without incident. I finally figured out that when the painting is finished, you need to put down a matte medium. It's a white varnish but sprays on clear. It took me so long to figure that out. I worked from early in the morning until midnight to learn tricks like that. To make the lines in the tracer paintings from World War II, I again turned to car culture and the way pinstripes are made. I used a gravity-fed bottle with a wheel at the bottom; the wheels come in different sizes to determine the width of the line. For the burning city series, I discovered that I could spray paint through cotton to depict smoke.

I directed all of my work; my performances, my sculptures, my records, my films, the choreographed pieces, the burial pieces. When it came to my paintings, I was the one who had to figure out how to make them. I didn't call someone and say, Make me a painting and I'll see you at four o'clock. I had to figure out all of the methods of making the paintings, not to mention what was going to be painted.

On the other hand, it is also true that I tried to disappear by hiring actors and by hiring others to manufacture my paintings. The movies and performances and paintings became symbolic of my disappearance, just as in my final show at CalArts I was buried. All anyone saw was the blinking light, which was symbolic of my heartbeat.

Ron Terada, *Jack (Series 5, Chapter 7, Painting 6)*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 178 cm x 142 cm
PHOTO: SITE PHOTOGRAPHY; COURTESY OF CATRIONA JEFFRIES, VANCOUVER

Nic Wilson, 'The Afterlife of Writing', *C Magazine* 160, Spring 2025

Among the stacks of a library or adrift in a digital archive, I feel immersed in death. The accumulated pasts that I wade through are thick and they place me in time. There are many ways to trace the wake of others and ourselves, but I choose to focus on this textual anterior. Sometimes reading, writing, speech, and text are made mundane through use. They are so easily glossed over in constant cycles of desire and fulfilment, but through attention[1]—long, slow looking in tandem with long, slow thinking—I want to make them strange again, restoring their jagged edges.

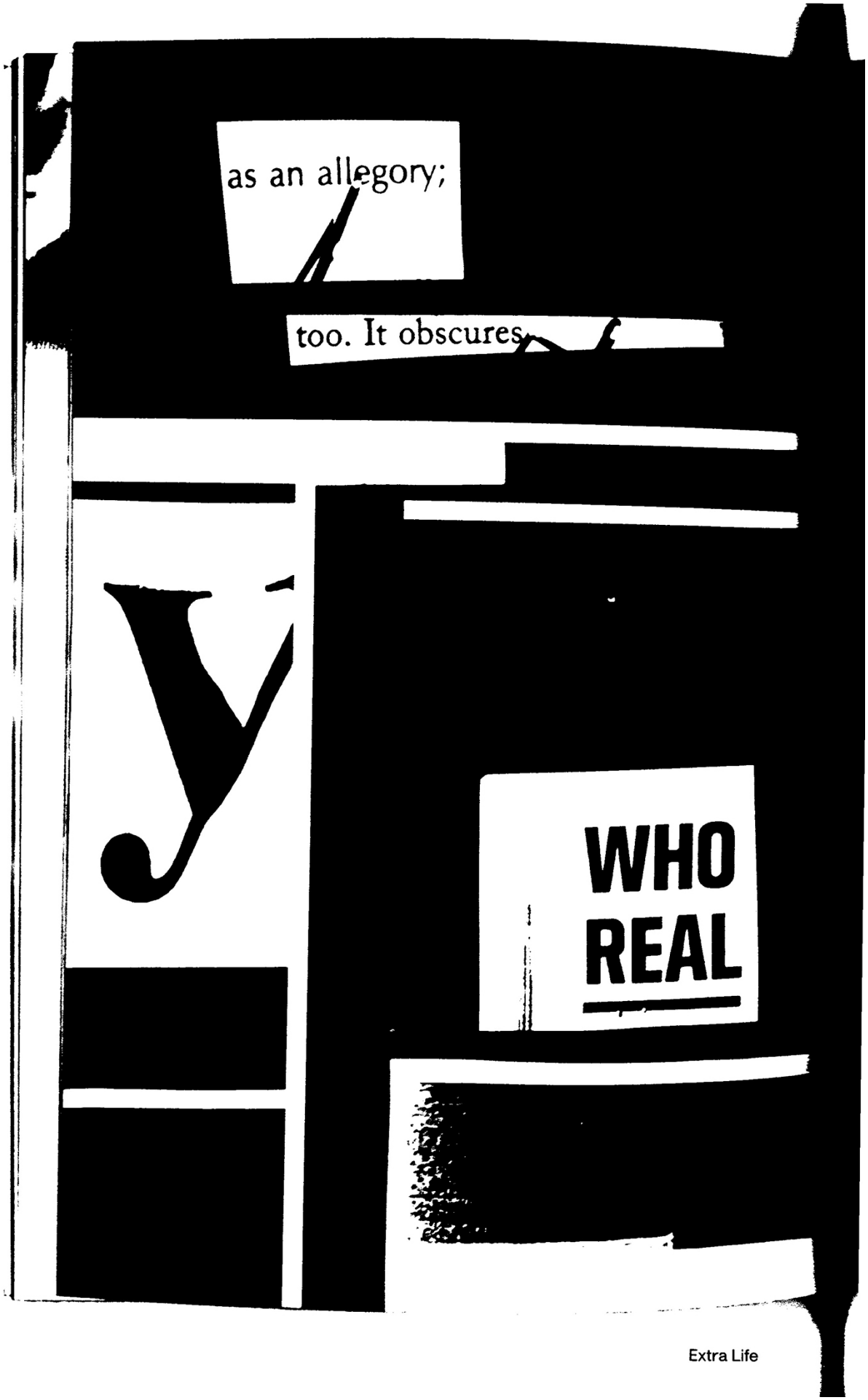
Yes, Dorotea. It was the murmuring that killed me.

—Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 1955

About halfway through Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955), the central narrator, Juan Preciado, dies. Much of the book is ostensibly narrated from the grave he shares with Dorotea, whom he encounters upon arriving in Comala, a fictionalized version of a town in Mexico. He was sent by his mother to that ghost town, as she lay dying, to find his eponymous father. In a more conventional text, the death of the narrator would be equated with the death of the story, but here, in the shared grave, Preciado encounters a past in dreamlike remnants that are hard to place in a linear understanding of time. Rulfo uses multiple forms of punctuation (', "", «», —) to indicate shifts in voice and time. Different characters' voices emerge from stories of others. In the text, death is a portal. It leads him out of his body and into the past with Dorotea as one of his many co-narrators. It is here that one voice bleeds into many.

The book is awash in spooky conundrums that entwine questions about life, time, order, and the ambiguity and relativity that pervades them. It begins with a strong declaration of place: "I came to Comala because I was told my father lived here, a man named Pedro Páramo."[2] On the level of language, the reader is given a location that also gestures toward both an individual and a social identity, as "I" is often taken as the ultimate declaration of personhood and autonomy. It is the foundation of a self that we grow into.

The Afterlife of Writing



Nic Wilson, 'The Afterlife of Writing', *C Magazine* 160, Spring 2025

Interior spread of Kameelah Janan Rasheed's *No New Theories*, published by Printed Matter, Inc., 2019

Nic Wilson, 'The Afterlife of Writing', *C Magazine* 160, Spring 2025

In *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (1993), Hélène Cixous writes, "We need to lose the world [...] to discover that there is more than one world and that the world isn't what we think it is. Without that, we know nothing about the mortality and immortality that we carry."[3] The acts and results of making are often aligned with birth and new life, but the fingerprints of death rest on them as well. Like the concepts of new and old or time and space, the dyad of life and death are inseparable. You can't speak about the beginning of something without invoking the concept of its end. Any invocation of life holds the trace of death looming like a silent letter.

One of the reasons I keep returning to text and writing is the possibilities they provide for questioning the boundaries that construct the space between self and other, along with concomitant boundaries between life and death. Writing is a form that recognizes the failings (or perhaps the contingencies) of an idea of the "self" as an entity contained to a discrete body. It can be a place of non-division from which many questions and declarations of separation and clarification can be unwound, demolished, or left to decompose.

Writing is learning to die [...] to live at the extremity of life...

