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# Question mark in Landia

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## Abstract

What happens when we remove key specificities that orient ethnography? Based on 30 months of fieldwork somewhere and set in fictional Landia, this piece eschews conventional ways of representing ethnographic encounters—through specific matterings of people and place—for disquieting generality. Against vague references to violence by Snatchers and a movement to protect the Marked, I foreground the affective experiences of two interlocutors without relying on taken-for-granted specificities that structure modes of seeing. This reveals how power operates through the reproduction of embodied difference, even within movements by and for people with non-normative bodyminds; and how generality as a method of creative ethnographic writing can reveal otherwise eclipsed strands of meaning and experience. Despite being Marked, Yuli and Adan do not see themselves in discourses about markedness. As a result, they question processes of categorization, identification, and marginalization in social movements. My goal is to dwell in these moments where operative narratives unravel, and people overflow their categories. Asking what a messier crip politics of difference might do for those with forms of markedness, this piece encourages readers to envision activist-adjacent modes of redress that acknowledge complicity and entanglement, embrace accountability and repair, and build solidarity across forms of difference.

## KEYWORDS

embodied difference, ethnographic fiction, marked categories, social movements, violence

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After Yuli's sister, Rania, was killed by a gang of Snatchers on her way home from school, the Activists took Yuli to live at the center. *You'll be safer here, they said. You'll be around other Landians who are marked like us.* Hundreds of children, teenagers, and even a few adults had already been taken to the center, voluntarily or more often despite some resistance, by Activists working on behalf of the Landian government or private charities. Instead of remaining vulnerable to the gang of Snatchers who were said to search for marked children or risking possible rejection from her unmarked parents and family, Activists reasoned, Yuli should stay at the center, where they could teach her how to properly embody her markedness and, if she abided, reward her with gifts and sponsorships. But Yuli stayed only 1 week until her unmarked parents could cobble together the bus fare to pick her up and return her to their village.

At the center, everything revolved around their markedness. Yuli was surprised to learn that in her native Landia many children who are marked like her are scorned or, even worse, sacrificed. *When I was born, I could not find any words against me from my family,* she mused to the boy next to her. He was tall with scruffy hair and torn pants. In addition to being undervalued by their families and communities, Yuli was told, marked people were also overvalued by gangs of Snatchers who failed to understand the true nature of markedness. As she listened to Activists tell stories of Snatchers consuming marked bodies for their nefarious Devil Worship, her mind shifted between the Activists who also seemed to value her, though not for reasons she understood, and the Snatchers who she heard had taken Rania. Everyone said it was because Rania had been marked too. Confused by what she signaled for Snatchers or Activists, Yuli wondered what naming the mark and centering her markedness would actually help. *What if you're marked but you don't feel that different?*

Over the course of that week, Yuli was given answers to questions she was told she had and then wasn't sure if she had. *Your mark is encoded in you,* the Activists said. *Others don't understand this. This is why they took your sister. It's why your parents dropped you here. The tradition in Landia is to not love those children who are marked.*

*But I wasn't dropped off,* Yuli said. Though she didn't see her experiences reflected in their declarations, she sat quietly as they opined. *We are your brothers and sisters. We come from across Landia and the world. We are all encoded with The Mark.*

Still unconvinced by the need for new family or friends, on Tuesday Yuli was visited by experts who explained that marked bodies needed to be cared for in particular ways. An unmarked expert scientist who spoke a language she couldn't understand handed her a vial of something. A marked translator with a clipboard stood beside them. He said quietly: *This is our solution. We must use it every day to protect The Mark.* On Wednesday, another set of experts joined the Activists to inspect the bodies of marked children. Yuli attempted to decline, insisting that she was perfectly healthy. But one of the most popular Activists—a Landian man who traveled internationally speaking about his markedness—thrust her into a makeshift exam room, where she stood meters apart from other marked children, separated only by a sheer curtain that hung suspended from the ceiling. A doctor dwelled for some time on her eyes, placing various lenses and lights before her and then making notations in a chart. She peered over his shoulder. Unsure of why she was suddenly being treated as a medical patient, Yuli turned to the same boy with tattered pants.

*I know I'm marked, but does it always have to matter? And do Activists want me to love myself or hate myself?* Having just finished his eye exam, Adan stepped off a cement ledge and sat next to Yuli on a wobbly baby blue bench. He wobbled it to scare her, and she laughed as she gripped the bench and her skirt.

