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# Familial Dialects

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## Familial Dialects

Using the framework of scientific investigation, 'Familial Dialects' explores the languages – systems of signs and codification of those signs - of individual members of my family, and the metaphors that arise from their interaction with pieces of the natural world. Each of the pieces combine an inherent form and an organizing action as a means of representing an individual's form of expression. These familial dialects are created and translated using the methodologies of a naturalist - collection, dissection, observation, and classification. The pieces draw meaning from the connotative associations built from familial connections as well as from broader cultural constructions regarding the natural world.

In their book *Objectivity* (2010), a study of historical shifts in the epistemology of science, Daston and Galison suggest that there is no objectivity in scientific inquiry without the twin spectre of subjectivity. "Objectivity and subjectivity define each other, like left and right or up and down. One cannot be understood, even conceived, without the other. If objectivity was summoned into existence to negate subjectivity, then the emergence of objectivity must tally with the emergence of a certain kind of willful self, one perceived as endangering scientific knowledge."<sup>1</sup> In my work, I attempt to reunite the scientific to the subjective self, using one to examine and reflect upon the other.

### My Approach

My work borrows the authority of scientific illustration to document a subject matter that is entirely subjective. The use of the digital camera, the macro lens, and the scanner bring the authority of contemporary technology to the scientific depiction of objects. I draw on photographic approaches frequently employed in scientific illustration, including the use of color imagery, clean white backgrounds, and a hovering observational perspective. The images have the direct one-to-one reproduction made possible with camera vision. In some, the enlargement of objects and the removal of a visual context approximates the perspective of a microscope or a telescope. The construction of each language in discrete units mimics the way cellular structures of organisms are often illustrated for scientific study. Using photography to document the objects flattens them, simplifying them and rendering them more legible as a translation.

At the same time, the subject matter upon which these methods are applied revolves around narratives of nostalgia, estrangement, loss and difference. I use the creation of languages as a way of developing a portrait avoiding a physical description to focus on psychology. The objects serve as indexes of personal meaning. The methods that I use to organize and curate them constitute a physical coming-to-terms with someone else's mode of communication. Creating a translation by employing the materials and methods of another person is a way for me to honor, to forgive, to remember, and to grapple with the limitations of communication. Once the dialect has been decoded, creating the photograph is a kind of a secondary preservation of meaning. The process makes me aware of the difficulties of deciphering and denoting something that is constantly shifting and evolving out of my grasp.

While building upon personal stories, the photographs employ signs that have a broader social significance. They reflect understandings of environment that are both inherited from the past and updated by each individual. The photographs embody sentiments about nature from a previous era, with its heroes and its symbols; its nostalgia and its privilege; and its celebration of the processes of collecting, naming, and knowing. However they also reflect a certain uneasiness, not only about physical changes in the environment leading to loss, but also a kind of uncertainty about where to locate the natural and how to

remain connected to it. The photographs all document attempts to preserve or repair a kind of relational meaning.

In 1978, John Szarkowski described photography as having two dichotomized strategies of pictorial representation – the 'Mirror' strategy focuses on self-expressive photography and the 'Window' element allows people to look through the photograph to examine the world in a more objective transmission of information. The critique of photography has evolved since then, but that dichotomy often still infects the way people approach the analysis of photographic work. I would argue that like anything else made or performed by humanity, photography can be both a mirror and a window at the same time. It can reflect personal experience, while simultaneously allowing us to glean information about cultural constructs. The case studies elaborated below reveal how cultural constructions of nature insinuate themselves into personal stories in a very fundamental way. The ideas are absorbed, reorganized, and then projected back out into the world in new arrangements.

## Depicting Science

The underpinnings of scientific theories and the photographic practices used to uphold their authority have been viewed with skepticism in the post-modern era. The idea that science is neutral or ahistorical has been questioned by many artists who focus on the cultural construction of associated fields of knowledge, including natural history.

Mark Dion's work uses the practices of collection, categorization and curation to both mimic and parody the orders we impose on the natural world. Dion's work focuses particularly on what kind of information we can derive from the object about the society that created and valued it, and in some cases ultimately discarded it (as in the *Tate Thames Dig*, 1999). His collections cause the viewer to question how objects accrue their social and historical meaning, and how these meanings are retransmitted through the institutional practices of researching, archiving and curating. By reappropriating the same apparatus through which we identify and reify natural history - the museum cases, the explorer's tools, the specimen collections, he draws attention to both the processes and the products of that history. Dion's scale is civilizational (though the civilizational perspective is one that originates in the West). While he focuses on the level of cultural institutions and practices, my focus is on how the meanings derived from tactile materials are integrated into and transmitted through familial lives.

