

You Have Been Misconnected

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In August 2019, Jean-Pierre Meston, an eighty-six-year-old Parisian, struck up a conversation with a *jolie dame* on the 46 bus. It turned out they had been born just a month apart and both had battled cancer. Having fallen “under the charm of this pretty lady,” Jean-Pierre descended from the bus without asking for her name and number, which he immediately regretted. “I am an idiot,” he wrote afterwards in a letter to her. He made twenty-five copies and posted them along the bus route. Street cleaners regularly tore them down, but he returned each day to post them again.¹

Jean-Pierre stood out as quaint because of his reliance on old technologies—pen and paper, copy machine. He and the *jolie dame* crossed paths on physical platforms and infrastructures, and he relied on these again to find her. In many ways, however, the letter to this mysterious woman fits in with notices that appear on online forums. Personal ads tightly condense within them a personal backstory, even in their articulation of generalized desire.² This article focuses on a subcategory of personals that is a vernacular genre

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1. Noëlle Ly, “Paris: à 86 Ans, Jean-Pierre Recherche la ‘Jolie Dame’ Rencontrée dans le Bus,” *Le Parisien*, 24 Aug. 2019, www.leparisien.fr/info-paris-ile-de-france-oise/paris-a-86-ans-jean-pierre-recherche-la-jolie-dame-rencontree-dans-le-bus-24-08-2019-8138643.php

2. See Alaina Lemon, “Hermeneutic Algebra: Solving for Love, Time/Space, and Value in Putin-Era Personal Ads,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 18 (Sep. 2008): 236–67.

in its own right, narrating an unexpected meeting, the finding of a face in the crowd that stands out from the others and then disappears. The most widespread form of such texts appears on Craigslist, an online classified ads site founded in 1995 by Craig Newmark, in a section called “Missed Connections.”

Craigslist added the “Missed Connections” category in 2000, when employees reportedly noticed the recurrence of these posts in their regular personals section.³

It was Friday afternoon, Sept. 27, around 5:40. You stood in front of me, holding on because the car was crowded. I asked you if you wanted to sit. You declined. You were getting off at the next stop. I never got the opportunity to introduce myself. If only I had three stops. I don’t even know if people ever look at this or not, but it’s worth a shot. I really hope I run into you again. In a city of 3 million people, I know it’s a crap shoot. But, I’ll take a gamble. I’ll know it’s you once you describe your hair, complexion, and what you wore. And if you paid half attention to me, I had something I was carrying. Tell me what that was.⁴

Sometimes called “I Saw You” ads (in the *Chicago Reader* and New York’s *Village Voice*) or “Rush Hour Crush” (in London’s *Metro News*), Craigslist didn’t invent missed connections, which we can treat as a penumbra of categories, but it did spread them far and wide, particularly in North America in the early 2000s. A 2005 *New York Times* article reported that San Franciscans were posting eight thousand missed connections on Craigslist every month, which comes to 258 per day. New York came in second, with seven thousand per month.⁵ The peak missed connections era may have passed, but the phenomenon persists. They normally narrate a brief moment, but silent crushes also unfold for years: “We’ve waived to each other many times

3. See Jennifer 8. Lee, “Romance Beckons (in case You Missed It),” *New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2005, www.nytimes.com/2005/02/23/nyregion/romance-beckons-in-case-you-missed-it.html. See also Jessa Lingel, *An Internet for the People: The Politics and Promise of Craigslist* (Princeton, N.J., 2020).

4. Anonymous, “Blue Line Beautiful on Friday Afternoon (Damen and Milwaukee, Blue Line),” Craigslist, 28 Sep. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org. We are unable to provide URLs to individual missed connections posts as Craigslist removes them after a short period of time.

5. See Lee, “Romance Beckons.”

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as we head off to work in the morning But we finally introduced ourselves on the day you were loading up your truck. Wish we had done that sooner.”⁶

Missed connections call out publicly for intimacy, renewing the city as a site of erotic potential. They articulate desire and anxiety surrounding contact—of eyes and bodies—across channels of transportation and communication. As they do so, they characterize cities according to the infrastructures and commercial spaces where chance meetings occur. Ads balance the banal and the extraordinary. The crowd of the daily commute gives rise to the meet-cute. Each post helps reconstitute a space and time of potential on the internet and in the city, for the individual writing the post and for the wider public. The sparse nature of these texts invites projection and remediation.⁷ These posts are the focus of this article, in an attempt to understand *missing* and the allure of fleeting contact in the city.

I began comparing missed connections posts from Chicago, New York, and Toronto in late August 2019, collecting over two hundred from each city over the course of a month. There was enough consistency across cities (and internal variability) that I turned my attention to Chicago, where I was living at the time. Over the course of the following year, I collected and cataloged over nine hundred posts from the city and its surrounding communities. I organized them as a folklorist might, pulling dominant traits and order of progression to chart the typical development of a post (fig. 1).⁸ Jessa Lingel argues that Craigslist embodies Web 1.0 values and aesthetics that include minimalism, anonymity, and serendipity, which have become scarce in the gentrification of the internet that has followed.⁹ The site’s simple design and the possibilities it still offers for posting (almost) anything lend the site an aura of wildness, perhaps all the more special because it has survived.

Missed connections can begin and end in almost any way, offering a “blank slate” as an affordance.¹⁰ Unlike similar ads in printed newspapers, they have no limit in length. As a result, they range widely in the level of detail they offer. Patterns become quickly evident, nonetheless, in glancing through these posts. Many follow a strikingly coherent basic structure, these elements often appearing in more or less the same order: (1) you/the city;

6. Anonymous, “Lauren Who Just Moved (Naperville),” Craigslist, 2 Oct. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org.

