

Withstanding Time: The More-Than-Human Punctum from Roland Barthes to Sumana Roy

Hilary Thompson

Prologue

This essay explores two questions: What is it like to hear Roland Barthes's voice refracted through Sumana Roy's prose and what is it like to use a resonance instead of influence model to analyze this reverberation? Writer of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction, Roy recounts graduate work on Barthes's semiotics, admitting the influence of his *Mythologies*.¹ Yet her 2017 *How I Became a Tree* bears little immediate resemblance to *Mythologies*. More expansively personal than even Barthes's most autobiographical texts, Roy's work arboreally tends toward contemporary autotheory. Yet at key points in her text, readers can hear sentences whose cadence and juggling of times might be called Barthesian, echoing not the earlier Barthes of *Mythologies* but the later one of *Camera Lucida*. An influence study might track Roy's urge to demystify cultural mythologies but do little to explain such thoughtful echoes. Instead, in his examination of Lydia Davis's resonance with Wittgenstein, Ben Roth asks, 'Not how one reads a work—any work—of literature in a Wittgensteinian manner, but rather: What would Wittgensteinian fiction look like?'² Extending Roth's terms, I ask not what a Barthesian work of contemporary autotheory would look like, but rather what it would *sound* like, even to the mind's ear. Listening for a conjoint voice, we might attend to both authors' performed sense of time. In the fall of their phrases, we sense a double temporality attesting to both an apprehension of the intractable and an expectant witnessing, a paradoxical tempo I call one of withstanding. This time of withstanding is exemplified in Roy's sense of trees as humans' both longstanding and longsuffering fellows, a form of co-presence comparable to the one Barthes proposes in *Camera Lucida*'s discussion of the *punctum* but

whose creaturely dimensions emerge in *The Preparation of the Novel*'s adjacent consideration of the pointed techniques of haiku.

Forking Paths

'One day', 'At first'—although the first of these openings leads to an emperor and the second to underwear, they are both instances of the instantaneous, in medias res moments when something cuts through one's thoughts and then makes itself at home there (the seeming opposite to Proust's opening gambit, 'For a long time'). 'One day, quite some time ago', Barthes tells us, 'I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor."'”³ 'At first it was the underwear', remarks Roy, adding, 'I wanted to become a tree because trees did not wear bras', as if to say, I am looking at a being impervious to an emperor, that is, a being who doesn't feel exposed to the same threats that I do. She continues, 'Then it had to do with the spectre of violence. I loved the way in which trees coped with dark and lonely places while sunlessness decided curfew hours for me.'⁴ These beginnings, whether of *Camera Lucida* or of *How I Became a Tree*, both think about types of sovereignty as they initiate inquiries, investigations of obsessions, whether with photography or with tree being. And this voice of an investigator, a voice that's really the storyteller's, follows readers throughout, making the story of the investigation as central as the investigation itself. Moreover, both inquiries revolve around trauma, losses and wounds, and repeatedly return to time. It would be easy to understand this performative dimension, continual revisiting of trauma, and interest in time within the terms of autoliterature, an as-it-happens theorizing of self or staging of a self-adjacent persona that readers watch textually take place.⁵ In this reading, Barthes becomes the before-the-letter pioneer and Roy the contemporary creaturely innovator. Likewise, it would be easy to read Roy back into Barthes, highlighting his arboreal potential, making use of her references to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome along the way. Yet as applicable as the capacious concepts of autoliterature and plant-thinking may be to any examined inter-writerly resonance between Barthes and Roy, it's worth asking what we miss when we take them as stopping points, as interpretative ends in themselves.⁶

Roth, by methodological contrast, eschews models that read merely to highlight philosophers' and literary writers' most obviously shared references and themes. He notes the powerful influence Wittgenstein has had, often via Stanley Cavell, on literary criticism, but remarks on such criticism's limits seen in its frequent tendency towards one-way application rather than mutually illuminating reading. Instead, he wonders what a search for 'a basically akin sensibility' or 'deep overlap of sensibility' between a philosopher and literary writer might reveal.⁷ In searching for the kind of kinship whereby in reading the sentences of one, as he remarks of Lydia Davis's prose in relation to Wittgenstein's, you might believe you were reading the sentences of the other (p. 3), he rejects both strictly thematic and superficially intertextual studies, ones that don't 'reveal much about the philosophy in turn' (p. 2). In his own essay, he looks first to Adam Ehrlich Sachs's sense of philosophical comedy before moving to Davis's prose, and, in their resonant kinship with Wittgenstein, he finds all three to highlight the ways we are never truly 'at home' in language, and hence he devises a category for all three, dubbing them 'uncanny grammarians' (p. 1). In Davis's case, he describes this shared uncanniness with a term important also to readers of Barthes, that is, as 'poignance':

The pathos Davis conveys in her grammatical investigations reveals a paired poignance that, reading in a philosophical mindset, can be easy to overlook as also present in Wittgenstein. Taken together, these writers suggest how pressing in an extraordinary way on our ordinary language can defamiliarize the familiar, such that we can understand it more explicitly, revealing our deepest patterns of thought and life. In all of these writers, we see that, though we live in language, we are never fully at home in it—which is why uncanny moments of language are so revealing. (p. 3)