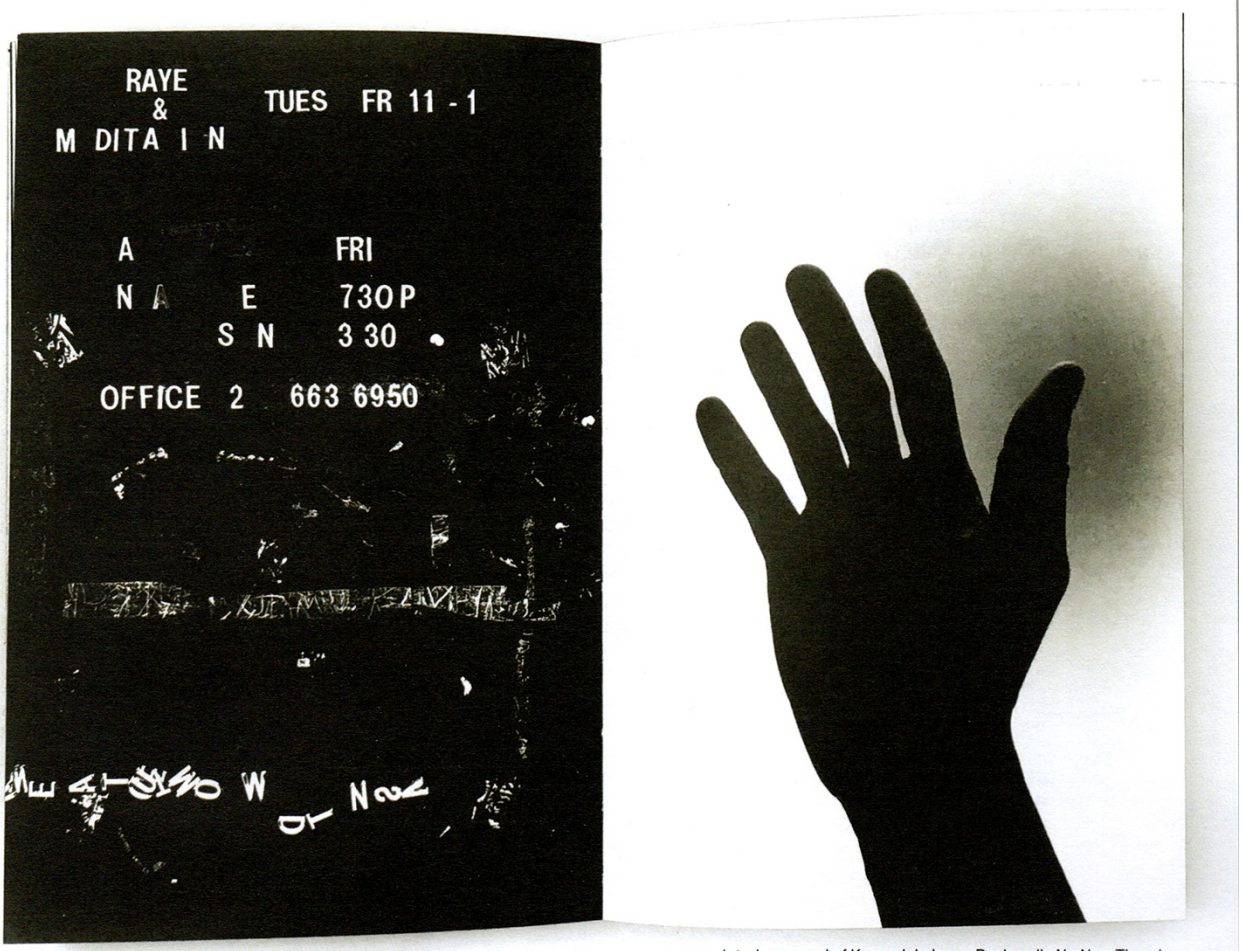
—Hélène Cixous,
Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing, 1993

