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### The Perverse in Historical Perception: Anne Frank and Neutral Milk Hotel in the Aeroplane over the Sea

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A substantially revised and updated version of this article appears in the book, *Hope and Wish Image in Music Technology*. Please refer to that version for purposes of citation.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### THE PERVERSE IN HISTORICAL PERCEPTION: ANNE FRANK IN THE AEROPLANE OVER THE SEA<sup>1</sup>

DAVID RANDO

To be honest, I hadn't thought of [my friend Hanneli] for months—no, for at least a year. I hadn't forgotten her entirely, and yet it wasn't until I saw her before me that I thought of all her suffering.... Hanneli, Hanneli, if only I could take you away....<sup>2</sup>

I wished I could save her in some kind of time machine  
Know all your enemies  
We know who our enemies are<sup>3</sup>

The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious.<sup>4</sup>

The cover art for Neutral Milk Hotel's *In The Aeroplane over the Sea* reproduces a turn-of-the-century postcard that depicts bathers in an ocean. In the foreground, the figure of a woman leans propped against a railing. For the album, her head has been replaced with a well-worn drumhead. She and the nearest bather have an arm raised. From behind the woman, another raised arm of an otherwise subtended bather appears. Two figures farther in the distance are in the water up to their heads. The blithe face of

<sup>1</sup> This essay is dedicated to Samuel Frederick.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*, 150.

<sup>3</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, "Oh Comely" *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*, Merge 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings Vol. 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Jennings and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 391.

the nearest bather looks up toward the woman, whose own face has become a blank. In other words, it is just another weird indie rock album cover. Or so one might be inclined to think before hearing the album. After listening closely to the album, however, the cover art and one's attitude toward it may change in ways that are symptomatic and thematic of the music and lyrics themselves. Then it is difficult to shake the conflicting feelings that the respective figures are either making a blithe and a blank fascist salute or, perhaps more disturbingly, that they are blithely and blankly drowning and hailing the viewer for help, a viewer who probably feels quite powerless to help them. After all, this is a vintage postcard, and if they were drowning, they must have drowned long ago. There must be nothing that we can do. We had better not fall in love with them.

Upon its re-release in 2005, *Pitchfork Media* awarded Neutral Milk Hotel's 1998 album *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* a perfect 10 score; this leading online source of indie rock journalism also noted that the album "is loved in the indie world like few others."<sup>5</sup> Two qualities seem especially to define *In the Aeroplane*. The first quality is the album's startling instrumentation, which, as *Pitchfork* remarks, "seems plucked randomly from different years in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: singing saws, Salvation Army horn arrangements, banjo, accordion, [and] pipes."<sup>6</sup> The second defining quality is the album's unusual relationship to Anne Frank. *In the Aeroplane*'s lyrics are said to originate in songwriter Jeff Mangum's terrifying but unspecified dreams about Anne Frank upon reading *The Diary of a Young Girl*. The album is a sound collage of historical anachronism, lyrical impressionism, and sepia-tinted evocations of circus and carnival encounters, all centered, sometimes loosely and at times brutally directly, upon the singularly unlikely subject for an indie rock album, Anne Frank.

As journalist Kim Cooper discovered as she researched her oral history of *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*, the album consistently elicits powerful reactions and listener responses of a kind seldom reported for other canonical rock albums such as, say, *Revolver*, *Pet Sounds*, *Astral Weeks*, *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, *Slanted and Enchanted*, or *OK Computer*. One of Cooper's interviewees, "describes *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* the way a religious man speaks of his favorite

<sup>5</sup> Mark Richardson, "Neutral Milk Hotel: *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*," [http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record\\_review/20351-in-the-aeroplane-over-the-sea](http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/20351-in-the-aeroplane-over-the-sea).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

bit of the liturgy";<sup>7</sup> another reports, "There's three times in a row where I saw them live and I started crying";<sup>8</sup> and a third "drove from Arkansas [to the band's show in Chattanooga] to give Jeff [Mangum] her grandmother's rosary, talked with Jeff for a while and had to head home without even seeing the show," an extreme variety of what Cooper calls a "devotional act of Neutral Milk Hotel fandom."<sup>9</sup> Such responses hint at the affective power of *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*. But the power of the album is not only found in its tendency to move us: in what follows, I explore the historical power that inheres in the album's sexually perverse historical perception.

What can we learn about historical perception from music that represents erotic desire for the specter of a young girl killed in an historical catastrophe? In this essay, I read and listen to *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* for what it reveals about the special value of perverse eroticism for keeping the catastrophes of history near and comprehensible to those in the present, even when these catastrophes have been institutionalized and mediated. I argue that the bizarre, even perverse, eroticism of *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* represents the source of its powerful historical effect. Mangum's evocation of a sexualized Anne Frank re-animates her, arguably, domesticated, institutionalized, and commodified story in such a way that the catastrophes of history become powerfully present as both historical memory and historical awakening. In this way, I show how *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*, in its perversion, satisfies Walter Benjamin's concept of a "pathos of nearness" that draws history close to us and renders it personal.

