

So I just take it from the top? I wasn't expecting that my commentary would really be needed, it mostly speaks for itself. Sure.

We had just finished up a live performance of Car Seat Headrest, which is a really weird thing to have on a late night talk show, but you know, happens, I guess. We cut to break, came back, and she was already on set doing casual banter with JC. I set up the camera, the applause sign behind us turns on, and we're rolling.

An Evening with Cyan Acryl

Cyan Acryl (she/her) is a trans woman, a gay rights activist, lesbian, autistic, "genderfucked"¹, aroace, a mental health advocate, and author. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois Urbyn-Champagne studying cognitive science.

Her research and writing is about the reflection of society on our sense of self, the social construction of the self, and the effects of ego death on the human psyche, in which she attempts to answer, or avoid answering, the question as to what a human truly is. Her book *On Irrelevance* will be published on August 8th by Sniler Press. This is her sixth interview on her tour.

Welcome. Thanks for your time.

Yeah, dude, I have *such* a packed schedule it's unreal. You really lucked out by getting me here.

Oh, I didn't realize. Sorry.

No, that was- that was a joke². My bad.

Tell us a bit about yourself. How did you become an author?

Funnily enough, I didn't think that writing was the path for me. For a while I was stuck looking for jobs in film, since that's what I did my undergrad in, and nothing was really able to click. I think I started writing because of the angst that kind of came from that job search: I needed a creative outlet, because I've always wanted to make something, and- you know, it's just the easiest thing you can do.

¹ JC seemed pained having to read this word out, but Cyan refused to cut it from the intro.

² Notable that absolutely nobody laughed at this.

Interesting- so all this kind of emerged after you went to school?

Right. In retrospect it's kind of funny, because I don't really feel attached to film anymore. It felt like a much more... *concrete* medium than writing, because it builds on good writing, or at least good narrative design, I guess? But what I really learned was that I'm more attached to telling good stories than how they're told. I mean rather than. **Laughs**

Right. So, what prompted you to write this book?

So, a while ago a bunch of me and some people I'm semi-close with decided to create this compilation of our work. If you're familiar with the concept of a zine, it's that — like, we all got together and wrote some stuff that was kind of in the vibe of our group. What interested me was that I hang around a bunch of psychotic [transgender people]³ and they all have this tendency to assert their authority over their own sense of self, violently if necessary. There were tons of submissions about that topic in the final zine, talking about the idea of *becoming*, about the idea of what it means to be yourself, many of which were decidedly made in this spirit of self reflection.

I found it strange, right?⁴ Like, as somebody trying to de-emphasize my experiences while writing my own works, I found so many people in a trap that I found myself in. When I was writing work that was mostly about myself, I would end up constantly dwelling on my own trauma. I guess I got sick of it after a while, and so I would focus a lot more on character writing. That's what I'm doing here: I'm making up people and exploring their senses of self, or exploring the senses of self of people I already know.

So what's it about? What's the thesis?

Well, I don't want to spell the entire thing out, obviously⁵ - I firmly believe in a death of the author approach to storytelling, it should be taught in like, high school. Like, with poetry, you have this massive collection of imagery and insane things that don't tend to happen in stories with a strict narrative. Subjectivity in art is one of the most important things to me.

³ Slur redacted by standard procedure.

⁴ The camera zoomed in on her here, while she repeatedly gestured around with her hands, waving them left and right to try and seem more evocative. She was clearly nervous, trapped like a deer in headlights, but at the time still really peppy. I mean, I've seen nervous guests, but it felt like she had something to hide.

⁵ It got worse here. I didn't pan the camera back, because at this point it was so clear that this was an anomaly to be explored that I wanted to see what happened.

In general though, it's a collection of stuff about how we, as humans, experience identity. I hope that everybody can see a little of themselves in my work, at least that's what I'm trying to get at. I tried to get a diverse range of perspectives, different issues that people have, and tried to put a little bit of everybody into it, at least everyone I know and have the ability to speak for.

Do you believe you have the ability to speak for those people?⁶

Well, I mean... uh, in a sense, yes, because I've seen many things in my life, and I believe that I can comfortably understand a lot of these experiences. I don't mean to be, like, the kind of person on Peeper who says "I'm an empath and I can feel exactly what you feel", but I do think that I can probably talk about the topics that my book touches on.

I'm aware of the issues that come with speaking on *behalf* of other groups, especially the marginalized. But I firmly believe that I'm not doing that here.

What kinds of music do you listen to while writing?⁷

Honestly? **Laughs** Loud, dissonant shit. As much as I'd like to say I listen to Mozart while writing, it makes me feel pretentious, like I'm sitting on my ivory tower sipping tea looking down on the peasants. Instead, especially while writing short stories with any form of conflict, I'll listen to electronic stuff or heavy metal. Some of my friends have asked me why I do it like that, but it just makes me feel pumped, it makes the ideas flow better.