Visual artist and writer Sarah Tripp's *You Are of Vital Importance* (2014) takes on scenarios I rarely encounter in literary fiction. These vignettes dramatize the events of an experimental spatial workshop and chart the history of a restaurant that has become social hub in the arts community of a city. One piece particular, "Studies of practice," documents the expe-ce of a person who steps into the working methods arious artists as if these constellations of materials, s, and locations were a glove that one could don shed. The unnamed narrator sits in a small, dark oard and paints with their fingers, following the al guidelines of its usual inhabitant. They also poke nd in the word processor of an anxious writer.[4] These studies offer the impression of time spent ide of oneself. Through the patterning of experi-es, the narrator flickers between possible selves, sible days in the studio; they imagine through re-rch, and the strange social guises art can take on, w their life could be just a bit different. A reader guided into that mundane empathetic space.

I take "Studies" as documentation of a series of actions that, while they may or may not have happened, dwell in a small and secretive space not usually known to an audience. Any artist can tell you that most of the work of practice is private or, at least, happens in a cascade of private spaces: homes, bedrooms, studios, notebooks, computers, headphones, web browsers, etc. Part of what ignites Tripp's "Studies" is the possibility of climbing into the driver's seat of another person's practice and performing a kind of possession.

In horror, possession is often characterized as the worst type of violation—a forcible evacuation of the self in order to control a person's body—but the fantasy of seeing from another's perspective can be seen here as a far more familiar and benign longing. Though it can be regarded as naive, sentimental, or spurious, the ability to induce empathy in a viewer upon encounter, even across great physical and temporal distance, is a central fascination in art-making.

Extra Life



Interior spread of Kameelah Janan Rasheed's *No New Theories*, published by Printed Matter, Inc., 2019

The earlier culture will become a heap of rubble and finally a heap of ashes, but spirits will hover over the ashes.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 1970

For nearly a decade, Ron Terada worked on a series of paintings based on the book *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia* (2003),[5] comprising dramatized first-person accounts by Goldstein and a long list of his peers from the California Institute of the Arts in the '70s. The book documents the rise and fall of Goldstein's career in the rapidly commercializing art world of the '80s. Each of Terada's canvases in the *Jack* series (2009–2018) presents a facsimile of the text with obvious visual allusions to book pages, but also to stone tablets and, by the end of the series, large memorial slabs embedded into the floors of cathedrals.

These canvases perform several circuitous plays—commenting on the position that Goldstein (along with many other members of the so-called Pictures Generation) holds in art history, marked by a shift in global attention from the conceptual work of the '60s (often emphasizing the use of text) to the pictorial work of the '70s and '80s (often invoking mass media forms). Terada cheekily turns this relationship on its head, reframing the biting text into the medium of large-format painting—one of the golden calves that propelled some of Goldstein's peers into the post-conceptual, globalized art market.

I encountered part of the *Jack* series in a large gallery, shifting from one aching foot to another, slowly circling the room. The text is consumed by discussions of money, rivalry, and backstabbing: all concepts that I knew were part of art-making, but ones that are not usually brought up in the glossy, sublime image of "creativity" presented by art institutions. This seemed like the dirt—the bits that you hear in a cab on the way to drinks after an opening—which felt somehow at odds with the slow, slightly monastic mental image I had of the work's construction. It implied a layer of melding between this already polyvocal text and Terada, through the act of transcription.

The effect is a series of nested quotations that are obscured by Richard Hertz's dramatization in the source text, but also by Terada's deadpan delivery. The intimacy of voices blending, and the ambiguity of who is speaking and what is said, quietly disturbs the expectation of art as an individual pursuit. After years of working on the series, Terada said, "I catch myself repeating [Goldstein's] phrases."[6] This messy relationship is one in which all parties are shaped by contact with one another, even if that contact is across great leaps in time and space. At least that is my hope. I can't think of a life without the company of the dead.

Nic Wilson, 'The Afterlife of Writing', *C Magazine* 160, Spring 2025

I think about my own practice—my installations—as a series of unfinished sentences with commas that lead to the next part or that remind us that there is no full stop in this conversation…

—Kameelah Janan Rasheed,
No New Theories, 2019

I used to spend time with the office administrator whenever I was visiting my father's work. She would take me to the photocopier and help me improvise compositions on the scanner bed that usually involved the palm of my hand and scrap from the recycling bin. I liked to hold the warm paper after it was spat out of the machine. I kept these compositions in an empty office beside my father's. As he worked on editing a journal for scholars of military history, my own research into the phenomenology of childhood developed next door.