7. See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

8. See V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, ed. Louis A. Wagner (Austin, Tex., 1968).

9. See Lingel, *An Internet for the People*.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

Make a Missed Connection

1. You/The City*	2. Me†	3a. Our eyes met.	3b. Other connections	4. We parted.	5. Regret	6. Invitation	7. ...so I know it's you.‡
Back to Back at Berlin (12/27/2020)	I recycled an ink cartridge. (12/4/2019)	We locked eyes...You have a beautiful set (1/23/2020)	We rode standing in opposite doorways. (9/26/2019)	you got away (8/28/2019)	Wish I said something (11/8/2019)	Fancy another duet? (12/7/2019)	my art medium. (11/12/2019)
My checkout at Home Depot (9/24/2019)	I was picking up trash. M4F (5/4/2020)	you made eye contact with my heart & soul! (1/26/2020)	We met at a fence line, talked for a few minutes. (3/1/2020)	An old friend ran into me and I lost you. (12/7/2019)	I wanted to dance with you! (8/25/2019)	plz take me for a drive (12/21/2019)	what company I work for (9/29/2019)
You have been cutting my hair for 20 years (9/13/2019)	you thought I looked like Bill Pullman (10/1/2019)	I caught you staring at me and then maybe you caught me blushing. (10/1/2019)	When the lights came up we were on stage shirtless. (1/27/2020)	...you were already backing out and leaving. (8/27/2019)	wish I would not have turned the other way! (8/28/2019)	let's talk more over coffee. (8/28/2019)	what stood out about me (8/27/2019)
the pretty girl I saw walking her cats on Milwaukee (8/31/2020)	ME. MARRIED MALE (52) PLAYING SLOTS NEXT TO YOU. (9/28/2019)	We were exchanging glances in the hardware (nuts & bolts) section. (11/8/2019)	You drew my blood and asked if I went to Growlers. (12/21/2019)	before I could say anything you looked away. (12/3/2019)	Should've done the real life swipe right, ah well. (11/1/2019)	would love to make it up to you. (8/27/2019)	Describe what I was wearing or what I was doing, so I know it's you. (12/13/2019)
You had on a smile that I could see behind your mask. (9/14/2019)	my heels, toes too, they were aching for sunset cobblestone (2/28/2020)	locked eyes for about 3-4 seconds and then we passed each other. (3/2/2020)	You were washing your bulldog next to me washing mine. (10/4/2019)	People... crowding on the train...distanced you were gone. (2/27/2020)	Should have tried to get your number. Facepalm emoji. (9/1/2019)	very much want to see you and share this with you (8/28/2020)	So I know it's you...tell me what were the few words we exchanged via lip reading? (1/21/2020)
You are an older mentor type guy who likes to use hypnosis. (12/7/2019)	I travel with my own water...He has been with me for many years. (3/1/2020)	We made eye contact and smiled from a distance...I couldn't take my eyes off you (10/18/2019)	I nervously showed you a photograph of your Maryland doppelgänger. (9/1/2020)	I had to pee and when I came out you were gone. (12/22/2019)	I wish we had made a connection before it closed. ... (3/30/2020)	Maybe we could go take our dogs for a walk in some local forest preserve. (11/4/2019)	what my hair looks like and what stop I got off at (and what song you were listening to!) (11/4/2019)
The broken drumstick got caught in your hair when they threw out to the crowd. (12/10/2019)	I was on a silent retreat wandering the grounds when I ventured into the gorgeous sanctuary. (9/28/2019)	We kept glancing at each other...you had turned around (the sun had been in your eyes), and we kept glancing at each other. (8/27/2019)	We were 2 guys with our parents looking at stuff for our rooms I guess. (12/7/2019)	Thought we were going to look up but you had to leave suddenly. (12/1/2019)	Wanted to give you my number but I was with my mom. (12/7/2019)	...meet up somewhere that isn't a stuffy silent room with a two-way mirror (12/2/2019)	Let me know what product I bought if you remember or what else I did while at the store. (12/4/2019)
You ate a piece of candy that was taped to the wall at the grand stop. (11/5/2019)	I'm the lonely older dude who was looking for an older woman...I live alone w/my cat in Forest Park, (12/7/2019)	our eyes met and I think you wanted me to say something to you but you were with I believe your boy friend. You slightly waved and winked. (10/1/2019)	You sat next to me and we were both falling asleep and our knees were touching. (8/26/2019)	We ended the conversation with "I'm sure I'll bump into you again here..." (3/24/2020)	i should have hugged u tighter ... the last time I saw you (3/23/2020)	what if we had a chair,some rope and a desire to do something 'kinky'? (1/18/2020)	And if you paid half attention to me, I had something I was carrying. Tell me what that was. (9/28/2019)
Mysterious Asian Woman You had just came from the police headquarters and joked that you weren't a wanted criminal... (9/24/2019)	you tried to start a conversation with me, but I was pretty rude...3 days of smoking cigars and drinking whiskey left me omery and tired. (8/27/2019)	so yes I stopped at the sight of you well across that boulevard but of course you have grown used to not doing the same. suit and topcoat yes but I saw the flinch of your conflict from that far (2/28/2020)	our discussion began with the office wanting more for less and taxes then eventually morphed to your relatively small shoe size and your new boots (11/3/2019)	Missed out last week when a friend introduced me to you but did not have a way to write down your number. Thinking I would see you yesterday, I brought plenty of pens. (2/25/2020)	I wasn't sure if you wanted to talk about it more but I should have asked. (2/1/2020)	Please let me know if you are interested in looking at my pictures of being nickled? (3/1/2020)	Let me know what my hair looks like and what stop I got off at (and what song you were listening to!). (11/4/2019)

* Person and place often appear together, inextricable from one another.

† A description of the author is often omitted.

‡ The phrase "so I know it's you" appeared, for example, in posts on 8/28/2019, 8/29/2019, 8/31/2019, 9/24/2019, 9/25/2019, 9/27/2019, 9/30/2019, 10/2/2019, 10/4/2019, 11/13/2019, 12/3/2019, 12/13/2019, 12/15/2019, 12/16/2019, 12/17/2019, 12/18/2019, 1/21/2020, and 1/21/2020.

FIGURE 1. The flexible formula for a missed connection figure is provided here, with real examples. Mix and match or invent your own.

(2) me; (3) our eyes met; (4) we parted; (5) regret; (6) invitation; (7) so I know it's you. It is rare to find a post that includes them all, but figure 1 offers real examples for each. Predictability does not diminish creativity. As Mikhail Bakhtin argued when characterizing daily utterances, "Our repertoire of oral (and written) speech genres is rich. . . . Even in the most free, the most unconstrained conversation, we cast our speech in definite generic forms, sometimes rigid and trite ones, sometimes more flexible, plastic, and creative ones (everyday communication also has creative genres at its disposal)."¹¹ Bakhtin's point was not to undermine our appreciation for the possibilities of speech as constrained to pat phrases. He emphasized the range of genres we command and their necessity, as radical openness would make spoken communication impossible. The flexible formula of the missed connections post offers infinite possibilities of uniquely exquisite moments that pierce the monotony of running for coffee or atop treadmills. Finding the posts rich with poetic qualities despite myriad typos, I attended to the stylistic characteristics of those that stood out and those that fit in, including posts that circulated as especially beautiful and were remediated in articles and in artwork.¹² Writers skillfully combine the banal and the precise: the addressee's attractiveness and the exchange of glances combine with details of what was ordered or what was worn, capturing the singularity of the encounter itself.

By studying the poetics of digital communication and treating missed connections as a vernacular genre, this article attends to everyday affects and aesthetics as they emerge and transform online.¹³ Missed connections create a nexus among bodies, cities, and texts, motivated by twin impulses of regret and desire, allowing readers to take pleasure in the sometimes-painful promises offered by a passing glance amid the hustle of the city. I look at them to consider what they can teach us about connection and missing. In the next section, I define missing as an affect-laden act and examine its relationship to movement and mediation. I then trace the emergence of newspaper personals in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century and the missed connections posts that became popular at the beginning of the twenty-first in order to emphasize the nagging ambivalence surrounding them. The "Making a Missed Connection" section of this article unpacks

11. M. M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tex., 2010), p. 78.

12. See Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 350–77.

13. See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, N.C., 2007); and Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (New York, 2014).

key elements of typical posts. They move intimacy through various channels—of eyes, transport, and communication infrastructures. Ambiguity—of gazes and of texts—leaves encounters open for interpretation, which writing on flâneurs, queer desire, and utopia helps illuminate. The final section shows how missed connections, as dense narratives of contact and rupture, offer pleasure, hope, and longing that extend beyond the writer and addressee as exemplified and encouraged through remediations. These posts and the creative sharing of them offer a reading public the opportunity to project themselves into these narratives. In doing so, they reanimate the city as a space of possibility for unexpected intimacy.

You Got Away: Missing, Movement, and Mediation

Missing locates longing in a particular other. An act often hopeful, it articulates the possibility that a separation, however painful, might be overcome. Like nostalgia, missing is “a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.”¹⁴ However, missed connections locate that fantasy outside of the imagined fictional home. Susan Stewart recognizes the interlocking of longing and mediation when she writes about “narrative’s desire to invent a realizable world, a world which ‘works.’ In this sense, every narrative is a miniature and every book a microcosm.”¹⁵ The miniature narrative of the missed connection creates a spare world, pregnant with the desire for intimacy, itself “an aspiration for a narrative about something shared.”¹⁶ Missed connections articulate the promises and vulnerabilities inherent in intimacy. Various channels articulate longing, which then become infused with affective energy. They moreover imagine—and make—a cityscape capable of transforming a stranger, a fellow city dweller, into a lover. José Esteban Muñoz describes queerness as “a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present.”¹⁷ The messages act as channels of desire, queer in their open anonymity, that imagine alternative relations between persons and places.