Blurring the line, as I will argue is inevitable, between being influenced by Roth and resonating with him, I, too, will read for a 'paired poignance', here in Barthes and Roy. This shared poignance is discernable in their articulated thoughts' cadence, in the ways they let themselves fail, registered in the particular ring and fall of their sentences, sentences that center an affective and enactive dimension to their quests' narratives. Working through provisional itineraries, course corrections, and revisions toward their open-ended conclusions, *Camera Lucida* and *How I Became a Tree* sketch out ways to

register the experience of wounding, of sustained pain that won't go away. At the same time, they invoke a non-static idea of co-presence—one that becomes ever more creaturely—that we can see both in the way they accompany themselves through the unfoldment of their investigations' staged stories and in the way their objects of study repeatedly suggest provisional dualities.

On the surface, Barthes's and Roy's foci might appear opposed. Photographs and trees seem disparate obsessional objects, one born of mechanical reproduction, the other organic growth. Thoughts of one can tend toward the alienated, the defamiliarized, and the fragmentary, while the other might conjure meditations on the dendritic, the fractal, and hence the holistic. But Barthes's skepticism—his determination right from the start to keep turning on himself—is a textual constant, creating a coherent macro structure of spiraling bifurcations. And the role of photography in what became known as the 2012 Guwahati molestation case in which a young woman, before finally being rescued, was assaulted by several men while multiple video clips were shot (a case Roy renders in fictional form in her 2018 novel *Missing*) looms large in the many meditations on sexual violence in *How I Became a Tree*. Divergent in their forms of advocacy and in the material they draw from, Barthes's and Roy's texts nonetheless share in forms of plant-thinking and in their concern for a vulnerable subject. And these common qualities form an important context for any consideration of their engagements with time.

Barthes's undermining of himself is an immediate premise. He announces in Part One of his bipartite study that since he could find no one who shared or understood his amazement in the face of the 1852 photo, he not only 'forgot about it' but decided to divert his thoughts toward the cultural, to like 'Photography *in opposition* to the Cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it'.⁸ And failing to separate it, he recounts launching an ontological quest 'to learn at all costs what Photography was "in itself"', a quest that signaled to him his own uncertainty 'that Photography existed, that it had a "genius" of its own' (p. 3). Acting at once as his own analyst and Cartesian evil genius, Barthes throws his journey-to-come into disarray even as he sets out his terms for embarking. He will repeat this forwards/backwards motion at the end of Part One as he takes stock of his progress, and, having completed twenty-four subsections and examined fifteen photos, declares that he needs to progress by retracting. 'I had perhaps learned how my desire worked, but I had not discovered the nature (the *eidōs*) of Photography', he considers, and, calling out his exercise in hedonism, his tour

of public photos followed at his own pleasure, he lays the perfect foundation for his study's second part: 'I would have to make my recantation, my palinode' (p. 60). This first poem/subsequent palinode, cantatory/recantatory, structure is but one of many bifurcations, dyadic distinctions running through Barthes's text, the most famous of which is the core *studium/punctum* pair.

Yet equally intriguing are the affect/phenomenology contrast he draws just before distinguishing the *studium* from the *punctum* and the choice he describes, implicitly offering it to readers, at the book's close. These two dyadic moments are, in their techniques, only superficially opposed. Arriving at the method of describing his own photographic attractions or repulsions (having dispensed with the idea of a lengthier consideration of aspects of picture taking he knows less about), Barthes admits the unorthodoxy of his phenomenology. Whimsical and contradictory, his version is 'vague, casual, even cynical', since it embraces the opposed urges of believing in the Photograph's essence while also reducing it to absolute contingency (p. 20). Not only this, but his method has strangely insisted on affect—an affective intentionality, a view of the object which was immediately steeped in desire, repulsion, nostalgia, euphoria—despite the phenomenology with which he says he's familiar, having 'never, so far as I could remember, spoken of desire or mourning' (p. 21). If this modified phenomenology retains core contradictions, it seemingly contrasts with the choice Barthes concludes the book by claiming as 'mine' even as he extends it to others. His closing lines present a choice between taming the Photograph, either as elevated art or ubiquitous form of mass media, or else letting its madness, its absolute realism, its proffered 'return to the very letter of Time' be—a choice between the temperate and 'ecstasy' (p. 119). In the first instance, Barthes preserves an element foreign to his 'borrowed' (p. 20) phenomenological method by refusing a choice between affect and phenomenology, and in the second, he clears room for ecstasy by setting it to one side as an option apart.

