, even in the realm of myth, to use the generic term "young boy" to describe a brown body and mean it? This might be Barthes's subtle and brilliant point. Given the work that myth performs—it has, according to Barthes "a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us" (5)—what is the *work* of the person identifying the signifier? Is identifying the body honest work, or is the work of myth so omnipresent that the identifier can't help but produce its logic, again and again? As if to answer this question, Barthes proposes

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that when meaning (which already has "a memory," "a past," "a history," "a geography" [5]) becomes form, it "leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, *only the letter remains*" (5; emphasis mine). I will come back to the letter and its signified remains later.

Since the signifier is both form and meaning, but now devoid of real or proper meaning given to the subject by its place in the historical, Barthes can conclude that "[t]he form has put all this richness at a distance: its newly acquired penury calls for a signification to fill it. . . . [O]ne must put the biography of the Negro in parentheses if one wants to free the picture, and prepare it to receive its signified" (5). On so many levels, Barthes is right about the work of racialization—the racialized body has to become form and therefore fiction to be comprehended, written about, written on. But some nagging questions remain, when we think outside the box, about the role of the identifier—the dead author in all this: Isn't the biography of the Negro about blackness? Is blackness sign/ifier only, and never someone's (?) story? Does Barthes single blackness out as the mythical meaningless form not constitutive of biography because biography, after all, is about hu-man (read "nonblack") being? Would it be impossible to write the story of another—to commit the act of biography—with the story of the Negro intact? After all, biography is the narrative written by another that assumes it entitles the scribe to know something about the subject. In this Barthesian world, the individual and the community take on a special resonance in the presence of blackness; writing the individual's biography in a community is impossible because the narrative we would recall to write such a story is missing a proper ordering—we cannot resolve the question of Negro/(hu)man to record that life. This subject has no community or individuality—it is like the quintessential floating rib, a by-product of natural selection and biblical genesis.

This last series of questions, arising from a brief encounter with Barthes, weighs heavily on the explorations and explications to come. Barthes's pronouncement that after form takes over meaning "only the letter remains" dovetails with Derrida's rhetorical question in the second epigraph: "Does the letter ever reach its *intended* destination?" Playing on the written form and its remains, Derrida and Barthes leave for us an inadequate trace of the predicament of writing a life. If you tell a story, does it always reach the intended audience? If you stand a world apart from the community, is there any hope of articulating the visceral nature of that gulf?

There is a work of fiction that attempts to answer these and other questions about identity, community, belonging, and the self. Pamela Lu's experimental novella, *Pamela: A Novel* (1998), has been described as "the last masterpiece of the twentieth century" by at least some "underground critics" (Wilson 9). Lu's characters are literally *characters*: named for letters of the alphabet, they float in and out of the narrative freed of the burden of *being*—the sign presents itself without its proper companions. Even the "I" of the text is constantly problematized, as the reader wonders if the protagonist of *Pamela*, if there is one, is its author. Are we getting the story of Lu's life or a refraction of it through another *character*? In *Pamela* we constantly float between autobiography and biography. The novel seems to shed light on the questions left over from Barthes's explication of the saluting soldier. By placing us between self and other, *Pamela* quests after the grounds of hu-man being. If the self cannot cohere long enough for the identifier, the always already dead author, to place it in context—to submit it to the discursive logic of history, of geography, of all things that make it necessary to "put the biography of the Negro in parentheses"—then what is there to write about? What is the point of the text at all?

In *Pamela* the signifier is a slash on the page, and the signified is only an echo of what

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was once a shrill sound. By eschewing the name that usually endows being with subjectivity, Lu questions whether a sentence (without a "subject") carries any meaning at all. Moreover, the "biography"—the experience that the subject acquires through the act of naming by another—is consistently parenthetical, withheld from us so that the author/narrator can speak to us about its inconsequential aspects. By keeping the possibility of a distinct individual's biography at arm's length yet endowing the landscape with everything else—race, class, gender, sexuality, airports, strip malls, and various kinds of digital media—Lu restores any discussion of difference and its community of believers to its proper place. By putting the biography of another in parenthetical relation to the text, Lu signals, through the sign of the letter, a constant inability to know. We have personality, surely, but we do not have the stuff of (auto)biography.