Kameelah Janan Rasheed often works in the vernacular of copy toner, a material I often think of as a bridge between spaces of research and the cultures of DIY music, art, and politics. In Rasheed's *No New Theories* (2019), this material erodes many myths about the aesthetics of knowledge and punctures the neatness of theoretical speculation. Throughout the publication, Rasheed builds texts from fragments and layers of annotation, citation, revision, and accumulated voices she has invited or invoked.[7] The black-and-white pages unfold as grainy, smeared sets of interstitial spaces connected by graphic elements that bare diagrammatic qualities as well as allusions to punctuation and Arabic calligraphy.

Along with underlining the porous and unfinished nature of writing, *No New Theories* stands as a reminder that "[w]riting and reading are not separate, reading is a part of writing."[8] The core of the publication is a conversation between Rasheed and Jessica Lynne, which is expanded, both conceptually and graphically, through various interventions that fill in the background of the exchange with quotations and annotations. These layers of thought remind me of my own intellectual development, slashing hurried and emphatic lines under the words of others and jotting half-formed sentences in the margins that would go on to underpin a new piece.

Writing is always gesturing at the ineffable, the unsayable, the unpronounced parts of itself. Punctuation that controls clauses and sentences. "I can't be A comprehensive sentence," says *No New Theories*. The work seems to demand that language be left open and that we take up the work of that language. One page is adapted from the Wikipedia article for the term "Hapax legomenon," describing a word or idiom that occurs only once in a given context, such as in an author's body of work or a specific language. The concept gestures toward the emergence of words or language used in novel ways to express particular phenomena. The shadow of this emergence is the chipping away at experience that used to belong to the ineffable, and this brings with it a small amount of grief.

In "11 Statements Around Art Writing" (2011), Maria Fusco, Yve Lomax, Michael Newman, and Adrian Rifkin imagine a space of "non-division" where assumedly discrete activities (like of practice and theory) can collapse and commingle.[9] It may have one foot in the realm of fantasy, but I like to think through non-division when it comes to life and death. I think about myself as inhabiting the afterlife of so many people who have lived and died before me. Text can be a link to the world of the dead, but more often it is what allows the smear of non-division between self and other, living and dead. Reading and writing give a sense of transcending the boundaries of the corporal self that is bound in time. Cixous says that "[w]hen I write I escape myself, I uproot myself,"[10] and that uprootedness is a small death, in a small neighbourhood of the self and of language, that allows people to flow into each other.

Nic Wilson (they/he) is an artist and writer who was born in the Wolastoqiyik territory known as Fredericton, NB, in 1988. They are now based on Treaty 4 land in Regina, SK.

Endnotes

1 "We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will." Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 116.

2 Juan Rulfo and Gabriel García Márquez, *Pedro Páramo*, trans. Douglas J. Weatherford (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2023), 1.

3 Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 10.

4 Sarah Tripp, *You are of vital importance* (London: Book Works, 2014), 74.

5 Richard Hertz et al., *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia*, 1st ed. (Ojai: Minneola Press, 2003).

6 Tom McDonough and Ron Terada, "Time Is Different Now," *Canadian Art*, March 9, 2020, https://canadianart.ca/features/ron-terada-time-is-different-now

7 On her website, Rasheed describes "citation as a practice of deep lineage storytelling that centres knowledge production as a dynamic, interspecies and interdisciplinary process → this is not about ownership or authority." Kameelah Janan Rasheed, "Colophon," https://kameelahr.com/Colophon

8 Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 21.

9 Maria Fusco, Yve Lomax, Michael Newman, and Adrian Rifkin, "11 Statements Around Art Writing," *Frieze*, October 10, 2011, https://www.frieze.com/article/11-statements-around-art-writing

10 Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 20.

Nic Wilson, 'The Afterlife of Writing', *C Magazine* 160, Spring 2025