*Many Activists tell us to love the Mark—to claim it as part of us. All I know is that they want us in the center. But you see how we find ourselves here. This is not a life. I'll apply the solution, but my markedness will never define me.* Adan quickly skipped over to an Activist who was passing out sodas, grabbing two before returning to the bench. As they sipped ginger fizz and dragged their worn shoes through the dusty earth, he told Yuli that 3 years ago he had been rounded up by two Landian politicians who were aggressively looking to protect the marked. To ensure that he would not meet the same fate as Rania and to ensure that an Activist would not be made to look ineffectual, Adan was taken from his grandparents' house early one morning just after he turned 12. He had been sent there days prior by his mother, an unmarked single parent who was abandoned by Adan's father when she bore a marked child. She was distraught when

Adan told her that he had been threatened by four Snatchers, and she didn't know what else to do to keep him safe. On the drive to the center when the Activists thought he was asleep, Adan overheard their conversation about the recent spike in murders of people who are marked. *Our national reputation is on the line*, one said. *The president will surely fire us if another marked child is killed in our districts. We must round them up.*

Now, Adan hasn't seen his mother or grandparents in almost 2 years. They can't afford the trip to the center and don't like being told by the Activists that they don't know how to care for a marked child. Aside from seeing his mother, all Adan wanted was to return to his village and previous school. It didn't matter that he was the only marked child in the area. Nor did it matter that he couldn't see the chalkboard and had to copy notes from a peer, or that his markedness made it difficult to till his grandfather's plot and herd their flock. Like Yuli, he found his markedness mostly *unremarkable* and grew tired of the anyone trying to convince him of his difference. But of the 300 or so marked people at the center, Adan and Yuli had found only each other in whom to confide their skepticism with the activism undertaken on their behalf. With the exception of Ursa who was one of the younger kids and selectively mute, the others seemed enthralled by the Activists and their newfound understanding of their markedness.

On Thursday, Yuli and Adan found themselves in another intervention conducted by Activists, this time a psychosocial assessment by volunteer Activists from outside Landia. These volunteers had come to help marked children; each one was assigned to a child and after a day of training was instructed to conduct a psychiatric evaluation where they determined which children needed further therapy. For Yuli, this meant answering questions about Rania's death. She tried to find the answers these experts wanted, but the more she spoke the more confused they seemed. Finally, an Activist blurted out, *what do you mean you don't know what happened to the assailants? You haven't followed the investigation? Don't you care about justice for Rania?* Uncomfortable even with the idea of speaking to a foreigner about her markedness or about what happened to her sister, Yuli could sense that there was a particular way in which she was supposed to answer the questions. But she wasn't sure what this was and, finding the idea of confiding in a stranger downright dangerous, she opted instead for a lack of eye contact and short, nondescript answers that left her feeling like she wasn't being a very good marked person. She also remembered what Adan had told her: *if you want an Activist to offer you support, identify with your Mark. Don't correct their claims about you or your family. Let their story of you be your story, but only in a sense.*

Yuli could feel that the Activist was displeased with her role as a mental health patient, since she answered honestly that she had no questions about her mark, didn't think about it all that much, and didn't think it played a central role in her already-strong relationships with family and friends. The Activist, a young woman in her 30s whose name Yuli never learned, wasn't angry, but she was stupefied. Even though she was just days into a 2-week service trip, she had studied people who are marked and read copious media articles highlighting their miserable plight. Moreover, the lead Activist on the project had prepped her specifically for working with Yuli, and so had familiarized her with the few known details of what had happened to Rania. Having read the police report, she reasoned it safe to assume that Yuli was speaking out of trauma. She opened her notebook, clicked her pen, and wrote: *Too traumatized to speak lucidly about her markedness.* In so doing, she subsumed the texture of Yuli's life to The Movement, erasing all the ways in which Yuli exceeded markedness. Now, she was a traumatized victim, forever marked too by her sister's abduction and murder. Yuli's eyes moved from the nameless volunteer's hands down her pen to the page's red ink. She couldn't read it, but the presence of the words felt vaguely insulting, nonetheless. *Am I in denial? Maybe the mark does matter*, Yuli thought. *It's obviously all this Activist sees.*

