他人の肌で自己を体現する：

知ることの恐怖と小説「*Terminalian Drift*」

Embodying Selves in the Skin of An Other:

Horror of Knowing and the Novel *Terminalian Drift*

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At the start of H. P. Lovecraft's story "The Call of Cthulhu," we read from documents left behind by the late Francis Thurston in which he offers something that serves as an observation of, and an instruction for, living with the mind. He states: "The most merciful thing in this world is, it seems to me, the inability of the human mind to correlate all of its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the middle of the black seas of infinity and it was not meant that we should voyage far" (Lovecraft 1).

In this passage, Lovecraft's narrator, Francis Thurston, draws a geographic map to explain the human mind. He describes the mind through the use of recognizable (if mysterious) features of the world. As the voice which occupies our head in the reading of this story, Thurston introduces us to a geo-psychographic metaphor: that of a tame island of ignorance precariously confronting the mind's oceanic and evil abyss. The geographic image serves as a tool for understanding the psychological. The mind is made navigatable via geography, and made livable via ignorance. But how should we understand this island of blessed ignorance?

The narrating voice explains that ignorance is a merciful and peaceful island that results from a lack: an "inability" which supposedly saves us from facing the mind's endless seas of knowing. A peaceful ignorance saves us by limiting what we know of the vastness that our minds know. Thurston tells us that this merciful island in the mind is the human capacity to not know the totality of what the mind presumably still knows. Our ignorance shelters us by allowing us to be aware of only part of the vastness of what we know. This merciful ignorance is disconnected understanding and means that the peace is threatened by putting together too much of what we

know. Thus, we can conclude that Thurston believes knowing too much of what we know is a form of cruelty. Limiting our understanding forms a protective shoreline against the roiling seas of memory and the horror of knowing what we know. This implies that we are constantly under threat of being terrorized by our own minds, by memories of our life and the new connections that may form, by the monstrous and excessive self that knows more than peace can stand. This geo-psychographic metaphor of a fragile island confronting an ocean portrays the horror of what is lurking in our own personal mental abyss, the threat the stably limited self faces from knowing too much.

Geo-psychographic metaphors are useful. They help us to imagine abstractions and functions of thought, as well as the mind itself, by replacing these mysteries with familiar and stable objects from the world. But the mind is not literally an island or an ocean, not a mountain or a city of crossing streets and alleys. The mind does not have a shoreline or peak. The mind does not literally have two-way car traffic or a subway system. However, the mind is set within and affected by the literal world of geography. The mind is shaped by the city's streets, and the literary and arts practice of psycho-geography explores how literal geographies entangle the literal psycho. As Guy Debord writes, "Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (Debord 5). Psychogeography examines how the mind is made by the world around it, particularly the energies and physicalities of the city. "If psychogeography is to be understood in literal terms as the point where psychology and geography intersect, then one of its further characteristics may be identified in the search for new ways of apprehending our urban environment" (Cowley 13).

Returning to "The Call of Cthulhu" narrator, there is a definite irony in Francis Thurston informing us as readers that ignorance is bliss at the start of the tale through which he will add to our knowing of the world. By continuing to read, we risk destroying the peace of our ignorance by absorbing more knowing. The same disclaimer should thus be made by me at the start of this article. But I trust that you and I here in the vague meeting space of this text are not afraid to exceed the proscribed limits of how far "we should voyage." Maybe it's even fun, or edifying. Maybe

we care less about the peaceful bliss of ignorance than Mr. Thurston. Perhaps we even enjoy experiencing brushes with horror because of what such dangers teach us and how they transform the fragile shoreline delimiting our island of the self-deluded self.

It is more thrilling, anyway. And, it is largely why I enjoy thinking and writing. I like how my island of comfortable self gets threatened, undermined and transformed by the abyss of letting characters lead me into their odd worlds.

Similar to Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu," my 2021 novel *Terminalian Drift* is guided by a narrating voice that takes the reader through a psychogeographic landscape. But the world roamed in *Terminalian Drift* is much more intimate and actual than an imaginary isolated island set against vast seas. The *Terminalian Drift* world is more real. Rather than traveling to exotic corners of the world searching for details to confirm or refute a monstrous power that lurks somewhere in the darkness of the world, the voice in *Terminalian Drift* takes us into familiar city streets. The voice in *Terminalian Drift* leads the reader on a tour of Osaka, Japan to resolve a conflict that roils within the narrator's skin. Or, more accurately, to resolve a conflict that exists between its self and a new skin. Or rather, a new used skin. For, early on in the novel, we learn that the narrating voice in *Terminalian Drift* is moving around Osaka city within a recently acquired used skin which the narrator purchased off Amazon about a month before. More specifically, the used skin is that of 20th century conceptual artist Andre Cadere.

