

the erotics of not going any deeper than this

Let's consider the insects in the family Gerridae (insects colloquially known as water striders, water bugs, magic bugs, pond skaters, skaters, skimmers, water scooters, or Jesus bugs). Do you have an image in mind. Water molecules are attracted to each other, the positive end of one weakly bonding with the negative end of another. The surface-level effect of this molecular affinity is surface tension. Attraction results in the formation of surfaces. A water skater's appendages form concavities on the surface of the water they skim. This is a kind of contact that doesn't delve: the strider doesn't sink; but it is also a binding contact: the strider cannot leave the surface. Or to be more precise, its bind is intermittent: every other generation of water strider is born with wing technology. During an interlude at a reading in the fall of 2015, CA Conrad says, you're never going to kiss someone who isn't dying. This means that we're not a species with wings every other generation. If attraction creates a surface, we might as well take it the other way too. The back float is the most erotic swimming pose; the high dive is the least.

Anne Carson makes this point too, observing that the bloom of literacy in Ancient Greece is coincident with the earliest figurings of Eros as lack, as an absence inside the self. If you can read and I can read that means you are no longer bound to read to me. You may read to yourself. This is a new space then—headspace. Before I can read to myself, if I want to learn or if I want to get turned on I have to turn to you. Or turn is not the right word because before I can turn myself on there is no turn to make; I'm attuned, not turned. I'm attracted to what I read, or I'm attracted by what I read. By in the sense of proximity. I'm attracted near what I read.

A bareback porn video, "Plantin' Seed," released by Treasure Island Media a good few thousand years after eros first gets figured as longing lack, shows someone getting cum funneled into their anus after group sex. This is a blob-by-bind: the cum is hot because it is dangerous and it is dangerous because it binds. The bodies linked are not limited to the on-screen actors, but those present before the scene and after the scene, and not just the human actors but the viruses and the funnel and the camera lenses and so on too. This binding is blobby because its borders are in flux; not bound by the firmness and linearity of a rope for instance but by blob. By the way, blob is onomatopoeic: the blob of bubble blown by your lips. Onomatopoeia is a form of desire.

When a microphone is turned up too loud—when it is too sensitive—it is 'hot.' "be careful, that mic's hot." Like it will burn you if you get too close. When the mic is plugged in and carrying signal, it is 'live.' A burn is an injury that reconfigures your surface. We can't get too close to something—especially something that reproduces us—like a microphone, or like a parent—without being reconfigured. While sex often involves bodily rigidities, the most "hardcore" sex, which is to say the kind of encounter that undoes or redoes you, involves going soft.

In Latin, semen means seed as well as cum, so that double sense has been present for a while, but let's let a botanic valence float a little longer. The seed in the video Plantin' Seed doesn't map neatly onto a metaphor of pregnancy: there's no child, no reproduction; but to plant seed is a bit weirder still than a queered version of making-pregnant: of plants let's just mention self-pollination, environmentally triggered sex-switching, the interspecies reproductive exchanges of plants and insects, and the seed that propagates by floating across an ocean.

The Motion Picture Association of America introduces a four-tiered rating system in 1968. The rating of X is adopted from the British Board of Film Classification, which creates the category in 1951 amid anxieties about the corruptibility of a newish marketing demographic of youths. Unlike the other tiers of lettered ratings, X isn't trademarked, since to make lewdness proprietary would be to implicitly endorse prurience. Shortly after its introduction in the United States, pornographers begin to self-label their films with the non-trademarked X-rating. Self-imposed XX and XXX ratings follow, extensions anticipated already in the early 19th century with X, XX, and XXX denoting the relative alcoholic strength of beers, designations borrowed from the Xs of poison labels, themselves likely formal simplifications of the skull and crossbones symbol standardized during the upheaval of ongoing revolt, famine, and epidemics in the late middle ages, which itself begins to regularly appear as the standard of cruising pirate vessels by the 18th century. That's to say nothing of X as an epistolary figuration of kisses. Nor of X as an indicator of the unknown. Descartes formalizes the algebraic unknown as X but not the unknown of the treasure map. CA Conrad says, you're never going to kiss someone who isn't dying. That's not unhelpful but leveling. A pirate is parasitical. A pirate ship cruises. The English cruise, is after the Dutch kruisen, to cross; cruise's etymological trajectory before the 17th century is thus identical with cross. Which in its barest orthographical form is an X. To cruise is to cross.

I understand that in French the word for parasite means not only the tick or the lamprey sort of parasite but also an interruption in the transmission of a signal: the noise that parasitizes the message, the speaker pop of a loose cable. "Sometimes you have to go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the people," announces George W.

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Bush three years into his presidency. Bush's metaphor of signal transmission inverts its terms: a filter is not that which stands in the way of transmission, but that which allows for transmission, by eliminating noise—squeezing out the parasite—while maintaining the intelligibility of the message. So to speak above the filter would be to transmit the noise with or instead of the message. While the metaphor's terms are employed unconventionally, the resultant meaning is in fact true to his intent: the public that Bush appeals to is not a public organized by refined discernment but one that "feels the funk" of its togetherness. Funk and spunk both have their roots in a word meaning spark, that which starts a fire, which of course is not something ultimately material. Spunk swerves towards something like mettle or strength of character before acquiring its slangy connotation, but of course semen as in seminal is already in spark. Funk's descriptive slides from fire to smoke, an atmospheric disturbance, a bad smell, noise. A rogue etymology of funk has its black 20th century usage pulled from the Ki-Kongo term *lu-fuki*, meaning the strong bodily odor of venerated elders. Funk is noise in any case, the interference transmitted along with any signal. A kind of noise that is in the body, or the body as a kind of noise. Noise is fuzzy, and as we know from baby animals, fuzz is soft. If a filter works to remove noise then what we're left with after filtering is hardness. No filter means no softness. It is a cliché to say you have got to appreciate the low, the bad, or the heartbreak in order to really appreciate the high, the good, or the love but it's less a cliché to say that you have got to be soft to get hard. (Less a nudge against the repetitive bloom of clichés in general than against the structuralist logic of these few.)

