



2018 | VOL. 1, Nº. 2

# ***CAPACIOUS***

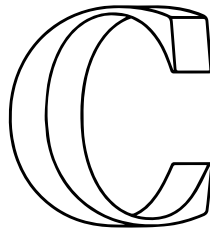
JOURNAL FOR EMERGING AFFECT INQUIRY

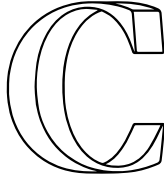


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# ***CAPACIOUS***

JOURNAL FOR EMERGING AFFECT INQUIRY





*Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* Vol. 1 No. 2

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# ca·pa·cious

kə'pāSHəs/ 

*adjective*

having a lot of space inside; roomy.

*Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* is an open access, peer-reviewed, international journal that is, first and foremost, dedicated to the publication of writings and similar creative works on affect by degree-seeking students (Masters, PhD, brilliant undergraduates) across any and all academic disciplines. Secondly, the journal also welcomes contributions from early-career researchers, recent post-graduates, those approaching their study of affect independent of academia (by choice or not), and, on occasion, an established scholar with an 'emerging' idea that opens up new avenues for affect inquiry. The principal aim of *Capacious* is to 'make room' for a wide diversity of approaches and emerging voices to engage with ongoing conversations in and around affect studies.

This journal will champion work that resists:

- the critical ossification of affect inquiry into rigid theoretical postures
- the same dreary citational genealogies
- any too assured reiteration of disciplinary orthodoxies

The journal will always encourage the energies and enthusiasms, the fresh perspectives and provocations that younger scholars so often bring to bear on affect within and across unique and sometimes divergent fields of intellectual endeavor. *Capacious* seeks to avoid issuing formal 'calls for papers' and 'special theme issues.' Submissions to this journal are accepted at anytime and are welcome to pursue any and all topic areas or approaches relating to affect.

Our not-so-secret wish is that essays and issues will forever remain capacious and rangy: emerging from various disciplines and conceptual [t]angles. Indeed, our aim for every journal issue would be that its collected essays not really coalesce all that much, but rather rub up against one another unexpectedly or shoot past each other without ever touching on quite the same disciplinary procedures, theoretical presuppositions or subject matter.

*Capacious* shall always endeavor to promote diverse bloom-spaces for affect's study over the dulling hum of any specific orthodoxy. From our own editorial practices down through the interstices of this journal's contents, the *Capacious* ethos is most thoroughly engaged by those critical-affective undertakings that find ways of 'making room.'

Gregory J. Seigworth  
Mathew Arthur

June 2018

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*Algae*, Luis Alvoeiro, 2011  
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## Hashtag #Affect



Meera Atkinson

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Affect theory has a reputation in some academic quarters for dealing with the intangible, slippery, and wishy-washy—of pursuing the suspect realm of feeling as opposed to hard fact or scientific knowledge. As such, it might readily seem to some as an unjustifiable scholarly indulgence given the pressing challenges of the 21st century. In November 2017, a buzz circulated around an article published in *Bioscience* in which 15,364 scientists from 180 countries signed off on an urgent warning that time is running out to avoid nothing less than whole scale environmental collapse (Ripple et al 2017). With the Anthropocene/Capitalocene (Moore 2016) upon us, and a myriad of sufferings, old and new, plaguing an unsustainable global population, the question of how the study of affect might make a viable contribution with “real world” effects is, perhaps, a fair one, but it's also reasonable to point out the central misunderstanding driving assumptions about affect theory's impotency and charges of theoretical navel gazing.

The historical casting of affect/intensity/emotion/feeling/ as amorphous and untrustworthy experience has traditionally been associated with the feminine, with the body, the relational, with private and domestic life, as opposed to public,

political, and institutional life, and correspondingly assigned lesser value. Such ideas have long dominated Western societies and the education sector at all levels. Successful and lively theoretical and creative engagements with affect therefore have a heightened potential to serve as feminist interventions in unsettling a patriarchal social order that thrives on privileging economic rationalism over empathy, and ethical commitment.

For many of us, drawn to the exploration of affect and its [inter-]subjective, collective, textual, historic, and/or contagious movements, the notion that affect shapes every human project and discourse (in the Foucaultian sense of the word) and informs all cultural practices and events is a given—the starting point from which to proceed. The opportunities for investigating the ways in which affect generates, binds, blinds, exacerbates, entangles, illuminates, and fuels human thought, art, and activities are manifold and seemingly inexhaustible. Affect is also a living, breathing membrane between the human and the nonhuman. Affect ghosts places, inanimate objects, and even—if you really want to get freaky—the solar system beyond our planet (“spooky action at a distance,” anyone?). We *feel* nature and the atmosphere. Affect animates the diversity of individual beings referred to as “animals.” Many (e.g. Bradshaw 2012, Brooks Pribac 2013) argue for the complexity of their agency and ties, and the devastating impact humanity often has on both. And developments in critical plant studies suggest previously unacknowledged affective capacities in plants.

The ubiquitous nature of affect is, in part, why intellectual enquiries into its operations have leaked into, and out of, so many disciplines, including literature, music, medicine, architecture, geography, and media studies. This goes some way to explaining why it so notably lends itself to interdisciplinary explorations, as *Capacious* Editor-in-Chief, Gregory J. Seigworth, gestured toward in his introduction to the first issue of *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* (July 2017). There is, quite simply, not a culture, community, or endeavour on earth in which affect isn't implicated, and yet, it is not and never can be universalized, because its circulations and manifestations are always tied to the specific cultural milieu of a particular individual, or group of beings, at a particular place and point in time. Add to this the complexities of gender, race, species, and the ways in which each have been socially and structurally constructed as categories that advantage certain bodies and collectives thereby disadvantaging and ravaging others, plus the established heteronormative and ablest orientation of most modern

societies, and the unevenness of the playing field becomes glaringly obvious. As Teresa Brennan stated, some subjects are set up to absorb more “negative” affect than others (2004). It follows then that while affect is something we all share, it would be blinkered folly to imagine we can speak of it in homogenous terms.

This is precisely why a journal like *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* makes such a vital and timely contribution. The openness of this venture is its greatest strength. Its commitment to giving platform to a “wide diversity of approaches and emerging voices to engage with ongoing conversations in and around affect studies” stretches across not only a range of issues, concerns, and perspectives but also a range of methodologies, fields, and possible intersections (*Capacious*, n.p.). The journal's mission to nurture early career scholars (who face ever more trying conditions in the increasingly competitive academic environment that dominates the tertiary sector in many regions across the globe) is a crucial one.

Such emergent theorizations of affect promise to produce an eclectic and sometimes surprising array of readings, ponderings, and investigations, for which there is no shortage of inspiration. We live daily amid affective contagions, affectively motivated actions and reactions around matters of social justice, and organizational denials and disorders of affect—even at the highest levels of office. We deal now with not one world, but two, or rather a new synergistic reality. The spheres of “IRL” (In Real Life) and networked ecosystems increasingly blur and synergise as lived experience meets significant viral phenomenon (e.g. the intimate impact of the #metoo moment for many). Anna Gibbs has referred to the media as “primarily affect” (2010), meaning that it functions as an amplification and modulator of affect via the imaging, recording, and transmitting of the face and voice, music, and other forms of sound (338). Digitalized media's “primary affect” saturates, leaving us chattering in its wake, one person's “new horizon”/next-President utopian protest-celebration is another person's classist corporatized-feminist Golden Globes colour-coded sham-spectacle. Trump's “Very Stable Genius” declaration was met by mass analysis and despairing mockery; but there was, too, everyday micro-pop-genius in the form of an impromptu e-dance of rhyme, meter, and affect-loaded humour on the Twitter thread initiated by “Bob.” While elsewhere on Twitter an uncommon display of compassion made news when US comedian, actor, and producer, Sarah Silverman, met an abusive sexist troll with sympathetic understanding and offers of support. This is the question I mean to get at: what do we *do* with affect, personally and conceptually, to make things better, and (how) can it be worked with to effect change, on scales big and small?

The exploration of what affect and emotion do was at the heart of Sara Ahmed's influential book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), and has been taken up by many others in various castings. The more explicit question that has occupied my theoretical and creative work these past few years is (how) might affect be used in service to revolution and to what ends?

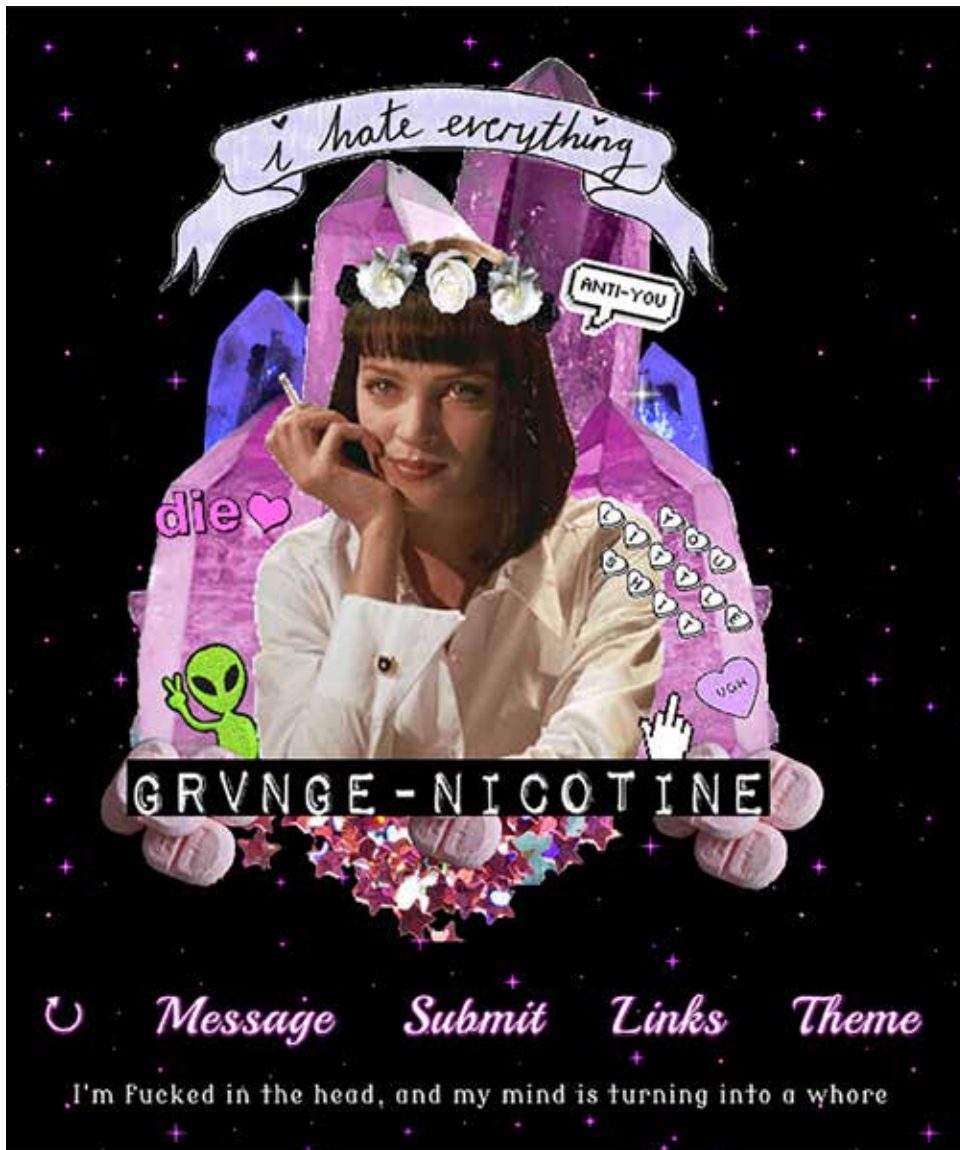
In *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* (2017), I argue that certain kinds of literature and associated strategic practices can, working at the nexus of trauma and affect, testify to transgenerational trauma and its transmissions, not just in relation to the previous one or two generations, but farther back, revealing trauma as a social, and socially structured, force. This literary testimony, I proposed, is of political import regardless of its presenting genre or apparent story. But this is not the same as insisting that writing or affect are capable of bringing about political and material change in a simplistic cause and effect manner. Michael Hardt (2007) has referred to Spinoza as “the philosopher who has advanced furthest the theory of the affects and whose thought is the source, either directly or indirectly, of most of the contemporary work” (ix). If ever a time in which working with affect, both personally and conceptually, in the kind of life-affirming spirit espoused by Spinoza was called for it is now. Which is to say, it has always been that time and now that we are being warned we are running out of time it is more that time than it has ever been before.

In the same month that the aforementioned *Bioscience* story broke with its prediction of a dire future, failing immediate radical response, a workshop titled “Feelings for our Time” was held at the University of New South Wales. The workshop was convened by Michael Richardson (who has new work in this issue) and Lisa Slater, and they invited nine academics from different disciplines and institutional affiliations, many of who had not previously met. Participants were invited to bring work-in-progress to discuss the daunting, and exciting, task of “mapping feelings for our time.” In addition to considering the prospect of what “from feeling to action” might mean, we presented work at various stages of completion, ranging from early days to mature and robust pieces. Flounderings and frustrations were aired, inciting possibilities that percolated in the electrifying and confronting process of scholars coming together, each with the aim of making a difference.

You are about to enter a “bloom-space” in which feelings of and for our times are addressed and differences can be made. Maybe not the strident difference we're inclined to imagine when we speak about making a difference, but a difference nonetheless. Time's up, as they say. Chips will fall where they may. And in the meantime, here we are.

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# Social Media Sad Girls and the Normalization of Sad States of Being



Fredrika Thelandersson

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY, MEDIA STUDIES

This paper examines virtual manifestations of “sad girls” on the media platform Tumblr. Here users write about their struggles with mental illness, revealing a set of shared experiences that encompass both psyche and body. Predominant narratives of what it means to be mentally ill are questioned, and alternative conceptualizations of the psyche are introduced. I argue that the sad girls legitimize each other’s experiences of mental illness while also romanticizing melancholic sadness. I use the concept of sadness as referring to a multifaceted affect that includes clinical diagnoses like depression as well as general sad sentiments. By looking at the way content is circulated in a meme-tic fashion among the sad girls on Tumblr, I discuss how a shared discourse around sadness is created. I suggest that this collective discourse is an example of what Lisa Blackman calls “distributed forms of perception,” which can be seen “in social media practices that allow traces and fragments to become linked together to assume a collective authorial voice” (2015, p. 37). I ask if the sad girl represents a new kind of sadness that challenge the norms around mental illness which tend to conceive it as something to be immediately cured. This question is examined by mapping out various ways of conceptualizing and analyzing sadness. Finally, I discuss the productive possibilities of resting in sadness by examining the sad girls’ potential resistance to neoliberal demands for self-governance.

## KEYWORDS

sad girls, Tumblr, affect, depression, social media

## Introduction

This paper examines virtual manifestations of “sad girls” on the media platform Tumblr. On this multimodal blogging platform users write about their struggles with mental illness, revealing a set of shared experiences that encompass both psyche and body. Predominant narratives of what it means to be mentally ill are questioned, and alternative conceptualizations of the psyche are introduced. In what follows, I introduce social media sad girls and discuss how they circulate content on Tumblr, including the relation between mediated process and the configuration of the sad girl herself. I ask if the sad girl represents a new kind of sadness, exploring the question by mapping out various ways of conceptualizing and analyzing sadness. Finally, I discuss the productive possibilities of resting in sadness by examining the sad girls' potential resistance to neoliberal demands for self-governance and social performativity of happiness and success. I am also interested in why the figure of the sad girl has emerged at this moment in time. Do social media ecologies contribute to a new form of sadness, conceptualized and lived in ways shaped by the media through which it travels? And do the sad girls on Tumblr and Instagram represent a sadness that challenges traditional notions of mental health?

I use the concept of sadness as encompassing a multifaceted affect that includes clinical diagnoses like depression as well as general sad sentiments. In this I am influenced by Ann Cvetkovich's broad definition of affect in her study of depression. She writes that she uses affect “as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways” (2012, p. 4). A broad definition of sadness (as encompassing mental illness diagnoses, melancholia, and a general sense of hopelessness and inertia), allows me to look at the connections between what is “officially” considered a mental health problem and what is considered common or insignificant sadness, and then examine how they overlap and interact with each other.