You see, that's what this narrating voice does. The voice switches from skin to skin. And has been doing so for decades. But life in Andre Cadere's skin is not going so well for the narrating voice. This has not been a happy re-embodiment for the voice. The get-to-know-you stage has been excessively uncomfortable. Things were getting "a bit too co-residential" (Gordon 5). So, the story's voice takes us along for a walk in the streets of Osaka as it tries to rebalance the opposing territorializing energies of its familiar inner depths and this new (used) outer surface. As Manuel Delanda describes, "territorialization in . . . assemblages is performed by the processes that give an entire region a certain homogeneity," and the voice hopes to destablize those homogeneities and thereby prevent conflicts that feel like they are building up along the skin/meat border (Delanda 111). The voice hopes to establish a deterritorialized new normal. Because, if a mutual balance can

be achieved, the voice expects things will improve and the new skin will become something like a "fleshy spaceship with time travel options" (Gordon 6).

Reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's "schizo, continually wandering about, migrating here, there, and everywhere as best he can, [the voice in *Terminalian Drift*] plunges further and further into the realm of deterritorialization, reaching the furthest limits of the decomposition of the socius on the surface of his own body without organs" (Deleuze 35).

As that adventurous description implies, taking a new skin is a means for going beyond the voice's familiar here and now. The voice's skin-switching practice offers new modes of knowing. In contrast to Francis Thurston's geo-psychogeographic life coaching advice, *Terminalian Drift*'s skin-switching voice is not afraid of too much knowledge or how unwelcome correlations might flood it with turmoil and transform the settled shape of its self. The voice goes out looking for ways to blur the clear, and to destabilize the settled. If we compare the voice's skin-switching desires to the island-in-oceans map that Lovecraft's narrator draws, the re-embodying voice in *Terminalian Drift* hopes to exceed the ignorance that staying in a familiar skin limits it to, and thereby the voice expects to travel farther than any limits imposed on its voyage. The skin-switching practice hinted at in *Terminalian Drift* is a method for dissolving destiny's hegemony, revealing it as merely an option rather than an obligation.

But the voice in *Terminalian Drift* isn't completely okay with the present reality of being in Andre Cadere's skin. Not yet anyway. So far, the life in Cadere's skin has felt overly crowded, too co-residential, too haunted. Cadere's skin is not fitting well and is causing excessive discomfort, perhaps similar to the danger posed to the safe little island by too much knowing. The voice in *Terminalian Drift* knows from previous experiences that the early stages of embodying an other's skin always require a suspension of some control, but the discomfort level this time seems too much. So, the voice hopes wandering the winter streets of Japan's second largest city will facilitate a mutual letting-go by both the self and the skin—which will hopefully bring about a physical and psychogeographical getting lost and allow for a deterritorialized reassemblage.

The voice says:

The differences between a skin I change into and the one I change out of always feel irritating and bothersome in the beginning. Little things irritate and make me doubt the choice to change, at least until a bit of my sweat and scent start to soak in and territorialize the new.

It's normal that I need to bring the former owner's claims on the skin to a more clear, or at least more believable, termination.

"Evict the ghost," as it were. Make the other mine.

And, that was my goal for being in the city on that February day. That's why I was walking the streets and drifting around lost. I was hoping to alter my relationship with the new skin. I was hoping to suspend previously established arrangements.

It's not unreasonable for me to want to feel at home in a skin, or at least not feel like I'm constantly under the threat of eviction. I have a right to push back and press out. I have a right to shape what contains me. Maybe it's even a duty. And, from my experience over the years, part of the process of getting placed well inside a new skin involves heat and getting the skin to a point of a fitting flexibility.

Of feeling fitting, flexibly.

When a skin fits, I can be less self-conscious about the mundane stuff. I don't need to think about turning a door knob or how my feet are placed beneath a chair. I don't need to think each detail when using a fork or lifting a glass of water to my lips. When the noticeable goes unnoticed, that's when I feel I've come to belong in a skin.

This sense of belonging definitely happens from the skin physically changing. Adjusting. Becoming more supple, flowing and pliable on my muscles, bones, joints, etc. It comes when the skin starts working with my habits of gesture. When it fits my movements.

But, it's also about me changing.

A new skin makes me lose something inside. Makes me work with unknowns. Makes me become a bit other.

And, that is a big part of why I do all this. It makes me become something else (Gordon 4).

A self is not just a ghost with a housing issue. Skins themselves can arrive in the mail as haunted sites of residence, with their own ghostly traces from former occupants lingering within muscle memory, scar histories, traumas and lusts. As the narrating voice describes it:

In a used skin, there are often bouts of memory seep. At times they are regular occurrences, and other times they are random floods of flashbacks that transfer the skin's experiences to the cognitive meat of me.

They are how the skin weaves a net of references.

