

Whispers from Notes Afoot &
How I Became a Vegetarian out of Confusion

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indexing the appendix / capacious connotation

One of the great mysteries of language is its essential ambiguity. Uncertainty is its most critical bone. On the skeleton of language, a rickety figure, we dance our lives away. It is a wonderful thing that a word can have more than one meaning—not to mention the symbols themselves.

Without even stumbling into the land of homophones, we can settle with a smile that a ‘mug’ can connote both a face and a vessel for liquid. And how about ‘mugshot’. This opens up even more to consider. Shot with a camera; shot of tequila; shot by a bullet. To connote something is to signify without a steadfast anchor in any given meaning. Whereas in annotation we mark a text in an onion of layers, words upon words, connotation is a capacious landscape where words find other ways of being (words).

While sitting in a café, I overheard a conversation that reminded me of a certainty we often leave unquestioned. A certainty undergirded by the idea that we are understood. That our friends, family, and lovers know what we mean with words. And yet, what is certain is exactly the opposite—that despite our attempts to clarify we are always at odds with an irreparable and eternal chasm. A chasm that language feigns to bridge because language merely presents associations—a subjective film of interpreted meaning over the words that were spoken.

Behind me, a young child asked confusedly what the section at the back of a book was called, to which the mother replied “it’s an appendix.” “But,” the child remarked, “I thought the appendix was here,” pointing to the place an appendix could be on a body. The mother laughed and replied “yes, that is also right.” Books and bodies. Bodies and books. One and the same.

This confusion, at around the same age, is what prompted me to become a vegetarian. On an otherwise unextraordinary summer’s day, I was baffled about why the food we were about to eat—tuna—had the same name as the living, breathing animal, swimming freely. In synchronous motion, my twin sister and I requested the truth about the relationship between food tuna and animal tuna—surely one could not be both. “And were *these* once living fish?!” We desired to know. With my parents cornered, they felt compelled to paint us a picture of just such a scenario, of what were once happy living fish, now serving as the food fish for our enjoyment.

We swore on the spot—standing together at just under 3’7”—to never eat fish again. This was a rehearsal, it turned out, and a week later we asked the same about the word ‘chicken’. Given a

truthful and unsavoury answer, we agreed to abstain from eating all meat. A pact we have kept for the greater part of three decades. While we didn't know it then, we would have to communicate this choice to people using the word 'vegetarian,' a word we learned very quickly would be critical to utter at friends' houses to ensure their parents knew, so as not to make it awkward if a steak was cooked for dinner without warning.

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desire paths / notes afoot

In parks, even on grassy roundabouts amidst busy intersections, you will find something known as a 'desire path'—see figure 0. These paths are drawn by pattering feet when humans want to get from point A to point B if the designated, official path is unsuitable or inefficient. Desire paths are a gentle reminder that our built environments do not adequately represent human wants or needs. Nevertheless, these paths are carved by foot, by a collective agreement of there being a better route. Sometimes these desire paths are disturbances (for city maintenance crews), but sometimes they serve as inspiration. They serve as a reminder that there are always alternate routes, desires whispered by the path of our feet.

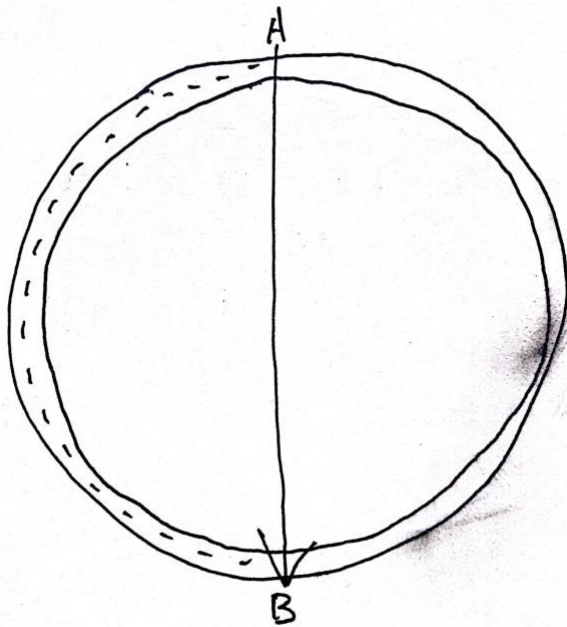


Figure 0. Diagram of a desire path. ---- as designated path; → as desire path. Smudges not intended.

In my case, I want to take a desire path from connotation (appendix, vegetarianism) to footnotes (or connotations of a footnote). If the built path that is rejected (consciously or unconsciously) by

pedestrians serves as a model for denotation, then the desire path serves as a model for connotation. Connotations are built on iteration and desire. For the relationship between annotation, connotation, denotation, and footnote—see figure 1.

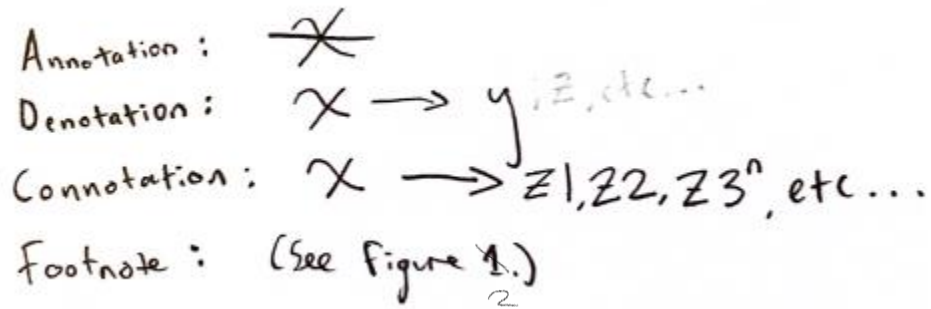


Figure 1. Diagram of anno-deno-and-conno-tation.

What if footnotes, that is, notes on people's feet, were as common as footnotes as we know them?¹ What if we considered the underside of the foot as we did the underside of the text? What if we thought of them in a similar way to the communication channel of the footnote, as whisper, as intimate message.



¹ Such as this one?

Figure 2. A note afoot.²

Perhaps actual writing on people's feet is only one form of the 'footnote.' Even more commonly, desire paths are notes of a collective foot. Notes about the way that bodies want to move through space, x to y on a diagonal, the path all but forgotten. If you look at my footprint, you'll find notes of my past, too. My left foot leaves only a slightly less marked imprint next to my right foot. The inconsistency in weight distribution on the snow, on the beach, in the mud, after stepping in a puddle. A whisper to the careful observer of an injury, a slight metal rod connecting my fibula and my ankle. If you look carefully, footnotes abound. In the case that an annotation of a footnote presents itself, be ready to take off a sock, to squint at a foot and read the inscription through cracks and folds, from the tender toes to a hardened heel. Be ready to read the sidewalk beyond a puddle as a chapter of footnotes, a subterranean text, a story of notes afoot.

² See figure 1.