But particularly revealing is his language, even in the first example, for hanging onto affect, to pathos, when he knew he could instead pursue essences strictly logically: 'I stopped, keeping with me, like a treasure, my desire or my grief; the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the "pathos" of which, from the first glance, it consists' (p. 21). And this, he tells us, comes from knowing

I could make out in Photography, in a very orthodox manner, a whole network of essences: material essences (necessitating the physical, chemical, optical study of Photography), and regional essences (deriving, for instance, from aesthetics, from History, from sociology); but at the moment of reaching the essence of Photography in general, I branched off. (p. 21)

In other words, stopping is equated with branching off, two routes are preserved and with them a treasure, his desire or grief. Preservation amidst splintering can be readily associated with Freud's melancholic subject, with the 'cleavage' of its ego between critical and identificatory functions, a split that, as he maintains in 'Mourning and Melancholia', preserves but remaps the libidinal energy associated with the lost object.⁹ And the metaphor of a limb shooting off from a plant can just as easily be denigrated as repeating the structure of what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the multiplicity-denying, misleadingly dyadic 'root-book', the book that 'imitates the world, as art imitates nature', a model that reflects a tiresome law by which 'the One becomes two'.¹⁰ 'One becomes two', they repetitively lament as though the melancholy were self-evident and inescapable, since 'whenever we encounter this formula [...] what we have before us is the most classical and well-reflected, oldest, and weariest kind of thought'.¹¹ Years later, however, Roy takes a stand, in feminist and anti-colonial terms, for an affective approach reducible to neither Freud's nor Deleuze and Guattari's models, nor even a vegetally melancholic hybrid of them.

It should first be noted that Michael Marder (whom Roy later cites for his vegetal models of politics) also takes Deleuze and Guattari to task for their misunderstanding of trees, their seeming ignorance of the leaf's status as more than merely the stem-root structure's derivative offshoot. Given Deleuze and Guattari's stated interest in 'the body without organs' and 'a pure multiplicity of immanence',¹² Marder finds it 'all the more astonishing then that the authors of *A Thousand Plateaus* single out a particular kind of plant (the tree) as the exemplar of a hierarchical arrangement of multiplicities'.¹³ As they make trees emblems for hierarchy, they 'forget', he says, that the leaf is 'an infinitely iterable and radically egalitarian building block of the tree, for it is at once the source, the product, and the minute reproduction of vegetal being, from which it may at any time fall away'.¹⁴ In both sympathy with and contrast to

Marder, Roy follows the course of her own desires and repulsions, underscoring her indifference to taxonomy and philosophical fight-picking:

The question began to come gradually, and then often. Which tree did I want to be? I still have no answer. How was I to explain that it did not matter to me whether I was a tall tree, a middling shrub or grass or garden weed? [...] The French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have written poetically and passionately about the rhizome—say, ginger or turmeric—as a model to oppose the hierarchies and power structures of the tree model that holds Western civilization together. The rhizome, without beginning or end, without the privileging of top over bottom or one ‘branch’ over another, is a moral about subverting hierarchies. For me it did not matter—this was as much man-made appropriation as the tree had been for centuries.¹⁵

We hear the voice of the Barthesian affective phenomenologist turned to new critical purposes here, rescuing trees as akin to many forms of plant life, equally desirable to become, and equally vulnerable to, in Roy’s explicitly hemispheric and gendered phrases, the whims of ‘Western civilization’ and ‘man-made appropriation’.

Yet although we can see Roy’s emphasis on affect and evolving self-description as echoing Barthes’s method, their engagements with visual media diverge as do their experiences of wounds and sense of wounds’ impact on aesthetic forms. Barthes may want to pursue first the essence of the Photograph and then the essence of its pathos because he has beheld a record of emperor-beholding eyes that he alone finds amazing, a seemingly restorative project, even to the point of resurrecting wounds—and, in fact, Barthes prefers the idea of ‘resurrection’ to restoration.¹⁶ And he may frequently want to distinguish a photo’s poignantly wounding detail from mere sensationalism and simple shock value. But Roy, in a world saturated with appallingly captured and circulating images, might wish to spare another, and by extension herself, from human and even nonhuman animal feeling altogether. In their affect-centering phenomenological inquiries, Barthes’s and Roy’s sense of wounds differs profoundly. To understand their resonance, it’s necessary to take in this divergence.

Barthes’s series of illustrative examples of photos’ evocative details intriguingly begins with not the fragmentary elements that will become typical (eyes, fingernails, teeth, a bridle, clothing accessories) but with whole human

figures, notably female. Before explicitly articulating his theory of the photo's odd detail that is experienced as strikingly wounding, the *punctum*, Barthes presents an initial example of a picture with two elements that are as heterogeneous as the *punctum/studium* (or striking detail/ostensibly engaging content) pair will be: a street scene in 1979 Nicaragua with both nuns and armed soldiers. The image might inspire questions: What are nuns doing there, or what do nuns see when they look at soldiers and a war-ravaged landscape around them? But although the nuns' presence may feel heterogeneous to the soldiers', it can also seem hard to think of the nuns themselves, despite Barthes's later appearing to do so (p. 42), as truly a background detail or *punctum* in line with his later discussions. As isn't the case in many of his subsequent examples, there's little subjectively additional about the nuns that would lead one to say, as he later does of the *punctum*, 'it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*' (p. 55). But, moving on from the nuns, his next example, also a photo of Koen Wessing's taken in 1979 Nicaragua, is, in its details, more characteristically poignant: a weeping mother holds an additional sheet as she beholds her already covered dead child. Barthes fixates on the state of the child's feet, one booted one not, the additional sheet—'(why this sheet?)'—and the handkerchief another woman in the background holds to her nose (pp. 23–24). These elements can evoke mournful questions: Why should these details persist, objects with paths, provenances, and lives of their own, amidst such destruction and death?