I think a lot of my work kind of hinges on me being mad about something, about wanting something to change at any cost. In that sense, I think the dissonance channels that.

⁶ I panned back here, mostly because JC looked absolutely perplexed. Like, to him, this is basic shit, right? The optics of "I can speak for the mentally ill", it's bad for ratings. Some audience members were a bit fidgety too, clearly shaking from the strange tension of it all, as if they couldn't just leave if they wanted anyways. This wasn't going well for her, but I don't think she noticed it at all. She was talking like there was no audience, like the audience didn't seem to matter.

⁷ JC went straight back into ratings mode here, clearly wanting to change the subject entirely, his face scrunching up and then relaxing, almost forcing it to be exaggeratedly calm, like he just took 20 mils of propranolol. If you don't know what that is, it's called a β (beta) blocker, and you can get them from most doctors. They're really useful for panic attacks, genuinely, and they might help you a lot. Anyways, the point is that JC wasn't doing well.

So, with that kind of aggression and desire for change, you're *not* channeling the same kind of... radical self-actualization tendencies as your peers.

It's about systemic change, not individual change.⁸ It's about reshaping the world in a way that better accommodates people we don't see as "normal", as human. Like... it's about the way that mental illness acts upon us as people and what it shapes us into.

Like, for example⁹, let's suppose that you're a kid lying in bed at a summer camp, and you've been having just this nightmare hell the entire time. You're lying there sitting in your bed with chiptune on your iPod, and you start spacing out, starting to delude yourself into believing you're in Sleepaway Camp. You see blood on the ceiling that says "YOU ARE TRANSGENDER".

Woah¹⁰.

Right. Hear me out. So you're freaked out, lying there, you can't seem to move. You're terrified, you fall asleep, you wake up, and you remember it. Was the delusion acting, or were you acting?

Because I'd say that you're the one acting, and the contention of classical psychiatry is to lean towards dehumanizing. It's why it's harder to get hormones when you're psychotic, for example, since everyone has to test you to make *sure* that you want to do these things first: what if it's just delusion? What if it's just a manic episode?

I think that psychiatry is a tool for stripping agency from people who we deem to be abnormal. Not to say that it's wrong for a person to believe that your mental illness affects you! But it's a way for a select group of neurotypical people to dictate the ontology of reality.

⁸ She looked positively pissed having to answer this one, and her face scrunched up a bit. It was like this was an *obvious* thing to her, something that her readership and JC should just get out the gate, like water being wet or a Pop-Tart being a sandwich. You know, basic stuff.

⁹ There was a very specific tone of voice to this. "For exaaaaaaaample", almost, with the "a" being stretched out as if she was trying to be sassy, or lying a bit. Maybe she was lying to herself, a delusion that she herself was too deep into to break free from, trying to fill some void within her.

¹⁰ The audience seemed unnerved, but there was still some notable laughter from the back. She seemed like she didn't want them to laugh.

That seemed like a very specific example.

Right, well¹¹. It happened to my buddy Coda. I think about him a lot.

So, on that note. Is any of your work about being transgender?

What? No. I mean... yes, but also no. If you view my work as being about being transgender, it can be, sure. But like, again, I'm really not trying to offer any insight as to *me* with any of this work, more trying to capture a bunch of nebulous ideas, some reflecting me, some not.

It's something that I noticed while I was on Chris's show, actually. I was asked what my work meant to *me* a lot, why *I* wrote it, trying to reflect very directly as to my book being a statement about myself. And I kind of hate the over-centralization of the self in media, where me being trans has to be *the* subject of my work because I'm trans. I can't just be the author, I have to be the trans author. I can't just write something that I think is neat, I have to write it because it has intense meaning, it has to be about suffering and trauma- that'll make people who haven't experienced that pain understand it, so they finally empathize and give me human rights. I can't write with both "he" and "she" nebulously referring to the same person, because obviously that's a trans allegory and not a plural one.

Plural?¹²

What? Oh, like, dissociative disorder stuff. Again, really, uh, trying to capture the breadth of mental illness here¹³.

Okay. I mean, that's interesting, though. Would you be interested in sharing a poem from your book about it?

Uh, sure. Let me...¹⁴ Yeah, this... should work.

¹¹ Cyan fidgeted with her fingers around here, and notably paused for a bit before saying "Coda". Methinks the lady doth protest too much, like a highschooler trying to make up a friend so that their parents don't believe they're actually alone. See? That was an anecdote I actually pulled from my own experience, and I didn't pussy out about who it was from.