By virtue of being specifically sad *girls*, not guys, the sad girl raises questions about the gendered nature of the sadness and mental illness represented. The link between women and madness in Western culture has been strong since the late eighteenth century. The figure of the “madwoman” and the assumptions that accompany it have manifested themselves in medical as well as popular culture.

Appearing under different names—neurasthenia, hysteria, schizophrenia, depression—mental instability has been culturally female, regardless of the actual statistics of genders represented in the clinical treatments of these ailments (Showalter 1985). I believe that the sad girl relates to the traditional “madwoman,” in that she follows in the tradition of categorizing mental illness, or madness, as female. But she also differs in that social media users voluntarily adopt and self-identify as sad girls, and thus presents a subject position that diverges significantly from, for example, the 19<sup>th</sup> century hysteric. In this essay, which is part of a larger dissertation project that examines the changing faces of female madness, I chose to put aside specific questions of gender and instead focus on mediated processes of subjectivation and the sad girls' relation to traditional models of mental health.

## Social media sad girls

The sad girl can be found on multiple platforms and in various configurations. On social media, she is most present on Tumblr and Instagram. Some typical examples of content circulated by sad girls are pictures of pills in bright pink colors; animated texts that read things like “having a threesome with anxiety and depression;” glittering words that spell out “100% Sad” (see Figure 1); and cartoon character Lisa Simpson lying face down on her bed with the word sad girl spelled out in the front and center of the image (Grvnge-nicotine 2015; Less-love-more-alcohol (n.d.); Animatedtextgifs 2016; Hollywood-noir 2015a).



Figure 1: Less-love-more-alcohol (n.d.)

Posts like these position sadness and depression as a shared and common experience. Statements like “having a threesome with anxiety and depression” does not portray anxiety and depression as by default negative ailments to be cured; neither does it position them as something to be ashamed of. Instead it states loud and clear that the person posting it is living with anxiety and depression, and has come to terms with it enough to formulate the suffering in a sarcastic way. One post about psychotropic drugs depicts pink pills in a polaroid-like frame with the word “Medicated” written at the bottom (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Grvnge-nicotine, 2015

Another is just a picture of a pile of turquoise pills with the imprint “S 90 3” (Havic-dp, 2014). A simple google search for this code reveals that the drug portrayed is the benzodiazepine Xanax. Posts like these both normalize and glorify psychopharmacology. There are also those that communicate the commonness of therapy, like a photograph of a framed poster that spells out “I told my therapist about you” (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Sweet-despondency, 2016

Among the sad girls on Tumblr, sadness and depression become normal rather than abnormal, to be sad and mad is something to strive for, it even becomes cool.

At the same time, mental illness has become increasingly visible in popular and celebrity culture. Several TV shows portray both diagnosed and undiagnosed mental illness in a non-stigmatized way (see, for example, *Homeland* (2011-); *You're the Worst* (2014-); *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-); Kliegman 2015). In addition, more and more celebrities are coming out and talking about their own experiences of mental illness, frequently speaking out for awareness campaigns (Pugachevsky 2014; Shah 2016). The narrative told by celebrities tend to focus both on a road to recovery and the importance of "coming out" as a sufferer. Pop star and former Disney child actor Selena Gomez, is one example of the outspoken celebrity. In August 2016, she revealed that she was suffering from anxiety and depression. She has since talked repeatedly about the importance of getting help, and named the various strategies she has used. These include rehab,

group therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, exercise, and self-care (Vogue.com 2017; McCall 2017). In similar fashion, pop star Miley Cyrus has said, in relation to her struggle with depression, that “every person can benefit from talking to somebody,” and that despite her usual anti-medication views she has conceded that sometime medication is necessary (Gevinson 2014). Declarations like these work to remove the stigma associated with mental illness, and do so largely by classifying it as an ordinary sickness that can be cured.

The presence of sadness related content is also prevalent in online editions of women's magazines. A headline on MarieClaire.com reads “Depression Makes Looking Hot a Lot Harder” (May 12 2017). In the article, writer Annakeara Stinson describes the troubles she has had with getting motivated to dress well when in the thick of depression, and finally concludes that it is O.K. to only get to “adequately kempt” style-wise most days. Stating that “Depression Makes Looking Hot a Lot Harder,” indirectly defines depression as a “natural” part of everyday life, on par with familiar women's magazines topics like bad hair days and acne. The autobiographical celebrity statements and the coverage in women's magazines present sadness, medicalized as depression, as both common and exceptional. Common because it afflicts so many people, and exceptional because it is presented as a disease that turns you into a sick subject.

The self-identified sad girls active on sites like Tumblr are crystallizations of the sad structure of feeling seen in the larger popular culture. They write about their psychiatric diagnoses and the experiences that come with them, like wanting to stay in bed all day and being under the treatment of a therapist. But importantly, they do not follow a direct road-to-recovery model, whose primary goal is to get rid of the negative feelings. Instead they rest in the sadness without immediately fleeing it. The sad girls may identify as sick subjects, but the sickness is conceptualized in multifaceted ways that refuse traditional biomedical strategies that aim to instantly cure.

## Delineating an archive

Tumblr has established a reputation among the major social media sites as “a comfortable place to be honest, weird, and maybe even depressed” (Premack 2016). It differs from other social media platforms in a few significant ways: it

functions more like a blog than other social media sites, the content posted is published to each user's own Tumblr page which is visible also to non-users (the design of this page can be endlessly modified, something I elaborate on below). The social aspects of Tumblr resemble other platforms in a few ways: users follow each other via linear news feeds like that on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter; one can post original content in the form of text, image, quote, link, chat, audio, and video; and one can reblog or like someone else's posts. Much of the content that circulates among the sad girls has been reblogged thousands of times.<sup>1</sup> This number is trackable in a "notes"-section found at the bottom of each post, each note representing one reblog or like. Study of the phenomenon of the sad girl on Tumblr cannot include only an examination of a few users' original content, but needs to follow the content that is being spread in a meme-like fashion on the site.

The sad girl affect can be said to circulate in this meme-like way, utilizing the distributing and repetitive capacity of the meme. Jack Bratich has studied the memes generated around and out of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement to gain "insight into its mediated subjective processes" (2013 p. 2). He explains that "OWS started as a meme by meme specialists and then mutated into a meme-generator, flashmob, and platform" (2013 p. 3). Bratich defines OWS as a potential aggregator of subjectivities, arguing that the movement "could be a name for an aggregate of operations, even an emergent subjective figure" (2013 p. 3). I think it can be helpful to think of the figure of the sad girl as constituting a similar "mediated subjective process." Through the sharing and reblogging of affective images the subject position of the sad girl emerges and becomes available for users to inhabit.

The archive I draw on here is not a fixed or limited set of Tumblr accounts, but rather content I have seen circulated multiple times among the sad girls I follow on the site. I have paid particular attention to the posts with a high number of notes, or reblogs. Importantly, the sad girl affect is not contained only on Tumblr, but can be seen on sites like Instagram and Pinterest as well. Due to its technological affordances like pseudonyms and modifiable HTML (Renninger 2014), Tumblr lends itself to a sad girl aesthetic. The majority of these users do not use their real names, as is common practice on Facebook and Twitter. This allows for a more open sharing of personal experiences and feelings that people in their everyday lives might find alarming, "abnormal," or shameful. Several of the sad girls have also taken full advantage of the modifiable HTML, creating elaborately designed banners, including moving glitter backgrounds and gifs that reveal

more information as you scroll over them (see <http://grvnge-nicotine.tumblr.com> and <http://hollywood-noir.tumblr.com>). For example, user *Grvnge-nicotine* has a header that shows a picture of Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction* smoking a cigarette, displayed on a background of crystals and pink pills. Surrounding, and on top of, this image are phrases like “I hate everything,” “anti-you,” and “you little shit” in various figurations and colors. In the top left corner of her site is a spinning pack of Marlboro cigarettes, which, if you hover over it, reveals informational blurbs under the headings “About me,” “Quote of the moment,” “Networks,” and “Featured in” (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Grvnge-nicotine, 2017

When one scrolls down the page, the posts made by *grvnge-nicotine* are seen in chronological order, with the newest on top. This is the way most sad girls design their Tumblr blogs, and it shows their posts lined up together in about five columns, creating a larger compositional image that conveys a shared sad girl aesthetic (see Figure 5).

But, as Bryce Renninger points out in his study of counterpublics on Tumblr, “with changes in platforms and networks of users, media ideologies shift” (2014 p. 5). Such shifts contribute to the move from one platform to another, or the “spreading out” of activity across multiple platforms. The sad girl phenomenon can thus not be defined as specific to Tumblr. The “mediated subjective process”

that makes up the sad girl exists on multiple social media platforms, and consists on a continuum with the shifting representations of mental health in the mainstream popular culture mentioned above.

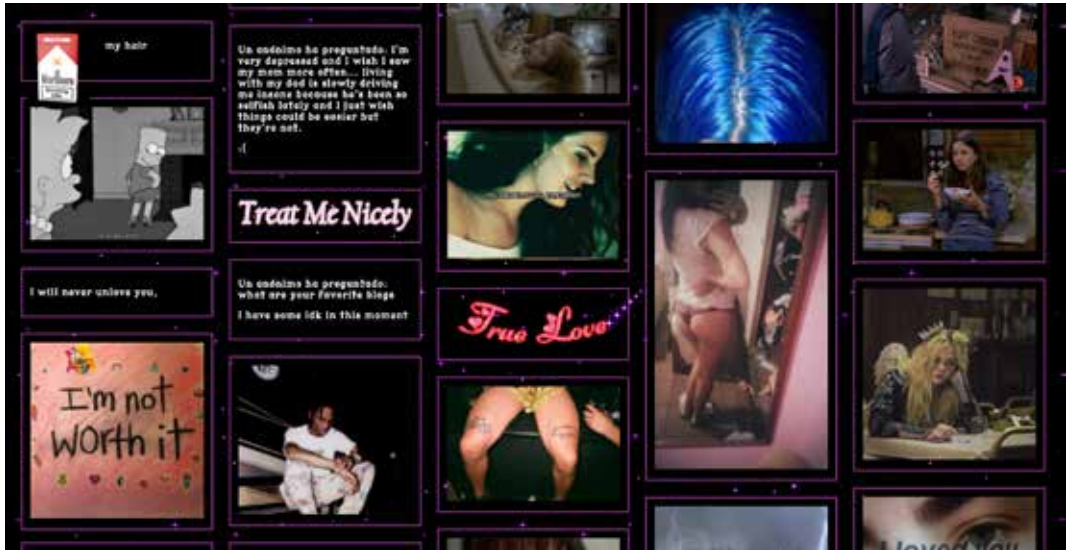


Figure 5: Grvnge-nicotine, 2017

## Distributed forms of perception and affective resonance

Through the meme-like sharing of content, a shared definition of sadness is formed within the online community of sad girls. Lisa Blackman's concept of distributed forms of perception captures the way this collective voice takes shape and is expressed. She argues that: "Distributed forms of perception assume that we are always situated, speak and are spoken through by a range of others, human and non-human," specifying that these are visibly seen "in social media practices that allow traces and fragments to become linked together to assume a collective authorial voice" (2015 p. 37). The sad girls share snippets of their lives, expressed in textual or visual forms, which are then reblogged and re-circulated to users beyond the original poster's network. Blackman (2015), also theorizes distributed forms of perception in terms of Grace M. Cho's (2008) notion of a "collective psychic apparatus" (p.156). Perhaps the sad girls' emergence on social

media can be conceptualized as a development of a collective psychic apparatus, through distributed forms of perception. The individual experiences of living with sadness/mental illness are expressed via multiple social media channels, and expressed via this medium the individuals together form a shared notion of mental health that is different than the one provided in traditional psychiatric discourse and mainstream cultural narratives. This process can also be conceptualized in terms of affective resonance, which Anna Gibbs defines as “the positive feedback loops created by affect, and in particular the tendency of someone witnessing the display of affect in another person to resonate with and experience the same affect in response” (2013 pp. 131-132). The sharing of affective content by individual Tumblr users resonates with other users, and together form a mutual “sad girl affect.” Gibbs writes that “repeated experiences of affective resonance (whether “firsthand” or “mediated”) produce a concatenation in which affect resonates with like-affect, so as to link otherwise unrelated scenes without producing articulable meaning” (2013 p. 133). The repetition of the sad girl affect in a recurring affective resonance creates a shared “sad girl aesthetic” whose meaning cannot be directly explained, but makes sense to the sad girls who participate in its creation and maintenance.

## Conceptualizations and analyses of sadness

Are the sad girls sharing a new kind of sadness? And if so, in what ways might this challenge traditional conceptions of sadness and mental illness? Before responding to this, I will map out the background of how sadness has been portrayed in popular discourse, and how it has been analyzed.

Blackman has argued that representations of mental illness in popular discourse tend to follow a “victim to victor” narrative that constructs psychiatry as a technology of hope (2007, pp. 2, 6). In this framework, when one is afflicted with a mental health issue the first step is to acknowledge and accept the biological cause of the illness, followed by a compliance with psychiatric treatment plans, and psychotropic drugs that are hailed as necessary. The reliance on a medical diagnosis lifts “the burden of agency and responsibility” (Cvetkovich 2012, p. 88) that has historically been associated with the “crazy” label. Here, an individual's irrational behavior is not their fault, but rather caused by inevitable neurological components. The only solution to a mental health problem is to adhere to an uncritical psychiatric discourse that medicalizes the sad subject as a “patient” in need of a cure (Foucault 2006).

This subject is by default ahistorical in that it seemingly exists in a vacuum from the surrounding culture. Socioeconomic factors like gender, race, and class are ignored in favor of biomedical explanations that hail medication and traditional psychotherapy as primary cures. This is seen in many cultural narratives where the individual who suffers tends to be white and middle class, and who, by virtue of their privilege, can represent mental illness as only rooted in neurological makeup and close family relations. An example of such a narrative is the television show *You're The Worst* (2014-), where one of the main characters goes through a period of clinical depression. Gretchen had suffered from depression in college, and it re-emerges seemingly out of the blue a few years later, even though her life on paper should ensure happiness. The depression is defined as clinical early on, and is portrayed as being caused by unruly brain chemicals. As we watch Gretchen struggle and subsequently get help from a therapist, we never have to worry about her health insurance (because it is set in the U.S. access to health care is a constant concern), nor about any systemic racism she may encounter in the health care system. Due to her privileges depression can be constructed as purely biomedical.

This approach simplifies what are usually complex problems with multiple causes and solutions, and ignores potential effects of cultural and socioeconomic circumstances, preventing all connections between ailments like depression and power/knowledge structures. The blind faith in the psychiatric model also leaves those who it fails to help responsible for their own inability to heal. The individual who suffers, and for whom the medication and therapy does not work, or who would rather not take it for a variety of reasons, including bothersome side effects, assumes fault. Following the neoliberal call to self-governance, the person who remains ill despite having sought help via the traditional psychiatric channels, is made to feel that it is because she did not try hard enough, or is not compliant enough. Inadequacy in care becomes the problem of the individual rather than a call to expand the available modes of treatment. Critical analyses, on the other hand, have tended to focus mainly on the connections between power regimes and constructions of the psyche (see, for example, Rose 1998). Even though this approach takes social and cultural circumstances into account, it can result in delegitimizing feelings of sadness and depression, implying that it is only a product of power regimes and not a “real” lived experience.

I do not intend to follow either of these traditions, I wish to explore theories that examine the discourse around sadness somewhere in between the poles of pro- and anti-psychiatry. Like the thinkers I am most influenced by, Blackman and

Cvetkovich, I argue a contemporary understanding of mental health must go beyond simple analyses, and instead acknowledge the complex entanglements of the prevalence of psychotropic drugs and critical thinking about them.