Person and place—addressee and address—are often inextricable from one another and dominate the titles of missed-connections posts. *Missing* can describe the maintenance of intimacy over vast distances, but near connections can occur just outside one’s home or at the threshold between public

14. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), p. xiii.

15. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C. 1993), pp. xi–xii.

16. Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Winter 1998): 281; hereafter abbreviated “I.”

17. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, 2019), p. 1; hereafter abbreviated *CU*.

and private—when one is accepting a delivery or walking the dog. Lauren Berlant proposes we consider intimacy’s emergence from “mobile processes of attachment” that don’t fit easily into institutionally organized spaces of public and private (“I,” p. 284). Such intimacies, like marginalized desires, might be easier to hide in plain sight in urban spaces; thus “most large nineteenth-century cities in Western Europe and North America had areas where men could cruise for other men.”¹⁸ Missed connections articulate unruly attractions. While “marginal sexual worlds” are frequently portrayed as “bleak and dangerous,” online ads offer narratives that cast chance encounters as rife with potential—dangerous, shameful, or miraculous.¹⁹

The yearning of missed connections is at once embodied and communicative, involving questions of mediation and movement. John Durham Peters has described the conceptual history of *communication* as “a registry of modern longings,” which “evokes a utopia where nothing is misunderstood.”²⁰ Rather than a straightforward transference of information, the fantasy surrounding pure communication produces feelings of ambivalence, ambiguity, and failure. We can look at everyday mediations of missing as particularly affect-laden articulations of this pervasive attempt to use communication to overcome the distance between us. Missed connections anchor the wish for contact to a past moment of movement through infrastructures and enterprises that invite encounter even as they push people along and past one another. These texts make use of landmarks that populate the cityscape—train stops, intersections, shops, and parks. “Crossing the Williamsburg bridge, I liked that you were looking out at the water instead of your phone.”²¹

While communication has consistently presented itself as “at once bridge and chasm,” missed connections continue to articulate hope for the former.²² They call for a return to a moment on an actual overpass where eyes briefly met, where something almost happened but didn’t but still could.

Missing makes note of a personal history of sensory contact that has been lost, its loss noted. Georg Simmel describes the urbanization of the late nineteenth century as affording new opportunities for strangers to encounter one another via cities’ new transportation infrastructures such as the train. The new mix of proximity and speed give rise, he theorizes, to increased numbers

18. Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, N.C., 2011), p. 157.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

20. John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago, 2001), p. 2.

21. Anonymous, “Cowboy Boot Tattoo on the M Train (Williamsburg),” Craigslist, 1 Sep. 2019, newyork.craigslist.org.

22. Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, p. 5.

of encounters and a concomitant increase in loneliness. Isolation is most acute not when one is actually alone but rather when “one is a stranger, without relations, among many physically close persons, at a ‘party,’ on a train, or in the traffic of a large city.”²³ Strangers encounter one another, only to find that they are going different ways. Infrastructures (and the details surrounding them) help define the particularity of the encounter itself, along with characterizing the city.

One result of the rise of mass transit is the dominance of eye over ear. The classic missed connection involves an exchange of glances and often no more than that. While exposure to strange faces increases with new public transportation technologies, the exchange of glances becomes exceptional. Simmel sees this as an inevitable reaction to the increased density of sensory information that would otherwise overload the city dweller.²⁴ This confounds Friedrich Engels, however, who writes of the strange sociality of London:

The hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks crowding past each other, are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? . . . And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common . . . and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement . . . while it occurs to no man to honour another with so much as a glance.²⁵

Engels implies that the city creates an opportunity for different classes to recognize one another as equals. Instead, they look past one another.

Rather than despairing at this shift, for Walter Benjamin it creates the conditions for the flâneur’s eroticization of the crowd in the late nineteenth century. He describes the phenomenon of “love at last sight,” using Charles Baudelaire’s “To a Passer-By” to draw out this argument (“P,” p. 45). The poem reads like a missed connection: “A flash . . . then night!—O lovely fugitive, / I am suddenly reborn from your swift glance; / Shall I never see you till eternity?” (quoted in “P,” p. 45) In Baudelaire’s poem, the traffic is “deafening,” making speech impossible, and so the narrator can only drink from the woman’s eyes. Benjamin argues that “the *never* marks the high point of the encounter, when the poet’s passion seems to be frustrated but in reality bursts out of him like a flame” (“P,” p. 45). The brevity of the meeting matches the

23. Georg Simmel, “Isolation,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York, 1950), p. 119.

24. See *ibid.*, pp. 409–24.

25. Quoted in Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1983), p. 58; hereafter abbreviated “P.”

city's tempo, a flickering glance and then the person is gone. The impossibility of reconnecting is invigorating, reaffirming the city's size and density. Missed connections reject "the never," insisting on possibility, even decades later: "You attended Iowa State University in the fall of 1984. . . . I am in Chicago tonight if you see this."²⁶

I Saw You: Before and after Missed Connections

Similar ads have been found at different moments for the past one hundred fifty years, at least. However, the turn of the past two centuries saw heightened ambivalence about personal ads interlinked with anxiety surrounding changes in transportation and communication infrastructures. As young people moved to urban centers in the late nineteenth century, they lost access to the familial and social ties that would have assisted them in finding partners. Personal ads became a necessary evil to some. Singles used newspaper ads to find partners for marriage in late Tsarist Russia; German Jewish newspapers regularly featured similar advertisements from the turn of the twentieth century, later offering a lifeline for those seeking to flee the Nazi occupation or to make a new start.²⁷

New faces in new crowds create an opportunity to describe the crowd itself in texts by Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe that Benjamin analyzes. While the former describes love at last sight, Poe treats the crowd as the "refuge of a criminal" ("P," p. 45). Benjamin writes as if the danger and the eroticism of the crowd are two different attitudes toward the same object, yet we might treat these as inextricable. Baudelaire describes his passerby as giving him the "pleasure that kills," after all.²⁸ Personals sections replicate the ambivalence of the crowd on the two-dimensional space of the page or screen, presenting the reader with a sea of ads that offers danger and disappointment but also perhaps love. In his cultural history of turn-of-the-century Berlin, Tyler Carrington writes, "The inherent riskiness of an unknown rendezvous, not to mention the newspaper ads that often occasioned such encounters, thus colored this path to intimacy in a menacing hue."²⁹ New technologies for intimacy prove deadly for Freida Kleim, the woman at the center of Carrington's

26. Anonymous, "Wendy, ISU (Ames Iowa)," Craigslist, 28 Aug. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

27. See Stephen Lovell, "Finding a Mate in Late Tsarist Russia: The Evidence from Marriage Advertisements," *Cultural and Social History* 4, no. 1 (2007): 51–72, and Sarah E. Wobick-Segev, "'Looking for a Nice Jewish Girl. . .': Personal Ads and the Creation of Jewish Families in Germany before and after the Holocaust," *Jewish Social Studies* 23 (Spring/Summer 2018): 38–66.

28. Baudelaire, "To a Woman Passing By," in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (New York, 1993), p. 189.

29. Tyler Carrington, *Love at Last Sight: Dating, Intimacy, and Risk in Turn-of-the-Century Berlin* (New York, 2019), p. 119.

study. Freida's own love at last sight ends with her murder at the hands of a man she met through the personals.