¹² I watched as Cyan jumped back into her chair, all the hairs on her back standing up, each individual hair seeming to carry its own agency. The audience mostly seemed confused, like they just heard a word that had no semantic meaning to it. I mean, we know better at this point, but fuck if I knew what it meant back then.

¹³ She was speaking a lot faster for this line, like a fucking racehorse trying to catch up from the back of the field, or like a bride on her wedding day who has to get out to the altar to say "yes".

¹⁴ She grabbed the book off JC's desk, which is weird, since she had her own copy that she was supposed to use. She flipped through the thing almost as if she didn't even know what was in it, and I zoomed in on her.

you spun up from nothing,
floating aimlessly.
caught up in the web¹⁵
formed from those before you.

scared and floating,
you found yourself compared to
the shadow of those before you
without standing on your own.

comparing yourself to
mere shadows of a person
while struggling to stay upright
changed you forever.

the shadows shifted and took form.
you cried and cried,
screaming “i’ve changed,
and i don’t even know how¹⁶”.

you cried, and the shade embraced you.
you were given the love you deserved.
you didn’t know why

¹⁵ This here is the first part that caught my eye. If we’re really trying to be general here, why use something as specific as a spider analogy when you’re wearing spider earrings *right now*?

¹⁶ I know you aren’t asking for literary critique or analysis, but hear me out. An excerpt from Jimmy’s show a few weeks back, first interview she did in this tour:

So you really don’t actually know that much about your past self?

Yeah, I mean, it’s weird, right? Like, I don’t really know how to talk about myself in my work in the first place, because I feel like my memory just kind of blanks in this way I find it hard to describe. Sometimes I get told things about me in, like, college, and I just feel this primal detachment. I think it’s part of the trans experience.

But the real kicker to me is that I’m obviously a very different person, and I can’t really put my finger on why or how. Past me didn’t leave enough clues to figure that out. So that’s why none of this work really *can* be about me, because I don’t really *know* me. You know?

The context shift is weird to me, here, since one of the things she’s trying to use to prove that this isn’t about her ends up being what she’s talking about. It’s like this weird angle where you- you’re remembering about not remembering. Fucked up, really. You know, despite everything, I still feel bad for the girl. She didn’t know what she was getting into. At least I hope not.

you had caused hurt.

you were given compassion
from a self as in a mirror¹⁷.
she had caused hurt,
but she was you.

that self you kind of knew
stared you down in the face
saying “i’ve known you all my life,
and i love you.”

staring with eyes unlike a pale moon,
you replied “i’m not real”.¹⁸
she said “i love you”,
and you acquiesced in tears.

you thought you weren’t real,
you didn’t know what to do,
but you spun your own web¹⁹,
because you had to²⁰.

And, so, like, capturing the dissociative experience. A non-you entity being you. That’s kind of the horror aspect of it, I guess.

This aspect of “not-you-ness” seems to show up a lot in your work. I mean, can you really fault a reader for thinking that a lot of this stuff is about you?

Yes. Yes I can, actually- I mean, this was a thing that happened a lot with Jimmy, actually. He kept trying to read into me, but it just wasn’t about me. I get a lot of emails about the same topic, too, where people exert overfamiliarity²¹ with me because they think that I’ve spilled my thought processes all over the place. Like, obviously, there’s a bit of me in this work, there’s a bit of any author in any work, but that doesn’t mean that you can *say*

¹⁷ Maybe this is about trans dysphoria with the mirror analogy? Stuff like this is built to be ripped open like a popcorn bag, right?

¹⁸ A lot of Cyan’s work seems to deal with unreality. This by far isn’t the only one. The internal landscape of that unreality always seems to be the same though: this transient space that permeates the same set of core concepts. It’s either this infinite void, or a sandy beach, but both of them seem to be referring to the same space every time. It shows up like ten times throughout *On Irrelevance*, so it’s definitely gotta be something.

¹⁹ More fucking *spiders*.

²⁰ Panned back to the usual position here. JC looked floored, but mostly confused. I wonder if he had the same thoughts as me.

²¹ Sorry.

anything about the author²². You can't even say "the author wanted to write this", because under capital, that isn't even the case anymore!

Whenever I write, I imagine being in a conversation with my audience. But that's just it, it's an imagined conversation. Whenever I read, I imagine the author being in a conversation with me, but the author is imaginary, inexorably removed from the work even if mentioned directly by name. You can't actually say anything about the author, you can only say something about the imagined. And they *don't* have to coincide.

I guess the thesis of this interview is: stop *fucking* emailing me about stuff like this. *Especially* stop emailing me expressing sympathy for experiences that *could happen to anybody*²³. I'm not *special* for having been through that²⁴.

So they did happen to you, then?

No, you're reading into it too hard. Sorry, I'm just- I'm tired, is all, and like...

But you just said that it did.

