

fifteen ways to cross the desert

by Lili Zang





with love and thanks
to Jane, Polly, David, and our class
for their warmth, generosity and insight



From my tangled mass of questions around subjectivity come fragments of coherent thought, each straining to pull a strand of text from the tight-knit knot of some larger (self)critical, post/modern idea. A constant pull between conflicting methods and mixed positions; there comes the term 'split subject,' with some promise of resolution but semantic implications of corporeal rift and a subjectivity weakened by fracture.

1988
ibid, 585

Haraway's **Situated Knowledges** explores a possibility of a feminist, embodied objectivity, a series of '**webbed connections**' between partial forms of vision, non-binary nodes of knowledge in a field of contestation. Her version of multiplicity brings cohesion, a split subject with the courage to write.

What follows is a series of texts. They have emerged from Donald Judd's *15 untitled works in concrete* (the 15). They follow the pattern of the artwork and can be read in any order. These texts are a response to the 15, but they are also wrestling with the question: How could you write as a split subject?





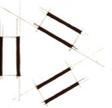
The Judd archive is out in Texas and the scraps left by
his hand illegible and notes too brief; a coded sketch
with rhythms read aloud instead of words
these words themselves always the same

Eastwest exact
sun-rise or set-

And so before you start to write, you close your eyes—
lightly, now, you see the dust- or grass-land sunbeat
bleached, it's sunrise (though it wasn't) you're alone
(though you weren't) you close your eyes again, and
pen to paper:

*sounds like smells like soft dry grass whispings warm
winds brushing, hushing but beyond it*

doubt, or dream, the real fading rapid-like words
folding—golden, golden grass—or dust cast concrete
shadows longer still, but—
brainblocked and so quickly losing nuance and these
nauseating waves of unsure unknown factless flat,
dissolving into Gold—



—and grappling harder with
a fading frame and diving into pages deepened, falling
in on time-tried text the same phrase circling round
repeated sliding out of language into air and with these
words the body too is wavered fractured self and mind
half doubling/splitting side by side and layered thick
a fickle whit sprung sprightly out the doubt but each
word writ the stronger whit now gaining ground and
pacing settling stopping soon the hook comes back
around

always the same

Eastwest exact
sun-rise or set-

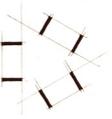
now holding fast the same words that once spun you
out your waning panic draining and a slower heart,
drowning down the chatter, click and tick for buzzing
hum and pen to paper:





My father used to speak of Zambia
where he ran barefoot in and out
of houses built by british rule
with cook's son keeping fire
so he too would kindle spark and stoke 'til smoke
would sting and sun had baked the rocks
and dusk brought purple skies
when boys and dogs alike lay down to swelling heat
still pulsing out the earth.

At twelve he lost his country as his father had
not exiled in the night but shipped up north
to England where at last he'd see the sea
and snow and sit
with proper Polish nuns to pray
through misty coastal mornings
for Ndola's dusty earth.



His prayers fell short on jaded lot
since Zambia's not his to have and
England's damp sits sour in blood born warm
and aeons gone 'fore back in Zam
out AC'd truck with driver tipped
now shoed feet soft but air still smells the same
he kneels to kiss the ground.

But so on England's saltstruck shores we stand
the writer theorist shrink and father all as one
with me this plural mess,
depressed at Earth's slow turning into darker waves
would walk down concrete relics strewn 'long Orfordness
and think of Marfa's sunbleached flats and dead-dry grasses,
dusts not red like dad's but dry the same
with desert climes where sandwind sings in eddies
whipping face like salt and concrete relics there in lines
so sanctified that sundown come still there
and as my father did I kneel to kiss the ground.





Burke, 2006

The units appear as extrusions of a platonic cube: doubled, hollowed, opened at the ends and iterated as if straining their bodies towards the ideal, their parts repeating so far and in such a direction as to approach infinity, or **some kind of the sublime.**

Plato Timæus

After determining his five solids, Plato assigned them to the elements, and as the cube was the most stable: **‘to the earth then, which is the most stable of bodies.’** Others to fire, water, air, but though these have their felt manifestations in our world, the Forms degrade as they are made material.

The units are open on one or two sides, framing the landscape in a picture plane, abstracting it. They take parts of the earth into themselves, trapping a fragment in the hollowed solid. They hold them still. It is only the spectator that moves, approaches, sees the cracks in the concrete.