Writers of the late nineteenth century point to personals as indexing and contributing to urban depravity. In 1870, Joseph Hertford self-published *Personals; or, Perils of the Period*, in which he connects personal ads to broader dangers of trafficking women in New York.³⁰ In *Lights and Shadows of New York Life; or, The Sights and Sensations of the Great City*, James D. McCabe places his "Personals" chapter under "The Social Evil" section (rather than "The Press").³¹ Missed connection-type ads already appear here, though not labeled as such. Hertford pities women who merely made innocent eye contact with a sick stranger and inspired such responses. Yet he also condemns any who would reply to such an advance: "If she is a vile woman, undoubtedly she will do so, and that establishment will deliver her letter and do its part in helping on the assignation."³² The communication infrastructures that enable such transactions—the press and the post—thus act as accomplices to sexual deviance.

Personal ads continued throughout the twentieth century, but the rise of digital culture at the turn of the twenty-first century reignites, with particular vigor, ambivalence regarding new information infrastructures and the contact they afford. Excitement around *cyberspace* was especially effective in "imagining electronic networks as a terrestrial version of outer space" by emphasizing qualities of "openness and endlessness," this fantastic space nonetheless rife with risk.³³ The romance of cyberspace hung on a discourse of frontiers, of wilderness waiting to be conquered, renewing tensions between connectivity and loneliness along with concern that vulnerable populations might be used or seduced.³⁴ Even before rampant circulation of video content, users invented novel forms of sexual brutality. Julian Dibbell describes the individual and collective trauma experienced in the early 1990s' "semifictional digital other-worlds" of multiuser dimensions (MUDs), when a user entered one of these text-based communities and carried out heinous acts of sexual violence entirely through writing.³⁵ In writing of sexuality as crucial for understanding

30. See Joseph Hertford, *Personals; or, Perils of the Period* (New York, 1870), p. 207.

31. James D. McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York Life; or, The Sights and Sensations of the Great City* (New York, 1872), p. 24. The book includes word-for-word excerpts from Hertford's text without crediting Hertford.

32. Hertford, *Personals*, p. 207.

33. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), p. 51.

34. See Thomas Streeter, "The Moment of Wired," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Summer 2005): 755–79.

35. Julian Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace (or TINYSOCIETY, and How to Make One)," www.juliandibbell.com/articles/a-rape-in-cyberspace/. See also Dibbell, *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (New York, 1999).

both the risks and (capitalist) benefits of being online, Wendy Chun argues that “anxiety over or desire for online contact is expressed as anxiety over or desire for sexual exposure.”³⁶ Online personals emerged as part of a more general excitement about the ways that digital and real-life encounters could overlap.

Placing an ad in Craigslist is free, easy, and anonymous. But—many have been quick to worry—at what cost? As Craigslist grew in popularity as a site for casual sex, mainstream media and social scientists characterized its personals as catering to sexual deviance.³⁷ Alleged prevalence of sex trafficking constituted the primary concern, with media coverage on the dangers of the site peaking in 2009 in the widespread reporting on a “Craigslist Killer” who murdered sex workers he had met online.³⁸ Craigslist shut down its personals section in 2018 in response to two controversial bills in the US Congress that threatened to hold platforms accountable for users’ human trafficking crimes (though the effects of FOSTA-SESTA have arguably been more serious for sex workers than purported victims of sex trafficking).³⁹ The missed-connections section survived the purge but was moved to the community category.

Though Craigslist hasn’t significantly changed its design, users and journalists nonetheless remark on a shift in the possibilities it offers. Craigslist is increasingly treated as a relic of an internet culture that has passed—its appearance described as having a retro feel. The now-defunct personals and casual-encounters sections offered anonymous ways for users to post stigmatized desires.⁴⁰ One journalist described it longingly as “the Wild West” of the internet, a time and space that had permitted a confluence of “spammers, weirdos trying to collect photos of strangers, and horny jerks eager to e-mail you dick pics,”⁴¹ identifying Craigslist personals as encapsulating the settler-colonialist spirit of an earlier internet.⁴² Users sometimes turn to missed

36. Chun, *Control and Freedom*, p. 13.

37. See Kelly Beckham and Ariane Prohaska. “Deviant Men, Prostitution, and the Internet: A Qualitative Analysis of Men Who Killed Prostitutes Whom They Met Online,” *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences* 7 (Dec. 2012): 635–48. See also Chelsea Reynolds, “‘Craigslist Is Nothing More than an Internet Brothel’: Sex Work and Sex Trafficking in U.S. Newspaper Coverage of Craigslist Sex Forums,” *Journal of Sex Research* 58, no. 6 (2021): 681–93.

38. Reynolds, “‘Craigslist Is Nothing More than an Internet Brothel,’” p. 685.

39. See Lingel, *An Internet for the People*. See also Lura Chamberlain, “FOSTA: A Hostile Law with a Human Cost,” *Fordham Law Review* 87 (Apr. 2019): 2171.

40. See Lingel, *An Internet for the People*.

41. Ryan Smith, “Remembering Chicago Craigslist Personals, the Wild West of Internet Dating,” *Chicago Reader*, 23 Mar. 2018, www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2018/03/23/remembering-chicago-craigslist-personals-the-wild-west-of-internet-dating

42. See Streeeter, “The Moment of Wired.”

connections posts to try to reconnect with people they met not on the L, but on “cl [Craigslist] in the old days . . . lol old days.”⁴³

Some posts chastise readers who believe genuine missed connections still exist. Regularly posts appear with titles that resemble missed connections but with text in the body that immediately mocks readers, in strange prose, for their gullibility: “What is this the early on two thousands?” referring to the last time, apparently, one could find real people using the missed connections section of Craigslist.⁴⁴ Since then, “no one has been able to find a real woman on this site since Trump was continue to firing individuals upon TV!”⁴⁵

These posts warn that the only things left on missed connections are scammers and “the five-O”—the police, presumably working to catch those in violation of sex trafficking laws.⁴⁶ These posts recommend an alternative site where one can find a genuine hookup community. Thus, Craigslist missed connections present a dual set of threats—of becoming a victim of sex trafficking or of getting caught in a trap set by the police.

Other online spaces for narrating chance meetings continue to emerge: dating and social media applications such as Lex and websites such as Blew My Chance feature missed-connections ads.⁴⁷ Video games such as *Journey* (2012) create virtual worlds that offer brief encounters, some of which, like missed connections, turn to an alternative online forum to narrate the connection afterwards.⁴⁸ However, Craigslist missed connections—like the personals sections in nineteenth-century newspapers—allow such narratives to mingle among ads for housing or work. This offers any reader or user of the site the pleasure of skimming the ads without necessarily seeking them out.

Making a Missed Connection

How should we characterize contemporary missed connections today? Among those lamenting a past (real or imagined) when Craigslist offered a site of radical openness, missed connections might seem the vanilla cousin to casual encounters or an artifact of 1.0 web culture. However, the flexible

43. Anonymous, “The First Time We Seen Each Other,” Craigslist, 29 Aug. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

44. Anonymous, “My Imperfection Makes Myself Beautiful (Chicago),” Craigslist, 13 Sept. 2020, chicago.craigslist.org

45. Anonymous, “Fresh Horizons.. (Chicago),” Craigslist, 25 Sept. 2020, chicago.craigslist.org

46. Ibid.

47. See Lex, thisislex.app, and Blew My Chance, www.blewmychance.com/search.aspx

48. Patrick Jagoda characterizes *Journey* as an affective experience bringing together questions of space and contact with strangers. Jagoda cites the game as an example of network aesthetics across media that emphasizes connection. Silent encounters in the game inspire remediation through the blog *Journey Stories*, journeystories.tumblr.com/. See Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago, 2016).

consistency of the genre enables continued play within the digital space it occupies. It serves as a humble but persistent site of hope for surprising intimacy among strangers. Missed connections narrate the encounter in an order that diagrams the temporality of the interpersonal, spatial, and sensory engagement between the city, the addressee, and the narrator.⁴⁹ The spare text leaves the traces of a history that only two people know but which we are all invited to imagine: “You refunded me the milk.”⁵⁰

The briefest descriptions of one seeking a match could powerfully evoke poignant details of one’s past: “You had just came from the police headquarters and joked that you weren’t a wanted criminal as you walked away.”⁵¹

The posts, like the stranger leaving the police station, leave us wanting more.