Cvetkovich describes how the affect-focused scholarly collective, Public Feelings, approaches depression: “a political analysis of depression might advocate revolution and regime change over pills, but in the world of Public Feelings there are no magic bullet solutions, whether medical or political, just the slow steady work of resilient survival, utopian dreaming, and other affective tools for transformation” (2012 p. 2). Can the sad girls on Tumblr constitute such a “resilient survival?” With their glorification and aestheticizing of sadness in both its artistic and medicalized iterations, the sad girls seem to fall in neither the pro- or anti-psychiatry stance. The romanticizing of sadness implies a refusal of psychiatric models that aim to cure mental illness and restore them to healthy subjects as soon as possible. The embrace of medication in a way that assigns it “coolness” and “edginess” reveals an at least partial belief in the possibility of pills to soothe symptoms and make one feel better. The sad girls, then, move in a space in between wholeheartedly accepting or completely rejecting a psychiatric model. The former because they refuse to immediately heal and choose instead to remain in their sorrow, and the latter because they acknowledge the power of psychotropic drugs to relieve symptoms. In other words, the sad girls are positioned in an ambivalent position akin to that described by the Public Feelings project.

## Acedia

In her mix of memoir and scholarly study, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), Cvetkovich examines the history of depression in Western Culture, primarily how it has been understood outside of a medical discourse that by default conceives of it as something to be immediately cured. She starts with the concept of acedia, first talked about in early Christian writings on monastic life. The term refers to spiritual crisis, inertia, carelessness, and intense feelings of disgust and disdain (Cvetkovich 2012, p. 85). Acedia has frequently been written off as too religious to be used in any understanding of depression. Rooted in spiritual thinking it is contrary to a medical model based on secular notions of progress and Enlightenment ideas. Cvetkovich, however, argues for the use of acedia in theorizing contemporary depression, as it “foregrounds matters of faith and hope

as relevant to the experience of being stuck, which can manifest in psychic and spiritual ways, as well as biological and physical ones” (2012, p. 102). She aims to open her analysis so as to understand depression “as the product of a sick culture” (p. 102). By turning to a concept like *acedia*, which incorporates both the spiritual and the physical, connections between culture and depression can be studied beyond the (historical) limits of secular understandings of mental health.

Cvetkovich writes that “*acedia* helps place the medical model of depression within the longer history of notions of not only health but embodiment of what it means to be human” (2012, p. 102). Thinking of depression as an “embodiment of what it means to be human” implies a rejection of a medical model that sees depression as something exceptional to be immediately cured away, and instead assigns it a central place in the experience of life itself. The tendency to conceive of depression as abnormal indirectly marks “feeling good” as the “normal” mood for which one should always aim. The occasional states of “feeling bad” are also accepted as normal if they do not result in the inertia and inability to act so characteristic of depression. Depression as a deviation, as an illness to be cured, fits into the neoliberal society in which we all need to be functional subjects capable of laboring. Adopting a model of *acedia* that places depression as central to what it means to be human, allows a move away from seeing it as exceptional. Instead, it can be viewed as something that offers an opportunity to pause and break from the requirement to constantly be a profit-making subject, and provide a chance to process the emotional impacts of life under neoliberalism. In their refusal to heal, the sad girls can perhaps be an example of conceptualizing sadness as *acedia*.

## Suffering as ordinary

Blackman writes frequently about the importance of “reframing suffering as 'ordinary'” (2015 p. 26; see also Blackman 2001; Blackman & Walkerdine 2001), which follows the trajectory of repositioning negative affects at the center rather than the periphery of human life. She explains that conceiving “suffering as 'ordinary'” reframes it as “not an exceptional phenomenon, but rather part and parcel of the costs of neo-liberalism(s)” (2015 p. 26). By conceptualizing suffering as ordinary, one can, Blackman argues, acknowledge the “difficulties of living normalised fictions and fantasies of femininity that [are] produced within [neoliberalism(s)] ... as signs of personal failure, inadequacy and the associated economies of pain, fear, anxiety and distress that keep these apparatuses alive and

in place” (2015 p. 26). Seeing suffering as ordinary, and not something that can immediately be cured or done away with, makes it possible to connect suffering with the neoliberal power structures that control our wellbeing while telling us that we have endless possibilities to maximize our mental and physical health. The sad girls do seem to see suffering as ordinary, as they rest in it as a part of everyday life that they cannot get away from. For example, a post by user *straightboyfriend* that has been reblogged and liked 42,304 times reads “its summer vacation you know what that means! Isolation & severe depression” (*straightboyfriend* 2016). Another post, by user *gothicprep*, which has been reblogged and liked 58,058 times, reads “how do i contour my abandonment issues?” (*gothicprep* 2016). Both posts imply a base level of constant sadness, and the ironic tone serves to establish shared connections with other users who have had similar experiences. The connection of sad feelings (isolation, severe depression, and abandonment issues) with usually joyful and “normal” things (summer vacation and makeup) turns the negative feelings into a shared comedic discourse.

## Melancholia

Besides accepting sadness as ordinary, the sad girls also display an idealization of sadness. This could be described by the concept of melancholia, which has also been used as an alternative to contemporary medical models. Cvetkovich explains that melancholia allows for “a return to a time when sadness could be viewed in other ways, including as a normative part of cultural experience, and even, most notably in the case of Renaissance and Romantic understandings that have had a persistent influence, as a creative force” (2012 p. 107). It is something that touches more upon sadness in general, a sadness that is creative and inspiring, rather than the debilitating “stuck-ness” associated with depression.

There is also an element of pleasure in melancholia. Freudian psychoanalysis defines the melancholic as “one who incorporates a lost object of desire into her ego, so that she never fully experiences the loss, since the loved one, even in absence, becomes merged with the self” (Berlant 2012, p. 29). The lost love becomes integral to the make-up of the subject, to her entire self-image, and the incorporation of the loss takes the form of masochistic pleasure in love relationships. The pleasurable and creative aspect of melancholia differs significantly from the

spiritual crisis and inertia of *acedia*. I think one can hold on to both concepts as ways of thinking through depression and sadness. In relation to the sad girls, *melancholia* can capture the pleasure they derive in glorifying sadness, and *acedia* the inertia that co-exists with this romanticizing.

*Melancholia* might be said to glorify feeling bad because of its promise to produce great art; it is the driving force of the archetypical tortured genius. In this way, the sad girls seem to partially adhere to a melancholic stance. There is a dedication to artists and celebrities that fulfill this role of tortured and misunderstood genius. The artist Lana del Rey is one recurring figure. del Rey is not a celebrity that has spoken out about actual struggles with mental illness, rather she has adopted a persona of being sad. She sings about female weakness and dependence in a way that makes it seem like she is enjoying it. These themes are present in much of her work, but is especially visible on her 2014 album “*Ultraviolence*” which is dominated by themes of submission and self-destructiveness in relation to various men. One line that particularly seems to encourage the abusive relationships portrayed throughout the album is a quote from a 1962 Carol King and Gerry Goffin song: “he hit me and it felt like a kiss,” sung on the title track “*Ultraviolence*.” The persona del Rey communicates is one that takes melancholic pleasure in not getting what she wants. The sad girls on Tumblr adopt her affect by frequently posting and reblogging images of her, sometimes with lyrics from her songs written on them. She even has a song entitled “*Sad Girl*” that contains the lyrics “I’m a sad girl, I’m a bad girl, I’m a bad girl.” Another popular del Rey lyric that is repeatedly reblogged is “you like your girls insane,” from the song “*Born to Die*,” shared as text atop a photograph of the singer (m1nd--0ver--matter, n.d.). del Rey lends herself perfectly to the sad girl affective resonance, shown by the frequency with which images of her and her songs are reblogged and spread among these Tumblr users.

Idealizations of real life persons who inhabit the position of (female) misinterpreted and tortured genius are also common. Courtney Love, Amy Winehouse, Sky Ferreira, and celebrities who have had public breakdowns, like Britney Spears, Lindsey Lohan, and Amanda Bynes appear to reinforce a melancholic notion of sadness as romantic, mystical, and inspirational (see Got-you-where-i-want-you, 2017, infinitystorms, and cling2something, 2017). *Acedia* and *melancholia* are ways of conceptualizing sadness beyond the pro- or anti- medical model offered by psychiatry. I believe these concepts can explain the activity of the sad girls by providing ways of thinking about the simultaneous resting in, and normalizing of, sadness and the glorification of feeling bad.

## Possibilities of sadness

Blackman and Cvetkovich have written about the “productive possibilities of negative states of being,” which seek to “to de-pathologise shame, melancholy, failure, depression, anxieties and other forms of 'feeling bad,' to open up new ways of thinking about agency, change and transformation” (Blackman 2015, p. 25). Cvetkovich describes how the Public Feelings project uses the term *impasse* to refer to “a state of both stuckness and potential” (2012, p. 21). She explains that the notion of *impasse* maintains “a hopefulness about the possibility that slowing down or not moving forward might not be a sign of failure and might instead be worth exploring” (p. 21). *Impasse* could be one kind of productive possibility, allowing sufferers to rest in “bad” feelings without having to immediately work to get rid of them. Similar to Blackman's notion of suffering as ordinary (2015), the concept of *impasse* allows us to think about and process the power structures that inevitably affect the possibilities of succeeding at a healthy life. Among the sad girls noted, there is not an overt political engagement that directly connects suffering to structures of power. But the mere act of resting in sadness, as they do, might function as an *impasse*, where the refusal to move forward becomes a protest of the neoliberal demands of becoming a laboring and “happy” subject.

## A supportive community?

It is in the collective notions of sadness that develop among the sad girls, that the alternative conceptualizations of sadness move from theoretical to actual. By sharing their own views of sadness on the multimedia platform, it becomes possible for Tumblr sad girls to explore their feelings together, and potentially provide support for one another by validating each other's experiences. The glorification of sadness found among the sad girls sometimes borders on encouragement of self-destructive behavior. But, paradoxically, the fact that these experiences are shared within the virtual space of Tumblr intervenes in the glorified isolation and presents the possibility of a supportive collective. In the middle of Lana del Rey quotes and pictures of pills, more “positive” posts are found. For example, a gif of moving text that reads “sext: I want to be good for your mental health” (hollywood-noir, 2015b). “Sext” refers to the communication of sexual acts via text message, or, the text version of phone sex. “Sext:” followed by various sentences is a meme that juxtaposes the sexual connotations of “sexting” with non-sexual

phrases for comedic effect. Saying “I want to be good for your mental health” in this context communicates a tender longing for emotional support and stability.

Anne Allison recounts an experience during fieldwork in Japan where she attended a talking event that aimed to prevent the contemporary suicide trend. She explains that the aim of the event was “to share stories of near-death experiences as a means of assisting each other ... in trying to stay alive” (2013 p. 130). The participants told their stories of depression, loneliness and withdrawal, including how they managed to move beyond the worst point of despair and avoid suicide. The turning point for many was precisely the moment when they learned that they were not alone in feeling sadness and despair. Emily Martin describes a similar phenomenon occurring in the support groups she visited for her study of bipolar disorder in American culture (2009). Here the participants formed a collective understanding of what it means to live with the diagnosis based on their own and each other's personal experiences of navigating a flawed psychiatric system.

Through distributed forms of perception and meme-like spreading of multiple voices, the phenomenon of the sad girl can be said to manifest an alternative collective psyche (as discussed by Blackman 2015 and Cho 2008). By forming a discourse where multiple voices and experiences of living with mental illness get to be heard, an alternative and multifaceted way of conceptualizing sadness becomes available. This gives sufferers access to a potentially supportive collective of other sufferers. Here, those who fail to be helped by traditional psychiatric discourse can get a chance to be heard, learn that they are not alone, and possibly receive non-medicalized modes of support.

## Endnotes

1. When you reblog a post on Tumblr you repost the original content (text, visuals, or audio) to your followers and on your personal Tumblr blog. You can choose to include previous comments or leave them out. The username of the person you reblog from is always included in the new post, as is the original poster, who is referred to as “source” at the bottom of the post.

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## Affect and Exhibitions

A Curatorial Seminar at Hrafnseyri, Westfjords of Iceland,  
August 2017



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From the town of Isafjörður, the road towards Hrafnseyri tunnels for seven kilometers through a mountain – a single-lane channel carved from crusty volcanic rock. A stately game of chicken ensues where outward bound drivers pull over in alcoves to wait for incoming traffic to pass. Tunnels in Iceland provide portals of passage and connection. Mountain roads close for the winter and render remote communities like Hrafnseyri inaccessible except by sea.<sup>1</sup> Past the town of Þingeri, the asphalt turns into a dirt road paved with salt water to retain its surface, which snakes over a mountain and around a sequence of hair-pin turns

in the clouds. As a passenger, I enter the Westfjords swept by a vertiginous sublime, at once expansive and perilous. Spectacular panoramic views expand beyond the road's edge which drops relentlessly hundreds of feet below. Particularly anxious moments are alleviated by the good humor and reassuring conversation of kind companionship.



Photo: Viktor Petur Hannesson



Photo: Valdimar J. Halldorsson

I arrive in Hrafnseyri to teach a seminar on *Affect and Exhibitions* at the invitation of Valdimar J. Halldorsson, curator-director of the museum complex that also serves as a satellite programming space for the University of Iceland.<sup>2</sup> Built on the site of an 800-year old farming homestead, the on-site case studies are exhibits that stem from this birthplace of two national heroes, Jon Sigurdsson (1811–1879) a proponent of Iceland’s peacefully achieved independence from Denmark, and Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (d. 1213), a Viking chieftain, seer and the country’s first physician.<sup>3</sup> The seminar takes place across an array of contemporary structures and historical sites situated imposingly on a hill overlooking a fjord. A mid-century visitor center holds a commemorative museum, accommodations, and a flexible meeting room that also functions as a chapel. A period turf house encompasses a dining room, reading room, contemporary art gallery, and kitchen with sleeping lofts upstairs for residents. A nineteenth-century church on the property, administered by villagers nearby, has become a site for destination weddings. Its graveyard holds the oldest traces of habitation, including some timeworn headstones. The experience of the curatorial seminar extends throughout these spaces. Participants include curators, anthropologists, graduate students in museum studies, media and cultural studies, independent scholars, and artists. Impromptu conversations occur while walking between buildings, during meals and in dormitories before sleep. Activities peripheral to the class include investigating the material culture

### ***CAPACIOUS***

around the complex, playing music in the dining room after dinner, and for the most stalwart a dip in the chilly waters of the fjord. The stillness of the landscape and vast views provide an extraordinary impact on proprioception. On a quiet day, one can sense the atmosphere for miles around, a spaciousness that impels a kind of intuitive consciousness of being part of it all. The museum complex lent itself to exploring the empirical tangibility of affects embodied in moments of immersion, in bonding to the elemental forces of the terrain, and in tuning into the hauntings of history.

The curatorial seminar was grounded in dialogue with site research, explorations that sought to collectively delve into the affective resonances of the context. Taking the exhibition complex of Hrafseyri as case study, participants were invited to explore how the affects of the site extend beyond museum narratives (or the discrete meaning of autonomously displayed objects) to encompass broader sensory,



Photo: Jennifer Fisher

cognitive, and emotive contexts. Just as affect works to transmit the feeling and atmosphere of an exhibition, so does it play a dynamic role in feeling space and time. We investigated affect in ways that inform the kind of curatorial processes involved in a site visit where discerning context plays a crucial role in the preparation of an exhibition. I asked participants to identify the notable affects they

encountered. Some reflections are included here as parallel texts and photographs. The exercise was to open to ambience and lateral relationality to engage process-based intuitions familiar to curators and artists.

Actions that situated the body in the environment arose as a recurring theme. As an intervention in the seascape, Bjorg Stefansdottir and Viktor Hannesson took a bracing ‘mermaid’s swim’ at dawn with the temperature hovering around seven Celsius with cold rain. They returned with Icelandic sweaters, socks, and hats over their bathing suits, rosy and exhilarated for breakfast. The body in the landscape was likewise explored by Olof Sigfusdottir. Over several on-site residencies her investigations have engaged tangible affects to inform what she calls the “curatorial aspect of intellectual work”:



Photo: Olof Gerour Sigfusdottir

During my residencies at Hrafnseyri, I have consciously exercised heightened attention, sheer attunement, and careful activation of my bodily experiences during the intellectual working process by placing myself into the surrounding environment. I discovered my force-field in a hollow up on a hill situated in a subtle bend in the ground, just above the tree line of a small man-made wood that separates it from the residential area. It is framed by trees on one side, a bare hill on the other, and parallel to a big rock that must have fallen from the mountain above some hundreds or thousands of years ago. To lie in it became a ritualistic act. It was a welcoming gap for my body, creating a state of in-between-ness, some sort of a threshold between physical and intellectual practice. Its gravitational force was luring and I wanted myself to be permeated by it. I let it leak into me by reclining there with no clothes on. Having my body touch the ground, spiders and flies crawling on my skin, I felt grounded. This daily act of ‘earthing’ helped my task by creating an unexpected space for mental processing of the text I was dealing with. Seeing the pressed grass, the ambiguous imprint of my body on the ground created an after-effect that has resonated with me ever since.

