

Seeing *xings*, or why I write about transparency

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When I learn the fundamental difference between liquids and solids is not structural, but dynamic—a matter of responding to stress—already, I am changed. More on this in a moment. “Xin,” in the philosophy of Confucius, refers to the quality of keeping one’s word; of being *faithful*. When translated into Western languages like English, its meaning becoming alloyed, it has also meant “mind,” “heart,” “consciousness,” “intentions,” “thoughts,” and notions of the Absolute (mind).¹ Xin is regarded as an indispensable virtue because without the alchemy of believing and trusting, survival would hardly be possible. Consider the faith required of a person to perform a speech act, or for that matter, any act of communication. When we do language, of any kind, the line between figuration and abstraction goes live, becoming electric—deadly, yet generative. The words cannot do all the work we ask of them. The assurance we’d like to give our listener or reader is unable to be delivered. We are not always able to land, or take root. And yet, still, we try anyway.

What can something missing reveal about that which is present? How does a person with a formal thought disorder participate in a philosophical thought experiment? Why can’t we see each other more clearly? Read together, Anita Allen’s chapter in *Feminists Rethink the Self*² and Denise Ferreira da Silva’s *Toward a Global Idea of Race*³, permit the asking of such questions. One of the reasons I engage such concerns or “crossings” is my once disabling fixation with the threat of such tensions as the line between visibility that empowers and exposure that exploits. I

¹ Benická, Jana. “Mind or Heart? On Translating the Character *Xin* in Chinese Buddhist Mahāyāna Texts into Western Languages.” *Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 12, 2003, No. 2, p. 148-157.

² Allen, Anita L. “Forgetting Yourself.” Diana T. Meyers (ed.), *Feminists Rethink the Self*. Westview Press, 1997, pp. 104.

³ Ferreira da Silva, Denise. “The Transparency Thesis.” *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

have long struggled against self-destructive responses to stress. Strangely, confabulations with psychosis and suicidality and my suspension from Columbia University in the spring of 2020 are as responsible for my deep commitment to rethinking ethics and morality as anything, becoming catalysts for the precise metamorphoses that have made me. Made and unmade.

Our modern scene's demands for transparency ultimately amount to the restatement of white supremacy's mythemes. The language of transparency claims to present a linear path to ethical, morally righteous behavior. In this essay, I challenge the usefulness of "transparency" as an ethical syntax or foundation for morality. Transparency alone is not sufficient for virtuous conduct, such as xin. I call upon the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva largely due to the rigor and spirit with which she conducts her forays, questioning and dissolving the legitimization of "transparency" as a unitary construct. What could be the impact of coloniality and racialization on modern ethics? Both her critical theorizing and my writing share a commitment to black people globally, and a concern with how we act and are acted upon by others. These crossings are at the center of my work.

Contemporary concerns about the lack of correspondence between what is *said*, and what *is*, should be taken seriously and alternatives should be sought. Though, how can this be done without simply reifying the spectacularly vicious fictions of the white imagination? The lenses or paradigms through which we understand and make the world are seriously strained. The weight of ceaseless sense-making, value-assigning tasks, and the ever-present threats of essentialism, reductionism, and erasure, are more than language or self can bear. Going beyond explanation to reveal something about what it is to be alive, Black feminist writers and scholars are making new thinking and new grounds for questioning in real-time response to overtaxed landscapes of truth and faith, reality and reason. And we are doing so with critical intellect and profound nuance,

both reference and reverence. This mechanics of reading and meaning is a repeating theme in my writing, reading and life.