### Perversion and the "Pathos of Nearness"

When Walter Benjamin imagines the crucial revolution in historical perception in *The Arcades Project*, a revolution in which history is to become an awakening to, rather than a reconstruction of, the past, he likened it to a Copernican revolution. Just as Copernicus displaced a geocentric with a heliocentric model of revolution, Benjamin proposes a revolutionary new model of history to displace the historian's "what has been" in favor of what he calls "the flash of awakened consciousness": "Politics attains primacy over history. The facts become something that

<sup>7</sup> Kim Cooper, *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*, 33 1/3 series, vol. 29 (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 92.

just now first happened to us, struck us; to establish them is the affair of memory."<sup>10</sup> For Benjamin, history is no desert filled with dates, facts, and names, no abstract volume that gradually fills as a slow clock ticks the pace, and no "homogeneous, empty time" for which historicism "musters a mass of data to fill" it,<sup>11</sup> but is rather a linked succession of real human experiences, and too frequently, human catastrophes, or, from the perspective of Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage."<sup>12</sup> For Benjamin, it is only in the moment that the catastrophe of history strikes us that we perceive history properly, and on the only scale proper to catastrophe: the human scale.

One of the forms to which Benjamin looks when he searches for ways in which history could be made present is the diminutive form of the anecdote. Anecdotes may represent what might otherwise seem incomprehensibly abstract as something "adequate and comprehensible to human life," capable of producing what Benjamin calls a "pathos of nearness."<sup>13</sup> The anecdote is a form that might convey a story without mediation and without appeals to abstract contexts. One's relationship to the anecdote is unmediated by context, and one is unarmored and unguarded against its strike and the force of the historical experience it shelters.

It is a bitter irony that the story of Benjamin's suicide at the Spanish border as he fled the Gestapo has become such an anecdote. In "The Story of Old Benjamin," Lisa Fittko recounts Benjamin's last days:

In his remoteness, what counted was that his manuscript and he were out of the reach of the Gestapo. The crossing had exhausted him and he didn't believe that he could do it again—he had told me so during our climb. Here, too, he had calculated everything in advance: he had enough morphine to take his life several times over.

Impressed and shaken by his death, the Spanish authorities let his companions continue their travel.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 388-9.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 396.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 846.

<sup>14</sup> Fittko, Lisa. "The Story of Old Benjamin," in *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 946.

Just as Benjamin's death opens the Spanish border for his traveling companions, so the story of his death may open an historical border for us. Benjamin's story, like Anne Frank's, becomes one of so many stories that make genocide comprehensible on a human scale, defying the tendency to abstract and putting history in a form that demands that one come to terms with it in one's own space. Perhaps when one absorbs the shock of Benjamin's tragic end, one has begun to awaken to and to remember history in the manner that approximates Benjamin's Copernican revolution in historical perception, which was the aim of *The Arcades Project*.

But anecdotes constantly threaten to lose their power and to retreat back into abstraction. What happens, for instance, when "The Story of Old Benjamin" becomes "The Old Story of Benjamin"? Reviewing the English translation of *The Arcades Project* in 2001, J.M. Coetzee begins by remarking, "The story is by now so well known that it barely needs to be retold. The setting is the Franco-Spanish border, the time is 1940...."<sup>15</sup> What does it mean to say that the kind of story that most needs to be told, "barely needs to be retold"? Isn't it unusual that the most powerful stories are told most often, but threaten to lose their effects precisely because they are retold and retold? Isn't there always the danger that the anecdotes and human stories that one values most for their historical force in fact lose their historical force by circulating too long or too often? It is against this hardening, against this impulse to contextualize and to contain such stories, that there may be a necessary place for the perverse.

Sigmund Freud defines perversion simply as any sexual aim that deviates from copulation: "Perversions are sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path toward the final sexual aim."<sup>16</sup> This is the relatively unspecialized meaning of perversion that I have in mind, and what interests me in particular are the spatial terms that structure Freud's definition. A perversion extends beyond an appropriate region, or it lingers in peripheral territory that should rather be quickly traversed en route to the primary territory. Perversions, then, are measured above all by distance.