Olof Gerour Sigfusdottir (2017)

Here Olof curates the conditions of intellectual work beyond configuring the writing context. By opening her senses to embody the surroundings, her affective adaption to the terrain energizes and creates a space for intellection as a receptive

counterpoint to the act of writing. Such a kinaesthetic attunement involves an energetic exchange with the landscape: just as her presence leaves an impression in the grass, the gravitational force of the ground is sustained in her awareness. This practice of incorporating the environment brings awareness into present time, a mode of perception continuous with that of the exhibition experience.

The fact is that very few authentic artifacts remain at Hrafnseyri. Yet, I would like to suggest that the persistence of ice, frost, rain, and wind permeate the terrain with a sentience born of the force of natural elements. Age and exposure accumulate like surface patina as the site is imbued with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “texxture,” the material evidence of use and history.<sup>4</sup>



Photo: Ragnhelour Kristin Palsdottir

Hrafnseyri is haunted. The resonance of historical events endures in the secluded beauty of the homestead site. Here the past inhabits the present, the historically imbued place releases its presences, sometimes through eerie modes of experience. At Hrafnseyri this summer, a ghost story related by Thora Vilhjalmsdottir Wright describes her auditory encounter with a troubled spirit the year before:

During 2016 I decided to stay in the turf house where I slept well with no disturbing dreams. On the last morning I woke up and heard the French girl sobbing in her bed. I turned and looked but she wasn't moving at all. She

was sound asleep! The sound of crying was coming from around her face. My mind struggled – this didn't make sense and there was no sense to find there! Then the sound started to move away from her, towards the door. I felt the presence of a young woman, blond and heartbroken, feeling very sad about something. The sound slowly faded as it moved and then it was gone. I felt this powerful connection with the place, like I had literally taken a peek into its history. I wasn't afraid. I felt her sadness but didn't know what had happened. I got dressed and went downstairs and asked the woman who was preparing breakfast in the kitchen if anyone had seen this woman in the house. She replied that she had been seen walking through the walls. When I left Hrafnseyri later that day I felt like I had somehow traveled through time. Getting to know someone's heartache like that leaves a deep connection, even if you don't meet in the 'real world.'

Thora Vihjalmsdottir Wright (2017)

Thora's visitation by the ghost happened in the loft space of the Turf House, a reconstruction of a settler inhabitation. The apparition impacted her perception through an affective register that was at once auditory and mobile, present and disappearing, providing a portal into the sadness of a woman resident from another time. This haunting emerged from the space as part of Thora's dialectical sensing of its history.



In contrast to such transient impressions, the exhibitionary affect of the Jon Sigurdsson display in the visitor center presents a more contained sector of sensations coexisting with the site as if frozen in time. Commissioned by Iceland's Prime Minister's office, this display marks the site within a national touristic semiotic. It is permanently fixed in the year 2010, the date of its installation. That Sigurdsson was a philologist engaged in the study of literary and historical writing may have impelled the preponderance of inscription adorning its undulating didactic panels. The display was designed by Basalt Architects, the firm who transformed Iceland's famous Blue Lagoon from a swampy geothermal puddle into a world-class spa. The blue-green translucency of the Plexiglas screened with text and photographs recalls the hues of ice, like walking through a wintery cave. While aspiring to invigorate a narrative of national heroism, its atmosphere is ultimately impenetrable and sustains the protective impulse of historical fortifications built on the site.<sup>5</sup> While the Plexiglas deflects the museum problem of visitors' curious hands, its smooth coolness abstracts any feeling of period immersion.<sup>6</sup> The few artifacts – a plaster bust, a desk strewn with papers, a wooden box and a cabinet – are not authentic to Sigurdsson's life. The only hint of warmth are several wooden mid-century chairs interspersed in the space that offer points of rest or invite engagement with touch screens relating to Sigurdsson's biography in Hrafnseyri and beyond. Devoid of the patina of textured authenticity of the other period buildings, the display presents a compressed and somewhat claustrophobic exhibition path that alienated seminar participants.<sup>7</sup>



Photo: Valdimar Halldorsson

The curatorial seminar takes place in the flexible space that also serves as a meeting room and chapel. In contrast with the coolness of the Jon Sigurdsson display, the earth tones and hand-woven Icelandic wool carpeting furnish warmth and foster relationality. Seating can be configured in a circle for discussion or facing the large screen for a series of Skype dialogues with invited guests. These include several curatorial studies theorists: Jenny Kidd, who discussed how affect is instrumentalized in museum on-line games; Helena Reckitt, who spoke about affective labour in contemporary feminist curating; Gabriel Levine, who considered “glorious obscurity” and other affects involving vernacular museums; and Jim Drobnick, who discussed curatorial interventions into affectively charged sites. All insightfully contributed to substantial discussions about affect and exhibitions.<sup>8</sup>

In this room, a stained glass window depicts Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, in his role as a healer, treating the reclining patient’s leg, the sole commemorative image of him in the museum complex. The glass tableau portrays him with the dove of spirit and medical caduceus emblematically bestowing his healing gifts. In the background of the composition a yellow-leafed tree serves to support the composition. When the sun shines, the window illuminates the room with a



Photo: Valdimar Halldorsson

welcoming glow. The fact that Hrafn's medical talents included not only the healing of bodies, but also of mental illness and souls,<sup>9</sup> strikes me as intriguing in the context of affect and exhibitions because one of the etymological roots of the word 'curator' derives from the word 'curate,' or priest, who cares for the souls of a parish (see Weisgerber and Butler 2016). In the seminar we speculate about how the curative legacy of Hrafn might find a dialectic counterpart with curatorial projects in the Hrafnseyri complex.

The saga of Hrafn, as recounted by Anne Tjomslund (1951), describes his birth at Hrafnseyri, then a farm known as Eyri, to a family prominent in Westfjords. He travelled extensively in Scandinavia, England, France, and Spain and studied medicine at one of the earliest medical schools the Schola Medica Salernitana, in

Salarno, Italy. After his travels he settled into his role as Chieftan, or Godi, a role that involved legal negotiation and the settling of disputes. He practiced medicine at Hrafnseyri, for which he charged no fees. Healing arts in Iceland at that time involved using runes, chanting magic songs, attending to supernatural dreams, visions, and portents that signaled the intervention of fate or divine power. Hrafn worked with a combination of folk medicine, Christian faith healing, and his formal European medical training (Tjomslund

1951: xi, 1, 10). He gained renown for his work as a healer: he could cure patients whom others could not, and his capacity as a seer was well regarded. During a winter voyage to Scotland, when the ship encountered raging seas near the Hebrides, none of the crew knew how to navigate a safe passage. Because he was recognized as a "guide of men's souls" he was deemed the best suited to pilot the ship through turbulent and rocky seas to safe harbor. He steered in blind conditions and is credited in the saga with saving all aboard (Tjomslund 1951: 25-28). Hrafn's ability to navigate demonstrates acute intuitive alertness to the processes of knowing and feeling of one charged with the guiding of souls, the capacity of a curator in its originary sense.

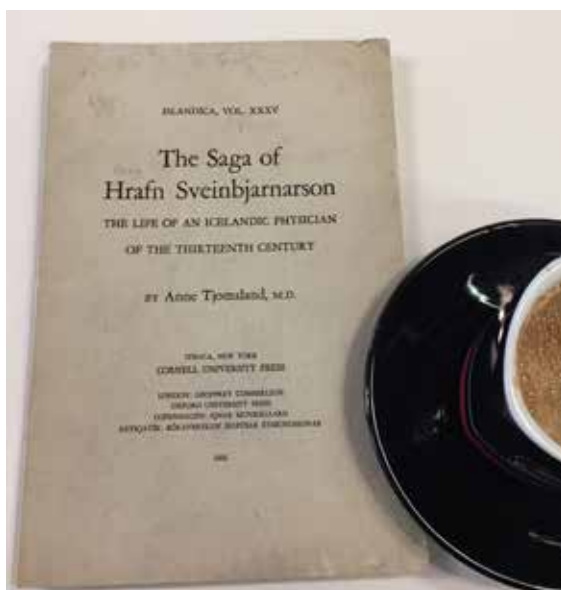


Photo: Jennifer Fisher

Hrafn was recognized as a popular chief. So the motive for his brutal murder by Thorvald Snorrason of Vatnsfjörður remains unclear, but it is likely related to the responsibility of settling disputes. Hrafn's rhetorical talents forestalled the homicidal Thorvald for some time, and he had built a fortification around the homestead in the effort to stave off attack. But Thorvald was not interested in reconciling. On New Year's Eve 1213, Thorvald's men jumped the wall. Hrafn offered himself up on the condition that the other residents of the homestead be left in peace. Thorvald agreed. After receiving confession, Hrafn went outside. Kneeling down on knees and elbows, his head on a piece of driftwood, he was slain.<sup>10</sup> Hrafn's two sons escaped the burning homestead and eventually avenged his death in 1228.<sup>11</sup> A stone monument on the front lawn of the museum complex memorializes the place of Hrafn's martyrdom.

The Medieval period in Iceland was characterized by a ruthlessness that eventually led to the breakdown of the country and its submission to Norway. During Hrafn's lifetime, the political situation was not unlike the warlords of contemporary Afghanistan, with competing chiefs warring with each other, none with sufficient power to form a centralized government. This power dynamic is in



Photo: Bjorg Stefansdottir

some ways similar to the unregulated circumstances of the contemporary art market. With extremely wealthy collectors and oligarchs competing to dominate the art world with ostentatious bravado, the value of art has been thrown into question.<sup>12</sup> Outside the ferocity of market-driven art, there is a palpable fatigue with its neoliberalist commercial dominance. As an antidote, some curators such as Helena Reckitt are reviving the curatorial role in its ethical sense of ‘caring,’ both for others and oneself. Helena’s skype session during the seminar illuminated how the ‘support acts’ of caring can sustain the affective labor of feminist curatorial practice. This inspired much discussion amongst participants about how the retreat center at Hrafnseyri might extend its museum mandate beyond the paternalistic nationalism emblematic of the Jon Sigurdsson exhibition, to create a curatorial dialogue that draws from Hrafn’s legacy of visionary compassion and empathy.<sup>13</sup>



Photo: Andrea Thormar

Participants warmly shared their observations of the support acts of Valdimar and his partner Ola that had contributed to preparing and supporting an inventive context for friendly intellectual and creative exploration. Here multisensorial affects were clearly evident in the daily cycle of

activities in the Turf House, which features the café, an archeological exhibit, a small gallery for temporary art exhibitions, a period kitchen exhibit contingent to an actual kitchen, a reading room, and the sleeping lofts. The low ceilings enhanced the intimacy and conviviality amongst seminar attendees during mealtime. Soups, grilled salmon, Thai noodles, roast lamb, breakfasts, and ‘happy marriage’ cake<sup>14</sup> crafted by Ola – herself an artist – bolstered energies to sustain a demanding schedule of seminar presentations and discussions. We sat in congenial tables for breakfast and lunch, which were reconfigured into a banquet table for the sumptuous lamb dinner on the last evening. As an anthropologist living and working in the Westfjords, Valdimar’s organization of seminar excursions brought the group into the immediacy of his research of vernacular culture.<sup>15</sup> An afternoon tour to the mechanical seminar museum at Þingeyri provided insights into the region’s industrial history, and how traditional economies are transforming amid ascendant tourism, and a twilight climb of the waterfall at Dynjadni alerted participants to the splendor of natural forces and the fragility of the ecosystem.

Another zone of affective encounter within the terrain arose from the immediacy of an actual excavation on the site. Archaeologist Margret Hronn Hallmundsdottir has recently unearthed evidence that proves aspects of the Hrafn saga that had been, to date, supported only in folklore. One evening at twilight she gave us an impromptu tour of the dig – a 13th century tunnel leading from the homestead site to the fjord – where, she explained, Hrafn’s two sons were said to have escaped after their home was torched. Margret’s research strategy has endeavored to substantiate knowledge of the tunnel’s existence sustained in local oral accounts. To walk the edges of this once subterranean passageway is to become oriented to a conduit to safety used some 800 years ago. Standing by the excavation one can trace the tunnel from the museum to the sea. Margret’s feminist conviction is remarkable in how it gives credence to living folkloric epistemology sustained through oral transmission. Equally important is her perseverance.

Archaeologist Margret Hallmundsdottir’s enthusiasm and extremely inspiring love for her work affected everyone very strongly. We were in awe of her persistence despite the lack of government funding (a very common problem of any researcher in Iceland), and pressure from her colleagues for scientific proof of her findings. We all believed that she is right.

Gudlaug Gunnarsdottir (2017)

While bits of wood emerged from Margret’s dig, few trees remain at Hrafnseyri. Most of the trees of Iceland were cut down centuries ago by the Vikings for boat building. Today mature trees grow in Reykjavik, in parks, in front lawns, in graveyards. Yet in retrospect, it is the trees of the museums that stand out in my recollections. Unremarkable to me at first glance (and throughout the entire seminar), the tree featured in Hrafn’s stained glass window now strikes me both in its supporting role in the composition and its emblematic force. The tree is depicted as the background for Hrafn’s act of healing, its sentient affect sustaining the curing transmission.

More commonly, the healing benefits of black birch leaf tea are well known in Iceland. My first evening in Reykjavik, my university hosts kindly serve me some after dinner, which was delicious. Later in Hrafnseyri, I notice a small copse growing beside the museum parking lot and harvest leaves and dry them on the radiator of my room. After I return to Toronto, I brew them into tea to serve to a friend with a broken heart.

The last afternoon of the seminar, after tours of Isafjörður museums with curators from the Museum of Everyday Life, the Cultural House Heritage Museum and the Marine Museum, all of whom had attended the seminar, Valdimar drives me to the airport. Flying out over the Atlantic, the Westfjords appear below. The unusual lateral relationality of the seminar at Hrafnseyri coheres into a feeling of emergent elation.

My experience at Hrafnseyri [was] a time outside of time and a place outside of space, imbued by the immediate environment with a meaning and character that was somehow, though never entirely articulated, co-created by all the participants. There was something like magic that bonded us, an eclectic group of strangers, and translated to a kind of close kinship.

Rana Campbell (2017)



Photo: Jennifer Fisher

The currents mysteriously energized by our collective stay in Hrafnseyri's remoteness were not contained by its structures of exhibition, but permeated by the rhythms of wind and rain, the climate of the season, the luminosity of day and night, the traces of sentient presence. Distinct from formalist approaches to narrative displays of history, the zone of the curatorial became a space to explore ways of navigating knowing and feeling modeled by Hrafn's marine voyage so long ago.