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The events of the week were enough to throw Yuli into a line of questioning about herself that she hadn't yet experienced in her 15 years. Despite the volunteer's insinuations, there was no moment during Yuli's childhood when she suddenly realized her markedness—she saw her difference, of course, but it had no meaning, no name, and she inhabited no category. That was, until Rania's death, when non-state

Activists came to their home to interrogate their unmarked parents and arrange for Yuli to be taken to one of Landia's many centers for people who are marked. In the process of trying to convince her parents that they should surrender one daughter only days after losing another, Activists pleaded that Yuli was unsafe with her parents. They reasoned not only that the family's plot lacked adequate security to keep a marked child safe at night, but also that Yuli's parents lacked sufficient knowledge of her markedness—where it comes from, how it is acquired and transmitted, and what one must do to care for a marked person. When an Activist quizzed her by asking her to explain how she, a young, healthy, unmarked mother, could possibly bear marked children like Yuli and Rania, she responded: *Something happens in making the child. There are changes in the blood of the mother and father—something in how they mix.* Yuli's father nodded in agreement. Until that moment, Yuli had never thought to inquire about the exact nature of her difference. Now, her position of non-wonder felt inadequate and possibly even dangerous.

The problem of Yuli's non-wonder and non-knowledge intensified at the center. After her therapy session, she listened to one Activist preach about special opportunities for those who are marked. *They should come forward, allow us to count them, and be recognized as marked.* This, Yuli thought, would perhaps position her to receive some of the gifts and services that were apparently designated for marked individuals. But when she asked this directly, she was shunned, her intentions questioned.

*This is about your rights, not just accessing material things,* one Activist expounded. *People with markings have been ignored for too long, kept out of school and in the home, denied proper funerals, and buried in secret.* Yuli couldn't help but think of Rania, who at the behest of village elders was buried late at night under the family's house. Of course, Yuli knew that her parents wanted to follow the tradition: amid grief so intense they weren't sure how or if they could continue, they saw that a private, inside burial would bring dignity to Rania's short life, as well as protect her corpse from grave Snatchers looking for marked bodies. But where the family saw love and custom, the Activists saw shame and superstition, averring that marked individuals are buried under homes not out of love and protection, but because the life of the marked person was too stigmatized for the funeral rituals and forms of sociality of the unmarked.

Now, Yuli saw both sides. Feeling herself and her parents the target of an intervention they neither needed nor wanted, she was simultaneously angry with and captivated by others' narratives of Rania's death. This left her unable to reject their claims outright but also unable to employ them in a narrative that rang true to her family's experiences. She wondered if this made her less marked, even as she struggled to parse what exactly her markedness meant for her or for others.

## II

When Yuli found Adan, he was encircled by the youngest marked children at the center who were enthralled by his whispers. Adan had a bit of a reputation for being a storyteller, which was odd given that he was a divisive and often disagreeable guy who the Activists had for years tried "to rehabilitate." After many seasons of enrolling in schools and training programs only to drop out weeks in, he would inevitably return to the center, where his relationships with the Activists were strained. It is not that he denied his markedness or even that the Activists couldn't speak to his experience—just the opposite, since he had been threatened on the outside and was grateful for the armed wardens that secured the center. Rather, it is that he wasn't seduced by the Movement for the rights of the marked. He didn't see how their claims for a higher form of consciousness around markedness, whether through science or human rights, would improve his situation and he resented their draconian reactions to his only mildly subversive questions. As a result, Adan refused to correctly embody markedness. He often forgot to wear his protective gear or apply his solution; he refused to use people-centered language—that is, person with a mark, rather than a marked person, to preface one's personhood not their markedness; and he was unwilling to raise awareness by participating in the narrative about marked violence. His stories, though, were something else entirely.

Yuli never found out what Adan was telling those children, but at dinner that night she knew something had happened. The atmosphere was charged, and children were abuzz. Over evening porridge,

they whispered and scurried from one area to the next. Rumor had it that the Activists were actually Devil worshippers who had come in disguise: their humanitarian devotion to markedness a rouse, these marked and unmarked “Activists” were seeking marked bodies for their own nefarious pursuits. *It's not all the Activists*, Adan whispered to the boy beside him. *But to these Activists here, we are sacrificial meat*. With that, he absconded for the dormitories, as if suddenly given an idea.