Distance is also the measure of the second term invoked by my title, historical perception. The more distant we are from events in the historical

<sup>15</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005* (New York: Viking, 2007), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. VII, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 150.

past, the less likely we are to perceive either the urgency of past events or the claim that extends from such events upon the present, and, indeed, upon ourselves. In other words, historical distance threatens to obscure the catastrophes of the past and to obscure our own relationship to history. Marianne Hirsch has used the term “postmemory” to describe forms of historical connection to events as distant as a generation preceding the present, in particular the historical perception of children of Holocaust survivors:

In my reading, postmemory is distinguished from memory by generation distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences.<sup>17</sup>

Hirsch is interested in forms of historical perception that bring the past across great distances into one's personal space. Not only is the distant past made nearer, but those who did not themselves live through past catastrophes feel “deep personal connection” to them as well. This deep personal connection begins by being “dominated by narratives” that one did not experience but is rather born into. Because one cannot engage history through recollection, “postmemory” is formed through imagination and creativity. Again, spatial terms seem to structure this formulation. One is distant from historical catastrophe, but through family narratives and imagination, the past is brought powerfully close.

But what happens when such definitions of perversion and historical perception are pushed to more extreme distances? *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* could be characterized by its extreme distances both of perversion and of postmemory. Jeff Mangum, far from dominated by Holocaust narratives, remained ignorant of Anne Frank into adulthood. Instead of being forever dominated by a narrative of the past, Mangum seems to have experienced the sudden shock of a narrative that arrived from somewhere

very distant relative to his own time and experience. What was always distant for Mangum quickly becomes close, perhaps too close, and *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* registers his creative attempt to come to terms with his own sudden and deep personal connection to Anne Frank. The crucial element of Mangum's creative attempt to manage the shock and closeness of Frank's narrative is sexuality. If perverse sexuality is anything that extends “beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union,” then Mangum's sexual desire for Anne Frank represents an extreme of sexual extension and distance, reaching through the distance of time and past the distance of death. These extremes of distance in both sexuality and history are precisely what make *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* so affecting and so valuable as a form of historical perception. The album represents the shock of distance suddenly and devastatingly traversed, and it argues for the profound power of perverse sexuality to bring history into an uncomfortably personal space, and thus to keep our perception of historical catastrophe both personal and, perhaps, painfully sharp.

Part of what makes *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* perverse are lyrics that express passionate physical and spiritual love for the long-dead Anne Frank, whose ghostly presence emerges and retreats throughout the album—“Anna's ghost all around”<sup>18</sup>—and to represent erotic desire and sexual intimacy between Anne Frank and Mangum:

Soft silly music is meaningful magical  
The movements were beautiful  
All in your ovaries  
All of them milking with green fleshy flowers  
While powerful pistons were sugary sweet machines  
Smelling of semen all under the garden  
Was all you were needing when you still believed in me

And I know they buried her body with others  
Her sister and mother and 500 families  
And will she remember me 50 years later  
I wished I could save her in some sort of time machine  
Know all your enemies  
We know who our enemies are

Goldmine my dear  
We will fold and freeze together  
Far away from here

<sup>17</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, “In the Aeroplane over the Sea.”

There is sun and spring and green forever  
 But now we move to feel  
 For ourselves inside some stranger's stomach  
 Place your body here  
 Let your skin begin to blend itself with mine<sup>19</sup>

These stanzas encapsulate the way in which Mangum combines impressionist sensuousness, brutal directness, and an almost ineffable hopefulness into his lyrical approach to Anne Frank. The discontinuities of referent and addressee between and even within stanzas are means by which Mangum is able to hover suggestively around Anne Frank's story, while leaving himself room to fictionalize, depart from, or to contradict her well-trodden tale. For instance, notice how the subject seems to flicker indeterminately in the first stanza: are the "movements" those of "soft silly music" or are they some process taking shape within "your ovaries"? Does "all of them milking" still refer to the "movements," or does "them" now refer to "ovaries"? Each of these possibilities suggests different images that Mangum can suspend together without allowing us to descend upon a single meaning. Indeed, it seems as though Mangum uses this technique to represent some deep interconnection between his "soft silly music" and Anne Frank's body, his "powerful pistons" and her ovaries.

The next stanza shifts sharply from this mode and style of address. It seems to signal a break in the reproductive fantasy of the previous stanza, for now Mangum acknowledges that he too is aware of what his hearers are likely to protest about the implausibility of his love: "And I know they buried her body with others." This stanza reasserts historical time, which had been elided or somehow overcome in the earlier stanza. Now Mangum is separated from Anne Frank by both time and death. This is the historical fact that we are probably most comfortable with. We are not used to figurations of reproductive sex between the living and the historical dead. It is crucial that Mangum asserts the sober assessment of his project because it makes his continual insistence that he and Anne Frank are sexually and spiritually attached all the more challenging and disarming. We sense this even in the shifting temporality denoted by the verbs in the remainder of the stanza and in the next one: "they buried," "will she remember," "we know," "we will fold and freeze together," "but now we move to feel," "place your body here," "let your skin begin to blend itself with mine."