## Endnotes

1. With tourism ascendant in Iceland, another tunnel is being forged near Hrafnseyri by Romanians that won the tender to provide a year-round road to the museum and waterfall. They work continuous shifts, arriving and leaving by boat all year round. During the winter, the power station where they live is a contact zone should there be a problem with the museum, a power failure, a fire alarm going off.
2. My thanks go to Greg Seigworth for generously including my Skype participation in his 2016 workshop, and for introducing me to Valdimar Halldorsson.
3. The art of principled negotiation espoused by both Sigurdsson and Sveinbjarnarson underlies their stature as Icelandic heroes. The programming is inspired by this legacy, and includes courses, exhibitions, workshops, conferences, self-directed residencies, documentary film festivals, archaeological field schools, and retreats. Thematics that have been featured during workshops and conferences include nationalism and globalization, tourism and identity, museum education and exhibition design, workshops in renewable energy, international folklore and story-telling symposiums, a group reading of the saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, creation and rehearsal of theatrical projects, gender equity conferences and seminars on affect theory.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (after Renu Bora) distinguishes “textxture” from “texture.” Sedgwick states “textxture ... is dense with offered information about how, substantively, historically and materially, it came into being,” whereas “texture ... invisibly blocks or refuses such information; there is texture, usually glossy ... that signifies the willed erasure of history” (2003: 14-15).
5. I acknowledge Viktor Hannesson’s insight here that the structure of the Sigurdsson display conveys an affect of protection.
6. Baudrillard’s idea of “the structure of atmosphere” is useful in understanding tangible affects of empirical exhibition contexts. He describes atmosphere as “the systematic cultural connotation at the level of object” where atmospheric values are conveyed through colour, materials, volume, space and seating. Baudrillard notes that glass is a material that solidifies, distances and abstracts atmosphere, that “glass is to matter what vacuum is to air” (1999 [1968]: 41-43).
7. See Vimeo walkthrough of the Jon Sigurdsson Museum by Valdimar J. Halldorsson <https://vimeo.com/251732586>
8. Jenny Kidd, Helena Reckitt, Gabriel Levine, and Jim Drobnick contributed to the “Museums and Affect” and “Affect and Relationality,” issues 4.3 and 5.1 of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* that comprised the workshop readings.
9. I am indebted to Olof Sigfusdottir for sharing this perception. On my last morning in Reykjavik she kindly gave me a vintage copy of Anne Tjomsland’s volume *The Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson* that informed this text.
10. Not surprisingly, Thorvald then robbed the house at Eyri of all valuables: weapons, clothing, furnishing, utensils, and food. Eventually, as was the law at the time, Thorvald was fined for slaying Hrafn (Tjomsland 1951, 43-55).
11. Hrafn’s sons were killed in retaliation shortly after that.
12. A Leonardo da Vinci painting sold at Christies, London, of uncertain authenticity, and fetched a record \$450,000,000 in November 2017.
13. Tjomsland underscores Hrafn’s unwavering ethics: “it seemed he was so humane that he would sooner die for the sake of a sworn truce than break faith” (1951: 41).
14. The recipe for Happy Marriage Cake *Hjonabandssaela* is as follows: 2 cups of quick oatmeal; 2 cups all-purpose flour; 1 cup white sugar; 1tsp baking soda; 1 cup butter (at room temperature); 1 egg; 1 tsp almond extract; ¾ cup rhubarb jam (or blend of rhubarb and prune jam). Mix oatmeal, flour, sugar, and baking soda in a bowl. Cut in the butter and knead the dough until well blended. Stir in the egg and

almond extract. Butter a cake pan or pie pan and press 2/3 of the dough into the bottom of the pan. Spread jam evenly over it and then crumble the remaining dough over the top of cake. Bake at 400 degrees for 20-25 minutes or until crust is golden brown (Bjarnadottir 2016).

15. Valdimar's fieldwork with local communities (particularly disenfranchised populations) draws from affect theory to develop a method of collaborative research qualified by empathy (Halldorsson 2017).

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Cacao (*Theobroma cacao* L.): fruiting and flowering branch with separate numbered sections of flowers, fruit and seed, chromolithograph by P. Depannemaeker, c.1885 (after B. Hoola van Nooten)  
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# Craving Assemblages: Consciousness and Chocolate Desire



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In this paper, I use the case of a craving for chocolate to explain that a craving is a desire for food emerging from a process whose components exceed conscious awareness, and thus the idea that desire is something that can always be consciously controlled and resisted must be overcome. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage, I propose that understanding desire requires considering the distribution and heterogeneity of agencies participating in the event of the production of desire. I will suggest that the role of the brain in the production and reproduction of desire is crucial if we want to develop more sophisticated ways to consciously deal with our desire for food. I will introduce the difference between molar and molecular strata of organization operating within the assemblage of the craving to understand what kind of process should be triggered in order to deal with our desire for food. I end the paper by suggesting that focusing on the aesthetic properties of food in the generation of pleasure can be a powerful conscious resource for producing what Malabou calls brain plasticity.

## KEYWORDS

affect, chocolate, desire, brain plasticity craving

Affect Studies has prompted scholarly attention to turn to the non-conscious processes at play in experience. By exploring domains other than consciousness, we have been lured to delve into the processes that occur at small scales in both organic and material/non-human becomings alike, mediating and participating in complex entanglements with embodied human experience (Gregg & Seigworth 2010; Clough, 2012). In that vein, Affect Studies has re-encountered scientific expressions and some of the so-called process philosophies (Blackman and Venn 2010; Lara 2015a). Particularly, encounters with the neurosciences, mainly the works of Damasio and LeDoux, have brought enthusiasts and critics alike (Damasio 2003; LeDoux 1998).<sup>1</sup> However, Affect Studies' insights on non-discursive, non-representational, non-conscious activity still need to be understood in relation to other conscious and cultural processes, or at least, such a relation requires further exploration to comprehend complex processes emerging out of the concatenation of events at different scales of the reality. In what follows I take the case of food craving, understood as a sudden desire for specific food, to explore how desire production emerges from an assemblage made from multiple agents and events, where conscious activity is but one among other, sometimes stronger capacities. I give special attention to the restrictive capacities of consciousness commonly executed in the event of the craving, and I ask: other than exercising a restrictive capacity, what influence does consciousness have on cravings?

In nutritional science, Annemarie Mol's study of food cravings contrasts two different approaches that are concerned with weight loss and obesity. On the one hand are dieting techniques of control in which the main idea is that you should "mind your plate", and on the other, are dieting techniques of care in which the main idea is that of "enjoy your food" (Mol 2012, 2013; Vogel & Mol 2014). As Mol suggests, "mind your plate" approaches always involve the idea that "a person who wants to lose weight needs to overrule the desires of her craving body. Her mind has to put itself in a sovereign position and make 'good choices' about what to eat" (Mol 2012, p. 379). Such a model encourages a sort of "homeostatic eating" that allows the body to stay the same (see also Turner 1996; Jallinoja et.al. 2010). In opposition, "enjoy your food" approaches believe that from propitiating pleasure emerges the possibility of "a body that when it 'feels that it has eaten' stops eating without having been told to do so. It no longer craves for more, as it is satisfied" (Mol 2012 p. 388). This model encourages what she calls a "hedonistic eating" where the priority is creating pleasure (see for example, Rozin 1999; Willson 2005). Mol recognizes also that social sciences have adopted this tension

between health and pleasure and have taken it for granted: “While these views are in opposition to one another, a similar scheme is at work in both: rationality and control are disentangled from, and contrasted with, desire and excess” (Mol 2014, p. 306). Such a strongly defined division leaves no space to think about the production of pleasure as a powerful resource in manage desire production by means other than the repression of such a desire.

For Krause (2015), the idea of personal sovereignty involves at the same time the rational capacity for self-control and a normative claim about the right of such control. In a similar vein, Lavin (2013) uses the term “ontopolitical fiction” to refer to the illusion of a boundary defined by the organism and regulated through conscious deliberation.

Such an ontopolitical fiction allows us to ignore relational processes beyond organic and conscious organization. In light of processes that bypass human consciousness, such as cravings, we need to question human consciousness as the epicenter of sovereignty. We should look into the relations at stake in the production of desire to see how we might better construe the function of conscious deliberation. Panagia (2009) has pointed out the political potential of the mouth, not for its capacity to talk but for its capacity to reconfigure the organolepsis of the body, which is to say, the qualities of the encounters between subject and food. Thus, behind my interests in looking for other conscious possibilities within the craving assemblage lies the political project of challenging the sovereign status of human consciousness, and particularly its status as control device.

I evoke Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory to explain the configuration of the chocolate craving, and in the final part of this paper I will bring Malabou's ideas of brain plasticity as a conscious resource in order to diversify the experience of desire. Consciousness, I argue, can act as a disobedience device: a device more capable of using pleasure to diversify the production of desire rather than avoiding pleasure to resist desire. It then becomes clear that pleasure and control are not be in opposition after all. Elsewhere (Lara 2017), I have argued the speculative potential of experimental writing and how it is particularly good for building theoretical arguments in affect studies. As such, I also include fragments of field notes from one of my own experiences of chocolate craving in order to illustrate my theoretical argument.

## Chocolate-Craving Assemblage

I am taking a walk through my neighborhood in Brooklyn. With my mind in my own affairs, I fail to notice a chocolate store along my path. Yet, just as I pass, the aroma of the fresh chocolate billows into the street, and wafts in my direction, or so my nose is telling me. I feel the smell of chocolate. No longer my affairs, it is chocolate on my mind, a familiar scent, to be sure, but no less intoxicating. I turn my head, and for the first time, the chocolate store is in my sight. I enter and just as quickly I'm eating free samples and looking at their products. After taking a look, I finally get a bar of tangy dark chocolate and some spicy chocolate powder to prepare drinkable chocolate, as I foresee a cold night. This was not on my day's agenda, but with a sudden desire, my plans have diverged. I have eaten chocolate, and gotten more to eat and drink afterwards. As I leave the store I get rid of the chocolate bar wrapper, so I can keep eating as I walk away. . .

Consider this anecdote. Experiencing such an innocent chocolate craving becomes complicated if, as was the case, I am trying to lose weight. Why didn't I at least deliberate: to eat or not to eat? In light of cravings, how might one make sound decisions when one is suddenly invaded by desire? What forces, other than "willpower," are pushing and pulling on this event? To understand this chocolate craving, it is necessary to recognize that desire is not something that lies in consciousness, and so cannot be managed exclusively from there. Instead, desire is an event arising from the productive relations between heterogeneous agents with different natures, functions, and capacities. In the chocolate craving example, it is possible to recognize at least some of the agencies at stake: the smell, my nose, the store, free samples, my plans, Brooklyn's chocolate topography, and of course the chocolate itself. Each of these must do its part for the event to emerge. Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1987) coined the term "assemblage" to describe those events in which different agents, human and other-than-human, experience encounters and affect one another. From such encounters emerges a force of production that is the agency of the assemblage, this is to say, what this event can do.

Desire, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest, is the production of assemblages, and it produces assemblages in which consciousness is just one element among many. It follows that the advantage of understanding craving as an assemblage is that doing so allows us to see that it has no center of control. As Bennett has

argued, within the assemblage, “no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group” (2010, p. 24). This means that the agencies entangled in the assemblage participate in the production of desire but are also always exceeded by it.

While cravings can be triggered by different causes, my craving in the anecdote starts with smelling chocolate. Shepherd (2013) has suggested that smell is more important for feeling a taste than taste itself. In his theory of neurogastronomy, flavor is not something that a substance possesses; instead, it is the complex outcome of what he calls the 'Human Brain Flavor System'. This system is a machinist assemblage connecting molecules of smell, retronasal smell functions, and brain activity to generate a state within a body, which Shepherd recognizes as the sensation of a specific flavor. When we smell, the environment and human body get in touch by the interactions between receptor molecules and molecules of smell. Such interaction is often explained in molecular biology using the metaphor of “lock-and-key,” that supposes that smell molecules are like keys which “open” specific receptor molecules. According to this logic, when the key turns the lock, the molecule changes its internal structure. The interaction between smell molecules and receptor molecules, understood in terms of the “lock-and-key” system, has prompted consideration of how the information carried in a sensory stimulus is translated into a representation in the nervous system, and therefore how it is presented in the brain itself. How does the smell become a craving? Shepherd argues that smell molecules are “represented” in the brain as spatial patterns of activity and that this fact supports the hypothesis of an analogy with the visual system, implying the existence of an “odor image” or “smell image” (2013 p. 82). It is noteworthy that Shepherd's analogy is a metaphorical one. This means that such a spatial pattern of activity in the brain could be thought of as an image in the sense that is made out of specific networks configured in specific forms; not because the subject produces mental images to represent the smell and then accumulates them, as if the story of desire could be storage in images somewhere in the brain. What we have is personal and neuronal experience adding states to our body's repertory. However, we have to remember that Deleuze was fairly allergic to the idea of brain as a device of images or representations (Deleuze & Guattari 1994).

This brain “image” would then also correspond with certain physiological states in the rest of the body. It follows that the anticipation of such physiological states would be a proto-state of the body mediated by the brain. Then, the body's

awareness of the forthcoming flavor is due to the brain reading our retronasal smell, so the body can anticipate and desire a potential state. Such an organic invocation can be explained through the so-called mirror neurons which are generally defined as neurons that fire both when an individual makes a motor action and when they see another actor performing the same action.<sup>2</sup> Victoria Pitts-Taylor (2013) explains that mirror neurons located in brain regions associated with motor action, facial recognition, and somatosensory processing are supposed to allow the brain to simulate certain body states, as if they were occurring in the one's own body. Through mirror neurons, Pitts-Taylor suggests, the human capacities for 'mind-reading,' or understanding another's intentions, and empathy, or feeling what another is feeling, are being rethought as inbuilt, automatic, and prelinguistic neural capacities. For Damasio (2010) the network in which mirror neurons are embedded achieves conceptually what he hypothesized as the "as-if body loop" system, "the simulation, in the brain's body maps, of a body state that is not actually taking place in the organism" (p. 110). But, what is even more interesting in Damasio's reading of mirror neuron theory is this suggestion: "If a complex brain can simulate someone else's body states, one assumes that it would be able to simulate its own body states" (2010, p. 110). A state that has previously occurred in the organism, like an encounter with chocolate, should be more easily simulated, since it has already been mapped by precisely the same somato-sensing structures that are now responsible for simulating it. However, because these "as-if body loops" are subtle and fleeting, they are less likely to enter conscious awareness (Cromby 2007). Damasio suggests that the "as-if system" as applied to others would not have developed had there not been an "as-if system" first applied to the brain's own organism.

Following Damasio's understanding of mirror neurons, we can speculate that my brain has mapped previous encounters between my body and chocolate, and that it is easy to evoke the potential sensation of chocolate. In the example of me walking by the chocolate store and feeling the smell, such a smell works as a physiological warning of the potential chocolate experience. This state of evocation, or not-yet-mapped-state, is what Damasio calls a proto-state of the body, understood as a sort of anticipation to whatever the body has felt and mapped before. The proto-state is then an expression of empathy with the past of one's own body. The importance of proposing smell as crucial to the configuration of flavor lies in the fact that molecular components evoking the brain images come before the food gets into the mouth, even before the food falls into our sight, as in the case of my chocolate craving. Proto-states of the body triggered by smell

are therefore a part of the assemblage that is clearly not fully controlled by conscious activity. This means that brain activity is modulated and dependent upon the social configuration from which the encounters between bodies occurs. As Pitts-Taylor suggests, brain activity is not indifferent to surroundings but rather highly vulnerable to it. Brain is always plastic, always becoming from encounters, so “brain plasticity is a work of culture, an imprint of collective human effort” (Pitts-Taylor 2016 p. 40).

Desires for food and its neuro-correlates are necessarily situated within the history of our previous encounters. This is because the maps that the brain creates, correspond with certain previous experiences of food and social events that occur within social environments that are also part of our assemblage. Body-brain is processual, plastic, and embedded in a context. We cannot talk about brain functions working homogeneously within those bodies. Nonetheless, some elements of the environment represent a condition of possibility for both molecular transmission and brain mapping, and are thus relevant to any account of the chocolate craving assemblage. Berlant (2011) has explained that obesity in the United States happens in the context of what she calls “cruel optimism,” meaning the desire for something that actually precludes your wellbeing. In that vein, she regards obesity and desire for food as a sort of slow death. For Berlant, desire is a cluster of promises, and it is a cruel optimism when those promises are far from being achieved, or achieved in excess and so become dangerous. In cases of repeated over eating the proto-states occur so frequently that craving becomes constant, resulting in a stable formation of desire rather than a plastic one. Oversupply of food does not necessarily trigger cravings, it might provoke other sensations, such as disgust. It is precisely because agency in the assemblage is distributed that social configurations are not the necessary causes of subjective events, but instead they work as conditions of possibilities for the development of tendencies and propensities for the subjects (Lara et al 2017). In the US context, it is useful to remember Bennett's claim that “we can call the assemblage formed by these human and nonhuman bodies 'American consumption' and name as one of its effects the 'crisis of obesity'” (2010, p. 39).