My concern is that routines of transparency do little more than protect their referent from criticism. What does it mean to “make clear”? How to be deemed worthy of trust? What is the precise nature of the link between transparency, accountability, and integrity? For transparency to do its work, we must first have faith that our representational systems afford some level of vital indexicality. What is assumed but not explicitly stated in popular discourse on the morality of transparency is that mythologized access to “raw reality” will somehow save us from our own gaps in logic and ethical plot holes. Seeing through this, the post-disciplinary work of theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha reminds us that when “truth is produced, induced, and extended according to the regime in power,” the opportunity to discover something new and previously hidden, then “lies in between all regimes of truth.”⁴

What if transparency could mean a willingness to surrender or refuse the mechanisms of legitimation? I wonder, what are the effects, virtual and actual, of modern “literacies” on the human psyche and physical body? Minh-ha and I share the desire for a future in which the idea of transparency is no longer charged with “authentically” or even “truthfully” representing its subject, but rather authorized to assemble a mediation of the very being of its subject—one that perhaps disrupts hegemonic and oppressive spatiotemporal configurations. I am interested in what it would mean to withhold the equation of value until the matter’s response is complete; thereby infinitely delaying meaning from coming to a close at either what is said, or shown, for the purpose of living better in togetherness. Our understandings of reality, and ethicality itself,

⁴ Minh-ha, Trinh T. “Documentary Is/Not a Name. The MIT Press. October, vol. 52, 1990, p. 76.

are stressed and nearing exhaustion. I write about transparency because to do so is to become more precise, beautiful and more truthful with what we mean when we use the term.

Writing is constant negotiations. That's why it's exhausting, not unlike thinking. I have often exhausted myself with thinking. As a queer mad black poet, I care about the degree and nature of the correspondence between what we say, what we think, and how we move. Not in a way of assigning inherent or fixed values to these arrangements but instead to call attention to the constructedness of it. For if it was built, it can be taken down. Redirect attention toward what can already be done, what has already occurred, is still occurring. Let it change you. Already, you are changed. To attune yourself to a subterranean or neglected politics; to listen at a lower frequency and listen for the deeper stories of people and things. Why and how does blackness have the capacity to apply stress on our post-Enlightenment moral framework?

Transparency is a crossing—a leitmotif—an interval of power, politics, and faith. In our increasingly discursive, multiplicitous reality, the distinction between what *is* and what *is not* must constantly be restated. My obsession with transparent things⁵ and the precarious interplay of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility is motivated by a belief in the fundamental instability or undecidability of our world. The critical importance of xin can be made apparent by way of reflection on the role of uncertainty in the construction of modernity; the quotidian implications of the worldview inaugurated by Bell's theorem. For m/any of us, tomorrow is not guaranteed. Neither is the next nanosecond. At any point, reality might collapse under its own weight. But faith. My mad black gay life is a proof that demonstrates simply to live is to experience incalculable amounts of pressure. To my mind, xin is precisely that which permits life

⁵ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Transparent Things*. First Vintage International Edition, October 1989.

and information, and its power or total force is in catalyzing these foundational questions of importance and worth.

There is no such thing as clarity. Like documentary, clarity and transparency are best understood as problems of grammar—of relation, attention, and politics—or perhaps as a matter of responding to stress. We must, each and all of us, find our breaking point, or turning point, at which a change in state is triggered. And we must do it all the time. This will be different for each individual due to unique chemical and structural compositions and unpredictable trajectories of macro (conscious) and micro (quantum) movements/phenomena. It's the fundamental difference. I do not intend to explain or assign moral value to my transfer from a private university to a public one. Instead, I have tried here to address my challenging past experiences with “transparency” and hopefully some insight. I've tried to trace my thinking around faith, belief, trust, and truth, though I have not really been successful in doing so. Thinking goes on. There is still much more to be said. More than can be said.

Throughout my undergraduate experience, I have learned about vexed performances of scientific uncertainty, discovered my love for the small dramas of words and bodies, and questioned ethico-juridical constructions of insularity and blackness. When we use the term “transparency,” do we mean the stressed space where nonlocal knowledge emerges, or a repository of completely categorized cataloged worlds? Where and how we locate transparency in the ethical and moral landscape is indicative of a substantive and interspective difference. I'm always searching for this shifting and unpredictable point of departure, or entry. Transparency, like language, is in all of our hands. What we choose to do with it, and whether we do it or are done by it, is a matter of responding to untold stress. What I do is commune and conspire with

this impossible calculus, searching for a perfectness of connexion, of crossing, that may never actually be reached.

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