Of special interest among the verbs of past and future tense is the one that signals the absolute present, the contemporaneous moment: "But now

we move to feel/ For ourselves inside some stranger's stomach." Mangum seems to have returned to his signature province of the ambiguous body when the image of the stomach appears, the stomach in which Frank and Mangum move to feel themselves and one another. Perhaps Mangum has averted from historical fact back into the ill-defined and wistful mode of the first stanza, but perhaps he has also remembered or intuited what W.H. Auden said about the location of poetry: it is "modified in the guts of the living."<sup>20</sup> Listeners are strangers to both Jeff Mangum and Anne Frank, but, Mangum suggests, the unlikely, the audacious, the perverse, and the powerful coupling of *In the Aeroplane* is possible through the act of listening to his music and digesting it in our guts, modifying our prejudices about historical fact, accomplishing for Mangum the otherwise impossible perverse communion with Anne Frank for which he burns.

Neutral Milk Hotel's album, *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* is perverse in precisely this historical sense. In the recent reevaluation of this album on *Pitchfork Media*, music critic Mark Richardson recalls the embarrassment he felt for Jeff Mangum when he revealed that the emotional origin of *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* lay in Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*:

[Mangum] explained that shortly after releasing *On Avery Island* he read the book for the first time, and found himself completely overwhelmed with sadness and grief. Back in 1998 this admission made my jaw drop. What the hell? A guy in a rock band saying he was emotionally devastated by a book everyone else in America read for a middle-school assignment? I felt embarrassed for him at first, but then, the more I thought about it and the more I heard the record, I was awed. Mangum's honesty on this point, translated directly to his music, turned out to be a source of great power.<sup>21</sup>

Richardson's response gives evidence of how powerful and yet how domesticated and institutionalized Anne Frank's story has become. Of course, the context in which stories circulate contributes greatly to how they are and are not received and understood. David Barnouw notes, "the diary...was quickly pressed into the service of education."<sup>22</sup> Introducing

<sup>20</sup> W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: WW Norton & Co., 2006), 2430.

<sup>21</sup> Richardson, "Neutral Milk Hotel: In the Aeroplane over the Sea."

<sup>22</sup> Anne Frank, *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Revised Critical Edition*, ed. Documentation Netherlands Institute For War, David Barnouw, and Gerrold Van Der Sroom, trans. Translated B.M Mooyaart-Doubleday and Susan Massotty, revised and updated ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 103.

<sup>19</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, "Oh Comely."

the *Diary* to an American audience, Eleanor Roosevelt declared, "Anne's diary is an appropriate monument to her fine spirit and to the spirits of those who have worked and are working still for peace."<sup>23</sup> Mangum seems struck by the human and historical force of her story, but Richardson, and everyone else he can imagine, has safely contextualized and tamed this force. For him, Frank's story need barely be retold. It has become, as Roosevelt anticipates, a monument instead of a story.

The origins of *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* in Mangum's reading of Anne Frank and in the lucid dreams of her that Mangum subsequently dreamt are not significant because of their "honesty," but rather because of their perversity, which affords not so much a retelling as an arresting rescaling of her story. Is it perverse to feel sexual feelings toward Anne Frank? One might answer yes, for at least two different reasons. The first, of course, is that Anne Frank is a young girl, and one might consider any sexual feelings directed towards a young girl to be perverse, in the sense of improper, a form of sexual deviance.<sup>24</sup> But what about the question of what it means to be sexually attracted to the historical dead? Is it perverse in this sense to desire a historical figure, one who once had a body but who has long since been separated from it and become a proper name and a collection of facts and events?

One would also answer yes to this question, if perversion is a matter of distance, as Freud defines it. However, by casting Frank into the sexualized role that Mangum does, he in effect restores a historical dimension to her that was excised from Frank's text for most of its published existence. As the foreword to a recent edition of *The Diary of a Young Girl* reports, when Frank's father, Otto Frank prepared the manuscript for publication, "several passages dealing with Anne's

sexuality were omitted."<sup>25</sup> I do not believe Mangum has ever reported which version of the *Diary* he read in 1996, but if it had been the then newly published Definitive Edition, he would have encountered previously excluded passages such as this one:

*Love, what is love? I believe love is something that can't really be put into words. Love is understanding someone, caring for someone, sharing their ups and downs. And in the long run that also means physical love, you have shared something, given something away and received something, no matter whether you are married or unmarried, or whether you are with child or not. It doesn't matter in the least if you've lost your honor, as long as you know that someone will stand by you, will understand you for the rest of your life, someone you won't have to share with anybody else!* (Underlined in the manuscript)<sup>26</sup>

This restoration, and others like it, adds a crucial human dimension back to Frank, a dimension that Jeff Mangum seized upon as important, either in concert with the new edition of the *Diary* or independently of it, from his own imagination and intuition of Anne Frank as a fully-formed adolescent.