Yuli caught up, stopping him mid-path. Still breathing heavily, she uttered, *I need to talk to you about the Activists*.

*Tomorrow. I'm busy*. Returning to his room before the others, he removed a key from his pocket and placed it in his trunk. That night, with the key in hand, he woke the younger children from their room where they were sleeping three to a mattress. *Get dressed*. A few other children were there too, including one boy who only seemed partially marked and another who everyone said looked marked, even though Adan suspected he really wasn't.

They set out from the dormitories with no more than the key, using the light from the guard's torch, and from the moon, to guide their way. Adan carried a younger child on his back; others held hands as they scurried across the path to the medical building. One shivered as Adan struggled with his already poor vision to find the keyhole. *You're casting a shadow*, he whispered, shoving the kid aside. A few seconds later, they were in. *You know what to do. The boxes are in the front room*.

With that, they tore into the dozens of cardboard boxes stacked against the back wall. Each box had <INTL AID MARKED—LANDIA> stamped across it in blue ink. Inside were 24 neatly packed canisters of solution. Grinning widely, Adan spun open each container and slowly turned it upside down. The others followed in suit and within minutes the solution—a precious commodity that Activists work tirelessly to import to Landia specifically to prevent problems associated with markedness—covered the desks, chairs, and floor. In the corner of the room, the child who may or may not have been marked and the child who seemed partially marked were flinging solution across an exam table, haphazardly splashing stethoscopes, forceps, and several large needles.

*Devil worshippers want us to be theirs, so they donate solutions, eh?* As Adan spoke, his voice crescendoed, as did his uninhibitedness. Pouring multiple containers across his extended wingspan, he took to the walls, flailing his arms to spread the solution in all directions. *You...can't...poison...me*. The others began to spray the walls too, chanting in breathy and ill-timed unison *You...can't...poison...us. You...can't...poison...us*. Rather than quickly tiptoe to the showers once the walls were covered, Adan then began to dump solution down his chest and then thrust his hips forward to discharge it from his bare torso. Again, the children—by this point half-dressed and dripping in solution—aped their leader, aiming for increasingly provocative thrusts.

At some point in their trance-like eruptions, the center's Lead Activist appeared in the doorway. She stood there for a minute, frozen with horror at the scene before her. As she watched on with a look of disbelief, the call and response between Adan and the children sputtered and slowed for an instant before picking back up into a messy delirium. Adan turned toward the last row of boxes—the very end of the center's coveted supply—and as he reached for it, he caught the Lead Activist's stare from the corner of his eye.

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In the showers, Activists forcibly scrubbed the children with such terrifying intensity that the children almost didn't notice the pain of being rubbed raw. Coming down from his high, Adan was especially defeated; he stood there humiliated, feet taller than the other children, as his adolescent body was vengefully washed by Activists. While the younger children seemed not to understand the larger implications of their destruction, Adan wondered if there wasn't some redemption. *The solution is gone, whether it's poison or not, and whether it was donated by a Devil worshipper or not*, he thought. *The Activists are shaken. And my body is strong, pulsing, alive*. He closed his eyes while an Activist scrubbed solution from his scalp. A sense of calm washed over him as he rediscovered the pleasure that came from his plunder.

It was not lost on Adan that he felt most comfortable in his markedness during moments that were not defined by the goals of the movement. And he saw a twistedness in this, given the many Activist interventions that aimed to make him comfortable but left him ambivalent, at best.

He smiled, thinking about his marked body as precisely that—marked by both Snatchers and Activists, but not completely and so still open to possibility. By refusing Activist interventions that insisted on markedness as an identity category and attempted to govern its leaky boundaries, Adan relaxed into himself as fully enfolded and into an understanding of his markedness as something bigger than the stories he had been slotted into, whether by Activists, Devil worshippers, or the gang of Snatchers who took Rania and other marked children.

Activists groomed the children into the early hours of the morning. Adan sat for a haircut by a local barber who the center often trusted to work with individuals who are marked. This man arrived promptly and, after cutting Adan's hair, curiously swept the loose pieces into a bag that he left with. A different Activist explained to the younger children that scraps of hair were dangerous—they could be used against them by gangs of Snatchers, Devil worshippers, or even those claiming status as an Activist. Next, he had his skin inspected carefully by an expert Activist, a marked person from overseas who, despite his markedness, had a cold and strange gaze that made even Adan uncomfortable.