Missing isn’t inherently queer, and male gazes at sleeping women certainly abound in missed connections. Yet so do interactions between men in home-improvement stores (“exchanging glances in the hardware [nuts & bolts] section”) along with ambiguities that leave texts open.⁵² As queer theory has defined itself in contrast to all casts of normativity, we might identify a queerness of desire even in the gazes of men admiring women on the train in this century and in previous ones, as the anonymous writer casts himself as aberrant or transgressive.⁵³ Writing on queerness illuminates the ambiguities of missed connections and the ambivalence they produce. They can contain as much or as little information as they wish. They can offer details that would only be recognizable to the right person, or they can be so vague that any number of readers could identify themselves as the addressee. Before Craigslist personals disappeared and the missed-connections section was relocated to the community category, ads indicated the gendered identities of both writer and addressee. An earlier study shows, perhaps unsurprisingly, that men wrote most often, that they more frequently addressed women than men, and that F4F (female for female) were the rarest posts to find.⁵⁴ However, internet archives of Craigslist missed connections show that they expanded beyond the binary to include configurations such as M4FM (male for female and male) and T4T (trans for trans). Obligatory designation of genders has disappeared. Posts

49. See Michael Silverstein, “Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life,” *Language & Communication* 23, no. 3 (2003): 193–229.

50. Anonymous, “Instacart (Chicago),” Craigslist, 26 Aug. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

51. Anonymous, “Mysterious Asian Woman,” Craigslist, 24 Sept. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

52. Anonymous, “Big Bellied Home Depot Man 55+ (Riverside),” Craigslist, 8 Nov. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

53. See Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, “Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” *Differences* 26 (May 2015): 1–25.

54. See Dorothy Gambrell, “Missed Connections: Seen but Not Spoken to: An Atlas of Where We’re (Almost) Finding Love,” *Psychology Today* 46, no. 1 (2013): 112.

often make use of a general *you* and offer descriptors of shoe color or striking features. Like the use of second-person address in poems of the New York School, the reader is left to imagine or project gender and sexuality onto the text whether or not the author actually seeks such broad identification.⁵⁵

Actual postings are more heterogeneous than figure 1 suggests. Some of the most interesting posts are the outliers—the search for witnesses of a traffic accident, queries after a dog that the writer almost adopted and has been thinking about ever since, or messages inscrutable for an outside reader that are more like song dedications on the radio. A frequent subgenre of missed connections is what I have labeled the lost connection: a post describing an encounter or relationship of a distant past—a high-school sweetheart, a college crush, a half-brother born around 1945 who was given up for adoption by a shared mother.⁵⁶ These can include names and places where the addressee used to work, along with acknowledgments that the addressee is perhaps unavailable. As with regular missed connections, such messages express hope: “HIT me up if ur marriage is not good.”⁵⁷

Rather than a cruel optimism, lost connections sometimes suggest optimistic cruelty, a willingness to imagine that another’s misfortune could turn out in the author’s favor.⁵⁸ Some ads begin with recounting a specific encounter but then pivot to a general invitation: “If you are not the woman but think you may want to meet me for coffee also respond.”⁵⁹

If the majority of readers of each post are not the one with whom the writer actually connected, the writer presumes that at least some are reading with the wish to be addressed in such a way, a desire to be interpellated as one who caught—or could catch—someone else’s eye.

Some go far beyond eye contact, describing sexual encounters with a stranger whose number was lost or misentered or who has the writer’s number but has not called. Craigslist users find novel strategies to articulate their desires, with invitations for casual encounters regularly appearing in the missed connections section. When cities began to shut down in the spring of 2020, standard missed-connections posts became fewer and farther between as there were scant opportunities for chance meetings. Posts increasingly resembled

55. See Terrell Scott Herring, “Frank O’Hara’s Open Closet.” *PMLA* 117 (May 2002): 414–27. See also Ryan D. Sullivan, “Not You: Frank O’Hara and the Poetics of ‘Personism,’” *Textual Practice* 34 (Mar. 2020): 419–36.

56. See Anonymous, “Looking for Half Brother (Chicago),” Craigslist, 19 Dec. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

57. Anonymous, “Janet G.,” Craigslist, 30 Aug. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

58. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011).

59. Anonymous, “Short Woman at the Home Depot,” Craigslist, 14 Sept. 2020, chicago.craigslist.org

the casual encounters of the “old CL,”⁶⁰ with writers offering to drain “clogged pipes”⁶¹ or identifying themselves as “bored moms” looking to exchange texts and possibly more.⁶² Writers expressed concern for out-of-work exotic dancers and offered to help out however they could. When restrictions eased and people reemerged, genuine missed connections reappeared, albeit with masks adding to the mystery.

Craigslist missed connections’ move from the personals section to the community section is appropriate—not because missed connections users constitute a community per se. Rather, the cities and the crowds that populate them are as essential to the posts as the two people who nearly connected. Missed connections offer a collective characterization of cityscape by attending to sites where strangers pass by one another, face after face, until one stands out, when another’s eyes meet yours. The crowd and the two faces that emerge from within it to lock eyes coconstitute one other. A 2013 *Psychology Today* piece illustrates the landscape of desire in the US based on one hundred Craigslist missed connections posts from each state.⁶³ Walmart was the top site for random run-ins with strangers in thirteen states. Commercial encounters dominated my own survey of Chicago. Shoppers bumped into one another at supermarkets and checked one another out in checkout aisles.

Benjamin identifies the flâneur’s empathy and identification with commodities as a particularity of the petty bourgeoisie of Baudelaire’s historical moment, of a class whose “share could at best be enjoyment, but never power” (“P,” p. 59). The rise of department stores in the nineteenth century created concern and excitement about the danger of the haptic rather than the visual, particularly regarding women. Male writers and shop owners at the time considered women “sensuous and irrational by nature.”⁶⁴ Incapable of resisting the new luxury goods at their fingertips, female shoppers would compulsively spend beyond their means or even steal, men feared. Shopping complexes—whether malls or big box stores—might be the modern-day equivalent of Benjamin’s arcades. Crowds and commodities intermingle and the boundaries between them blur: “I gave you a compliment in a store and you gave me a

60. Anonymous, “Missed Connection (Cgo. Hgts.),” Craigslist, 27 Sept. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

61. Anonymous, “Experienced Plummer Will Drain You Clogged Pipe,” Craigslist, 23 Apr. 2020, chicago.craigslist.org

62. Anonymous, “Bored Mom Given Up (Chicago),” Craigslist, 23 Aug. 2020, chicago.craigslist.org

63. See Gambrell, “Missed Connections,” p. 112.

64. Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana, Ill., 2012), p. 195.

hug.”⁶⁵ Missed-connections ads within commercial spaces suggest an intermingling of the senses as shoppers scan the aisles and rest their eyes on one another.