Indeed, "The King of Carrot Flowers, Part One," the first track of *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* establishes a world of childhood, fantasy, and shocking physicality:

When you were young  
You were the king of carrot flowers  
And how you built a tower tumbling through the trees  
In holy rattlesnakes that fell all around your feet<sup>27</sup>

As in a dream, the addressee is distinct and indistinct. It is impossible to assign this "you" to Anne Frank exclusively, but it does seem as though hers is among the overlapping childish spheres set forth here. Childish dreams are coupled with "holy rattlesnakes," perhaps Edenic and phallic, but surely dangerous. When the song continues, it strengthens both the physical and the surreal qualities:

And your mom would stick a fork right into daddy's shoulder

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> The only other work of which I'm aware that imagines sexual union with Anne Frank is Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*. Here narrator Nathan Zuckerman fantasizes that 27-year-old Amy Bellette is in reality Anne Frank, having survived and emigrated to the United States. In the course of imagining Anne Frank as a "Femme Fatale," Zuckerman is able to reflect on Frank's power as a Jewish writer, as well as to psychologically deflect charges from his father that his writing is anti-Semitic, culminating in a comic scene in which Zuckerman imagines the satisfaction of introducing Anne Frank as his own wife to his parents: "Oh, how I have misunderstood my son. How mistaken we have been!" (159). However, unlike *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*, this narrative situation does not engage the theme of Frank's adolescent sexuality. See Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*, vi. For a full account of the *Diary*'s textual transmission and complex editing history, see "The Diaries, Het Achterhuis and the Translations" by Gerrold Van Der Sroom in Frank, *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Revised Critical Edition*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>27</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, "The King of Carrot Flowers, Part One."



And your dad would throw the garbage all across the floor  
As we would lay and learn what each other's bodies were for<sup>28</sup>

"Mom" and "dad" mark the childish Oedipal realm the story inhabits, and from this perspective each of them acts startlingly and incomprehensibly, throwing garbage across floors and sticking forks in shoulders. The final line above contrasts the inexplicable or indecipherable actions of the parents with an image of growing adolescent intelligibility, the act of deciphering of the mysteries of bodies, of first awakening to sexual love:

And this is the room  
One afternoon I knew I could love you  
And from above you how I sank into your soul  
Into that secret place where no one dares to go<sup>29</sup>

This lyric fuses sexual and spiritual images of love, evoking both romantic love and sexual penetration in "from above you how I sank into your soul." Similarly, the secret place can be both Frank's Secret Annex and the inside of her body. Mangum calls attention to these acts as well as his intention to represent them as an act of daring. In a sense, he has dared to visit a part of Anne Frank that her editors and readers had been avoiding for half a century.

In doing so, Mangum poses what appears to be an erotic problem, but will also emerge as an historical problem: what does it mean to love a ghost? In the song, "Ghost," Mangum represents Frank as both a ghost and a curiously embodied angel:

And she was born in a bottle rocket, 1929  
With wings that ring around the socket  
Right between her spine  
All drenched in milk and holy water  
Pouring from the sky  
I know that she will live forever  
She won't ever die<sup>30</sup>

This lyric characteristically combines the ethereal with the physical: Frank is an angel, but Mangum draws almost grotesque attention to the socket in her spine that supports her angel's wings. When he asserts her immortality in "She won't ever die," the spiritual claim comes into paradoxical tension

with her obvious corporality. Mangum often suspends his relationship to Frank between the physical and the spiritual in ways that keep listeners in states of impasse and contradiction. How can Mangum sexually love a ghost?

Freud works through a similar problem in "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*" (1907), providing us a loose parallel as well as a starting point for the problem of loving an historical ghost. In Jensen's story, a young archeologist forms a powerful connection with a Roman sculpture of a young woman whom he names Gradiva. The archeologist dreams of witnessing a historical catastrophe, Vesuvius's destruction of Pompeii and Gradiva's death, her body buried in "the rain of ashes," as Freud retells it: "The dream had as its result that now for the first time in his phantasies about Gradiva he mourned for her as someone who was lost."<sup>31</sup> Freud asks, "was not our hero's infatuation for his Gradiva sculpture a complete instance of being in love, though of being in love with something past and lifeless?"<sup>32</sup> Early in the story, mirroring, perhaps, *Pitchfork's* embarrassment for Mangum, the archeologist "appears to us as incomprehensible and foolish; we have no idea how his peculiar folly will be linked to human feeling and so arouse our sympathy."<sup>33</sup> After all, "This fresh pain about Gradiva does not seem very intelligible to us; Gradiva would have been dead for many centuries even if she had been saved from destruction in the year 79 A.D."<sup>34</sup>