Lu's novella follows the particle-like permutations of twentysomething Bay Area characters fresh out of college who reflect on their time at school with both irony and wit. The plot, if there is one, centers on "I" and her motley crew of friends, whose relationships commence and dissolve like the water that ebbs and flows around them. People in *Pamela* do not come together in normative bonds of human relation; instead, they find themselves, for instance, "*implicated* in the same vehicle heading northeast toward a dinner party" (13; emphasis mine). To understand Lu's creative trajectory here, it's important that we see "I" for what it really is: "I was a very poor impersonator of myself in public"; "I feigned an awareness" (13, 44). We get the autobiography of the individual told through a public performance—an impersonation—that yields a split personality. We, the readers, are never quite sure if "I" or "we" really means "it." In *Pamela* we travel far beyond the unreliability of the narrator: we are called on to witness the dissolution of the first person, as the individual appears to make way for a cacophony of voices, and those voices—call them the community, the grand "we" of the novel—are just as self-absorbed, just as navel-gazing, as any other character, or individual, in the book.

Despite the lack of reliable narration, we get characters that inhabit gender, race, and sexuality. In the first bit of narration about C, the poet, Lu notes:

> C wrote with all the awful clarity and slenderness of someone who grew up Asian in Indiana, the memory of anger and that daily experience of coming home single to watch the double of his face peel away from itself in the mirror now sublimated into a stunning command of the English language that manifested itself as poetry, or a series of eloquent, articulate stabs at reality. (17)

What Lu describes is a reflection of W. E. B. DuBois's "double-consciousness," which I'll rehearse here because it is still one of the most provocative, if not problematic, statements about racialization in the Americas:

> [T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this *double-consciousness*, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. *One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.* The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (3–4; emphasis mine)

There has been much debate among DuBois scholars in the last decade about the limits of this statement—how "twoness" relies on a

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binary arrangement that does not allow other factors, like sexuality or gender, to penetrate such a conflagrant contest. Nevertheless, the allusion in Lu, the first of several, is pointed and cannot be missed. However indirect, this allusion to, or sign of negotiation with, the presence of blackness in the text reflects the importance of blackness in the American dream (or nightmare) of racialization. One can speculate that what is truly parenthetical in *Pamela* is the presence of blackness. In a country where the white-black binary is so entrenched, from whom do subjects that are neither white nor black—in this case, Asian American—learn their uniqueness? From white subjects or from black subjects? Or does it take a melding of the two voices to achieve an understanding—in C's case, an "articulate stab at reality"? While moving away from the black-white "race" binary is often important and fruitful, the question still remains: How deeply embedded is this dichotomy? Does everyone outside its boundary learn its "twoness," its double self, while also learning how to negotiate blackness through whiteness? The axiomatic nature of racialization is made visible in this scenario of multiple contingencies. The "twoness" of C's being (not Asian, the text seems to say—how could you be Asian in Indiana? —and not white) "peel[s] away from itself" and is sublimated into poetry. As the quintessential measure of aesthetic discourse from Aristotle forward, poetry becomes a container for all that cannot be represented truthfully by the embodied subject of prose.

Even though identity *formation* is so problematically rendered in the text, there are several humorous interjections throughout that indicate that racialization or racial formation is alive and well and in *character*. For example, finally finding one another after several failed attempts to connect at the local airport, the characters R, L, and I observe that "what we needed then was not the *White* Courtesy Phone but rather the *Other* Courtesy Phone, a non-existent piece of technology that would cater to the demands of our marginalized discourse and bring us together against the dominant paradigm of airport static and confusion" (25). The observation here is multidimensional. Recalling "white only" signs, the characters pointedly identify the "White" Courtesy Phone as being for white airport patrons; ironically enough, in an airport (presumably Oakland's or San Francisco's) where people of color abound, the characters here wish for an "Other" Courtesy Phone—a "non-existent piece of technology" designed to cater to their marginalization—even in a place where it would be ludicrous to conceive of anyone as marginal. Such is the pull of hegemonic culture—even when there is no majority left, the idea of its presence persists.