The term *head space*, in its early 19th century British usage, describes the empty northern hemisphere of a page. The blank page though has never been empty. Saxophonist Ornette Coleman releases his first real pronounced *go* at a funk idiom in 1977 as the album "Dancing in Your Head." Here, *headspace* isn't *tabula rasa* but *nightclub*, which is to say a site of cruising. In the liner notes to the record, Coleman outlines a program for formal equalization without formal flattening, writing of "forms resolving into each other's lead." The north is a popular site for heroic fantasies. Three years after his final concert performance and ten years before Ornette's album is released, pianist Glenn Gould produces his first radio documentary, "The Idea of North," which collages five voices discoursing on Northern Canada. Gould calls this layering contrapuntal. Ornette Coleman calls his own layering "harmelodics." Glenn Gould's radio play is perhaps noisier than he thinks but Ornette Coleman's *harmelodics* are deliberately noisy: forms resolving into each other's lead. The forms get close to each other and resolve. Resolve means to get soft, to go from a solid to a liquid state. If we understand Ornette Coleman's project as not only erotic, which of course it is since we're now talking about going soft and coming together, but also political, we could consider the word *liquidarity*. There's more ice on the northern rim of the earth than around the center which is to say there's more hardness on the northern margin which might partially explain why fantasies of heroism get stuck on the north.

Europeans name the commercial sailing route they imagine connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean through the Arctic the Northwest Passage. A year before "Plantin' Seed" is released by Treasure Island Media, the northern ice gets soft enough to allow ships without icebreakers to make the passage, or in other words, to allow for cruising without bruising. Soft on soft. The ocean's an easy site for homo desire with its stacked crews. C-R-E-W-S and C-R-U-I-S-E. But it's the crossing rather than cohort that floats this. I'm pushing on the letter X not just for its signification of the erotic but for its form, for its cross.

Freud writes that he can't locate the oceanic feeling in himself. That's because he's a diver not a cruiser. A cruise ship too is erotic. So is a navel. Or at least Freud is a diver to a certain depth: he terms the passage in a dream that remains opaque despite analysis the dream's navel.

Freud also writes that one never willingly abandons a libidinal position, even when a substitute is at hand. That's about the only near quotation of Freud I can do from memory. You never willingly abandon a libidinal position because attachments are sticky. So our project is then not to hold onto multiple attachments at once but to assume multiple positions at once. Not to split attachment but to diffuse association. This is a way to get around the popular problem of being in only one place at one time. This sounds good because the most useful manual of techniques here isn't psychoanalysis but magic. My associations anticipate me; I can't fix them. We say an algae bloom rather than an algae blossom because a bloom is blobby and a bloom diffuses.

Despite their generational stucknesses water striders have a good claim on this kind of multiplicity: the surface of a pond is a reflecting medium in which the strider is reproduced. But also in which the strider is produced since the strider's life is predicated on this surface. The concavities in the surface of the water bent by the water strider's appendages are the points where the reflections touch. A mirror is a useful object to keep in your home not for its psychoanalytic lessons but it's magical.

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Later in the liner notes to "Dancing in Your Head" Coleman writes that his intent with harmelodics is to "read or write or play without reading or writing." That's to say, to get into that headspace carved out by reading without the instruments that did the carving. "Forms resolving into each others leads" means that there's no master text to read from. Fuzzy-headedness isn't an affliction but a temporary preference for the soft part of a message. Speaking of touch, runs of notes in jazz are called *licks*.

It turns out etymologically that the master in masturbation is in fact more than coincidental homonym. Masturbation's another good way of being in more than one place at once but it's a misnomer; there's no such thing as solo sex or sex that involves a single controlling agent. You get turned on by something, which is to say near something, which is to say with something, even if it's yourself. So reflection isn't the right word for this kind of floating, neither is reproduction. To cross isn't to betray but to keep things in play, to keep things circulating. Ice melts and opens the Northwest passage to easier crossings and increased circulation of commodities. The lesson to take isn't that increased circulation means increased dockings but that you have to get soft to get turned on. To make the letter X you have to go back on your line and cross it; it has a built in delay.

To read something to yourself—and you are reading something to yourself right now—means to bring it inside you. That's not representation. Dancing in your head means sweating it in rather than sweating it out. If there is a mirror in there it's a disco ball. To want to be like a thing is distinct from the desire to become that thing. Water striders, remember, cannot dive. Like produces like.

Repetition is another name or strategy for being in more than one place at the same time. You can remember difference here but let's also remember we're dealing in magic. Attraction results in the formation of surfaces. Association is a form of diffusion over a surface. Dancing is a good way to learn repetition; so is reading. We stop reading when it gets hard. This is a problem of increased circulation. You make me so hard, says one of the parties in an erotic exchange. Me too. I want to make you hard, but also hard in the sense of "it's hard to finish." It's hard to finish because I keep going soft. You too. Me too.

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