Yet if we consider the nuns an ur-example of the *punctum*, this example suggests the importance of whole figures. In the Guwahati case that is so crucial for Roy, it is the photographers themselves whose presence and behavior are wounding and questionable.¹⁷ Roy's sense of disturbance, experience of the media's role, and then conception of possible artistic responses to such trauma set her apart. Barthes writes somewhat more innocently of photographers who catch their subjects unawares, seemingly without their initial consent. They produce pictures 'whose principle (or better, whose alibi) is "shock"' and he adds that this shock is to be distinguished from both the *punctum* and from trauma: 'for the photographic "shock" (quite different from the *punctum*) consists less in traumatizing than in revealing what was so well hidden that the actor himself was unaware or unconscious of it' (p. 32). Roy's world offers a sharp counterpoint, since it is one of violent and rapid spectacularizing spawned by digital images and far-reaching social media. And it is a world whose traumatic and truth-obscuring

qualities seem, in her view, to spur autoliterature. Although this case explicitly becomes material for her novel *Missing*, published six years later but begun that very month, July 2012, Roy describes *How I Became a Tree* as coming from a similar, emotionally unsettled place. In *The Punch Magazine*, Shireen Quadri summarizes the premise of *Missing*:

Kobita, the 54-year-old activist wife of Nayan, a blind poet, travels to Guwahati to rescue a young girl who has been molested in full public glare, with journalists taking her photographs and making videos of the incident but none coming forward to help her.¹⁸

And in this interview with Quadri, Roy recalls of that July:

It was also a difficult time in my life, emotionally. I was thinking of disappearance all the time (I still do, I suppose). *How I Became a Tree* [...] my first book, a work of non-fiction, as you know, Shireen, came from that space—about the desire for transformation, an escape from human life to plant life.

Roy then turns her flight instinct towards a critical reading of mythology, in first a classical and then a media-world sense, and these considerations allow her to move from Ovid to autoliterature.

It's not surprising that when surveying transformational literature and turning to Ovid, Roy writes, 'The fear of sexual violence had propelled poor Daphne's desire to turn into a tree' and reports that reading of her, she 'began to grow uneasy'.¹⁹ And this feeling expands as she notes examples of mythic males also pursued or obsessed over to the point of their vegetal metamorphosis. Deeply unsettled, she recounts:

While I was reviewing these myths in books and artwork, the morning newspaper brought stories of women who had been raped and murdered, left to die, their bodies chopped and fed to animals, the corpses beheaded and thrown into rivers, 'honour killings' where women were killed by their own family members, fathers, brothers, and uncles, then planted into the earth or hanged from trees. (p. 20)

As Roy recalls her own 'growing nervousness' and 'inability to accept the world "as it is"', she also describes a particular case (not the Guwahati one), 'named

“Nirbhaya” by a permanently excitable Indian media’, a case she finds hard to block out from her consciousness (p. 20). Her reaction contrasts with Barthes’s claims that many journalistic photos can shock, ‘the literal can traumatize’, but that in such ‘unary’ photos there is ‘no *punctum*’ and that he will ‘glance through them’ but then not ‘recall them’ (p. 41).

Concomitantly disturbing for Roy, along with the kinds of cases she lists and the expansive media coverage of them, is the spread of fake news, a phenomenon that in its contemporary visual dimensions is beyond the scope of *Camera Lucida*. Although Barthes attributes no self-authenticating quality to written language, his thoughts are molded by an era in which he feels he can claim, ‘the Photograph’s essence is to ratify what it represents’, even if he then puzzles over his own lack of recognition of a photo of himself whose taking he does not remember (p. 85). Such alienation accelerates for Roy. ‘I also never tire of saying that I was also trying to reject the speed of the news’, she tells Quadri, adding, ‘It was in 2012 that I personally encountered fake news.’ Roy suggests that in the waves of media coverage, viral social media postings, and popular outrage over the Guwahati case, multiple opinions and stories spread, making the news seem, even in its visual components, instantaneously like fiction. The conversations she heard at that time are ones she reports inserting directly into her novel, rendering it, for her, a more faithful document of the moment than were many news accounts. And it is this dynamic that she credits with fostering autoliterature:

So something has happened in our times—the novel moving towards auto-fiction, the novelist relying only on the material of his life, perhaps because that is the only truth he knows, is an important marker of our distance from two things: the unreliability of news, and the fake constructedness of plot, in which the novelist is increasingly seen to be as complicit as the reporter of fake news.²⁰

How I Became a Tree likewise provides a writerly escape from constructing fake plot by instead rendering a faithful account of its author’s growing uneasiness with a spectacularly wounding world.

The suggestion that in the era of autoliterature, mediatization itself might be a *punctum*, that is, an added wounding element that is nonetheless *already there*, is timely and poignant, but not one Barthes would likely make. The world of the tyrannical and generalized photographic image, a world

exemplified for Barthes by US culture, is a world that even if it ‘crushes’ other visual arts, nonetheless tames the Photograph’s distinctive power (p. 118). Barthes writes of wounds that come from a world in which, rather than viral social media inciting responses in the form of autoliterature, studied photographs spark peculiar phenomenologies. Although his chosen photos can include evidence of war or document the history of slavery, his meditations—while they may credit the static retention of the Photograph itself with a kind of violence (pp. 90–91)—do not dwell on specific scenes of violence. About ‘reportage’ of ‘death, suicide, wounds, accidents’, he claims he has ‘nothing to say’ (p. 111). Instead of registering horror, outrage, or even growing uneasiness, Barthes’s meditations tend more toward astonishment, fascination, and grief.