When Adan was finally permitted to return to the dormitory, he took off behind the building, sprinting across the path that led to the fields. He walked through rows of corn, the sun struggling to appear on the horizon. Midway through a row, he dropped to his knees and banged his fists against the earth. *It's just a mark*, he cried out. *They're going to keep me here forever.*

### III

Yuli had been home with her unmarked parents and siblings for only 3 weeks when she spotted Activists in their village. With Rania gone, she was getting used to being the only marked person in her village. Before her sister died, their markings were never an issue. But everything was different now: several villagers questioned Yuli's parents for retrieving her from the center, arguing that she was not safe in their village, and they must not love her. Others avoided contact with the family altogether, lest something happen to Yuli and they, by virtue of association, become implicated in her disappearance. But Yuli's parents were resolute. *Now that the Activists are working for The Movement, we must be careful. We love Yuli—we can't allow them to portray us as backward or in cahoots with the morally bereft Snatchers who took our Rania.*

She had never met the Activists who arrived that day. They were Landian but from the big city; some of them were marked, and all of them carried books that they read together throughout the day. On their first morning in the village, four of them walked up to Yuli's compound and introduced themselves: They were there on behalf of the sacred, ready to worship its goodness and enlist its power in fighting Devils and other such evil. When they weren't preaching the sacred, they were organizing on behalf of the marked to see that no one else would meet Rania's fate and that people like Yuli could live in a society that tolerates markedness. Encouraged by her parents to attend the Activists' events, Yuli spent 3 days learning to communicate with the sacred. In between teachings, they passed out flyers about markedness to raise awareness about who and what marked people are, and to dispel rumors promulgated by the Snatchers who hunt them. They also enlightened villagers' consciousness by showing documentary films about marked heroes—leaders of The Movement who work tirelessly to make Yuli's life better, whether she supported their organizing or not.

The last morning, just hours before the Activists were scheduled to board the ferry for town, Yuli sat along the benches of their partly erected sanctuary. She was drinking the tea they had passed out when an Activist, an unmarked Landian who looked about Yuli's age approached her. *You know*, the Activist began, *there's really a lot of opportunities for people who are marked. There are people who want to sponsor you and support your dreams. If you commit to the divine, you will see these blessings come your way.*

Scared to admit her excitement at the possibility of a new opportunity and still unsure why others were so invested in her markedness, Yuli looked up from her tea and smiled but didn't say anything.

After the Activists left, she contemplated the experience: *what did the sacred have to do with markedness anyway, she wondered? And why was obtaining a sponsor contingent upon committing to the sacred?* Yuli's family already attended village events to honor the sacred, and she liked the friends and neighbors she encountered at prayer each week. Nevertheless, her parents gave her the space to decide what she would do. That night, Yuli texted the Activist she had met on the last day. *I'm ready to devote my life to the sacred. I'm ready to be a person who is marked.* Despite the uncharacteristic confidence with which she texted the Activist, Yuli was ambivalent. The truth was that she didn't feel the power of the sacred inside her, as Activists told her she would. She also didn't feel particularly like a person who is marked, or at least not in the manner that the Activists at the center told her she should. And yet, she was motivated—perhaps more than she would have liked to admit—by their proximity to charitable people, in Landia or abroad, who might facilitate a different future for her.

Days went by and the rains began. Activists came to continue building their sanctuary and preaching the sacred; they brought containers of solution for Yuli, which she was grateful for and dutifully applied each morning, and offered villagers posters of marked individuals doing heroic acts that revealed the greatness of Landians. They also, however, brought what felt to Yuli like a cataloging of her inadequacies, offering constant corrections not only on how she embodied and, in turn, came to perform her markedness, but also on her ability to partake in The Movement's discourse. For example, when the non-marked Activist friend she had been texting—whose name Yuli learned was Mariam—arrived to supervise the delivery of more lumber for the sanctuary, she brought with her a few dozen t-shirts in various sizes. On the front, they read *I support people who are marked*; on the back, they read *Markedness = Sacredness + Science*. As Mariam was passing them out, she saw Yuli with a group of peers from school. She approached to offer shirts. *Wear These. And you must stop calling her Yuli. You've got to know that it's a slur. Don't you listen to the radio? It comes from the Landian word NaYulita—it means a derogatory word for a person who is marked. And saying it makes it sound like you don't even understand markedness or the rights that people with the Mark have.*