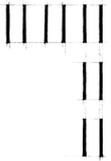
Grosz, 1994

In the becoming-real of Forms, they must pass a line dividing the binaries of real and ideal. *Chōra* is the mediator. It is the condition for entrance into material; the non/entity **onto which the Form’s copy is cast** and made matter. *Chōra* is a space of pure nurturance, by its nature traceless since any selfhood it held would mark matter in its entry into existence. By its denial of any characteristic it folds in on itself. Elizabeth Grosz calls it an **‘abyss, a crease, perhaps a pure difference.’**

ibid, 23

ibid

Plato made assignments of conceptive roles according to Greek **‘collective fantasy.’** The Forms he gave to the male, and to the female he gave *chōra*. While designated as female, *chōra* is severed with female corporeality.



Lloyd Thomas, 2007, 3

Grosz, 1994

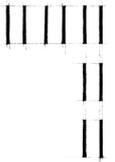
ibid, 27

This severance feels to me to be a violence. I am split against my will, irreparably.

On one side, this designation of Form to the male gives all characteristic-defining power to the male figure during conception. The architect or artist as a **'mythic form giver'** becomes unavoidably masculine. He projects himself outwards with his creations, taking up the social. On the other side, *chōra* leaves no trace in conception. It becomes an immaterial womb, obliterated by birth. The woman is left with the domestic, a **guardian of corporeality**, and thus entombed.

Grosz identifies this as one of the **'earliest models of appropriation and disenfranchisement of femininity.'**

This only reiterates the need for a fluidity or disgendering of the conception and experience of material and its conditions of entrance into the world.





Distances gather between people, between their expressions. It is the meaning that falls out of words in the air between, glances uncaught and silence drained of comfort. This is true too of places.

Disconnections start in interstices. In rhythms rattling slightly out, small slippages, missed footing. Edge abrasions knock the body, spaces juttied, jarring, like feeling the weight of your own tongue.

There are a few places my body fits. Some of them are surprising.

An amorphous, interactive art installation in an international art fair. Other attendees try to cut me from the frame of their photos. I draw my knees up to my chest and rest my chin on a sculptural outcrop.



A patch of carpet between our coffee table and TV. I lie on my front, facing the sofa. Sometimes I face the bookshelf. My flatmates have to step over me to get tea.

A spot at the base of a retaining wall on a beach in Hampshire. I am hunkered down small, tasting salty lips and finding good rocks.

sand, and formlessness
grinding down
glasses, cutting dirt
glittering sinful

rolling sweat
nape to spine and trapped
in the small

cigarette just singeing
uncracked lips
the air is thick today

engine cooling
bonnet hot and streaked
clean by grimy hands

oil dust and sweat
pilling
lining whorls
the contours of this land
spelled on my thumb

westward creaking porches
thicken nightly with bugs
light diving on screen doors

under darkened stars
and Texaco neon
I could make my home here.





15 *untitled works in concrete* is situated in the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, West Texas. It is a large outdoor sculpture consisting of fifteen configurations of concrete blocks, each measuring 2.5m x 2.5m x 5m. The configurations are 60m apart, laid over a 1km stretch that points due North.

2006

The form of the texts comes from an idea of Sara Ahmed's in **Queer Phenomenology**, where she describes an active inhabitation of a queer body as a process of orientation and relegation, an act of tending towards queer objects in lieu of following a straight path. Against our efforts at orientation, our bodies are '**pressed into lines**,' pressed to reproduce the lines that brought about our conception, or into a societal expectation of what a queer narrative should look like. Ahmed relates the straying from these constructed paths to landscape architecture's '**desire lines**,' acts of deviation that have left their own lines on the ground. She refers to a series of these deviations as generating a queer landscape, creating new textures on the ground.

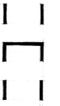
ibid, 17

ibid, 19

I have become fixated with this idea of a textured ground, that in writing as much as in bodily orientation one could perform multiple crossings of the ground. The ground could be any site, text, image, artefact, and so on, and the crossing could be any manner of response. The significance is in how this approach resists an expectation to form a linear argument, which—though often valuable—excludes the multiplicities and contradictions that emerge as part of a complex subject (or subjectivity). Less doubt than duality, these are too easily omitted, or if allowed at all are relegated to the status of footnote, all for the purpose of cohesion.