Seeking Soothing

Roy’s core idea, however, that photographic mediation’s poignancy might prompt, as much as phenomenological self-reflection, vegetal, and especially arboreal, longing is already present in *Camera Lucida*. And in both Roy’s and Barthes’s cases, the longing turns on time, and then sound. Roy opens *How I Became a Tree* with an immediately retrospective confession about her failings and longings:

So, when I look back at the reasons for my disaffection with being human, and my desire to become a tree, I can see that at the root lay the feeling that I was being bulldozed by time. As I removed my watch from my wrist, and clocks from my walls, I realized that all my flaws—and this I now discover I share with many others—came from my failure to be a good slave to time. I began envying the tree, its disobedience to human time. All around me were estate developers sending their fleets of workers to construct skyscrapers to tight schedules. The trees they planted in the gated communities annoyed them—they would grow at their natural pace. It was impossible to rush plants, to tell a tree to ‘hurry up’. In envy, in admiration and with ambition, I began to call that pace ‘Tree Time’. (pp. 3–4)

Her telling next step in following her desire to 'live to tree time' is a moratorium on news media: 'This timbre of nervous energy that had turned the world into an apocalypse movie was the resident spirit of the newsroom—we were all doomed, all moving towards a terrifying end, we were all part of the news' (p. 4). Ever sensitive to sound, Roy perceives the news media's apocalyptic cut-to-the-finish sense of time as a nervous 'timbre', a word easily heard (despite construction sites' attempts, however failing, at rapid regreening) as the tree-feller's cry, 'timber', and hence a hailing of trees.

Only initially contrasting is Barthes's sense of comfort in early forms of horological and photographic technology, particularly their sounds. Writing of the experience of being photographed as not so much one of collective doom but rather one of personal spectrality, a process of 'becoming an object [...] a micro-version of death [...] becoming a specter' (p. 14), he describes feeling soothed by sound:

Hence, strangely, the only thing that I tolerate, that I like, that is familiar to me, when I am photographed, is the sound of the camera. For me, the Photographer's organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens, to the metallic shifting of the plates (when the camera still has such things). I love these mechanical sounds in an almost voluptuous way, as if, in the Photograph, they were the very thing—and the only thing—to which my desire clings, their abrupt click breaking through the mortiferous layer of the Pose. For me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches—and I recall that at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood. (p. 15)

A surprising progression, one that revivifies as much as decomposes its elements, takes us through the mechanical to the organically human and on to the vegetal. We move from click to fingertip to limb to shifting plates, then to cabinets and something like epigenetic memory, before finally resting with tree life. The cameras, watches, and clocks that Roy must evade, even banish, in her quest to live to tree time are items whose progress Barthes can seemingly rewind, flashing back from a click to a time of 'living sound'. Roy's flight from mechanized sounds, particularly of measured time, may implicitly return her,

via homophony, to tree-thinking, but preceding her, Barthes had made the possibility of such a journey explicit. Against this vital arboreal backdrop, it's no surprise that the photo at the heart of Barthes's meditations is named, however figuratively, for a garden.

If the Guwahati case is linked to an emotionally disturbing time for Roy, and this is reflected in her composition of two different texts—one of at least partial autofiction and one of autotheory—the ties between Barthes's grief at his mother's death and his writing of *Camera Lucida* have become only clearer with time. And with this illumination comes the sense that *Camera Lucida* might be just as much a work of proto-autofiction as autotheory.²¹ As Neil Badmington states, cautioning those who would trace the origin of Barthes's concept of the *punctum* strictly to *Camera Lucida*, 'the publication in 2009 of the *Mourning Diary* complicates matters by casting new light on the development of the *punctum*', adding that consideration of Barthes's diary might disrupt many well-worn assumptions underlying orthodox, static discussions of the *punctum/studium* pair.²² Badmington highlights the diary's record of Barthes's fits and starts, rather than rapid composition, as he tried to make progress with *Camera Lucida* and notes, upon his decision to center it on his mother, his calling it 'the *Photo-Maman* book'.²³ In addition to its filial commitment amidst a fitful writing process, Barthes's photography book is notable according to Badmington for its alteration of a key inspirational date and with it, the suppression of a surprising inspirational source—the cinema, the art form Barthes said at the outset he had decided to oppose. Starting anew, Barthes claims at the beginning of the second part of *Camera Lucida*, 'Now, one November evening shortly after my mother's death, I was going through some photographs' (p. 63). He sets the scene for his pivotal discovery of the photo that will yield an essence, the picture of his mother, aged five, with her older brother, standing at the glass conservatory called the 'Winter Garden'. 'Something like an essence of the Photograph floated in this particular picture', Barthes tells us (p. 73) as he proceeds to refocus much of his book's analysis on this image that he names the 'Winter Garden Photograph'. But his *Mourning Diary*, as Badmington notes, dates the key viewing of the photo not in November 1977 but in June 1978, a time when he was also struck by the cinema, by particular movie scenes that overwhelmingly reminded him of his mother. Across his texts, Barthes refers to different viewings of pictures of his mother, including a later reference in *Camera Lucida* to a repeated look at her in photos (p. 115), suggesting an ongoing process and making it difficult to

pinpoint one moment of greatest emotional impact. But however ambiguous he makes the chronology of these photographic sortings and viewings and the Winter Garden Photograph's discovery within it, the idea of Barthes profoundly meditating on this unique image while being deeply moved by the cinema remains.

