

## Fragmentation and Reunification in Justin Torres' *Blackouts* | Michael Fagnani

Consider the nature of a collage. Through altering and combining, pieces of found media are divorced from their original context and granted a new, unified meaning under the artist's vision. The idea of recontextualization runs to the core of Justin Torres's *Blackouts*, reflected in its character's actions and in the very structure of the novel itself. Characters bounce back and forth from past to present, expanding and editorializing their lives. The narrative of *Blackouts* is presented in a broken nature, slivers of story delivered between interjections of historical images and poetry. Through the use of fragmentation, Justin Torres's *Blackouts* acts similar to a collage in the presentation of its narrative.

*Blackouts* is primarily a story between the unnamed narrator and his friend Juan Gay. The two met a decade ago while both were institutionalized in a mental hospital. Juan is old, and dying, and so the narrator has come to stay with him in a place known only as "The Palace." The narrator is plagued by fugues, or blackouts, resulting in memory loss and absences of time. With these in mind, the two men share remembrances of their lives, hoping that diving back into memory will help bridge gaps over lost spaces. Through memories, Juan details his relationship with historical figure, Jan Gay. Here, Juan references *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns*, a medical book that used her research on gay and lesbian people as its basis yet effectively erases her from its final publication. The narrator reflects on his own queer identity and how the blackouts he experiences leave him feeling divorced, or "gone" from his own life. Ultimately, Juan's story leaves the narrator considering how he can move forward and dictate the narrative of his life on his own terms.

Like a collage, the life of *Blackout*'s narrator is detailed

through a composition of chosen fragments. Playing into the idea of remembrance, Justin Torres fleshes out the narrator through diving in and out of his memory in a fragmented fashion. The novel begins with the narrator's arrival at The Palace but does not stay there long, instead jumping into a memory of when the narrator experiences a blackout. From there, the novel jumps again and details when the narrator and Juan first meet. In these jumps back and forth through time, Torres establishes that the narrator's life comes in fragments. There is no play-by-play of the narrator's life, rather the reader is left to fill in the gaps between each memory. By arranging the narrator's life in this fashion, Torres is placing the reader into his mind. The gaps in his life are not just Torres withholding information from the reader, they are the lived experience of the narrator. The narrator comments on how he lives in the absence of linear structure, claiming:

...I'd spent many years pretending: either to be younger and more innocent, more oblivious, than I was, or else to be unafraid, or sluttier, or more radical—a *provocateur*—and many times I'd be tripped up, or caught out, and burnt by the exposure. (Torres 52)

In the absence of a definite meaning, the narrator is left to try and craft one for himself.

One of the novel's best examples of fragmented storytelling is when the narrator details the relationship between him and Liam, his former lover. The story begins at the end, the relationship is already over, and they've reconciled. The narrator dives back into memory, detailing his attempts to move on from Liam, then the breakup and its aftermath, finally ending with the beginning of their relationship. Though the story comes in non-linear fragments, the full picture is unified by the end. At the end of the passage, the narrator says "...we're on the slope of a mountain, in the dark, wondering what in hell we've signed ourselves up for, and how it's all going to play" (Torres

247). This quote exemplifies Torres's strategy for character development in the novel. The reader is thrust into an unfamiliar situation without all the pieces, and yet what they are given engages them enough to press on to see how they'll fit together.

*Blackouts* is presented as a story rooted in reality and Torres helps solidify this idea with the inclusion of historical images and poetry. These inclusions add layers to the story, making the story feel all the more real. Many times throughout the novel the narrator will describe a memory, such as another person or a location. Turning the page, the reader will find a photograph that matches the narrator's description, giving the narrator's words a sense of validity. The original context of the image is stripped away and they become re-signified as markers of the narrator's existence. These images also lend themselves to the mysticism of Juan Gay's character. As he details his life story, he reveals that at one point as a child he was under the care of Jan Gay and her partner Zhenya. Turning the page, a photo of Jan and Zhenya with a small child appears. Suddenly, the reader is left wondering whether or not Juan was a real person or not. While he is ultimately revealed to be a work of fiction, Torres's inclusion of images into the story helps to pull the reader into the world.

Poetry also plays a role in grounding the world of *Blackouts*. Much of the novel concerns Juan's feelings towards *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns*. Juan dislikes the book, owing to the fact that it editorializes a study of gay and lesbian people, framing them as perverse and immoral. Juan wishes for *Sex Variants* to be reinterpreted to highlight its original intent: to display the lives of people as they are. Torres takes this wish upon himself, injecting sections of blackout poetry he created from real pages of the *Sex Variants* study. The inclusion of these poems further amplifies the reality of the novel by connecting its fiction to the real world.

In conclusion, *Blackouts* is a narrative of fragmentation and unification. The story is told in pieces, bouncing back and forth from past to present, dwelling in memory and the gaps in between. The inclusion of historical photos and blackout poetry adds additional pieces, and like a collage, Justin Torres ultimately combines them to create something new.