This is not to say that there is no place for hierarchy, or that this work is by any defence non-hierarchical, but it aims to grant emphasis to multiple lines of thought over the site, some of which might be odds, and some of which agree more readily.



1998

ibid, 77

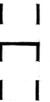
It seems natural that subjects who mediate the world differently should write differently, but some forms are more readily accepted. **Della Pollock** introduces the debate between the conventional and in her case the performative, as forms of writing that appear as more or less accessible and more or less easily taught. The defence for the performative or creative approach is that it evokes as much as it describes. The risk is ‘**clarity**,’ which Pollock cites Henry Giroux in identifying as a code word for a Eurocentric approach.

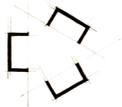
Splitting the writing self carries another danger; a *spreading-thin* of linguistic currency, that by choosing not to consolidate my writing into larger sections I might surrender the ability to make a well-supported point: that the same volume might amount to nothing.

I think it is the difference between what a poem can do, in a hundred words, to instil a sense of something through the breaking of language laws and conventions of the format, and what the academic can, through established methods of reference, argument, and quotation, with a mind to build a proof.

ibid, 80

The latter carries its own problem of truth, and the assumption of a universality of truth that can be known and unchanged. Pollock provides a way out of this with the evocative, making other-worlds, memories and subjugated histories possible, and truth experiential. She argues that language can be used ‘**like paint to create what is self-evidently a version**’ of what is, could, or might (have) be/en.





Some sacral stony monuments in desert otherworlds
shedding seeming power out in waves
and paced by stranger pilgrims
in their lonely dreaming daze,
unkept, unswayed and almost numb as if a roaring-
crashing, waves had battered out of feeling
out of time and all that's left is just to tread
down concrete relics there in lines
an echo singing ringing pounding out

And I've this secret sacred notion
solipsistic still to think it special
or that there's something to be said
when already clearly documented all of coastal bluffs
or moorland falls
but still this germs and springs, a wish or gift
these whispers drawing me down to water out to sea
or onto desert flats
to always turn my back to earth and before me
nothing but a blinding peace
this razor sense just mindless kindless wretched calm



Consider the sublime. Is it possible that I feel this in sharper detail than most? Otherwise it seems impossible that this is not the only thing we talk about. That in lieu of the social we not just walk into the sea, sinking down to black and bleeding thick iron-blue. Perhaps it is assumed already said. Instead I am left alone on the cliff as if the cool edge of a knife were held to flushing skin, giddy breathing hard between feelings, lost in the interstice, feeling hard enough it's almost numb. I offer words to describe it. I have been naming it for years, though no sounds nor signs could signify this weight.





These six types of configuration represent six types of crossing, in other words six types of writing.



explanations, or reflections: a kind of mission statement for the texts' conception and larger aim



poetic responses to the site, each ruminating on a different theme



introspective or self-critical, a moment of return for a discursive series



statements explaining the rationale of the book itself and its structuring principles



relation of the artwork and this project to existing theoretical texts and the most traditionally academic of configurations





combinations of the above, where emotive responses have been combined with extracts of academic writing around the site

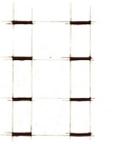
the text itself does not aim to replicate the artwork but is rather structured by it.

In the sense that a chronological order is suggested by the layout of the variations, so a chronological order is suggested by the layout of the book. However, in the sense that one could approach the artwork at any point in the sequence, so one could begin the book with any chapter.



Some of the configurations relate to one another in their formation, quoting a layout but always with a variation, never repeating a configuration verbatim. This mechanism of calling back (or forward) to another configuration is mimicked in the styles of writing or repetition of certain phrases or ideas.

Where text is shown in bold it refers to a side note or other text. Quotations are denoted by quotation marks as usual.



Judd began spending time in Marfa in 1971, as an escape from New York City. His influence took Marfa from a railway stopoff town with a dwindling population to a cultural centre for minimalism and dream destination for art tourists worldwide. The arts and tourism industries have become a great benefit to the community, making up most of the local economy.

The desert town dies with each caravan of glittering collectors, the local sacrificing to accommodate the global.

One example is the construction of a new luxury hotel filled with lace paintings by Mark Flood, perhaps his only painting series that does not directly criticise—or otherwise betray a deep antipathy towards—the art world’s commercial processes.