No, but, you see, it's the whole- remember the like, not-you-ness- I- this interview is over²⁵.

So. That was Cyan Acryl, then! Can we get a round of-²⁶

Oh my *fucking* god. I can't stand you fucking late night hosts anyway! Why the fuck did I sign up for this?

²² She got really passionate when saying this line, to the degree that the heat of rage in the room could cook an egg. It's clear this is something she thinks a lot about, prolly 'cause she has to.

²³ This is the thing, right? Like, let's take the idea that this work actually is about her. Wouldn't she want that sympathy? Or is she afraid of too many people knowing?

²⁴ And here's where our first crack forms, with the apparent pressure in Cyan's head starting to blow out steam, a burst pipe underneath the sink of a fourth-floor apartment building. JC paused here for a few seconds, and Cyan then put her own hands over her mouth, then put them back on the sides of the chair, gripping them like a stress ball. It was at this moment that she knew she fucked up.

²⁵ I started tracking the camera on Cyan, while the audience from the back did this cartoonish gasp, as if they knew what was about to unfold. I certainly didn't. But that didn't lessen the impact when she got up out of her chair and started storming off to the side of the stage in the middle of live TV. Fuck, I had to take the camera off the tripod mid-shot.

²⁶ The audience began clapping, but stopped immediately when Cyan turned back around. At this point I was fully in handheld mode, like I'm doing some found footage Blair Witch bullshit at this point. But this had to be documented, or else we wouldn't be here.

All of you act like you *fucking* know me, like you're trying to put a goddamn *power drill* through my head, trying to stick a fucking mind control device²⁷ on me so I say what you want me to. I'm fucking sick of it! You don't fucking know me. We aren't pals. I'm here for a deal my shitty agent set up²⁸, and now I'm blowing up my career because I am *so fucking* done with you people.

Wow, okay. I was just following the script, more or less²⁹. I think you're *really* overextending the power of the late night talk show host³⁰.

Right. So after that, Cyan ran around behind JC before he had a chance to get a word out, and she ripped him up out of his chair, his legs not knowing how to respond. JC barely had the ability to stand up after the fact, trying to wiggle around and out like a worm in heat, while the audience and myself couldn't even muster a peep as I captured the thing with the shakiest hands I've had since my parents died in a car crash.

Cyan, on the other hand, was clearly experiencing the greatest adrenaline rush of all time, almost like she was burning through her own brain. She didn't actually have to do much, is the thing. Talk show hosts aren't trained to fight. Put JC into a choke while he

²⁷ Possible paranoid delusion? It does make it more clear about some other works in *On Irrelevance* though, in retrospect. A notable passage from the poem *welcome, race fans* therein:

electricity runs down my spine
flowing to a camera in this room
it tells you my thoughts
your car is right outside
you're hiding in the closet
you're right behind me
i'll see you on the street
you'll call me and i'll fade again

Yet more unfortunate evidence that she was exactly as self-centered as she really thought.

²⁸ Do you have anything to say about that? I guess I'm breaking the procedure by just saying that right now, but like, wow, she doesn't like you. No comment?

²⁹ Cyan's face on this one was near priceless. I had to capture it closer up, honestly, because she scrunched it up so incredibly hard. You almost got the sense that she was going to just wreck somebody then and there, her brow furrowing. It almost seemed like she was going to cry, but something tells me that she isn't really the kind of woman to do that.

³⁰ The audience laughed wildly, but a lot of them were on the edge of their seats. Suddenly this had turned from a late night talk show to a high school debate club, or even a shitty comedy sketch club.

barely struggled. The guy's eyes were practically spilling out of their sockets, wanting to pop like uncovered soup in a microwave, except the soup is blood and you are in hell. Poor guy's out cold before you can say "Bob's your uncle".

She didn't bother to look at me, eyes locked like a missile defense system on her designated target, a genetically engineered apex predator. I don't know who would, really, I'm a pretty unassuming guy. Surprised she bothered to keep the evidence intact though. A few videos were being recorded, actually, beyond mine, but in my humble opinion mine's by far the best. I *know* JC, is the thing, and so I have an excellent comprehension of how to make this scene *work*.

The audience began to flee, the ant colony built up in the bleachers being snapped on the floor. The other people filming were shaking from just trying to get the fuck out, no stabilization software could save them from-

You've gone on quite long enough on these tangents at this point.

Okay. So, she literally just beats the guy while unconscious, over and over, low blow after low blow. Steps on his face, kicks him in the nuts and steps on them, you know, classic, could've been a scene out of Pulp Fiction if I actually saw that movie. The entire time she's screaming one thing, needing it to be heard, *desperately* needing it to be heard. If there was one take-away, this was it.

Which is?

"Stop acting like you *fucking* know me."

I suppose we know her now.

Yeah. Guess so.