In Taryn Simon's *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVII* (2008-2011), two panels of straight evidentiary photographs and text outline the parameters of a lineage. These two comprise an official account – a straight documentary approach that relies on visual cues of scientific authority to support the story. But in a third panel, using the same documentary approach, photographic footnotes reveal the strictures, discrepancies, and open-endedness of the official system. I am interested in Simon for the ways in which she demonstrates the failure of a system to convey meaning, even if the depiction of failure is as simple as a void in visual representation. A more complete view of reality requires jumps from one form of representation to another, to contingency, to things that are illogical. I value Simon's work for the recognition that something lives beyond the mere evidence and that describing a system of knowledge requires acknowledgement of its gaps.

The systems that Simon describes are so tightly delineated that sometimes it feels that there is no interplay or options outside of the ones that she offers. Particularly with the rise of new technologies, both scientific and artistic, there is more of a blurring of ontological boundaries and the potential for new types of creation that are simultaneously

troubling and liberating. While he can be flip in his approach, Joan Fontcuberta's work shows the recombinant possibilities of new technologies, which range from fake herbarium species (1984) to the digital images from the series *Orogenesis* (2002), which uses a kind of mapping software to translate classical landscape paintings into new landscapes that are entirely devoid of their original meaning but made up of the same essential data. I am interested in Fontcuberta for what his work says about the transmission of meaning over time and technology – how it escapes and becomes estranged from its original cultural moorings to transform into something else. His work is an illustration of the power and perils associated with the translation of ideas from one system to another. But I am also caught by what he demonstrates about the ability to imagine when one throws away the rules of creation and becomes an inventor of new forms.

My work is more private and potentially less accessible than that of the aforementioned artists. However, each of these artists in their own way helps me to think about physical objects as a kind of evidence, the systems of communication in which that evidence may be employed, and the ways in which those systems might fail or shift toward new types of meaning over time and across generations. The case studies which follow are an exploration of those ideas within the personal context of individuals whose dialects I have felt compelled to translate because of the way they have shaped my own system of communication.

## The Case Studies

### Case Study 1:

Clover (*Trifolium*) is a genus of plants in the leguminous family Fabaceae that is comprised of over three hundred species. The name derives from latin *tres* “three” and *folium* “leaf”, which describe the characteristic form of the plant which usually has three leaflets.

The four-leaf clover is an uncommon variation of the three-leaf clover. The multifoliolate trait in white clover is controlled by at least one recessive gene, whose expression is also strongly influenced by environmental conditions.<sup>3</sup> It is often suggested, though it is hard to find actual documentation of the research, that there are ten-thousand three leaf clovers for every four leaf clover. The rarity of the four-leaf variant gives it a special cultural significance. In the way that many superstitions misassign cause and effect, the luck involved in finding a four-leaf clover transmutes into a symbol of luckiness for the finder.

Searching for and collecting four or five leaf clovers is an activity that my grandmother taught her three daughters to do, and which they, to greater or lesser degrees, passed along to their own children. The clovers were collected in daily walks and in passing on the way to other places, or sometimes on purposeful expeditions. The finding of one clover indicates that there are others close by.

In my family there are informal rules associated with collecting clovers. Three-leaf clovers, which are naturally the most common, are not considered to be lucky. Four leaf clovers are for personal luck. Five or six-leaf clovers are to give away – maybe the excess of luck signified by the extra leaves necessitates the sharing of good fortune. It is considered especially lucky to find a four-leaf clover without looking for it. This does not negate the fact that one aspect embodied by the practice is the virtue associated with looking carefully at things, including things that most people pass by. Four-leaf clovers are evidence of sharp-sightedness. They are evidence of the capacity to ascertain patterns and disruptions of those patterns.

My family is not Irish in ancestry. I am not aware of the origins of the tradition for us, and why it became so strong on my mother’s side of the family except that it became a personal and collective habit. My grandmother was a musician and believed strongly that practice and self-discipline were not only moral virtues but the basis for self-improvement. The way that the idea of virtue is extended to luck, which is hypothetically out of one’s individual control, reflects an old New England, and potentially Puritan ethic which suggests that hard work is rewarded by good fortune.

Although my grandmother had the tradition of collecting the clovers and taping them to cards and books, and carrying them around for years in her wallet as talismans of good luck, my mother and her sisters expanded the tradition by sometimes adding the date and the location of collection, and in certain cases taping them onto documents that recorded an event or a context to which the specific clover was dedicated. In this way, for my mother in particular, the clovers became an archive of the important events in her life and of the hopes that she pinned to them.

Luck is both a product of chance, and of a dedicated search for opportunities to be lucky. The clovers are a language of my mother’s insistent optimism. With hindsight and the

patina of age, they take on the meanings associated with her expectations for life, and the ways in which these were, and were not fulfilled.

## Case Study 2:

Last winter I was trying to catch up on the classic writings on environmental conservation, and I asked my father to make some recommendations and lend me some books. I suggested trying out Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, but when I admitted to never having read Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, he insisted that I should start there.