It is unclear whether this was intended as a deeply ironic move or an unthinking scramble to procure the hottest new currency on the Texan art market.

In Marfa, the cracks in the art world are covered over.

Disjunctures between traditions of anti-elitist discourse in artistic production and the frequently hypercapitalist modes of exchange fade behind a cult of minimalism and earth work. Elmgreen and Dragset’s Prada Marfa homes the Marfan nexus of this tension, its **anti-consumerist ideation** now deeply appropriated and commercialised through use.

Utter futility: that critical artworks join the system of which they are critical at the moment of fabrication.

Alongside the more common questions of intellectual



Allwood, 2015

Ballroom Marfa, 2016

accessibility and the prefabricated elitism inherent in narratives of artistic appreciation, or 'getting it' so to speak, appears the problem of physical accessibility. Three hours from the nearest airport, through a **border control checkpoint**, art blogs speak in glowing tones of days-long roadtrips past oil fields, pulling into Marfa at dusk.

The pride of the pilgrim reproduces itself, meditating over the journey until miles from anywhere the land becomes sacral, the locals acolytes, the cult of Judd an irresistible doctrine with which to surrender the city, or anything outside Marfa. Cynics become spiritual in the desert, forgetting there was ever anything or anyone else.





Chocolate linen was chosen for its textual aptitude in signifying the ground on which the artwork stands, the inversion of the light-on-dark from the traditional dark-on-light of drawing emphasizing the use of stitch as performing a crossing of the ground. The pattern itself is a plan; scaled at 1:1000 and with due North at the loose end.

As you unwrap the book, you must turn it six times. Each of these turns represents one type of configuration and one method of crossing. The size of the book comes from the scale of the map and the number of turns.

$$\frac{100\text{cm} - 8\text{cm}}{7} = 13.1 \quad \pm 1\text{mm}$$



The height is given by a 3:2 ratio, one of four ratios used by Judd in designing the concrete variations. The reverse of the map is revealed by the unwrapping, performing a deconstruction of the artwork in the manner of the texts.

A **1:60** scale illustration of a unit appears on the cover. Chapters are marked with plans cut through the configurations, so the discovery of illusory configurations accompanies discovery of the artwork.

Each unit denotes 83.3 words, rounded to **84**.

The referencing style inspired by **Yve Lomax**.

Judd—unusually—used metric for these works, where the aluminium variations he did simultaneously were in imperial. 8cm accounts for the thickness of the book and increased size with recurrent wrapping. seven since the first turn is rather *opened*, like a page

there are 60 units total.

for reasons too extensive to address here

Pure Means, 2013



some notes on minimalism

Judd, 2005

ibid, 181

In 1965, Donald Judd's **Specific Objects** was published in Arts Yearbook 8. The essay detailed a trend in new art that belonged neither to the traditions of painting or sculpture, but which he termed '**three dimensional work.**' The text largely deals with examples of the new work, and how it dealt with its space, its status as art, and its objecthood, amongst other problems posed by what is now known as the minimalist movement. Judd was clear that he was not describing a movement; the aim seemed rather to be to describe an attempted break from the confines of traditional artistic practice.

This break is performed consistently through Judd's wall-based work and much of his smaller indoor work. The 15 untitled works in concrete marks a change; performing his vision of the 'specific object,' showing a freedom from traditional artistic practice whilst resisting the restrictive tenets of a purist vision of minimalism.



Stockebrand, 2010, 54

ibid, 70

The key difference between the 15 and Judd's doctrinate works comes from the design process and the evolution of the configurations. It is significant that Judd designed the configurations **in batches over four years**, designing each batch as the last was being built. As the configurations proceed they gain units, and the full set begins to resemble one of his early wall progressions in the configurations' density. He continues to use **numerical systems** evocative of the logical style in his designs, but repeated configuration types and the evolution of the configurations' complexity introduce elements of rationality in design and relational dynamics that the minimalist project **largely eschewed.**

Colpitt, 1993

These two features working contra the minimalist

Colpitt, 1993, 107

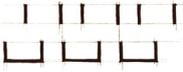
project do not entirely undermine the nonanthropomorphic objecthood of the artwork—the distinct presence that these objects maintain on an existential level—as they remain non-representational, but exist in the real. They are viscerally felt. Their geometric rigidity might be **‘unresponsive to the touch,’** but they are still tangible. In fact, these are among the few artworks of Judd’s that can stand to be touched. His use of materials such as plexiglass and untreated metals means that his artworks’ obdurate materiality would be instantly disrupted by smudges of human skin: the trace of the very entity they would distinguish themselves from. The work is transformed at the very moment its presence is confirmed.