Freud himself occupies an uncomfortable position in the essay. He argues that science "cannot hold its own before the achievement of the author," claiming that it would be wrong to "ask whether this imaginative representation of the genesis of a delusion can hold its own before the judgment of science";<sup>35</sup> rather, science must attempt to learn from Jensen's imaginative representation. Even more, Freud tells the story of a doctor who felt guilty for mistreating a girl with Graves' disease and so contributing to her death. Years later, the girl appears again in his office, and the doctor is forced to think, "So after all it's true that the dead can come back to life."<sup>36</sup> The girl turns out to be the dead one's sister, and the doctor, of course, is revealed to be Freud himself: "so I have a personal reason for not disputing the clinical possibility of [the archeologist's]

<sup>31</sup> Freud, "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*," in *Writings on Art and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, "Ghost."

delusion that Gradiva had come back to life."<sup>37</sup> However, Freud does not allow himself to pursue this ghostly path much longer. He veers back to the science of psychoanalysis and diagnoses the archeologist with having repressed his childhood and his present erotic feelings for his early playmate, who still lives across the street but is now quite forgotten by him.

Lost in Freud's diagnoses of both stories, his own and Jensen's respectively, is the shock of being confronted by a real ghost and the "confused shouts of the inhabitants of Pompeii calling for help" and Gradiva buried in "the rain of ashes,"<sup>38</sup> which Freud had evoked so powerfully earlier. When Freud emphasizes the power of repression and delusion, the ghosts are swept away, and with them, *the historical setting and character of their suffering*. In his reading of Freud's "Gradiva," Jacques Derrida makes a comparable observation using the terms of the archive. For Derrida, nobody has done more than Freud to show that the archive only exists because of threats to the archive—the spectral destructive force of anarchivization, archive fever, or death drive—within the archive itself, while at the same time, "as critical scientist of a past epoch, as a 'scholar' who does not want to speak to phantoms, Freud claims not to believe...in the virtual existence of the spectral space he nonetheless takes into account."<sup>39</sup> Derrida makes it clear that this spectral archive fever concerns "the great holocaustic tragedies of our modern history and historiography,"<sup>40</sup> and "why anarchiving destruction belongs to the process of archivization and produces the very thing it reduces, on occasion to ashes, and beyond."<sup>41</sup> Freud accounts for ghosts and ashes in order to discount them. These are the ghosts and ashes that Jeff Mangum takes as his subject:

She goes and now she knows she'll never be afraid  
To watch the morning paper blow  
Into a hole where no one can escape<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 94.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>42</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, "Ghost."

## Broadcasting Distant Intimacy

So far, I have neglected one of the major themes that threads through *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*, from its vintage postcard-derived cover art to its lyrical content and to its anachronistic instrumentation: the carnival. One of Kim Cooper's sources reports that Mangum "was always into that old-timey, magic, semi-circus, turn-of-the-century, penny arcade kind of imagery."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, these vintage carnival images are impossible to ignore as part of the packaging and meaning of *Aeroplane*, but at first it is difficult to imagine what connections they could have with Mangum's overwhelming interest in Anne Frank. After all, Anne Frank's world is not the world of penny arcades and magical circuses, but rather at first that of the emphatically unmagical world of bourgeois Amsterdam and later that of the vigilant and terrible world of the Secret Annex. Yet Mangum seems intent upon merging these different worlds into an unexpected configuration.

One way of making sense of this intentional merging is to see Mangum's circus as Mikhail Bakhtin saw Rabelais's carnival: "During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part."<sup>44</sup> The carnival opens possibilities that the quotidian world or the existing order would foreclose upon. Mangum seems to need the carnival in order to effect the historical opening that would unite him with Anne Frank. There is perhaps no other way for Mangum to save the dead than through the renewing and reviving powers of the carnival. In this sense, the carnival or circus is almost a requisite setting for the consummation for which Mangum wishes. It is a setting that teems with life, one that tries to overcome death and the false distances that death would arbitrate and enforce.

But, perhaps more importantly, the circus or carnival may be the crucial setting within which Mangum can manage and meditate upon his perverse and frightening nightmares and desires. If Mangum is in danger of being thought a freak, then the recurring Two-Headed Boy of *In the Aeroplane* may be seen as Mangum's self-representation, and his reflexive meditation upon his position and his project. In "Two-Headed Boy," Mangum seems to observe himself as a grotesque specimen seen through a glass jar: "Two-Headed Boy/ All floating in glass.../I can hear as you tap on your jar/ And I am listening to hear where you are." Again, in Bakhtin's terms,

<sup>43</sup> Cooper, *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*, 81.

