

ARE YOU WRITING YOUR MICROBIOME OR IS YOUR MICROBIOME WRITING YOU?

Cornelia Barber

It's midnight, I have just returned from the hospital where I had been for many hours receiving a neurotoxic chemotherapy infusion and continue to receive a supplementary chemotherapy through a plastic port surgically embedded in my upper right chest wall. I am on steroids that make me feel like the inner surface of myself has collapsed. All that's left is skin and sense. Occasionally, I lean over the side of the bed to vomit. A 22 year old Youtuber appears on the screen to discuss the intimacies of her every day life. I vomit. She speaks to the camera as you would your most intimate friend. She speaks charismatically of sex and love. She films "GWRM" (get ready with me) morning to night skin care, hair care, yoga and dieting routines. Her gaze is transfixed on the lens, her audience. I vomit.

She has long black wavy hair. It reminds me of my mother's long braided hair as a child. Wanting to touch it. Not touching. Wanting. There's an ideal maternal inflection, warm and open, her language steeped in the relating discourses of identity formation, self-help, spirituality, wellness, and fashion. Her focus on nutrition is different than the ordinary skinnydiet culture we have been, ironically, sadly, consumed by. She advocates for a concept that I have heard before, but somehow in this moment of precarity I receive it anew: food is medicine.

Food is medicine. Briefly the psyche takes up the image of Andre Lepecki in class eating a piece of paper. He had spoken something about ingesting, digesting, what can and can't be held in, taken out, how reading and writing perform what happens inside, outside, or is there a difference really between them? The matrix of forces that produce and reproduce our subjectivities, illnesses, artworks and cultures. When unexpectedly and with great care he shred a long piece of paper, folded it between his palms and threw it in his mouth like a grape. Then, he chewed. Chewed the paper. Without speech or hesitation. A goat. A lamb. A human. Chewing. Chewed. Swallowed.

What do we swallow, what do we allow ourselves?

I vomit more of this strange juice, medicine I'm told will destroy the cancerous cells, rid them from my body. I absorb day after day the statistics, the waiting rooms, the panicked faces of doctor after doctor describing the "epidemic of young people with cancer." I absorb the other patients old and young distributed along the chemotherapy hallways,

divided because of COVID, watching TV, sleeping, receiving new red blood, new platelets, screaming, dying, living. I swallow the fluorescent lights, swallow the yogurt made with corn syrup, swallow my medicine, vomit, cry.

There is a tricky line between writing and not writing this. A tricky chemistry. On the one hand it feels urgent. On the other I am tired of writing "I". To cancer, subjects do not exist. The cancer wants all of you, wants every organ, every cell, wants, without end to replicate itself, to live forever, to colonize, utterly the entirety of its environment. Cancer and humans prosper together. The cancer mirrors our narcissism, our brutality, our desire to dissolve the other, to transform the other into ourselves. To colonize everything in sight, without insight, is it driven by the convoluted libido, by jouissance, or maybe just death itself?

Cancer is a technology of the body. The strangest of symptoms, a literalization of the death drive, a misunderstood force waiting in the shadows of a culture, our culture—that does not understand the words "FOOD IS MEDICINE"—to take our immune systems hostage, trick our healthy cells into submission, and kill, kill, kill to live. Cancer is a manifestation of civilization, a product of colonization, a symbol for our collective discontent.

The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences defines the microbiome as:

the collection of all microbes, such as bacteria, fungi, viruses,
and their genes, that naturally live on our bodies and inside us.
Although microbes are so small that they require a microscope
to see them, they contribute in big ways to human health
and wellness. They protect us against pathogens,
help our immune system develop,
and enable us to digest food to produce energy.

The microbiome, a collection of interdependent subjects—are they subjects or subject like, are they atomized or a collective, but aren't all "subjects" in fact collectives written together under one name? A reduction of form in service of an elegant theory?—with their own properties of influence, driven to their fates, somehow providing the geography from which consciousness appears. Somehow, allowing the "I" of ourselves to come into being—digesting, protecting, energizing us.

So, perhaps it is not us alone fighting cancer. Neither is it us, alone, writing. Trying to write.

Writing is itself a libidinal technology. It is an act that performs the body as it reinscribes the symbolic order that is both beyond body and yet ever tied to "I". The microbiome is with you now, reading these words, absorbing their meaning, multiplying their function.

Sometime after the cancer I felt the pull of this other, this collection of bacteria, fungi call out for medicine. The chemo had successfully killed the cancer, but the microbiome had suffered too. So, I made it a promise; I will eat probiotics, I will eat only vegetables and legumes, and miso and food from the earth, no animals, no excess rage, no needless death, and I will take in the fear of death, the memories of cancer treatment, I will take it in, but I will not hold it in.

That night I fell asleep, finally, to some whisper from her. An image of less brutal medicine. There was a collective digestion, swimming in matter and matterlessness, my mother's long hair, chewed and swallowed, the pleasure of form, of nothingness, the shape of letters, enzymes, nutrients, wastes and gasses—a thread of living text.

■ Cornelia Barber's forthcoming book with 1080PRESS is titled *SPRING STREET*.

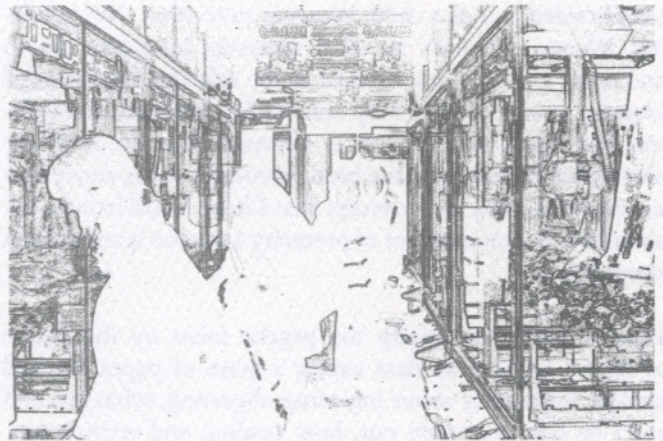


VIOLETS

violets rest in the garden but they are almost too purple like they are wearing too much make up like they are sunburnt like they are wilting like they cannot contain the inflammation falling out onto the street like that but everyone still bends in their direction I feel sorry for the violets and for everyone rummaging around on 6th Ave. looking for something hot or stupid or rich looking for a thing to fuck or be but I am just walking like a rat through the city dribbling cumming surfacing no ambition no \$10,000 purse but anyway maybe Soho isn't the place to feel better maybe it's better to lie on the grass in the park or to be a cat in the alley to even be empty of all things even fragments even descriptions even colors to be empty and motionless and unable to decipher myself from the violets who wait outside the city in sediments of blue

- CB

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