Amidst emotional instability, for both Roy and Barthes, ostensibly eschewed elements—disturbing sound, moving pictures—take on extended, unexpected importance. Both turn to silence and stillness, but in ways that suggest they want them to have a sound, a manner. Roy will discuss her desire for 'no human, animal, bird, automobile or cellphone' that might 'wriggle itself into the soundscape' (p. 23), but she will then detail her attempts to record the particular sound of wind through grass or trees. Distinguishing several such sounds and equating them with different human voices, she admits, 'I had, in frustration with industrial noise and human verbosity, mistaken trees as silent creatures' (p. 25). In a move many might liken to an attempt to retrieve subaltern speech, she declares:

My experiments with the sound recorder had brought about a new realization—that trees shared a natural sound with people. It is the sound of resistance—like protesters 'raising their voice', trees produced a sound that held in it their fight against wind, water, rain, to tearing, cutting and breaking. Like everything else, about sound too, they were economical. Revolution. Rebellion. Resistance. All other sounds were noise. (p. 25)

Likewise, Barthes will cite the imaginative and affective experiences moving pictures might foreclose, but in such a way that one senses moving pictures are often on his mind. For him, the added and moving detail of the *punctum* seems missing when pictures themselves move in a continuous, oblivious flow (pp. 55–57, 89–91, 111). But this observation underscores his looking for the *punctum* at the movies. What seems to interest both Roy and Barthes most, then, is not in fact the silence or stillness their chosen objects first emblemize but rather, upon revised consideration, the economy by which a still image can be moving and a rustle voice protest. And in such economy lies the poignant mystery of co-presence.

Withstanding

For Barthes a frequent exemplar of such dynamic economy is the haiku, and examination of *The Preparation of the Novel* as a companion text to *Camera Lucida* bears this out. In the latter text, Barthes claims the *punctum* as what pricks and wounds in its explosive immobility ‘brings the Photograph (certain photographs) close to the Haiku’ (p. 49). Both are unamenable to further ‘development’, since in them ‘everything is given, without provoking the desire for even the possibility of a rhetorical expansion’ (p. 49). And this giving of everything conveys a condensed ‘tiny shock’, an experience he relates to the Zen instant of illumination called ‘*satori*’ (p. 49). A Photograph emanates from the past, and, looking at it, we experience it as showing what has intractably been, shocking us into the question, ‘why is it that I am alive *here and now*?’ (p. 84). This shock that he says ‘cannot drift into reverie (this is perhaps the definition of *satori*)’, is the simple mystery of concomitance’ (pp. 82–84), and this is why Barthes can also say that ‘more than other arts, Photography offers an immediate presence to the world—a co-presence’ (p. 84).

Yet it is this awakened, but not singularly so, experience that we can see also in Barthes’s readings of haiku in *The Preparation of the Novel*, and these poems can make poignant space for the landscape and plants. The Winter Garden Photograph inspires in Barthes an exclamation: “‘There she is! She’s really there! At last, there she is!’”²⁴ And he will describe this as ‘a sudden awakening’ and ‘a *satori*’ (p. 109). Likewise, in his lecture material of February 1979, Barthes revels in the haiku’s rich conventions, ones that bespeak a poetic world of the *punctum*, as he dwells particularly on haiku’s concrete details, exclamatory elements, and core co-present pairs. Similar to the fragmentary items that evoke the photographic *punctum*, the haiku, he claims, always includes ‘at least one *tangible*’.²⁵ His vegetal example:

White verbena blossom
And in the middle of the night
*The milky way*²⁶

And his claim in *Camera Lucida* that the Photograph might achieve ‘the unheard-of identification of reality (“*that-has-been*”) with truth (“*there-she*—

is!”)’ and that thus ‘it becomes at once evidential and exclamative’ (p. 113) finds an analogue in his lecture material’s discussion of the *kireji*, the Japanese particle indicating exclamation that is often used in haiku. In one example, he perceives the *kireji* as marking ‘the moment of the Satori’, and, comparing it to an exclamation in, of all people, Proust, remarks that Proust’s similar use of ‘*Oh!*’ is ‘a very good Kireji, because it introduces an emotional protestation into Proust’s argument: the whole body is protesting that what is subtle is painful, therefore real’.²⁷ Barthes’s consideration of haiku offers multiple such points of comparison with the *punctum*, but most salient is his observation that the haiku’s ‘syntactic basis’ is ‘the *co-presence* of two elements’, a remark he illustrates with creaturely examples that pair new snow with leaping squirrels and a singing bird with a fallen red berry.²⁸ It is this *punctum*, the often more-than-human *punctum* of haiku, that is most resonant with Roy’s sense of tree being.