Sensory hallucinations and mystery itch. Traces of incidents continue echoing in the flesh—like a needle prick, a punch in the gut or a lazy caress.

Across the gap between meat and skin, the past leaps with its hooks and strings, building a lattice of habits, urges, addictions and drives.

A skin offers its gifts and threats.

A skin tries to train my brain to its thousand churning hungers and wills. It tries to shape me to fit the world filtered by its surfaces. Those are its territorializing efforts, trying to shape how I should experience its form as I move inside it inside the world. The skin wants me to believe how it shapes the world's surfaces with its touch and step and sniff and lick. It wants me to believe in the way it includes me in its presumed totality. The skin wants me to believe it about how everything is, about how everything is OF it.

But, I can't just let a skin control shit.

I have to push back. I have to push out at the skin's limits (Gordon 14).

In this quoted passage, we see a contrast between the self and the body, the self in a state of otherness to the body, the self as not-body. The voice identifies with self, and analyzes ways to ontologically exist as free as possible within the confines of the skin. Not free from the skin, but rather free via the skin. The voice understands that the skin's limits set it free from its learned

limits, its habits and routines. The passage describes how the new (used) skin brings with it its marks of past moments, its scars, urges and wants. Memories are inherited by the self in newly inhabiting the used skin. In this way, the momentary conditionalities that mark and alter the body make it something like a mobile psychogeographic space for the voice. The body gets fixed and scarred by experiences, carrying those signs of its history beyond the knowing historian that the self is assumed to be. The self is the voice, thus is the story-maker, the compiler and correlator of what is known amidst all it knows. But in a mode somewhat embodying China Mieville's critique of ghosts in Charles Dickens' stories, the narrator in *Terminalian Drift* doesn't play the instructional role of upholding societal and moral norms "of the preceding century – out of time, rearguard in their sentimentality, themselves haunted by the future" (Mieville). Rather, the voice in *Terminalian Drift* is modern in that it maintains a continuous practice of self-experimentation and destabization. Rather than viewing the self as a center that should hold firm, the voice in *Terminalian Drift* pursues a more fluid churn, exploring self as dynamic result and temporary assemblage of shift. The voice embodies drift.

The skin-switching voice is modern in its testing of conventions and the hauntological aspect of modern life: that we are living with and through the ghosts of the past, the dead that will not die – the antiquated social systems and mindsets that categorize the world and perpetuate historically held expectations that the world will make sense along a particular narrative line, whether that be based on Judeo-Christian or Marxist or Enlightenment assumptions, or whatever. The little island of peace attempts to deny the ocean of change roiling around it, shoring up its coastlines with outdated maps and devoted protectionisms. In contrast, modern ghosts race towards new futures – perhaps faster than societies can handle – impatiently trying to actualize conditions that accept them in their shift and blur, in their not quite this not quite that instability, in their ontology of "always already" becoming (Barad).

In the novel, we get a glimpse into a secret layer of society in which people remove and put on skins. They buy, sell and trade skins with other practitioners of what we learn is an ancient activity which has adapted to modern methods and means. By living in different skins, the voice reveals how it hopes to exceed the limits that staying in a single skin imposes. Variety offers

experiential comparisons in the first person. Living in different skins offers a plurality of intimacies that convey knowledge to the skin-switching practitioner. In putting on a used skin, the skin's past become the voice's present, because Being can't easily get free of what's been. Ontology is largely Hauntology. The memories stored in skins partly shape the self within. In *Matter and Memory*, Henri Bergson describes how memories are not separated and safely restricted to the past. Memories actively approach and shape the present. "Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history, we become conscious of an act *sui genesis* by which we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves. . . . [W]e simply prepare ourselves to receive [the memory] by adopting the appropriate attitude. Little by little it comes into view like a condensing cloud; from the virtual state it passes into the actual; and as its outlines become more distinct and its surface takes on colour, it tends to imitate perception" (Bergson 170). And such hallucinatory perception alteration is part of what attracts the narrating voice to this skin-switching lifestyle. The voicing self wants to be altered by familiarizing itself with unfamiliar energies. By doing the same things, but in a different body, by fitting in, losing itself and becoming a bit other.

This idea of transforming the familiar is largely inspired by psychogeographic walking practices, ideas which informed the creation of *Terminalian Drift*. I developed this novel as an experiment in using psychogeographic methods to spur a place-specific story into life. Moving within a specific district within Osaka City, I let the actual locations and happenings that occurred in those places inform and guide the events that form the story. In psychogeographic terms, I used methods of "Drift" to facilitate the pseudo-documentary development of the story. The "Drift" in the novel's title derives from that psychogeographic practice of moving through a geographic area with altered or augmented intentions, the goal being to make the familiar unfamiliar, and thereby to re-enliven an area of a city that has grown dull and mundane due to excessively rote interactions with it. Routine patterns of daily life can obscure the wonderment in our surroundings. Psychogeography provides methods for releasing us from lazy ways of seeing.