It is in this context, where people are constantly stimulated by thousands of smells (and a lot of other triggers), that they are going to find themselves in a situation of having to 'decide' what to do with their cravings. Meanwhile, an oversupply of food is going to modulate human bodies, as a result people may not have the desired agency to exercise will against the agency of matter, brain, and environment. In the field of nutritional epigenetics, food is starting to be understood as

information, such that there is a shift away from its biomedical meaning as a fuel or substrate. Instead of providing stuff to burn, in the information model, food plays a role in the construction of the metabolic system itself: it acts to set up metabolic systems at the outset (Landecker 2011). Of course, environmental conditions do not affect everybody in the same way. Analysis regarding the particularities of class, gender, and race have clearly shown that the right to choose—the right to neoliberal exercise of free will—is not equally distributed when it comes to food access or consumption management (see Probyn 2009; Berlant 2011; Guthman 2011; Julier 2013). It is precisely such inequality that makes it pertinent to look for alternative conscious strategies in a social configuration where not everyone can choose what to eat or crave.

As a food presented mostly in its sweet and solid version, chocolate partakes of the controversy around glucose and its effects in the body related to diabetes and numerous metabolic disorders (see O'Connell 2011). Notwithstanding, this has not always been the case, Coe and Coe (2013) trace the history of chocolate from the Aztecs' drink of the gods, all the way to the foundation of The Chocolate Society in UK, and the blooming of chocolatiers factories all around the world, especially in New York. As these authors explain, chocolate has just recently become a sweet and solid food widely spread and easily accessible. Capitalistic industrialization of chocolate has resulted in the commercialization of low quality chocolate high in sugar, containing less than 40% cacao solids, solid vegetable fat, and powdered milk. As Chantal Coady, owner of Rococo Chocolates and head of The Chocolate Society, has noted about so-called chocoholics: “These dietary villains . . . are responsible for chocolate's undeserved reputation as a fattening, tooth-rotting, addictive indulgence” (Coe & Coe 2013, p. 260).

It is after these environmental conditions that smell molecules and brain proto-states inaugurate the process of change in the course of action. Chocolate craving then is an affective assemblage, resulting from an emergent particular configuration of a set of agents. A craving is a bodily snapshot that maps a moment of connection of elements related to food. As Deleuze and Guattari put it “Affects are precisely these nonhuman becomings of man [sic]” (1994, p. 169). An assemblage of desire “is never either a 'natural' or 'spontaneous' determination . . . but [is] always historically attributable, . . . desire circulates in this agencement of heterogeneous elements, in this type of 'symbiosis' “ (Deleuze 1997, p. 185). If the concept of assemblage is welcome to Affect Studies, it is mainly because these environmental-organic configurations bypass conscious awareness of the

body's capacities to affect and be affected. It follows that any intentionality manifested in the craving emerges is a complex entanglement between conscious and pre-conscious activity. The conscious deliberation, the moment of decision-making, appears as the last consequence emerging from our assemblage. As Luciana Parisi puts it, “the subject is an appendix to the machine in desire, an accessory that does not determine ethical relations but only positions of will” (2004, p. 38).

## Ruptures and Continuities

As I walk away from the chocolate store, I continue to eat my tangy dark chocolate, one bite after another as the world disappears throughout the clove and anise notes in my mouth. This chocolate is driving me crazy. Suddenly, I note that it is almost finished. Then I stop. An awkward combination of guilt and remorse infringe upon my mind. Only now do I remember that I'm trying to lose weight, and that I need to control the calories I eat, or so my dietician and this guy from the gym say. But chocolate is so good. It is just as if body and mind were on different sides, working for different purposes. Guilt gets worse as I remember that this is not the first time that I have indulged my cravings. I keep walking, thinking, and somehow knowing, that the spicy powder for the drinkable chocolate is still in my bag and the air temperature is decreasing. . .

For Deleuze and Guattari the production of desire in an assemblage occurs in the middle of two different forms of organization of encounters called molar and molecular strata. Molecular strata correspond to those encounters that happen without following a previously defined, specific direction; rather the direction exclusively emerges from the interaction between properties and capacities of the agents at stake. Just like the interaction between chocolate molecules and molecule receptors in my chocolate craving, the elements of this encounter do just what they can do: lock and unlock according to their shapes. These kinds of encounters produce unexpected new relations between the agencies, a 'rupture' with the prior organization of agencies: like a molecule changing its disposition. Molar strata refer to other encounters within the assemblage that might be following a specific course of action determined at a distance by other forces, non-local agents of the assemblage delimitating the organization of the local elements. Just as the encounter between my conscious self and the quasi-finished bar of chocolate is mediated by dietician discourses. These kinds of encounters work to reproduce certain kind of relations between the agencies, a 'continuity' of certain relations among the agencies.

For the organism, the sensation of craving can be molar formations; especially when it is repeatedly induced by social forces arranging the configuration of the environment. Assemblage formations can make the body do things, and it can also trigger tendencies in our subjective events. Not everybody craves or even likes chocolate, but in Brooklyn, the distribution and diversification of chocolate practices increases the possibility to be attracted to and crave them. From the one dollar little bar in the subway stall, to the international variety in the street delis; from drinkable chocolate in cafés to the sophisticated and expensive chocolatiers factories; from organic-vegan stores for desserts to all ethnic forms of chocolate like Jewish bakeries, Latino drinkable, tamales, Japanese wagashi, etc. A chocolate assemblage has so many nodes for you to connect to and thereby create a stable, recurrent desire—bringing your brain-body into multiple modes of attention, whereas your conscious agenda remains to restrict your pleasure. For instance, a particular chocolate cartography sets free an unexpected smell that redirects the organization of the body. A body knows it is chocolate and wants to perpetuate the organization of the proto-state. A body wants to continue the pleasure. However, for the cultural norms and the alleged discipline that the conscious subject is pursuing, such a craving sensation represents a molecularity: a rupture with, for example, the regime of three meals per day to be healthy. Thus, consciousness tries to break desire in order to control the course of action, to conform to what is socially expected for the body. We can say then that conscious control expected in the experience of craving is a form of molar use of conscious capacities.

As Massumi explains, in molar strata “powerful forces descend to assure that what the body wills is, on average, what 'society' wills for it” (1992, p. 75). But, if the game between molar and molecular strata of organization is about ruptures and continuities in the kind of relations among the elements of the assemblage, then we can assume that molarization should work in such a rhythm that a molecular line of escape is always possible. Moreover, it is a tendency towards a different rhythm: “the stronger the molar organization is, the more it induces a molecularization of its own elements, relations, and elementary apparatuses” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 215). This means that the restrictive character of the relation between certain elements of the assemblage is prone to be interrupted. For example, the more restrictive the diet is and the more it tries to resist cravings, the more people are likely to indulge their cravings. The tension between molar and molecular is a constant one, as Massumi explains “No body can really be molar. Bodies are made molar, with varying degrees of success” (1992, p. 64). As

Delanda (2016) explains, molar and molecular are not mutually exclusive binary categories, but rather phases of the same process that can be transformed into one another, and even coexist as mixtures.

Conscious activity acquires molar status just when it is committed to restrict pleasure. Let us not forget that for Deleuze, conscious needs a cause; in the Spinozist vein he argues that desire is an “appetite together with consciousness of the appetite. But he [Spinoza] specifies that this is only a nominal definition of desire . . . we need then to arrive at a real definition of desire, one that at the same time shows the 'cause' by which consciousness is hollowed out, as it were, in the appetitive process” (Deleuze 1988, p. 20–21). What is at stake in a chocolate craving within the social configuration described, is an assemblage where consciousness has been given the 'cause' of control device, and it emerges in this form within the production of desire Elsewhere Deleuze argued “pleasure seems to me to interrupt the immanent process of desire; pleasure seems to me to be on the side of strata and organization” (1997, p. 189). So, it is pleasure, not restrictive control, that has the capacity to rearrange the role of conscious within the assemblage. Deleuze's assemblage theory provides a system where conscious can be analyzed in terms of the strata from which it is being organized as a component of desire production. The capacity of conscious to receive directions and the organizational capacities of pleasure point to the necessary rethinking of the sovereign and restrictive capacities of consciousness in current neoliberalism.

Craving shows us how organisms are organized beyond mere biological evolutionary criteria, organisms, cells, neurons, and its activity have been acculturated. Cravings are relatively new forms of desire, aesthetic desires, as Gard (2009) would say. Cravings have been with us throughout history, even contributing to changes in food consumption, snacks and appetizers as cultural rituals are a good example of that. The French “*apéritif*,” Chilean “*once*,” American “snacking,” even the Mexican “*antojitos*” that literally means “little cravings,” are all examples of culturally established rituals more related to aesthetic desires than to the need for food. They are established and ritualized molecular investments into the molar aggregate, the rupture of desire producing a cultural continuity. Given this cultural and historical organization of desiring production we have to notice, as Damasio (2010) puts it, that what is meant by conscious deliberation has little to do with the ability to control actions in the moment and everything to do with the ability to plan ahead and decide which actions we want or do not want to carry out. Conscious deliberation is largely about decisions taken over extended periods of time, as much as days or weeks in the case of some decisions. Rarely

less than minutes, conscious deliberation is not about split-second decisions. In the case of feeling a craving there is usually little time to 'decide,' or better, to act with self-awareness and marshal self-control. You might recognize the craved food, but this acknowledgment is not yet a conscious activity as much as an automatic and "thoughtless" response. "Conscious deliberation is about reflection over knowledge" (Damasio 2010, p. 287, his italics). It follows that such a temporality of mind is more prone to be committed to forms of organization proper to its own temporality. This means, for conscious activity, it is easier to engage—to rationally understand—and deal with arguments about how the body should be, like socially desirable standards of the body. When diet advisors suggest avoiding consumption, their position is "Just say no." As Damasio (2010) sees it, "this strategy may be adequate when one has to preempt an innocuous finger movement, but not when one needs to stop an action urged by a strong desire or appetite, precisely the kind posed by any addiction to drugs, alcohol, attractive foods, or sex. Successful not-saying requires a lengthy conscious preparation" (p. 288-289).

Consciousness and pre-conscious activity work in different rhythms. This is why you can't apply conscious resources to pre-conscious battles, at least not as straightforwardly as has been assumed. The strategy must be more sophisticated than that. The management of desire cannot be reduced to the restrictive capacity of consciousness, and the possibility of applying it during the event of the craving, especially knowing that conscious molarization represents an alienation from other forces that are not precisely our own. We ought to consider opportunities for consciousness to operate within the possibilities of its own rhythm and in better attunement with one's own body. In other words, individual conscious management of desire must depart from a diversification of the function of conscious. Consciousness is capable of managing important decisions for long periods of time. But the fact of the spontaneous desire for food reveals the need for strategies of conscious management that respond to the event-ness: the time when the non-conscious drivers are in command.

## Pleasure and Plasticity

The chocolate store I always pass by offers a huge variety of products. Nonetheless, ever since I moved to Brooklyn, I normally get the same tangy one, and the same spicy drinkable: these are my favorites. But my chocolate cravings are making a diet a complicated experience, more, I think, due to the emotional consequences than the actual pounds that I am—or that I am not—

losing. Indulgence feels good, but only as it lasts. Right after comes guilt. As I stir the drinkable chocolate with a wood spoon, I'm wishing that the fugitive pleasure that comes with it would last forever. I wish chocolate pleasure was not followed by guilt. . .

Following Spinoza, Deleuze (1988) explains that the encounters within an assemblage, the capacity of things might be increased (good passion) or decreased (bad passion). It must be noted that, when human consciousness is participating in an encounter, the effect of such an encounter depends on one's susceptibility to be distance-driven for the continuity of non-local purposes. Human consciousness might be thinking ideas that are not our own and thus working under a molar regime of activity. In terms of chocolate craving, if we please the craving without modifying anything in the way we eat it, indulgence will feel restrictive to our capacity to control and regulate our eating habits, taking power away from us. On the one hand, chocolate can make you feel guilty and frustrated if the project of conscious is that of restricting pleasure. On the other hand, if we indulge our cravings but invest in producing pleasure out of such an indulgence, then power is being added to our capacities, meaning increasing the capacity for pleasure.

The body-brain is exposed to the oversupply of food, lots of chocolate stores and products everywhere triggering cravings, but it is also exposed to health and beauty discourses about the body, like when my dietician suggested to me that I lose weight. The body-mind component of the assemblage is called on to invest in different capacities simultaneously: restrictive capacities on one hand, capacities for pleasure on the other. But consciousness can engage with a different project, and in doing so, it can modify the experience of the craving, even its biological and pre-conscious elements. Catherine Malabou (2008, 2012, 2015) has suggested the term "neuroplasticity," to refer to the brain's ability to biologically change and be changed.<sup>3</sup> In a general sense, she suggests that "awakening a conscious of the brain [. . .] means awakening a conscious of the self, a consciousness of consciousness, if you will, which is also to say a comprehension of the transition from the neuronal to the mental, a comprehension of cerebral change" (2008, p.66). Malabou's idea of an appropriation of the material plasticity of the brain resonates in what Schwartz and Bagley (2002) refer to as "self-directed plasticity." Meaning that might it be more related to a sort of functional or synaptic plasticity caused by learning and cognitive activity. For Malabou, "If neuronal function is an event or should bring about events, this is so precisely because it is itself able to create events, to eventualize the program and thus, in a certain sense, to deprogram it" (2008, p.8). Such potential to create new forms of consciousness carries the political ambivalence of emancipation and control (Bhandar & Goldberg-Hiller 2015), but at very least offers the possibility of diversifying conscious commitments to include the concerns

of the body. The idea of consciously provoked brain plasticity to deprogram brain activity can be applied to the modification of the experience of cravings. And this idea represents an actual different way to use consciousness in the management of desire for food: the use of consciousness informed by its possibilities and attuned to the timing of the event of desire. Following Malabou's plastic vein, Sparrow has recently proposed aesthetic pleasure as the key to reach the plastic condition of human bodies. In what he calls his "principle of aesthetic individuation," Sparrow suggests, "since a body's sensory identity is determined by the sensory blueprint of its environment, that body's power to affect and be affected will only be as complex as the totality of its aesthetic experiences" (2015, 216).

Pleasure must be made. Consciousness deploys resources, like its capacity to focus, that can be used to intensify the aesthetic properties of the matter. When eating chocolate, for example, the affective sensation of chocolate properties throughout the body can be intensified by virtue of our conscious focus on it. The affective sensation of chocolate's properties throughout the body can be intensified by our conscious focus on it. Attention must be given to all the playful properties of the food such as smell, colors, temperature, sound, texture, aftertaste, how it makes your belly feel, to the energy you are absorbing, and so on. Mol encourages such attention to flavor when she claims "The very act of attending to what you eat . . . should increase your appreciation. More strongly still, it should increase your ability to appreciate" (Mol 2013, p.101). Focusing on the sweetness of chocolate, for example, is not going to make it sweeter, but it will give the body more information about its sweetness. The body will be more aware. If we get to experience the intensification of the properties of the food through a pleasurable experience, we are able to modify the state that the body produces when it gets in touch with such substance. What is more, pleasure has the possibility to re-arrange the way in which body-brain is affected and participates in the whole assemblage.

In order for the body to maintain a suppleness of composition, Sparrow suggests, "it must actively expose itself to percepts and affects that intensify its power by bolstering its tolerance, that enable it to radiate new sensations and pleasurable affects" (Sparrow 2015, p. 230); so, we should work on the productions of our own pleasure. The modification of brain formation by altering the history of brain encounters, is what Malabou recognizes as "the second field of plasticity," defined as "the modification of neuronal connections by means of the modulation of synaptic efficacy." It is at this level, she says, "that plasticity imposes itself with the greatest clarity and force in 'opening' its meaning" (Malabou 2008, p.21). A relation to certain food

might be rigidly mapped, the kind of food we always crave and in exactly the same way, maybe under the same circumstances, maybe from the same store: just like my favorite chocolates. These kind of stable relations trigger molarized components of the assemblage of desire, the body has learned a state and keeps reproducing it. Influenced by the social configuration of the assemblage, the brain-body can develop well-defined molar structures, but this kind of craving needs to be molecularized. In order to do that, we must generate an aesthetic consumption, a creative one centered on pleasure that could always be different. An aesthetics of pleasure, as a molecular device to generate plasticity, is our main conscious resource for diversifying the production of desire towards a better regulation of food consumption. As Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller suggests, plasticity is “an agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model” (2015, p.9). The disobedient quality of pleasure production in the event of a craving relies on a simple gesture: a more consciously produced desire now replacing distance-driven desire production. Moving from a desire as something that is being done to us (and to our brain), to something we are doing using the resource of our conscious brain.