Taking a cue from these alternative, non-photographic instances of the *punctum*, we can reinterpret Roy’s wish to become a tree not merely as a flight from the human and from human violence but as a wish to enter a complexly understood and slowly lived co-presence—the tree’s imperviousness amid human haste, its spawning of shadows it then proffers others to assuage the heat, and its single-word protests as particles borne on the wind. The tree’s enduring sovereignty is intertwined with its multiplicity and interdependence. And this means it doesn’t matter that within the frame of her book Roy might never become a tree for her readers or herself, just as she never directly fulfills her fortieth birthday wish: to sit under the Buddha’s storied tree, the one that sheltered him in his moment of awakening.

As it turns out, the Bodhi tree, so identified with the Buddha as to have served at times as his proxy, is many, not one. Having had its cuttings transported and transplanted more than once in India and Sri Lanka, it exemplifies a logic of rebirth: ‘If the Buddha was the tree, then the many reincarnations of the Buddha had its parallel in the many avatars of the Bodhi tree in different places in the Indian subcontinent.’²⁹ But when Roy arrives at Bodh Gaya ready to sit there as the Buddha did, she (ironically given her sensitivity to external threats) laments, ‘the bureaucracy around the tree, with fort-like walls protecting it from touches and sittings had denied me that experience’ (p. 197). Until, that is, she culminates her quest nonetheless, via a Thai monk telling her ‘a piece of information that might have been useless to him’ (p. 197). The names of the four guardian spirits of the tree from a

sculpture of it elsewhere are 'Venu, Valgu, Ojopati', and, she remarks, 'The fourth guardian spirit was called Sumana' (p. 197).

Similarly, her quest to become a tree ends with a moment of happenstance, one that to Barthes could be a haiku, since it depends on a core co-presence of two elements. Despite her attempts to live to her perceived notions of tree time and tree being, she admits, 'And yet I did not feel completely like a tree' (pp. 221–22). As Barthes often does, Roy lets herself fail. And just as Barthes's ontological inquiry into photography, despite its explicit psychoanalytic and phenomenological borrowings, likely relies just as heavily on his research into a tradition beyond the so-called West, Roy's possibility of concluding must come from outside.³⁰ It will come from beyond both human and tree being, from a being she'll make no claim on. She doesn't feel fully treelike, she says, until an unexpected occurrence that is both moving and not:

Not until a bird came and sat on my shoulder around sunset one day. I did not move. I do not know about the bird but I was certain that in the thinning margins of that forest in Baikunthapur I was, at last, ready to be a tree. (p. 222)

This moment notably recasts and advances an earlier stage of her inquiry. Translating the Bangla expression for letting houseplants sunbathe outside as literally 'feeding them sunlight', she describes her sense of 'pain' at 'watching LEDs and fairy lights bandaged around trees to make them statues of light', calling it 'unbearable' (p. 80). This unbearable light's 'unnaturalness' is evidenced for her by its causing two absences: first, 'no bird ever sat on an electrically-lit tree' and second, 'in spite of the light, these trees, with LED strings taped to their bodies, did not cast shadows' (p. 80). These observations are followed on the righthand page with the shortest, down to just seven lines, chapter of the book. Here Roy describes another evening event: she extends her limbs in the fading light to observe the images cast on the ground. In a sentence that echoes yet reverses, in both phrasing and seeming Platonism, Barthes's 'I had perhaps learned how my desire worked, but I had not discovered the nature (the *eidos*) of Photography',³¹ Roy ends her condensed chapter, 'I had still not managed to become a tree. But I had at least become its shadow' (p. 81). In her second evening epiphany, the one that culminates and closes the book, Roy achieves accidentally what LED-bearing trees are

deprived, with her limbs now becoming even more substantial than shadows. Yet the moment of awakening, brought on by her feeling she serves as tree for a bird, is still set to occur just beyond the frame, although she claims she is ready. Likewise, Barthes closes *Camera Lucida* with two elements and an expectant gesture: the choice to 'subject [the Photograph's] spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions' (p. 119), what he elsewhere in the book, also drawing on Buddhism, calls 'Maya' (p. 82), 'or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality' (p. 119). Key to Roy's becoming a tree in one way is her failure to have yet achieved doing so in another, just as in Barthes's closing choice, one suspects illusion and awakening will be as hard to definitively disentangle as samsara and nirvana.

Barthes's and Roy's sentences of failure are offerings meant to point toward instances of awakening. We never see these instances. We see the painful impetus for them and then the near misses and then their thresholds. We see their moving outlines. Likewise, the conceptual pairs Barthes and Roy invite us to contemplate—the *studium* and *punctum*, movies and photos, human time and tree time, or soundscape and silence—prove not to maintain fixed distinctions or definitions. Roth's contrast, as well, between influence and resonance, with resonance often heard strongly in one who also cites influence, can lead to ambiguity. In Roy's case, it's not that reading her sentences, one hears precisely Barthes's voice. It's that, along with her own voice, one can hear bits of another Barthes, a second Barthes piquing one's interest because of speaking the first's idiom but to say things he wouldn't.