Leopold's entreaty to know and care for the land in which you live is an idea which became one of the pillars for the conservation movement and wildlife management in the United States in the 1920s. But rather than the message, I was actually more interested in the book itself, a reprint from the 70's with yellowing pages and Canada geese flying across the fragile cover. What caught me in it was the dedication page where there was an inscription to my mother in my father's hand – something that I had never seen before. "To Kitty, the most moving poetry I know".

My father believes in evidence. As an ecologist, he has spent his life studying the migratory patterns of seabirds, and mapping endemic populations of Jacob's Ladder. He is a creator of lists and charts. He records rainfall and numbers of flowering stems. He makes maps, he counts birds, he measures trees, he gives lectures, he writes reports. Taking a walk with him is an obligatory lesson in natural history. I am quizzed on the names of this berry, the call of that bird, what animal belongs to those tracks, what soil conditions might make it favorable for this plant to grow.

I think I have known for many years, with varying degrees of accompanying frustration, that this stream of information is code. It is the language for the things he loves. But beyond that it is the language of the processes of life. The evidence of rules that give the world its order and intelligibility. The inscription in my father's copy of the *Sand County Almanac* is the most straightforward declaration that I have ever seen of his emotional investment in that system. Moreover it is a declaration made to someone unable to understand his language then, and to someone else struggling to understand it now.

Ecology is the study of interactions among organisms and their environment. To structure the study of ecology in a conceptually manageable framework, the biological world is organized into nested hierarchies that range from genes to cells to tissues to organisms to species to communities to ecosystems to biomes up to the level of the biosphere. Food webs are archetypal ecological networks that describe the way energy is transferred through chains of organisms by consumption. They are a map that illustrates pathways of energy and material flows.

Studying owl pellets is a forensic examination of the mechanisms of life. While the soft parts of the prey are dissolved by enzymes and acids in the stomach, the undigestible fur, bones, and feathers are formed into pellets regurgitated 18-20 hours after feeding. By combing through the remains it is possible to find out the number and species of mammals the owl ate, the skeletal anatomy of the prey, information about the origin of the pellets, the anatomy, physiology, and habits of the owl, and the characteristics of the ecosystem in which the owl fed.

In my photograph, the bones of several barn owl pellets are picked apart, cleaned, organized. Like oracles they are examined for meaning. They are re-presented in code and as code. These bones are the ashes and evidence of existence. A small existence.

An existence that is linked to every other existence in an ever-expanding network large enough never to be apprehended. These bones are the most moving poetry. There is nothing more true and nothing more refined.

### Case Study 3

Birders, like other kinds of amateur and professional ecologists, often pass through phases in their infatuation. When they begin, they have an interest in birds, but also an appreciation for the game of hide and seek – a competitive streak that is piqued by a seemingly endless competitive horizon. As the pursuit continues, a kind of obsession can begin. Some start to collect species sightings like passport stamps, spending inordinate amounts of money and time to check off respective boxes on a species list. For these individuals, the pursuit can become everything. But for others, something else can happen too.

The goal to document the birds of America started as a personal hobby that metamorphosed into an obsessive labor of love that took John James Audubon approximately twenty years of his life. Audubon's illustrations differed from his contemporaries in that his drawings depicted the birds in their natural habitats, often in mid-motion, with behavioral traits observed from hours of field study. While sometimes criticized for their anthropomorphism, for Audubon the illustrations represented an attempt to recover meaning; to look for the equivalence of human ambition, passion, violence, and endurance in the natural world. He wanted to achieve a likeness that would reanimate the specimens before him; using art to “substitute its reverberant verisimilitude for the life the bird had lost”.<sup>iii</sup>

When my companion Nathaniel was young he was, like many amateur birders, a ‘lister’. He kept his lists in the *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. They were informal and simple lists consisting of a checkmark next to the species name. No information on date and place or notes about field conditions – these more detailed observations came later when Nathaniel's interests in ornithology had also deepened and transformed from a hobby into something more profound.

Nathaniel spent years combining research with work as a birding guide in the Southern hemisphere. Ornithologists often straddle the parallel worlds of amateur enthusiast and professional researcher. Many of the world's most renowned birders are dedicated to scientific research, but also earn a living fulfilling the ambitions of amateur birders. He memorized the names, Latin and common, of thousands of birds, and studied plates, which, resisting the transition to the more “scientific” documentation of photography, still mostly consisted of idealized drawings or paintings which allow for easier comparison among species.

In the 70s there was a shift in birding methodologies due in part to Ted Parker, an ornithologist who influenced the field practice of ornithology by using sound rather than sight alone as a tool for species identification. Trying to replicate Parker's technique, aspiring birders now not only had to diligently study images for minute physical variations and know the behavioral patterns and habitat ranges of birds but also to memorize songs, calls, communicative chirps, distress vocalizations, etc., and be able to pick them out of what, in the Neotropics, is generally a cacophony.