In writing the novel, I adapted psychogeographic walking methods as modes of practice in the surreal lifestyle of switching skins. As with routine behaviors in daily life, a similar dullness

has a way to stultify the self. Mundanity lulls the self into patterns of rote familiarity, a presumed state of peaceful ignorance in which forgetting takes over. Self becomes afraid of change, forgetting the fact that life is defying death at every breath. The voice in *Terminalian Drift* embodies the enlivening chance/embrace of change and self transformation. The voice invites more memories than even rightfully belong to it to flood in and do their damage, to suspend stability of self. This behavior enacts a similar horror of excessive knowing that Lovecraft's narrator asserts ignorance mercifully protects against.

If we analyze horror, we see that it is linked to experiencing an excess of mystery, of meeting too much of an unfamiliar or unknowable world. Horror is clinging to an ignorance or limited perspective when an unknown vastness presents itself and overwhelms as a result. Horror is an opposite of curiosity. Horror's existence hinges on the subject experiencing a brush with what is unfathomable, of feeling out of its depth in relation to a context that recontextualizes being as being out of one's control. Horror erodes the self's sense of being stable and protected. Horror threatens the safe edge of the peaceful island's familiar shoreline. Horror informs me of a larger and more powerful context that has come to get me.

In *Terminalian Drift*, we see evidence that the narrating self is in constant drift. The self consists of multiple shifting fragments rather than a stable and predictable form. The self is an ever-accumulating and ever-culminating assemblage of its previous selves that have occupied various skins through time. Each new exterior skin provides an altered vehicle and system of filters for the voicing self to increasingly layer experience in the world. This portrayal of such a layering of shape-shifting selves verges on making the novel a monster story. The main character is a hybrid of others and embodies the potential for unpredictable transformation. Too many voices crowd into a single mouth, making it hard to limit who are talking to who. The multiplicity of self-layers obscure and blur and create unsureness, like the inky dark seas that threaten to flood Francis Thurston's island of frail but predictable beaches. The fathomless depths and ephemeral multiplicity of self can be terrifying. They can echo wildly of others others others. And, this is what makes this first-person day-in-the-life documentary of a skin-switching practitioner in Osaka verge on horror genre. While a protected merciful peace can be found from negating more than needs to

be known, when the firm edge of self is allowed to blur with excess, monsters can come out and mingle.

Terminalian Drift wasn't intended to be horror. It was meant to be weirdly exploratory, to function as a vehicle to poetically analyze the energies and limits that shape self. More than a story of a monster, I view the novel as an extended meditation on empathy. In the classic proverb for activating empathy, we are told to "Walk a mile in another person's shoes." But what is the methodology implied in this thoughtful thought-experiment? Basically, the proverb asks me to imagine how I would feel if I lived the life of the other person. From that imagined first-personalization of the other's journey, a new and compassionate understand should naturally arise. How much more empathetic would it be to live in another's skin? Empathy derives from becoming other, by being able to climb inside an other's skin. Empathy is inherently self-altering. To imagine or feel how another feels requires a blurring of one's self-surety and self-attachment. Empathy teaches that what I know is not enough, that I have to not be ignorant of the difference that someone else lives within. Empathy experiments with becoming other and learning from the self/other comparison. Empathy is partly about letting ourself become the monster, the other, because empathy requires us to find commonality with difference, possibly extreme difference.

Monsters are regularly created as embodiments of extreme otherness. Monsters are viewed as dangerous based on our presumptions of their difference and our desire to protect self upon our fragile island of self-imposed ignorance. But monsters also fascinate our desires. We want to search them out, but not as an act of empathy. Monsters are recognizable because they are ourself embodying cruelty. Monsters embody the knowledge we know but want to be ignorant of as a means of offering mercy to ourselves. We make monsters in the inverse of empathy. Instead of imagining ourselves living in the other's monstrous skin, we make the monster by turning our own skin inside out. We see our intimate interior as unrecognizable, or we see a surface of the other which we fail to recognize as within ourselves. As Lovecraft's metaphor implies, our denial of self-excess creates the island of ignorance as well. We ignorantly believe that the world ends at the visible edge of our island of skin. We try to forget how much hidden knowledge we know in order to believe that nothing connects to us beyond our presumed limits. We judge the vast contents of our

mind to be dark and monstrous, and thus try to banish it. And that is perhaps why horror stories are so attractive. They show us intimate things that we presume are beyond our limits. Horror stories show us that odd acts of cruelty can be rites of pleasure, that the disgusting can be delicious, that the grotesque can glisten as beautiful. Horror lures us off of our peaceful island and we drift amidst our mind's dangerously transformative contents.

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