One must be careful here, bringing in self-directed brain plasticity to claim its potential to diversify experience doesn't mean gaining sovereignty, at least not as a capacity to control. It means rather the possibility for a degree of freedom that understands the lack of such sovereignty, freedom beyond sovereignty as Krause (2015) would have it. The argument is not that through brain plasticity we would have more efficient control over ourselves; it is rather the claim that we might gain awareness about the impossibility of such control. We might gain accurate consciousness of what can we do with our brains, by understanding what can be done to them by the assemblage, and particularly by the molar forces playing within assemblage of desire production. The capacities of our body, including our brain, can't be fully managed by ourselves. Self-directed brain plasticity doesn't mean a synaptic-self taking over, it is rather a conscious subject knowing the limits and therefore the potentialities of brain consciousness. The environment has “some” power upon our brains and can do “certain” things to it—so can we. A subject whose only conscious resources are applied 'against' desire production in forms of restrictive capacity, or “in favor” of pleasing desire by overeating, are the kind of subjects resulting from the assemblages arranged by capitalism and involving the capture of some cognitive and neuronal capacities—like attention. This sort of assemblage is what Sampson (2017) have called “neurocapitalism,” featured by brain-directed arrangements that affect brain capacities.

Instead of encouraging fast conscious deliberation, focusing attention requires slowing ourselves down. We usually don't take the time to do this; we eat too fast, with too little attention in such a way that we are unaware of food properties. Environmental distribution of food contributes to the absence of pleasure in the moment of eating. As some scholars have pointed out, eating practices are commonly related to anxiety (Probyn 2000; Lara 2015b), stress (Berlant 2011), or guilt (Mol 2013). Pleasure is not something that the socio-cultural environment encourages in our relationship with food, at least not thoughtful pleasure. Pleasure must not be confused with other experiences like satisfaction produced by overeating or pleasure associated with only certain kind of (generally fast food) products. This kind of sensation have certainly been promoted by capitalism. Again, pleasure has to be made.

The idea of eating slowly and pleasurably requires some clarifications, a lot has been said in relation to the class, racial, and gendered blindness of this kind of discourses (see Berlant 2011; Guthman 2011; Julier 2013). Also, how perspectives suggesting any sort of individual action, like creating pleasure, might exclude those who, because of their socioeconomic conditions, do not have the necessary resources to attain this kind of pleasure. In Guthman's words, these perspectives "lead to a disproportionate focus on individual consumption choices about which people should be educated rather than, say, a focus on enacting policies that would enforce corporate accountability, or in mitigating the consequences for those most harmed" (2011, p. 8). Well, the answer to this sort of critique is rather a straightforward one: slowing down and creating pleasure cannot possibly constitute a politics of eating in a general sense. If it all was about individual choices, it would be a neoliberal politics of self-regulation neglecting social configurations and other political forces participating in desire production. Food's inequality is not a matter of personal responsibility, but social one. This paper is by no means trying to propose a general solution to all contingencies within the assemblage, the aim here is much more modest, just to explore the possibilities of human conscious in the moment of the event, especially given the social configuration that escapes full individual control and distributes agency unequally among subjects. In other words, creating pleasure will never modify the whole assemblage of desiring production, but it might diversify the role of human conscious within it.

In a general sense, this approach is exploring the resource of pleasure production as a plastic-organic device for political disobedience beyond the control-centered alternatives of desire repression. Such an approach might be useful given stable

and problematic expressions of the assemblage as molar cravings: like a recurrent chocolate craving producing guilt. My approach to the event of a craving has required us to consider craving through the notion of assemblage, to be aware of the heterogeneity involved in the relatedness of the event of the assemblage, and then to understand that conscious activity is not the center and, so, cannot fully exercise control over, the other components of the assemblage. In addition to this, there is always the possibility that some components of the assemblage act at a distance to propitiate ruptures and continuities among the relations of the elements within assemblages. It is crucial to understand that the human mind might be embedded in molar regimes or activity, subjected to other agencies: like discourses about health and about how our relation to pleasure should be. Conscious capacities might just as well be restricted by environmental conditions of food. Understanding that molar and molecular strata of organization are pulling and pushing within the assemblage, opens the possibility to think about a different usage of consciousness in our desire for food. I have offered the idea of pleasure as a consciously driven device to produce brain plasticity and to diversify the production of desire. This provides the body with the possibility of a broader spectrum of desire to be evoked in the future and, at the same time, represents a non-restrictive use of conscious deliberation. This essay is not about resisting cravings but about diversifying them.

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## Endnotes

1. For a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages on the arrival of neurosciences to affect studies and social sciences in general see Connolly *Neuropolitics* (2002), and Papoulias & Callard (2010), "Biology's Gift" *Body & Society*, 16 (1), pp.29-56. For Deleuze and Guattari's warning on the brain as a relational device embedded in human experience see Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p.209).

2. For a review of the critiques of mirror neuron theory, particularly for its inattention to the cultural context in which bodily simulation occurs see Pitts-Taylor (2013), Leys (2012), Martin (2010).

3. In her review of the literature of neuroscience Malabou recognizes at least three different forms of brain plasticity: developmental, modulational, and reparative. For Malabou (2008) developmental plasticity refers to the morphological and structural modifications the brain goes through in the developmental process. Modulational plasticity is about the changes in neuronal connections resulting from one's relation with the environment as in learning processes of cognitive activity. Reparative plasticity refers to the brain's capacity to heal and recover from trauma or lessons. For a review of the literature on neuronal plasticity see Pitts-Taylor (2016), particularly chapter 1.

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# Neurons/Deterritorializing



Kay Gordon

Layered lithographs on duralar, 2015



## Neurons/Deterritorializing (cont.)



Kay Gordon

Layered lithographs on duralar, 2015



# Unthought Meets the Assemblage Brain



N. Katherine Hayles and Tony D. Sampson

## A Dialogue Between N. Katherine Hayles and Tony D. Sampson

It has become such a refrain for affect studies—Spinoza's “what can a body do?”—that it is sometimes repeated half-absentmindedly: as if all questions involving the realm of consciousness have been largely settled, as if they are somehow located elsewhere, as if they are entirely different sets of questions than those asked of a body. But of course they're not. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why the place of “nonconscious” is so particularly intriguing to take up: troubling any too-ready line drawn around, through, or between body-mind-and-world. “Just *where/when* is the nonconscious?” is, at least initially, as pertinent as the “what-can-it-do?” question—as it comes out of the cognitive sciences to intersect with and complicate the affect studies' refrain.

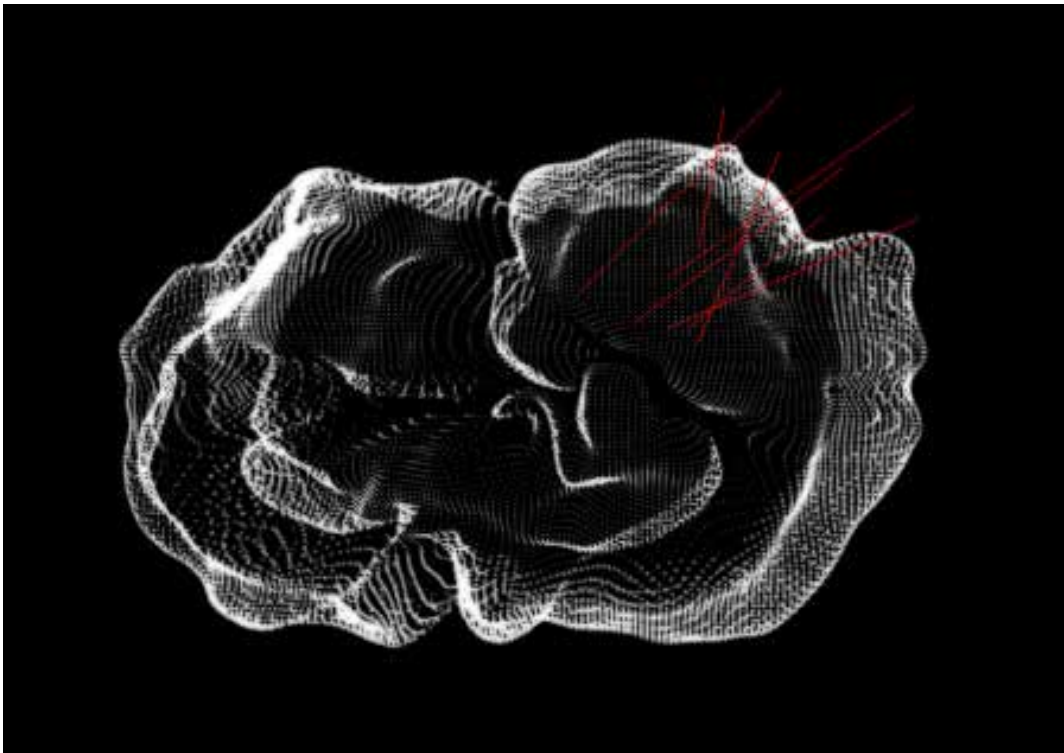
And that's what makes this dialogue between N. Katherine Hayles and Tony Sampson so fascinating and theoretically rich. Following upon their most recent books—Hayle's *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Unconscious* (University of Chicago, 2017) and Sampson's *The Assemblage Brain: Sense Making in Neuroculture* (University of Minnesota, 2016), the convergences and divergences that emerge and weave throughout this conversation are quite revealing.

What transpires in the unmediated space-time excess that moves, at once, between and alongside cognition and recognition, between and alongside formation and information, between and alongside prehension and comprehension? Nietzsche

said that we sometimes need to recall consciousness to its necessary modesty. But non-consciousness (technological or otherwise) is another sort of beast, a materially more immodest and rangy one—not responsive to just any call (after all, who/what precisely would be on the line? Except everything and no single thing). And, like all things addressed by way of affect, it matters deeply what avenues of inquiry and what particular aims are brought to bear on the foundational questions—in this case, it is the biosemiotics of human-computer interaction for Hayles and the ethology of more-than-human assemblages for Sampson. In that lively wedge of distinction between their angles of approach, this dialogue offers a more widely conceptualized world of the “doings” for affect studies.

It is beyond delightful that Kate and Tony agreed to engage in this spirited conversation. We already have plans for further dialogues between key figures working within or in near-vicinity of affect studies for future issues of *Capacious*.

—Greg Seigworth, co-editor of this journal



*Assemblage Brain* (alternative cover), Francesco Tacchini, 2015

**TS:** I'm keen to begin by noting some convergences in our work. For example, let's discuss how both of our approaches begin with a desire to jettison the computational brain thesis. I realize that you do this from "within" the cognitive frame, and my starting place is broadly affect theory/new materialism, but even if there's a degree of palpable divergence here, this rejection of the computational brain points to some clear examples of common ground that runs through each book.

The problem for me is that although there's a suggested break from computational approaches in cognitive brain sciences, and people like Damasio and LeDoux have helped shift debate to a far more interesting materialist approach that takes into account the environment, soma, affect, emotions and feelings, many of the information metaphors from the old paradigm are still intact. This is a point made in theoretical neuroscience in Bennett and Hacker's critique of Damasio and LeDoux, and gets repeated in HCI theory, wherein there's a similar move away from cognitive approaches based on human-information coupling toward a focus on a situated and embodied phenomenology of user experience.<sup>1</sup>

I note that on p. 218 of your book there's a footnote on the kind of materialism you are committed to.<sup>2</sup> I see this as materialism +information. Indeed, the processing of information (interpreting, choosing, and deciding) seems absolutely key to the important categorization you go on to make between cognizers and noncognizers.

Can I begin by asking you about why you see the computational brain as problematic? Then ask why you find information (and information processing, flows etc.) so important to your work on the nonconscious?

**KH:** My problem with the hypothesis that the brain manipulates symbols to accomplish its tasks is a lack of evidence for this thesis, and the lack of any reference to what the brain actually has to work with, namely the body, extended nervous system outside the brain, organs such as skin and viscera, etc. Nevertheless, I can understand why theorists want to make the connection between computational cognition and biological cognition, but I think it cannot be done by saying both work with symbols. A much better approach, I think, is biosemiosis: the creation, exchange, processing, storage and transmittal of information both within an organism and between an organism and the environment. Clearly, this also requires a definition of information very different from that of the Shannon-Wiener theory. Jesper Hoffmeyer, in developing the idea of biosemiosis and the semio-

sphere, uses the Peircian model of sign/object/interpretant. The movement from a binary logic to a triadic mode crucially includes the interpretant, the “someone” for whom the sign-processes have meaning—and the ground level of meaning for lifeforms is survival.

To make the connection to computational media, it is necessary at the outset to emphasize the enormous differences in embodiment between computational media and biological organisms. In addition, computers do not evolve but are designed for purposes. Thus, they have no innate imperative to survive but rather operate in artificial environments to fulfill their purposes (or better, since this assumes the computer knows it has a purpose, its design mandates). Of special importance in this regard is the “if/else” (in Fortran, “if/then”) command: if a certain set of criteria are present, do the following; if not, then do something else. This command is fundamental to computational semiosis because it establishes the temporality that sign-exchange implies.

It also opens a path to talk about how computers achieve meaning.

Here John Dewey's theory of meaning is useful, because it does not center on anthropomorphic criteria but instead emphasizes that the meaning of an action can be understood in terms of its consequences. For computational media, the “if/else” command is precisely aimed at the consequences of a computer operating in its environment to achieve something. That environment includes its dataset, the source code (and associated other code layers), the operating system, any sensors and actuators present in the system, and other affordances. When a computational system makes a decision about what actions to perform (execute commands if, else do something different), those decisions constitute an anticipation of what the consequences will be and thus constitute meaning-making for that system.

Meaning-making for biological organisms can be understood in similar terms. Even one-celled organisms are capable of creating meaning from their actions, because they process information in terms of their systemic dynamics and make decisions about what to do based on that information, their surrounding environments, and their sensory/biological capacities. They too anticipate consequences, and this is true even for minimally cognitive lifeforms such as plants.

The key components here, as I argue in *Unthought*, are cognition, interpreting information in contexts, and connecting information with meaning. In this age

when cognitive assemblages are crucial to everyday life, meaning cannot be restricted only to activities that humans undertake. It must be broadened to include nonhuman lifeforms and, equally important, networked and programmable machines.

**TS:** Absolutely, I agree with you that nonhumans importantly need our consideration and I think it's exciting that you extend sense making to algorithms and plants. To some extent, this hints at the kind of assemblage theory I explore in *The Assemblage Brain*. But can we stay with information for a moment? I have a few related points to make before we move on to look at cognition.

As I see it, your commitment to biosemiotics relies on an assumption that what occurs at the genetic level (where information is encoded onto physical matter) also emerges, albeit as a translation, at higher levels (the semiotic mind and perhaps even distributed consciousness). I see how this evolutionary emergence of information from the biosemiotic to the phenomenological semiotic corresponds to the bridge Damasio similarly develops between the protoself and the coreself (a major feature of your notion of the nonconscious). So we effectively move on from the hardware/software machines of the computational brain thesis to a series of interpretation machines taking part in an information dialogue between codes at different levels.