In Peru I watched Nathaniel heft around a brick-like tape recorder, a shotgun microphone, and a spotting scope as we walked slowly along rainforest paths. He would stop when he heard something and record the sound, quickly rewinding the tape, and playing it back to the bird. This started a dialogue that sometimes ended, after prolonged

discussion, with the bird descending from the canopy to investigate the familiar but unfamiliar voice. He often spent hours in this way waiting, coaxing, watching, with the occasional reward of a short burst of song at close proximity and sudden flash of color in the underbrush. Look, look!

I was with Nathaniel for six years. When he died in an accident in 2007, those birds receded from me back into the canopy. I had no names for them anymore. While instantly and infinitely precious to me, I could not distinguish or speak of them.

Many years later, I have become a kind of birder myself. Using Nathaniel's old species lists, I identify the ones that he did not get to see. Locating these birds among Audubon's drawings I carefully erase them from the plates, illustrating the interruption of language, the loss of part of the world to which he gave me access. The act of erasing transforms us all into 'listers', sending us back with him to that earlier time of possibilities, to a perpetual state of waiting, coaxing, watching, to the obsessive search for just one more iteration of an infinite variety of life.

#### Case Study 4

My sister Eliza has been legally blind since birth. While one of her eyes has visual acuity in a range substantially less than 20/20, the other eye has a cloud over the cornea, and subsequently registers only light and shadow and the faintest readings of color. This condition has remained relatively stable, apart from the normal weakening of eyesight associated with aging.

Because of the efforts of my mother when she was younger, and her own efforts as she got older, Eliza has been able to push at the limitations of her vision. She operates without a cane, but carries a monocular to see street signs. She reads voraciously, either holding a book close to her face, or more recently, enlarging the font size on a reading device. She read, as I did when I was little, the classics of childhood literature from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to *Watership Down*. Her tastes as she has grown older have ranged from Michael Ondaatje to J.K. Rowling – the unifying element being the wide imaginative spaces defined by the unorthodox construction of language and the open architecture of fantastical worlds.

Until recently I had talked very little with Eliza about how she sees. It was a topic we never explored simply because growing up it was more important to express solidarity than it was to explore difference - that was something that Eliza confronted in so many other aspects of her life. I have thought about it lately because I started to realize how many of the things that defined my perspective were relatively unimportant to her.

To a large degree, the scientific systems for creating meaning are upended with the absence of sight. Empirical systems of observation, distinction, and classification typically built around the capacity for vision must be rerouted to the pathways of other faculties. As a result, the recognition of difference and the designation of meaning are based on entirely different values. The visual qualities of things may become more precious, but at the same time less reliable in terms of signifying ontology. Not being tied so tightly to the way things look as a means to understanding identity creates more room for abstraction, intuition, and faith.

Eliza's altar is a visual manifestation of the ideas that she is thinking about or wants to manifest in her life. The altar changes on an irregular basis, switching contents and configuration with shifts in her emotional climate. The altar is built into a wooden shelf in the library, above her desk, in a room that feels like a synapse – accessible from each

area of the house but not directly open to external doors or windows - protected, dark, full of ideas. The altar space is bounded by objects that mark it as a place of intention – separate from and different in purpose to the typical clusters of objects that accumulate in a home.

The altar itself is made up of a magpie collection of things that speak to her in one way or another – small and significant gifts from friends, pieces of the natural world that she has picked up and which ground her in the world of bodily experience, objects infused with the spiritual ideas and symbolic powers of different faiths. They are selected for color, for the way they feel, for emotional significance, for energy, for memory, and for inspiration and support. A ribbon from the Dalai Lama. An arrowhead picked up when she was a teenager. Two crystals; one which speaks of multi-facetedness, the other of focus.

I can group these objects by material and by appearance. I can understand them according to place of origin, or function, or spiritual category. I can look at them and see what they are, but even if I do all of those things I am still overlooking an entire taxonomy of meaning. Each of the objects has a reason and a message. Together they make up an intensely private language from Eliza to herself. For me they mark the limits of my own system of communication and comprehension, a place where old modes of expression begin to fail, and a new grammar begins.

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<sup>1</sup> Daston, Lorraine and Galison, Peter. *Objectivity*. New York: Zone Books, 2010: 37.

<sup>2</sup> Tashiro, Rebecca M., Han Huanhong, Monteros, Maria J., Bouton, Joseph H. and Wayne A. Parrott. Leaf Trait Coloration in White Clover and Molecular Mapping of the Red Midrib and Leaflet Number Traits. *Crop Sci.* 2010. 50:1260-1268.

<sup>3</sup> Rhodes, Richard. *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*. New York: Knopf, 2004: 211.