In addition, in the novel's first pages, we learn that one of the characters experiences "that special non-heterosexual feeling" (12). That the novel focuses on a diversity of sexualities indicates the haphazardness of all experience in the text. While there are queer, or lesbian, characters in the text, one cannot call it a "lesbian novel"—it does not behave like novels in that genre. It is clear that several of Lu's characters are engaged in same-sex or queer relationships, but there is no move to differentiate this kind of sexual desire from others.[2] We have evidence of a bildungsroman, since the young characters are certainly growing up, but we do not have the certainty of a centered (lesbian) experience. For example, when we first meet C, the poet, I is quick to remember:

> Though he would never admit it later, claiming instead that he'd been walking just ahead and had overheard us discussing his poem with praise, which prompted him to slow his steps so that we would catch up to him. That was his version of the story, which YJ and I did not remember, just as I did not agree with C and YJ's memory that I'd been wearing a brown leather vest with tassel trim, an article of clothing I had never owned before or since, but which they believed on the strength of their narration could be found in the back of

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> my closet. For that was where my characterization diverged from theirs, at the east gate of campus where I left them. (14)

These characters exist in time, but they do not necessarily move forward in it—a necessary ingredient for the fruition of a bildungsroman about any life, lesbian or otherwise. Lu's characters constantly challenge the veracity of the time-space continuum. For example, after a long and hilarious debate about the difference between "there" and "here"—a debate bounded by the language of a colloquialism, "let's not go there," having its origins in a cross between African American Vernacular English and the speech patterns of the typical "valley girl"—R and I note:

> This problem of location seemed to hound us constantly, as we found ourselves perpetually displaced by the very maps that were meant to locate us. Or perhaps, as A observed, the maps were by their very design paradoxical and deceptive. For what other reason would cartographers design a building map with the highlighted phrase "You Are Here," accompanied by a large arrow indicating the place you were supposedly standing? How can you be "Here," a microscopic point on a map, and standing on the ground full-sized at the same time? Where does the map get off, telling you where you are or aren't at the moment? (22)

Playing on the familiar real estate mantra—so appropriate to California—"location, location, location," Lu questions the term "real estate." Perpetually homeless, the characters lead lives—do they have lives if they are just letters?—that are circumscribed by a kind of placelessness. There is literally no there there. This lack of location places the characters outside the merry-go-round of real estate's capital investments. Having no place in the market economy of the ever-present consumerism of United States culture, the friends begin to question existence itself. Midway through the text, one character observes that "we would often rush out recklessly to meet life with open arms only to find reality lying in wait, or prepare eagerly to play our parts in life only to discover that reality had reassigned our roles or, worse yet, cancelled the parts altogether" (48). In *Pamela*, Lu comes dangerously close to talking not about lives or a life at all but about something more precious and elusive. Here, the existence-versus-essence debate, in Sartrean terms, is inconsequential, since characters seem to want to catch up to themselves, their historical narratives, each other, and time. They have no time to contemplate such debates—they are in perpetual motion, letters without destinations.

At some point, the characters realize the purpose of "I." In a novel filled with tightly wrought little epiphanies, none is more important perhaps than Lu's brilliant elucidation of the disintegration of "I" and the "we" that accompanies this dissolution:

> We desperately depended upon the spectacle of the large "I," with all its artifice and white noise, to keep us alive and functional in the world. We sometimes wondered who this "I" really was. Raw speculations placed "I" at the dawn of Western civilization—"I" was the shadow on the far wall of the cave, in which we were still living, or it was the cave itself, which had evolved over the years to accommodate us more comfortably, like a second skin that we could never shed or live without. In this sense, "I" (which expanded during times of war or crisis to "we") was the most ubiquitous, and therefore elusive, self we could imagine: there was no way to find "I" without by definition losing it, and therefore losing ourselves. "Me" was a different matter altogether. It was inherently more objective and hence more honest to talk about "me" than about "I," because "me" never pretended to be anything other than itself and was perfectly happy with just being talked about. "I," on the other hand, talked about itself incessantly, all the while acting as though someone else was doing the talking. And our greatest fear was not that "I" would start talking, but that it might someday stop without the speech itself ending, for this