Offended at the insinuation that her friendship was somehow dishonest or her feelings toward a marked person somehow problematic, one schoolgirl whose family lived just a homestead away replied defiantly: *No, it doesn't. We've never even heard that before. We call her Yuli as a joke, from the Landian HaYulilo—or Shorty—since she's practically two meters tall!* Realizing an equally plausible interpretation of the nickname Yuli, and one that afforded these girls the benefit of the doubt, Mariam sheepishly apologized and waved to Yuli as she left to hand out more shirts.

The incident confused Yuli. For weeks after, she couldn't stop thinking about her nickname and what else an Activist might reveal that she had previously not considered. *Is the nickname derogatory? Am I a joke to people? So what if my friends don't really understand markedness? There are no other marked people in my mother's or father's lineage. I don't totally get it and I might even prefer it that way!* She tried to impress this upon her school friends and to put them at ease, but they stopped coming around after that. One went so far as to say that Yuli should return to the center, a sentiment that Activists misrecognized as rooted in villagers' backward rejection of markedness, rather than in their distrust for the spectacle that comes with activism on behalf of the marked. It was also a sentiment that Yuli considered for the first time. For her part, too, Mariam stopped answering Yuli's texts. By the rain's end, Yuli had already returned to her parents' sanctuary and given up hope that she might 1 day use her markedness to her benefit. And Mariam had passed on Yuli's phone number to an anthropologist friend she knew from her home sanctuary in town, ridding herself of any future interaction with a marked individual whose allegiance to The Movement seemed wavering.

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Save for the occasional visit from a Landian or international Activist, Yuli's days melted together like trees across a quickly moving horizon. She worked with her mom and sisters in the field and at home, harvesting, peeling, drying, and preserving their bounty, before preparing their plot for the following



season. The endless string of uneventful days ended when Yuli was walking the worn path between her family's plot and homestead. It was less than a kilometer and a walk she knew intimately, despite her poor vision. Still, it was early and not yet light. Immediately after crossing a patch of thick mud, a man stepped out from the forest. He was unmarked, with bloodshot eyes, and his left arm dangling a machete with alarming nonchalance. *Deal, deal*, he taunted, referring to the money that he could theoretically obtain if he were to sell her marked body for parts, as someone presumably did with Rania's. *We're coming for you.*

Like life at the center, house-bound life was bare. She began to consider more seriously returning to the center; the truth was that her parents' homestead wasn't secure—she was by any measure vulnerable, even with the presence of two guards who volunteered for her father to protect the compound. She imagined that Adan was probably still at the center, given the years that had passed since his mother's last visit and the trust that he had squandered with multiple marked rights organizations. Even though she wasn't sure she much cared for him and was particularly horrified by the incident with destroying the solution, she thought of him daily. It was his simultaneous defiance of markedness as a static identity category and openness to his own unfinishedness that Yuli found frightening and, in some ways, intriguing. He wasn't repressed or mired in self-loathing, as Activists had assumed, nor was he confused about his markedness or seeking clarity. What he was seeking she really couldn't tell, but she admired his ability to subvert fixed notions of markedness itself, whether medically, legally, or spiritually.

And so Yuli waited at home. She waited for the friends she was hoping would return; she waited for an Activist to arrive with a sponsorship for her higher education; and she waited to determine whether life was viable for her as a marked woman in her village. Though she wasn't the type to spray solution across the infirmity and still wasn't sure what to make of the rumors of Devil worship, she felt suspended, caught in a space with Adan all their own. She longed for some reprieve from the constant fear that she would end up hacked to death by men in the bright light of day, like her baby sister was—and so in theory welcomed any Activists ready to fight this horror. And she felt silenced by them. *Should I work within The Movement by striving to become a different kind of Activist, one who loosens their hold on the category of markedness and embraces its vastness? Or is there work to do in the village, outside The Movement, perhaps in telling villagers stories of the center, so that they might see how narratives about violence against people with markedness have maligned them, turning them into nameless voices speaking in unison.* Without clear answers, Yuli waited, hoping for an opening—for the possibility that she, Adan, and others might build futures from the messiness of markedness.

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