Judd, 2005, 183

Though the 15 performs what Judd described as **losing the problem of illusionism,** it does have illusory properties. It is most naturally approached from the northwest, and requires time and circumnavigation to perceive as a whole. An artwork’s temporality is a concern of minimalism that critics such as Michael Fried **were highly critical of,** which the length of the 15 along with Judd’s semi-logical, semi-rational use of variation takes to an extreme. The walking required in apprehension of this work, and the slow, meditative fluctuations of expectation and discovery make the process of walking the line a fascinating oscillation between existential presence and illusory non-presence.



Colpitt, 1993, 94



When you find the feminist problem in your own work, the floor drops away; then an onset of nausea, rising. In horror: what have I done?

When I choose to write about an artwork by an established, white, male, artist, am I not further privileging his position in art history?

In her essay **Modernist Art History: 'The Challenge of Feminism' (1988)**, Lisa Tickner describes art as a **specially valued but arbitrarily constructed category of human production** that is codified and thereby controlled by academic disciplines that historically have championed arts that maintain autonomy from the ethnographic, the decorative, and the domestic. This exclusion of modes of production historically designated to women and people of cultural difference reinforces the masculinisation and westernisation of the figure of the artist. The **artist-hero** is further reified by the use of him as a significant point of reference for the work. He is portrayed as **'objective and disinterested, in pursuit of universal values at once transcendent (of mundane social realities) and intrinsic,'** and crucially, as he.

To provide a caveat, to acknowledge Judd's—and my—privilege, and question the problems the artwork poses for a feminist writing: this is the absolute minimum I can do. The time it took for the problem to occur to me is alone a sign of privilege, in the way that ignorance can be a blissful form of privilege.

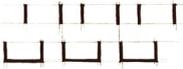
Tickner argues for a feminist art history, one with a subjectivity **'that can cope with unconscious and splintering identifications.'** Her reading

Feminism-art-theory, 2001

ibid, 252

ibid, 251

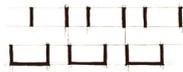
ibid, 252



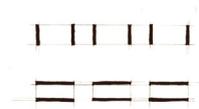
Feldman, in Tickner, 253

of formalist art and art histories forms a convincing criticism of minimalist ideology. She quotes Edmund Burke Feldman in saying that **‘lifting art out of the context of productive human relationships denudes it of all but its metaphysical value at one extreme and its pecuniary value at the other’**. Relating this to minimalism’s emphasis on a radical break from the history of artistic production, and its intentionally nonanthropomorphic avoidance of relational composition and rational design, minimalism seems to be aiming to enact this very lift from context. Feldman’s statement therefore highlights the potential of minimalist ideology to perform every elitism Tickner identifies.

How then, should I feel, after this realisation? Am I still allowed to like the work, or not? Can I offer a defensive argument—still feminist, but a positive guard of the artwork’s innocence—or does this become apologist?



One distinction to clarify is that the minimalist sculpture’s various ahistoric qualities might not be irrevocably damning, because it is equally damaging to assume that such qualities are unilaterally designated to the masculine and that women are precluded from making such work, or crucially, from connecting with it as a spectator. It is rather a problem of art history when discourse around such works reifies these qualities while trivialising work that has not historically been designated to white men, or in evaluative consideration of the artwork, forgetting that predilection for qualities of autonomy comes from a history of cultural privilege.



Ahmed, 2006, 150

ibid

Landloss is something that my parents and their parents knew, distant cousins still emerging from Siberia as if time had trapped them there. I have always lived in England. Their homes are full of tsatske: lion matches, carved stones, beaded lizards next to matryoshka and painted clogs. When I moved, the objects came with me.