While commercial sites risk transforming persons into commodities, public transit offers a purer site of the paradigmatic post. Movement is key to enabling interaction, as Simmel pointed out. Brevity and intensity go hand-in-hand, as Baudelaire describes the “swift glance” through which he is reborn. In Chicago, trains were the top site for Craigslist missed connections in earlier studies and certainly appeared frequently in my own, albeit less often than in New York.⁶⁶ A post circulated in 2013 as the most beautiful missed connection ever features two individuals on the New York City Q train. Clad in glasses and books in hand, they go up and down the same line for sixty years without ever quite speaking: “I’ll talk to her before daybreak; I’ll talk to her before Tuesday. The longer I waited, the harder it got.”⁶⁷

Eventually, the addressee exits at Queensborough Plaza, and the writer stays on the train.⁶⁸

Transportation infrastructure of North America includes not only public transit, of course. In fact, only 5 percent of American commuters take it compared to more than 75 percent who drive to work alone. Chicago’s mix of missed connections occurring both on the train and on the road corresponds with its status as the Second City, with transit rates above average and driving rates slightly below (at 70 percent).⁶⁹ The rise of American car culture in the early twentieth century gave birth to a genre of folktale that floated around the US, rendering highways a site of paranormal possibility—that of the vanishing hitchhiker. Social scientists collecting these tales in the 1930s and early 1940s characterize the vanishing hitchhiker as a modern ghost: a girl or old woman appears by the side of the road; a passing car picks her up. But before they arrive at her destination, the driver turns around to discover that the

65. Anonymous, “You Gave Me a Hug (Chicago),” Craigslist, 6 Dec. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

66. Kate Dries, “Study Finds Chicago Trains Are Missed Connections Hub,” *WBEZ Chicago*, 8 Jun. 2011, www.wbez.org/stories/craigslist-study-finds-chicago-trains-are-a-hub-for-missed-connections/7cee2482-de7b-4091-afa5-d5286acbbf6f

67. Neetzan Zimmerman, “Somebody Went And Wrote the Ultimate Craigslist Missed Connection,” *Gawker*, 7 Aug. 2013, www.gawker.com/somebody-went-and-wrote-the-ultimate-craigslist-missed-1057443676

68. See *ibid.*

69. See Richard Florida, “The Great Divide in How Americans Commute to Work,” *Bloomberg*, 22 Jan. 2019, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-22/how-americans-commute-to-work-in-maps. In my own study I tried to be generous in what I counted as a meeting in transit by including sidewalks and roads in addition to trains and buses.

hitchhiker has disappeared.⁷⁰ As in missed connections, the place where the hitchhiker appeared and disappeared are key to who she is—or was. The vanishing hitchhiker is usually fragile and feminine, but tales of a hitchhiking thug disguised as an old lady also circulated in the early twentieth century.⁷¹ The mysterious passenger is at once alluring and dangerous.⁷²

Missed connections happen within vehicles, in Uber and Lyft rides, and among any combination of drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. Erving Goffman describes all of these as “vehicular units”—including the single individual walking down the street.⁷³ The unit’s main objective is to move through the traffic of others without colliding. This special coordination requires “civil inattention,” in which one acknowledges another’s presence but makes clear that they are not a target of special curiosity.⁷⁴ Between pedestrians, this takes “the special form of eyeing the other up to approximately eight feet . . . and then casting the eyes down as the other passes—a kind of dimming of lights.”⁷⁵ For Goffman, bodies become like cars passing in the night. We attend to one another only to prevent collision. This norm of avoiding excessive eye contact—the prohibition of staring—makes the gaze a powerful tool for gaining attention. The shared glance from a stranger offers both ecstasy and pain, like the potency of *nazar* in South Asia, which can act as poison or cure.⁷⁶

At times, eye contact is all that can happen without doing something unseemly. Hertford cites one newspaper ad requesting: “Will the lady . . . grant an interview to the gentleman that would have spoken if he had thought the place appropriate?”⁷⁷ Hertford wonders: If it was unseemly for the anonymous writer to approach the lady at the moment he saw her, what makes

70. See Richard K. Beardsley and Rosalie Hankey, “The Vanishing Hitchhiker,” *California Folklore Quarterly* 1 (Oct. 1942): 303–35 and “A History of the Vanishing Hitchhiker,” *California Folklore Quarterly* 2 (Jan. 1943): 13–25.

71. See Hankey, “California Ghosts.” *California Folklore Quarterly* 1 (Apr. 1942): 155–77.

72. Hitchhiking was considered relatively safe during this period, when carried out by white, clean-cut men. Later, the rise of countercultural movements would make hitchhiking into a feminist act, at the same time that hitchhiking campaigns increasingly warned of its dangers. See Jack Reid, *Roadside Americans: The Rise and Fall of Hitchhiking in a Changing Nation* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2020). See also Pamela Robertson Wojcik, “Whose Tale Gets Told?: The Whitewashing of Homelessness and Mobility,” *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture* 6, no. 5 (2021), www.mediapolisjournal.com/2021/12/whose-tale-gets-told/

73. Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York, 2010), p. 5.

74. Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York, 1966), p. 81.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

76. See Shaila Bhatti and Christopher Pinney, “Optic-Clash: Modes of Visuality in India,” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of India*, ed. Isabelle Clark-Decès (Malden, Mass., 2011), pp. 225–40.

77. Hertford, *Personals*, p. 208.

him think it is appropriate to address her in the newspaper? In missed connections, writers claim they kept their interactions at eye level because one of them was working, because they were too shy, or because third parties made anything more than eye contact awkward or dangerous. The presence of spouses, parents, and children impede writers from speaking. The anonymity of Craigslist offers a workaround.

Eye contact often occurs multiple times. The first exchange opens the opportunity for more. The last glance before parting affirms the connection. Eye contact is safer than speaking but more ambiguous. It is usually the minimum connection necessary to warrant a post (though occasionally a poster will admit they watched the addressee from their window or while the addressee was sleeping on the train). Some posts suggest the exceptional nature of any glance in the era of smartphones, such as one entitled, “Actually Not Glued to Your Phone (Pink Line).”⁷⁸ Interocular fields—the “interweaving of ocular experiences” across sites—increasingly include screens competing for commuter gazes, so that the possibility of eye contact becomes all the more exceptional.⁷⁹ Other contacts happen as well—words exchanged, close dancing at a concert, a kiss. Some narratives offer striking symmetry—the touching of knees, side-by-side dog washing. Others involve unequal power relationships, one serving the other on a plane or in a restaurant, giving a ride or an injection, offering a hand after a slip on the ice, or relief from unwanted attention at a bar. These moments, like eye contact, are at once public and intimate, everyday and special, innocent but thrilling.

Eye contact is often still a necessary clue suggesting reciprocity of affection. Without it, other aspects of the connection could be taken as perfunctory—delivering a package, scanning one’s items in the checkout aisle. Eye contact is an act at once powerful yet not entirely conscious, open to interpretation, projection, and deniability. It can go unnoticed, easier to ignore than words or touch. Or it can be an act of aggression: a London tube campaign warns that “intrusive staring of a sexual nature” constitutes sexual harassment.⁸⁰ Furtive glances have long played a crucial role in cruising.⁸¹ Muñoz nonetheless challenges us to think beyond literal cruising for sex and instead to “cruise

78. Anonymous, “Actually Not Glued to Your Phone (Pink Line),” Craigslist, 13 Dec. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

79. Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, “Public Modernity in India,” in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Breckenridge (Minneapolis, 1995), p. 12.