<sup>44</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 7.

when Mangum represents himself as a grotesque body, he seems to allow for a kind of interpersonal interchange that could defy the normal boundaries and fixed areas of bodies. For Bakhtin, the grotesque image “never presents an individual body; the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body. It is a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception.”<sup>45</sup> The Two-Headed boy seems grotesque in this sense, consisting of fused or doubled heads that signal a breach in our typical expectations about body boundaries.

However, the Two-Headed Boy’s project is at least as significant as his body. We learn that he builds a radio in his jar:

Two-headed boy  
With pulleys and weights  
Creating a radio played just for two  
In the parlor with a moon across her face  
And through the music he sweetly displays  
Silver speakers that sparkle all day  
Made for his lover who’s floating and choking with her hands across her face  
And in the dark we will take off our clothes  
And they’ll be placing fingers through the notches in your spine  
And when all is breaking, everything that you could keep beside  
Now your eyes ain’t moving now  
They just lay there in their cloud<sup>46</sup>

The Two-Headed Boy’s radio is the central figure of *In the Aeroplane over the Sea*. The radio, of course, was one of the crucial ways that Anne Frank and her family received news of the outside world. It was the constant of their nightly ritual, when Frank might indeed have listened to it with the moon across her face. Mangum’s radio, then, represents the dramatic situation of the album, its central metaphor. The Two-Headed Boy embodies the freakishness of Mangum’s desire for Anne Frank. He builds a radio “played just for two,” in order to broadcast his feelings for her in the only ethereal form that has a chance of reaching her, for he is trapped in the jar of historical time, and she is trapped first in her Annex and then by death. And yet it is crucial to communicate, to broadcast. The radio and Mangum’s music form the connection. Mangum says, “I wished I could save her in some sort of time machine,” and the closest he can come, given the constraints of time and death, is the radio. The radio becomes the time machine.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>46</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, “Two-Headed Boy.”

It is interesting to note the role of the machine in Mangum’s dramatic situation. The prominence of the radio figure may even threaten to overwhelm the music itself, as though Mangum prioritizes the mode and technology of transmission in his lyrics over the idea of broadcasted music. However, this does not seem to minimize the importance of the musical content, but rather to stress the *act* of broadcast and reception. The radio, a transmitter, reminds us that music is powerless unless it reaches us and unless we are receptive to it. Thus, as a technology, the radio can bridge time and distance, but it also implies a broadcaster and a receiver brought into significant relation to one another. It is this form of distant intimacy that constitutes Mangum’s ambition, indeed, his passion.

Radios, however, do not have to broadcast solely from a single sender to a single receiver. The signal is available to any who would tune into the frequency. This is the component of Mangum’s radio metaphor that opens the distant intimacy between himself and Frank beyond the couple, making it available to other audiences. And this seems to be the primary work of the album: inviting listeners to share in the shock of historical perception in which the remote in time and space become suddenly intimate, until we too are “catching signals that sound in the dark.”<sup>47</sup> In fact, the end of *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* seems to stage first Frank’s and then Mangum’s exit:

Two-headed boy, she is all you could need  
She will feed you tomatoes and radio wires  
And retire to sheets safe and clean  
But don’t hate her when she gets up to leave<sup>48</sup>

Frank seems to leave Mangum here after nourishing and retiring to bed with him. She is fleeting and Mangum struggles to come to terms with her absence without hating her. After this final song ends, the recording continues so that we may hear a few moments of sound from the recording studio. The sound seems to be Mangum putting down his acoustic guitar and getting up from his chair. Now, both the specific receiver and the broadcaster are gone. What remains is silence. Mangum leaves listeners as Anne Frank leaves him, and he transfers the emotional and historical burden of the album onto them. The broadcaster/receiver mechanism of the radio thus implies a social act, and, by extension, *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* becomes a social act as well.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, “Two-Headed Boy, Part Two.”

We may return to the idea of archives and say that *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* not only becomes a part of Anne Frank's archive, altering it and reanimating it, but also archives Mangum's response to Anne Frank's story, a response that then becomes available through music to others. Something of Mangum's shock in response to Frank's story constitutes in turn an experience for the listener. It might seem, then, as though the listener's experience is somehow secondary to Mangum's primary experience to Anne Frank, a distant response to an already distant response. However, the opposite may also be true. Mangum's response, now an invigorating part of Anne Frank's narrative, becomes a new way for listeners to confront Frank's story, precisely through the shock of Mangum's perverse sexuality in relation to other elements of the archive, elements that may have become too distant through various forms of institutionalization and domestication.