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> would imply that someone else really *was* doing the talking, or worse yet, that "I" had been someone else all along. (34)

In this rambling collective stream of consciousness, the letter I is fully interrogated. "I"'s inability to control its own narrative reflects my earlier discussion of biography and community. To call attention to the narrator's perpetual lack of identity, the novel calls the veracity of "I" into question: it appears that "I" is now disembodied; "I" will keep on talking, the narrative will keep on, no matter what—the "great historical-cultural narrative" moves on (42).

As the novel closes, but does not end, Lu's postmodern pastiche gives way to a posthuman dilemma. As the narrator recalls, "I acutely remembered YJ exerting a gravity of being that expanded steadily in my direction until I was sucked in, while YJ insisted that her environment had remained unremarkable until I crossed its border, bringing with me a psychic urgency" (82). This moment reaches its fruition when the narrator explains, "We were often overcome by our comparative inefficiencies—by the sheer clunkiness of sweating and walking when we could just as easily have been transferred through phone lines at thousands of bits per second, or downloaded from the Internet as shareware for our friends" (89). Lu remakes the category of the human into software. In a novel where being is described as "the curative effects of a multicultural environment" (81), the possibility of being is arrested by the pull of a nameless space (Can we have being without a name? Can we have biography without the Negro [boy]?). Lu crafts an ending for *Pamela* that answers these parenthetical questions and identifies the intended address of the novel tradition. When she subjects "Pamela" to the discipline of her pen, the result is terrifying. The characters never assemble into being until the narrative ends, and when they do—when the "author" is confronted by the force of *Pamela*—the results are catastrophic:

> If I was at risk of suddenly becoming P in the midst of a plausible situation, then P was similarly at risk of becoming not me but Pamela, a project that I had invented to include both P and me, and that was expanding, day by day, into a larger persona than either of us could handle. . . . Pamela was smothering us or, more accurately since P lived exclusively in the past, Pamela was killing me. P was an act of memory but Pamela was an act of homicide, processing and consuming all my experiences before I could finish them for myself and attempting, for lack of a better alternative, to live life in my place, to assemble the particulars of my private existence into a form suitable for larger display—for the larger work of Pamela.
>
> Try as I might, I soon found there was no escaping Pamela. (58–59)

What does this narrative aporia say about biography, about life writing, about the attempt to put the story of the other into a readily available, indiscriminately circulated form? By way of an ending, I turn to the insightful ending of Kara Keeling's work on blackness and the human in the digital age. Keeling notes that "the European has been simply passing for 'human' all along and that black subjectivity and black culture, those very concepts created to serve as 'the human's' Other, provide the most fertile soil to till for ways to understand what it means to be 'human' in the digital age" (248). Lu's disassembling of individual identity and her allusions to the fate of the black persona in our collective imaginary all point toward another way of understanding both the letter and its destination. What we have here is a continuation of the project of biomythography Audre Lorde set forth in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*—something other than (auto)biography. We are shown a place where characters circulate in constant hysterical lack.

Notes

1. I borrow "Armageddon" from *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877–1919*, the title of Painter's

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history of the post-Reconstruction, post–World War I years in the United States.

2. At one point in the narrative, Lu writes, "R and I turned on the TV to discover a news special devoted to covering an organization of transgendered firefighters and cops, a.k.a. TOPS. A heart-to-heart interview with an MTF police officer was followed by a speculative discussion about the relation between transsexuality and homosexuality, and capped with the final bold conclusion that 'transsexuals and gays are just like the rest of us.' For R and me, this meant that we were just like ourselves, or more accurately, we were just like the 'rest of us,' which naturally led to the question of how the 'us' had gotten split in the first place. Who were we anyway, and what were we doing without the rest of us?" (35). The objective is to question the binary, to unravel the *how* of differentiation between us and them.

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