80. Quoted in Izzy Lyons, “Staring on the Tube Could Be Prosecuted, Says Top Detective,” *Telegraph*, 16 Apr. 2022, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/04/16/staring-tube-could-prosecuted-says-top-detective/

81. See Richard Tewksbury, “Cruising for Sex in Public Places: The Structure and Language of Men’s Hidden, Erotic Worlds,” *Deviant Behavior* 17, no. 1 (1996): 1–19.

the fields of the visual and not so visual in an effort to see in the anticipatory illumination of the utopian" (*CU*, p. 18).

After contact comes loss. The parting marks the end of the encounter—a low point. Self-reproach intermingles with a longing for what might have been. At the same time, the despair is momentary. The platform offers a second chance. The regret prompts action—an act of hope, of turning from what might have been to what might yet be possible. The invitation marks a turning point, rejecting the finality of “love at last sight.” Muñoz defines queerness as inherently utopian, relying on desire directed at “objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise” (*CU*, p. 26). Perhaps for Baudelaire it is better to remember the loveliness of the missed connection than to risk its ruin through a second chance. These writers have made steps, however, to take this chance. The invitation marks a temporal shift from a shared past to an imagined future reunion. Missed connections avoid nostalgia in their turning away from the past toward a possible future in which contact is again possible. The less likely it is to occur, the more utopian the gesture.

Writers of missed connections leave scant trace of their own identities. Minimizing *me* leaves the reader to intuit who the author is. Anonymity protects them, of course, for it is potentially embarrassing to have admired one from afar and to find the affection was not reciprocated. The question of the writer’s identity returns at the end in the form of a request for details about the connection, *so I know it’s you*. This suggests a wariness of imposter responses.⁸² It also asks the respondent to confirm the connection. The writer seeks affirmation that they, too, were noticed and remembered—that amidst the other faces populating the McDonalds, the Brown Line, or the highway, they captured someone’s attention and hopefully stayed on their mind afterwards. “Let me know what product I bought”,⁸³ “What stood out about me?”,⁸⁴ “Where did I live before here?”⁸⁵

This test of memory acts as a plea for recognition. Describe me.

Remediating Encounters in the City

The structure of the ad entextualizes the encounter.⁸⁶ *So I know it’s you* requests that the reply continue narrating the event. Considering missed

82. In *Perfect Strangers* (dir. Mika Efrat and Caed Scott, 2015), a documentary about Craigslist missed connections, two women describe having posted ads and receiving replies from random strangers who were simply eager for a date.

83. Anonymous, “Office Max (Tuesday evening) (Mt. Prospect Rand/Elmhurst),” Craigslist, 4 Dec. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

84. Anonymous, “Rogers Park McDonald’s on Clark-Tues PM (Rogers Park),” Craigslist, 27 Aug. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

85. Anonymous, “Neighbors (Rogers Park),” Craigslist, 11 Dec. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

86. See *Natural Histories of Discourse*, ed. Silverstein and Greg Urban (Chicago, 1996).

connections a vernacular genre emphasizes their consistency. They follow a formula that works, creating a miniature narrative that succeeds in producing pleasure and pain, bringing this evocative world into existence. The question of what types of interactions occur as a result of these posts remains outside the interests of this article. Posting or reading a Craigslist ad can serve as an erotic experience in and of itself,⁸⁷ rendering the question of did they or didn't they beside the point.⁸⁸ Through missed connections, commercial and public spaces along with trains and other infrastructures become charged with "virtual potential."⁸⁹ Paul Manning takes this phrase from Patrick Galbraith to argue that sexuality "not only involves real sexual practices but also centrally involves the circulation and citation of genres. . . . Cited fact drives fancy forward, and fancy proliferates in the empty spaces in the cited facts."⁹⁰ Missed connections circulate fantasies of serendipity by inspiring others to post, to share, and to elaborate. Narrating the *almost* transforms these spaces into settings rife with potentiality while highlighting tensions between the individual and the crowd, between public infrastructures and private commercial interests, and among the humans who encounter one another while moving through them.

Posts that safely follow the generic conventions outlined above express regret and offer hope—not only for the individual poster. The microscopic nature of these texts leaves them productively open in a number of ways: for the reader to project onto them, to fill in gaps, to identify, and to elaborate. Kate Flint writes of the salience of another genre, the short story, at a moment full of ambiguity in late nineteenth-century urban life:

The city simultaneously lacked cognitive wholeness, and offered itself up as a site of highly subjective impressions, to which the enigmatic, inconclusive possibilities of short stories, prose sketches, and lyric forms . . . were particularly suited, with their formal demands giving a temporary structure to that to which it was not always easy for one's mind to give permanent shape.⁹¹

87. See Brandon Andrew Robinson and David A. Moskowitz, "The Eroticism of Internet Cruising as a Self-Contained Behaviour: A Multivariate Analysis of Men Seeking Men Demographics and Getting off Online," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 15 (May–Jun. 2013): 555–69.

88. See Paul Manning, "Once upon a Time, There Was Sex in Georgia," *Slavic Review* 73 (Summer 2014): 265–86.

89. Patrick Galbraith, "Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan," *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, 31 Oct. 2009, www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2009/Galbraith.html

90. Manning, *Love Stories: Language, Private Love, and Public Romance in Georgia*, (Toronto, 2015), p. 105.

91. Kate Flint, "The 'Hour of Pink Twilight': Lesbian Poetics and Queer Encounters on the Fin-de-siècle Street," *Victorian Studies* 51 (Summer 2009): 693–94.

Missed connections offer, in their vagueness, identification through an exercise of the imagination. They move the modality of interaction from one of eye contact to one of writing, opening a digital channel where others were foreclosed by circumstance or hesitation. “Should’ve done the real life swipe right, ah well.”⁹² “Facepalm emoji.”⁹³

They offer a mediation of missing that is publicly posted, allowing readers perhaps to identify with the writer or addressee and certainly to project—to picture the scene as it happened and to imagine possible consequences.

Remediations offer evidence of more widespread acts of projection that occur when reading missed connections. Authors and artists cannot help wanting to flesh out the sparse narratives in one way or another. The *Chicago Reader* regularly featured illustrations of their favorite “I Saw You” ads. A children’s book illustrator made her favorite missed connections into a book for adults.⁹⁴ Gabriel Kahan’s song cycle *Craigslistlieder* sets real ads to music, beginning with “You looked sexy / even though you were having a seizure.”⁹⁵ The “most beautiful” Craigslist missed connection ever from New York was eventually revealed to have been penned by a professional screenwriter.⁹⁶ Personal ads borrow romantic tropes from other media and other genres, feeding off of and feeding into romantic comedies like *The Shop Around the Corner* (dir. Ernst Lubitsch, 1940) and its remake, *You’ve Got Mail* (dir. Nora Ephron, 1998). The two film plots create comic disjuncture between the protagonists’ written and in-person feelings for one another while missed connections posts attempt to render faithfully, in textual form, the moment of in-person chemistry.