But while there is a powerful archive drive in Mangum's project, in the sense that *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* seeks to catalog a response to Anne Frank's story, to contribute to it, and to reanimate it, it also contains elements of destruction and anarchivization, what Derrida calls archive fever, or the desire to erase and forget the archive, which is inseparable from the urge to archive and preserve. There is an element of erasure in the strange way that Anne Frank often seems not to be the object of the lyrics, or in Mangum's tendency to transform her into somebody or something else. For instance, "Holland, 1945" begins:

The only girl I ever loved  
Was born with roses in her eyes  
But then they buried her alive  
One evening 1945<sup>49</sup>

This addresses the subject of Anne Frank directly, but later in the stanza she is transformed into somebody else: "Now she's a little boy in Spain / Playing pianos filled with flames."<sup>50</sup> The final stanza almost seems to evoke Frank's Annex, but it is clear from the details that the "you" addressed cannot be the Anne Frank we know:

And here's where your mother sleeps  
And here is the room where your brother was born  
Indentations in the sheets  
Where their bodies once moved but don't move anymore

<sup>49</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, "Holland, 1945."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

And it's so sad to see the world agree  
That they'd rather see their faces filled with flies  
All when I'd want to keep white roses in their eyes.<sup>51</sup>

This could almost appear to survey the Annex emptied of its occupants, movingly evoking the indentations left on sheets by bodies now dead. But, of course, Anne Frank had no brother. The subject of "their bodies" and "their eyes" is ambiguous. Frank had become a little boy in Spain, and now she seems absorbed into a "they" that Mangum appears to mourn as a group. These gestures push in the direction of abstraction and universalization rather toward the particularity and peculiarity that constitute so much of the album's affective force. In this sense, the album seems to despair of the very anecdotal power that it creates, and to flee into obliquity and abstraction. The desires to conserve and to erase are inseparable in the album, and this accounts for its different forms of turning toward and turning away from Anne Frank.

To love a ghost is in some sense to court death, and Mangum's lust for Anne Frank expresses a death drive, the desire not to reanimate a ghostly Anne Frank, but rather to join her in nonbeing. In fact, lyrics often oscillate between preservation and mutual destruction:

What a beautiful face . . .  
What a beautiful dream . . .  
And one day we will die  
And our ashes will fly from the aeroplane over the sea . . .  
Anna's ghost all around  
Hear her voice as it's rolling and ringing through me<sup>52</sup>

As Mangum sings these lines, his acoustic guitar is accompanied by a singing saw that produces a mournful and ghostly effect and soars along with Mangum's impassioned and off-kilter voice. After Mangum comes to the lines,

And now we keep where we don't know  
All secrets sleep in winter clothes  
With one you loved so long ago  
Now he don't even know his name<sup>53</sup>

the saw stops singing and breaks into a series of staccato cries, like cries of pain or dogs screeching. It is a musically powerful and jarring moment.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, "In the Aeroplane over the Sea."

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Mangum imagines having his ashes scattered with Anne Frank's ashes. He imagines "keeping" with her in an unknown and secret place. The very nearness of Anne Frank tempts Mangum into distancing strategies of self-erasure. Anne Frank, too, is everywhere and nowhere in *In The Aeroplane over the Sea*; she is often the "you" addressed, but often elusive as well, a body for and to whom Mangum broadcasts. He longs to touch her, but also knows that to do so would be his own destruction, that there is danger as well as pathos in nearness. It is precisely between perverse desire and its consummation that this deeply historical album's power resides. In it, we may identify the historical power in the perverse:

And in my dreams you're alive and you're crying  
As your mouth moves in mine soft and sweet  
Rings of flowers round your eyes and I love you  
For the rest of your life, when you're ready<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Neutral Milk Hotel, "Two-Headed Boy, Part Two."

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .....	ix
Notes on a Collection .....	1
<b>Part I: Listening to the Past: Musical Performance, Reception and Remembrance</b>	
Chapter One.....	12
Time and Timelessness: Contexts for Popular Music	
Brian Diemert	
Chapter Two .....	39
Yesterday: The Beatles, Narrative, and Memory	
Robert McParland	
Chapter Three .....	59
The Drugs Ain't a "G" Thang, Baby, or Kicking <i>The Chronic</i> Straight	
Outta Compton	
Joseph P. Fisher	
Chapter Four .....	86
'I've Seen It Rain Fire in the Sky': John Denver's Popular Songs	
and Environmental Memory	
Jeffrey Filipiak	
Chapter Five .....	112
Coming In From the Cold: Icelandic Punk Rock and Sites of Cultural	
Memory	
Bjorn Vilhjalmsen	
<b>Part II: 'Reading' Sites of Memory: Musical Texts and Media</b>	
Chapter Six .....	140
Gone But Not Forgotten: Rushdie's Sites of Memory	
Yael Maurer	