Objects in homes are connections to the past; not nostalgic, as longing but **'impressions'** of the past, kept alive by their presence and interwoven with the **'weave or fabric of the present.'** What does it mean, then, for these objects to be inherited by a child who has not lived the context of the lost land as it is known culturally, but lived the object as part of their understanding of home? To me the object represents my family, and my childhood growing amongst such collected artefacts. The difference in my understanding does not rid the object of its symbolic value for others, and it does not mean I haven't claimed an object that wasn't mine.

It took me a long time to see the objects from the eyes of another, and their potential as symbols of appropriation. The objects out of Africa carry the weight of British colonialism. The European tsatske have their own histories of oppression, neither of which I can fully understand.

Many refugees from WWII ended up in colonised African nations, having been processed through England. There was work in the colonies, so whole communities of Polish immigrants sprung up there. One oppression does not forgive or outweigh another: the field only deepens.

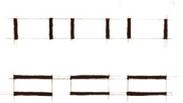
When I walk into that desert where my skin reflects sunlight like a mirror, beacon burning out of place, and



some part of me resonates there, a stir of belonging, I stall, appalled at the coloniser in me, for how could I dare to feel belonging in someone else's place?

Writing about home as a white person is ridiculous in itself, as we have taken the world as our home.

I spread objects around me, searching for stability in the collection, or an anchoring point. Contending the wish that land not be legislated, owned, that the whole idea of belonging is a dangerous one, with my animal self, who would nest, demand safety, and crave the privilege of voluntary isolation, to have seen the city and still self-sequester.



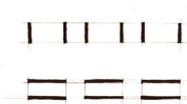
I used to dream of drawstring sacks all swinging from a staff, talismanic stones from every end and veined with signs; phials of holy waters stoppered tight, woven coded coloured strings all hanging from a belt of many-placed home itinerant and harmless never taking space but making place

in dreary city's sunlight blinking off of steel and glass by a river where nobody really lives but buildings rise

just as well as drizzling misting mornings on a moorland more like swamp with grimy ponies strolling free and nonchalant

or like in Marfa in a desert that's been thoroughly described

perhaps to find containment in a place I could call 'home.'





1988

In the northernmost configuration of this work, I described these texts as wrestling with the question of how one could write as a split subject.

My understanding of the split subject comes from a feeling of conflict between acts of critical distancing and those of immediate, emotive sincerity. In writing, moments of irony, of earnest feeling, of intellectual and poetic content feel inconsistent, and the implementation of opinion irrelevant if not supported by reference to academic forebears.

The conflicted subject is often discussed in the context of postmodernism, and in discussions around objectivity. The taboo of subjectivity and impossibility of pure objectivity find one resolution in the plurality of Haraway's **field of partial knowledges**, but what this field could mean in implementation is unclear. The repetition of a search so heavily preceded feels at once futile and necessary. Its necessity comes from a refusal to surrender to the futility: to surrender would be fall into nihilistic lassitude.

The tactic I have used in my response to the 15 and these dynamics of emotive-critical tension has been to relegate all but one of a myriad of feelings, to write each in isolation. Interrelations and contradictions still break through, but the intention was to capture the essence of one idea at a time. This method has made it possible to write when early attempts at a totally integrated text proved so overwhelming as to cause paralysis, and a feeling of exhilaration that started to approach panic as conflicting moments clashed, unfolding dialogues in a frenzy that felt impossible to capture. When isolated however, each idea seems comparatively unthreatening.



It is my hope that much of this dynamism is to be found in the spaces between the texts. There are also creases in the texts themselves, created by the hegemony of the word count and tonal requirements. While the language might occasionally have struggled under the dictates of the structure, and the structural system been challenged by the needs of the language, I have found these tensions to be more productive than limiting.



Some distance north, I introduced the idea of the 15 as performing Judd's vision of the 'specific object,' while freed from the restrictive doctrine of the minimalism that came after *Specific Objects*.

I won't dissect the whole text in an attempt to produce a definitive moment of closure. Instead, I will draw on only one quotation which does a lot to evoke the way in which he understands artwork.

They are specific. If they are used directly, they are more specific. Also, they are usually aggressive. There is an objectivity to the obdurate identity of a material.

Judd, 2005, 187

He is writing about the use of industrial materials in the new three-dimensional work. The language is simple, but seems prophetic, as if he is telling a raw truth. His words signify whole worlds, expressing the phenomenal weight with which he understands his artworks. Somehow, impossibly, this is something which he captured in the 15. It makes sense that these should seem immanent.



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