Journalists’ reports and social scientists’ studies are themselves remediations. In addition to accounts of sex trafficking and murder, news articles and blog posts offer stories of couples getting together or simply recirculate ads that have gained attention for offering a particularly poignant narrative.⁹⁷

92. Anonymous, “Brown Line Dark Haired Girl (Chicago),” Craigslist, 1 Nov. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

93. Anonymous, “Noah Flight Attendant Seat 10A Earlier Today,” Craigslist, 1 Sept. 2019, chicago.craigslist.org

94. See Sophie Blackall, *Missed Connections: Love, Lost & Found* (New York, 2011).

95. Gabriel Kahane, “You Looked Sexy,” *Craigslistlieder* (Wasted Storefront, 2006), gabrielkahane.bandcamp.com/album/craigslistlieder

96. See Tessa Stuart, “Mystery Solved: Who Is the Author Behind the Most Beautiful Craigslist Missed Connection of All Time?,” *Village Voice*, 8 Aug. 2013, www.villagevoice.com/2013/08/08/mystery-solved-who-is-the-author-behind-the-most-beautiful-craigslist-missed-connection-of-all-time/

97. See Lee, “Romance Beckons.” See also Diane Mapes, “‘I Saw You’ Romance Ads Wildly Popular,” CNN, 21 Oct. 2008, edition.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/personal/10/21/lw.missed.connections/index.html; Ted Thornhill, “Is This the Most Romantic Craigslist ‘Missed Connection’ Ever?” *Daily Mail*, 19 Nov. 2013, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2509840/The-beautiful-Craigslist

Researchers code personals as offering clues to the construction of gendered, sexualized identities and as expressions of the characteristics of desired partners, whether for casual intimacies or for marriage.⁹⁸ They have studied personals as offering information on sexual health practices.⁹⁹ They have treated missed connections as expressions of attraction and as constructions of digital selfhood.¹⁰⁰ In analyzing these ads as repositories for information about what went on beyond the page or screen, researchers must admit that any conclusions they draw require a bit of imagination and projection about the person behind the post and about what happened next.

Remediations of missed connections can reanimate public spaces through commercial strategies as well. In Toronto and Montreal in 2019, Excel Gum launched an ad campaign around the idea of missed connections. Videos on their Facebook page featured real individuals offering their stories, which took place at bus stops, in workplace elevators, at concerts, and at grocery stores.¹⁰¹ Most express a combination of regret and a determination not to let such an opportunity pass them by in the future. Excel's slogan, "Say it with confidence," along with their invented hashtag #makeconnections, suggests that minty chewing gum will empower individuals to say something to each other rather than remain stuck at the level of eye contact. Accompanying the online campaign, ads appeared at bus stops and train stations that prompted riders to observe one another, anticipating or provoking connections. For

-Missed-Connections-post-ever.html; Robert Gordon, "Man Posts Epic Missed Connection after Seeing Woman He Was Married to For 3 Days In 1989 on NY Subway," *Elite Daily*, 29 Jan. 2014, www.elitedaily.com/news/world/man-posts-craigslist-missed-connection-running-woman-married-3-days-new-york-subway; and Rosemary Counter, "A Craigslist 'Missed Connection' Lure (Updated with Podcast)," *New York Times*, 2 Jan. 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/fashion/modern-love-a-craigslist-missed-connection-lure.html

98. See Sebastian E. Bartoş, VoonChin Phua, and Erin N. Avery, "Differences in Romanian Men's Online Personals by Sexualities," *Journal of Men's Studies* 17 (Spring 2009): 145–54; Daniel Farr, "Online Women-Seeking-Women Personal Ads and the Deployment of 'Tomboy' Identities," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15 (Oct. 2011): 493–506; and Andrew S. Denney and Tewksbury, "Characteristics of Successful Personal Ads in a BDSM On-Line Community," *Deviant Behavior* 34 (Feb. 2013): 153–68.

99. See Amanda Denes and Annika C. Speer, "Infidelity Goes Online: Communicating About Sexual Health in Personal Ads When Seeking Extra-Dyadic Relationships on Craigslist," *International Journal of Sexual Health* 30, no. 2 (2018): 177–94.

100. See Jed Brubaker, "I Judged You at Starbucks: Identification and Regulation of the Non-Persistent Subject on Craigslist Missed Connections," in *Digital Technologies of the Self*, ed. Yasmine Abbas and Fred Dervin (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009), pp. 37–60. See also Jennifer L. Bevan et. al., "'You've Been on My Mind Ever Since': A Content Analysis of Expressions of Interpersonal Attraction in Craigslist.org's Missed Connections Posts," *Computers in Human Behavior* 54 (Jan. 2016): 18–24.

101. *Excel Gum*, "Excel Invited People to Share Stories of Their Missed Connections to Inspire Others to Have the Confidence to #Makeconnections, Not Miss Them," 28 Jan. 2019, *Facebook*, www.facebook.com/excelgum/videos/excel-invited-people-to-share-stories-of-their-missed-connections-to-inspire-oth/296579211026605/

Benjamin's flâneur, an abundance of faces stand in for ubiquitous commodities, with the passerby eventually standing out. The chewing-gum ads reassert the commodity as key to the encounter between strangers. It also expands our consideration of sensorial contact beyond the visual. Connection cannot happen if one must worry that the mutuality of gaze will be followed by shameful breath. The ads remind us that public transit creates a shared atmosphere, usually enclosed, in which we can smell one another—another type of contact that gives rise to discomfort about corporeality and modernity.

The masks that appeared in 2020 ameliorated concern about bad breath that the chewing gum was supposed to cure, while creating their own impediments to easy communication. And yet, this continual flux between new opportunities for contact and new obstacles is what perpetuates the phenomenon of the missed connection. "We didn't see each others' smiles because of the masks, but I'm pretty sure you made kiss-y lips and winked at me."¹⁰²

The barrier creates the gap, allowing deferral and an imagining of what might have been or of what might be.¹⁰³ The pandemic created new challenges to public intimacy. Berlant reminds us, "Intimacy was supposed to be about optimism, remember? But it is also formed around threats to the image of the world it seeks to sustain" ("I," p. 288). Nonetheless, new barriers to intimacy offer new opportunities to imagine how an encounter might have been otherwise, to wonder what lies beneath the mask.

Meston didn't use the internet, but his story went viral at the end of the summer—circulating in news stories on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Locals mobilized to help him track down the pretty octogenarian who had charmed him. The *mairie* (town hall) of the twelfth *arrondissement* retweeted a message with a photograph of one of his posts. After five days of searching, a genealogist used the information about the woman's date of birth to find her phone number. When Meston called her, she recognized his voice and said she would be happy to meet with him.¹⁰⁴ The fact that Meston found the *jolie dame* is nice, but perhaps more interesting was the mobilization through various media that made this happen. Missed connections and their uptake act as an invitation to follow the circulation of narratives about chance encounters as acts that express regret and hope. Many read such posts without any interest in finding ourselves interpellated as the dogwalker, the cute redhead, or the

102. Anonymous, "Erin Go Bragh (Wicker)," Craigslist, 31 Aug. 2020, chicago.craigslist.org

103. See Meghanne Barker, "Blank Faces: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Semiotic Review* 7, 20 Sep. 2019, www.semioticreview.com/ojs/index.php/sr/article/view/50

104. See "Jean-Pierre, 86 ans, a finalement retrouvé la 'jolie dame' du bus 46," *L'Obs*, 26 Aug. 2019, www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20190826.OBS17558/jean-pierre-86-ans-tente-de-retrouver-la-jolie-dame-qu-il-a-rencontree-dans-le-bus-46.html

hot MILF; we take delight in scanning and occasionally sharing them with others. Such acts confirm the genre itself and reaffirm the city as a utopian space that invites us to wonder what might have been and what might be.

This article treats missing as an act and a sentiment defined by mediation and movement. Genres that daily articulate missing offer insight on the ambivalences surrounding communication as they shift in aesthetic and in technological form as we move forward in the twenty-first century. A vernacular genre about minor intimacies—of everyday contacts and the traces they leave—missed connections pull together infrastructures of bodies, cities, and sites of mediation, relying on movement through channels for connection and loss. They offer a mix of promise and peril in a general yet specific narrative, so that unnoticed readers can nonetheless imagine a chance meeting. In such a way, missing not only articulates pain but produces fantasy.