If dissonance is key to resonance, then *Camera Lucida's* moments of plant-antipathy also make sense. In a phytophobic aside, Barthes claims some photos leave him 'indifferent', or, worse, that 'like some weed', they inspire 'a kind of aversion', and he even declares, 'there are moments when I detest Photographs: what have I to do with Atget's old tree trunks' (p. 16). Tree trunks memorialized may inspire a lashing out at even photography. But whether registered in (post)structuralism's love of bifurcating models and dendritic self-narration or in Buddhism's understanding of birth as cyclical and multiple, tree thought can persist.

On our deforested planet, trees, as we know, are far from intractable, yet tree-thinking reaches too far into our thoughts to be fully eradicated. Like Barthes's second definition of the *punctum* as 'Time', the '*that-has-been*' that is simultaneously a what will be or the '*catastrophe which has already occurred*', tree thought provides a snapshot of who we have been amongst others who've

both sheltered and suffered us.³² As trees, cyclically and multiply, stand with and withstand us, they occasion the thought that Roy takes up. Borrowing from her observations of their experience, she tries to resee our lives. Whereas Barthes sets aside images, still or moving, that don't seem to look at him (p. 111), Roy does everything from sound recording to plant x-raying to try not only to perceive plant experience but to live out some version of it. Following Roy, if we knew trees could see and we could learn to see with them, as them, perhaps Barthes would take a new interest. If a Barthes in our time took such an interest, one wonders what he would postulate. Perhaps that in trees' visions of the world in which we appear, we might be their *punctum*.

Notes

-
- ¹ See 'In Conversation with Sumana Roy at GALF 2018', <www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkHRZWsy9Kw> [accessed 30 September 2025].
- ² Ben Roth, 'On Wittgenstein, Lydia Davis, and Other Uncanny Grammarians', *Philosophy and Literature*, 46.1 (2022), pp. 1–21.
- ³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 3.
- ⁴ Sumana Roy, *How I Became a Tree* (Yale University Press, 2017), p. 3.
- ⁵ The term 'autoliterature' is one Callie Ingram has used to emphasize the shared features of autotheory and autofiction. I'm inspired by her panel for the 2024 Northeast Modern Language Association conference, 'The Rise of Autoliterature'. See Callie Ingram, 'The Rise of Autoliterature (Part 1)', *NeMLA Call for Papers*, Northeast Modern Language Association, 2023, <cfplist.com/nemla/Home/S/20337> [accessed 30 September 2025].
- ⁶ See especially Michael Marder's foundational text *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (Columbia University Press, 2013).
- ⁷ Roth, 'On Wittgenstein', p. 2.
- ⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 3.
- ⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *General Psychological Theory*, ed. by Philip Rieff (Macmillan, 1963), pp. 164–179 (p. 170).
- ¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 5.
- ¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 5.
- ¹² Quoted in Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, p. 84.
- ¹³ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, p. 84.
- ¹⁴ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, pp. 84–85.
- ¹⁵ Roy, *How I Became a Tree*, pp. 25–26.
- ¹⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 82.
- ¹⁷ An internet search of Indian news outlets' reports, and Wikipedia's page summarizing and citing a bulk of them, yields differing accounts of such key details as the young woman's age, the number of her attackers, the length of the attack, and the role of those who videoed it, videos that then went viral. While some sources cite the complicity of those who filmed the attack and even the instigating role of one tv journalist, others argue for the footage's usefulness as evidence for identifying the attackers. See '2012 Guwahati Molestation Case', *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 14 October 2023, <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Guwahati_molestation_case> [accessed 30 September 2025].

¹⁸ Sumana Roy, 'In the End, a Novel Is About Controlling Time', interview by Shireen Quadri, *The Punch Magazine*, 31 May 2018, <thepunchmagazine.com/the-byword/interviews/in-the-end-a-novel-is-about-controlling-time-sumana-roy> [accessed 30 September 2025].

¹⁹ Roy, *How I Became a Tree*, p. 19.

²⁰ Roy, 'In the End'.

²¹ And Badmington cites many who have read the text as a work of (auto)fiction. See Neil Badmington, *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes* (Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 40, 58 n. 30.

²² Badmington, *Afterlives*, pp. 41–42.

²³ Quoted in Badmington, *Afterlives*, p. 44.

²⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 99.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Kate Briggs (Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 56.

²⁶ Gonsui, Coyaud, quoted in Barthes, *Preparation*, p. 56.

²⁷ Barthes, *Preparation*, p. 64.

²⁸ Barthes, *Preparation*, pp. 76–77.

²⁹ Roy, *How I Became a Tree*, p. 194.

³⁰ See Jay Prosser, 'Buddha Barthes: What Barthes saw in Photography (That He Didn't in Literature)', *Literature and Theology*, 18.2 (2004), pp. 211–222 for a fuller discussion of Barthes's engagement with Buddhism in relation to his theory of the *punctum*.

³¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 60.

³² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hilary Thompson is Professor of English at Bowdoin College, USA. She is author of *Worldly Spirits, Extra-Human Dimensions and the Global Anglophone Novel* (Bloomsbury, 2023) and *Novel Creatures: Animal Life and the New Millennium* (Routledge, 2018).

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2025 *Barthes Studies* and is distributed under a CC-BY-ND licence. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as no changes are made to it and the origin of information used is credited in the appropriate manner (through bibliographic citation, for example).