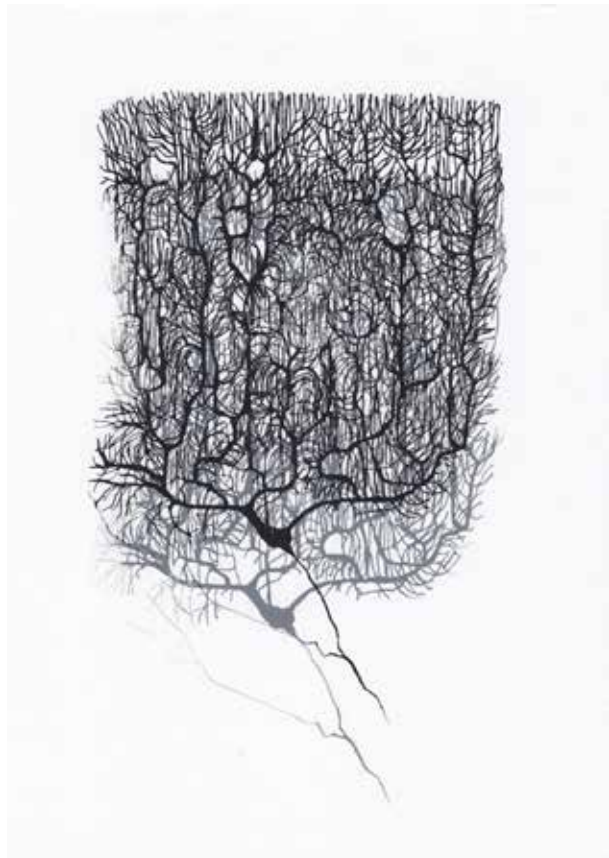
It's interesting that you say there's no scientific evidence to support the computational brain thesis. Can you please briefly outline what evidence shows us how encoding/decoding processes move up through these levels? Is there a specified location or network of neurons where the production of signs ("information") occurs in the biology of the brain? I can see how information processing works in computational media as datasets, code, operating systems etc., but where is the biosemiotic equivalent located in the brain? Is it something that has a simple location? Is there an fMRI scan, for example, that reveals this kind of information coding/decoding, representational storage, processing, and transmission at work? I say this, because although I welcome the departure from Shannon-Wiener, I wonder if this move from the symbol manipulations of computational cognition to the sign manipulation of biosemiotics is really radical enough. In short, is there an alternative to what still seems to be information theory analogies applied to biology?

My book is, as you might guess, critical of this emergent evolutionary leveling up process in which each level seems to transcend the next, like a staircase leading to consciousness and perhaps leading all the way up to a collective social consciousness. I initially follow thinking in HCI that considers information as an

inadequate way to conceive of experiences that are “felt” before they are thought. For example, Donald Norman describes visceral felt experiences that arrive before reflective thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (an idea that in many ways relates to affect theory). Similarly, I wonder how a model of information interpretation accounts for the emergence of feelings and moods in broader societal relations, like mass panic, for example.

Another way of looking at the problem of information interpretation is to consider how biosemiotics, for example, responds to the Whiteheadian notion of feeling or prehension. Whitehead also looks at plants and what he calls the “sense of conformation” a plant experiences when it responds to light or warmth (Debaise 2017, 46). This leads to the question of what is the “form” of feeling, which is conceived of as an “immediate” form of experience. In a Whiteheadian mode then, we find a vital theory of experience that takes into account a temporal sense of the *event* rather than a phenomenological representation.<sup>3</sup>

My point is that your materialism is crucially interwoven with information, which I think binds your notion of assemblages to a cognitive theoretical frame that is still essentially adhering to a kind of computational cognition (sign rather than symbol). That's why I'm interested in what you think of attempts to move beyond/away from this human-information coupling model. Bennett and Hacker's notion that, for example, a better metaphor for the brain might be the ocean. It's a playful metaphor, but one that I think offers compelling temporal alternatives to information, including waves, rhythms, and fluid flows, which can be displaced and distributed as intensities.



Anatomy of a Purkinje neuron inspired by Santiago Ramón y Cajal, Dorota Plekorz, 2017

**KH:** Tony, thanks for your comments. Let me address first your comment about where the production of signs occurs in a biosemiotic perspective. The major advantage of sign-processing over symbol-processing as formulated in the computationalist hypothesis is that signs are not arbitrarily interjected onto biological processes. Rather, as Hoffmeyer makes clear, the point is to interpret biological processes that act as signs signifying something to the cell. For example, the proteins on a cell membrane are folded in specific ways so they can detect alien bacteria; when these appear, the proteins engage in sign processes that signal a meaning to the cell, namely that the invading bacteria are non-self rather than self and need to be attacked.

The new elements here are 1) the notion that such processes (which occur at every level, from the cellular level on up) have the potential to act as signs that may be iconic and/or indexical rather than symbolic, and 2) that signs always require an interpretant, the “someone” for whom the sign signifies something of consequence. Such sign-processes do have a hierarchy of networks, but they also operate semi-autonomously at level-specific sites. Moreover, the consequences of those sign-processes are never completely accounted for (or exhausted) by the upward messages; that is, their content always exceeds the information sent forward to the next level up the hierarchy. In addition, these feedforward loops work continuously to produce meaning; meaning-making at a lower level does not stop when the feedforward loop sends its messages up the hierarchy. As I suggested in another context in *My Mother Was a Computer*, this process is perhaps best described as a heterarchy for that reason.

As you know, biosemiotics did not originate with information theory but with von Uexküll's *umwelt* theory. It therefore addresses the process of meaning-making by considering the meaning-maker as a subject with a specific world-view, that is, its *umwelt*. This makes it fundamentally different from the purely quantitative (and subjectless) information postulated by Shannon and Wiener. What I especially like about biosemiotics is precisely this subjective orientation, which it combines in a very convincing way with empirical research on biological processes.

As for the temporal structure of these processes (in Whiteheadian terms, its eventness), anticipation is shown to be woven into all biological processes, in the sense that phenotypic experiences give a specific life-history that affects how meaning-making subsequently occurs. A good example here would be the production of antibodies by the immune system, an anticipatory response based on past experiences.

As for moving away from an information model, the best way to describe information as it appears in biosemiotics is probably Bateson's "difference that makes a difference." I think the ocean metaphor (waves, intensities) has potential, for example in the "time-wave" crystals newly discovered in physics.<sup>4</sup> But for my taste, its utility so far has been somewhat obscured by a Deleuzian rhetoric, which is very difficult to reconcile with empirical research. I would not discount its possibilities, but the biosemiotic approach has been far more developed, and its potential is therefore much clearer in my view.

**TS:** Thanks Kate. I found your criticism of Deleuzian rhetoric in *Unthought* a timely challenge to new materialism. I understand your concerns. My main concern is, however, that some of the more dizzying rhetoric, which we all, to varying degrees, partake in, might obscure Deleuze's valuable articulation of science through philosophical ideas. More precisely, his work with Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* helps us to think through these contemporary mixtures of science and philosophical concepts in new ways. I think this is important for two reasons.

On the one hand, at a time when the neurosciences are laying down some big challenges to, and in some cases even rubbishing, philosophy, the Deleuzian non-scientific reading of science becomes ever more essential. After all, science is, for the most part, speculative; especially when it comes to figuring out consciousness. It operates very much in the virtual realm. Indeed, the desire for concrete empirical evidence to support, for example, a philosophical concept of consciousness is, in my opinion, problematic since scientific ideas are often drawn from moments of paradigmatic epistemological ignorance. Perhaps these time crystals you mention will upend the theory of time according to physics?

On the other hand though, I think that a more rigorous reading of Deleuze and more thorough grasp of his sources (Tarde, Bergson, Whitehead, Simondon) reveals a series of concepts that engage with science in ways that many in the humanities have failed to. I was first attracted to Deleuze because of my interest in science and technology. His work introduced me to Whitehead who is a major league mathematician with a deep interest in early quantum physics. In the contemporary work of philosopher-mathematicians, like Brian Rotman, for example, we find a fascinating alternative to a rather stale anti-scientific idealism in the humanities. So, I agree with you that, at one extreme, we find a rhetorical tendency in the overuse of terms like deterritorialization, lines of flight and frequent naïve rantings about rhizomes. But, at the other extreme, there's been a more

rigorous engagement with these concepts and where they originate from. To be sure, we cannot talk of deterritorialization without recourse to territorialization, reterritorialization and the refrain. This has an important bearing on how we conceptualize consciousness and nonconscious through events and assemblages.

Perhaps this is a perfect moment to move on to our next topic, which is consciousness, or more precisely those emergent conscious slices of cognition, which you say are ignored in a lot of new materialist work on the nonconscious.

To begin with, it's important to note that while other critics have contested the version of the neurosciences deployed by some new materialists (see e.g. Wetherell), we find that you similarly draw on Libet and Damasio as a starting point for grasping the nonconscious. Indeed, I'm struck by your initial enthusiasm for new materialism as an alternative to the linguistic turn—comparing it to a “burst of oxygen to a fatigued brain” (2017, 65). This concurrence does not, however, last for long. The challenging question that you pose for new materialism instead concerns why emergent consciousness is often missing from discussions on the nonconscious. As follows, I'd like to make two points.

Firstly, although I agree with you that many writers do overly focus on the nonconscious, I think this is for the reasons that you admit to; that is, new materialism is initially driven by a need to readdress the bias toward the anthropocentric subject. Again this is a shared point of interest. However, in many cases, the idea of emergent consciousness is not, I suggest, *missing*, but is instead *repositioned*, and to a great extent, *weakened*. This has clear implications for the use of a cognitive frame modeled on human subjective experience to explain the nonconscious of, say, a nonhuman.

By way of example, I know that elsewhere you used Thrift's technological unconscious to great effect (reconceiving it as a technological nonconscious), so it's interesting to quote, at length, Thrift's (2007) backpedaling response to the question of consciousness in his work. Here he presents a weakened, repositioned conscious cognition (supported by Damasio's thesis) and notes the importance of *precognition*. He says:

[C]onsciousness can be depicted as though it hardly existed, as an emergent derivative of an unconscious. Yet it is clearly dangerous to make too little of cognition, as I perhaps did in some of my early papers. Because it is so weak (though hardly as weak as some commentators have depicted it), it has enrolled

powerful allies which can focus and extend conscious awareness—various configurations of bodies and things which, knitted together as routinized environments, enable a range of different technologies for more thinking to be constructed (6-7).

We can return to the technological nonconscious later on, but here I note how, similarly drawing on Damasio and Thrift, Grusin (2010) offers a theory of affect in relation to the premediated human encounters with digital media, following, in part, a neuropsychology approach that insists upon “the inseparability of cognition from affect or emotion, often on the priority of affect and emotion to cognition and rational judgment” (78). There are many other examples of where cognition is not necessarily ignored, but weakened and repositioned in this way.

My second point refers to a notion of “unthought” I develop in *The Assemblage Brain* based on Deleuze's Whitehead-inspired *The Fold*. This conceives of a kind of unmediated non-subjective experience that is well explicated by Steven Shaviro in his book *Discognition* (2015, 17-18). Similarly influenced by Whitehead, Shaviro begins by acknowledging the kind of point you make about those new materialists who ignore consciousness having to admit that as they write about nonconceptual experience they do so through the conceptual experience of consciousness (as I just did above). There is, as such, no avoidance of, from a human perspective, cognitive consciousness. This is an unassailable fact, it would seem. Unreflective experience must itself be reflected on. There is no raw unmediated experience *without* concepts.

Fair enough, because, yes, if we limit ourselves to a human perspective of conceptual consciousness I think anthropocentrism slips back into the debate. In terms of human sentience, we ignore an opportunity to think beyond subjective thought or consider how to conceptualize sensation in ways that do not necessarily lead to meaning (as a human process of reflective interpretation and conceptual work). Of course, it seems that a concept of sensation can never escape the concept. I would therefore argue that we need to take on board Stengers' observation of Whitehead's concept of nature (nonbifurcated experience); that is, consciousness is not a “command post,” but a mere “foothold” in the events of the world (Whitehead 1964, 46). As affect theory posits, conscious cognition is weak. Evidently, given the slight foothold consciousness has in the world, humans can reflect on, to some extent, their own sentience—to know who it is that feels. This is what Whitehead calls an example of the extreme plasticity of nature. But why should that mean

that we discount sensations that are not available to consciousness? The point I make in *The Assemblage Brain*, following Bergson, is that consciousness seems to block access to nonconceptual content. It filters out the unmediated experiences of the nonconscious. Are these not the same lessons we learn from neuroscience too?

Likewise, in terms of the nonhuman, Shaviro draws attention to *nonintentional sentience*. Plants, for example, “feel” or prehend (in the Whiteheadian sense) the world they encounter not in the manner that humans experience it. There is no self-concept in plants, I assume. We do not have to enter into the complexities of panpsychism here to see how nonintentional and nonconceptual sentience might be distributed throughout the world in ways very different from cognition (conscious or nonconscious).

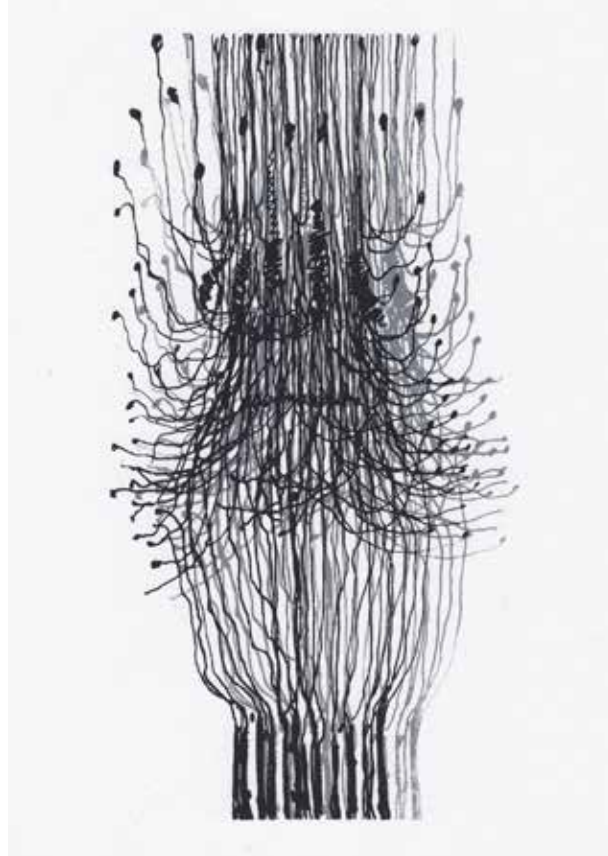
So overall I would say that rather than ignore consciousness, new materialism repositions it and tries to reconcile the ungraspability of a subjectless experience (human and nonhuman) through the theory of affect.

**KH:** Tony, thanks for your comments. I want to point out, first, that in my view cognition does not exclude affect but considers affective responses to be forms of cognition. Similarly, I would not say that plants, which are minimally cognitive by my definition, are not “nonintentional” but rather have intentions (ultimately, to survive and reproduce) and are capable of creating meanings within their contexts. These issues raise questions about meta-strategies, the positioning aspects that you foreground in your response. One way to go is to jettison meaning and intention and to emphasize drives, mobilities, intensities, etc., the route that many new materialists choose. Another way to go is to extend cognition, intention and meaning to nonhuman subjects and computational networks, which is my preferred route.

Why do I choose this route, and what are its advantages from my point of view? First is a desire I share with new materialists, namely to avoid, as much as possible, the constraints and biases of anthropocentrism. Also important for me is the possibility of building bridges between biological lifeforms and computational media. Ever since Searle's Chinese room thought experiment, folks interested in computational networks have faced the challenge of asserting that computers can create meaning, that they do more than just matching or processing numbers. This is a pressing concern in the contemporary world, where human-computer assemblages are now indispensable for much of the work that gets done in developed societies. Yet there is a scarcity of approaches that can talk about these assemblages in ways that go beyond the HCI vocabularies or the programming focus of computer scientists.

To build bridges in ways that do justice both to human and computational capacities, it is necessary to find common terms that can be used to describe both and yet that are attentive to the huge differences in embodiment between the two. I do not find the Deleuzian approaches helpful in this regard, but rather obfuscating rhetorics that create a gap rather than a bridge. Perhaps this is because the primary agents driving change are drives, intensities, deterritorializations, etc., for which it is difficult or impossible to find corollaries in computational media, at least in terms that anyone working

in computer science would recognize. My approach is thus to broaden and re-define the key terms-- cognition, intention and meaning-- in ways that recognize the importance of biological embodiment and yet can also extend to designed and purposeful devices in computational networks. I can see your point about the usefulness of Whitehead and Deleuze for thinking about biological organisms, and I understand why you and many others may choose this route. Years ago, I talked with a speedboat designer who made the point that all the parameters are known—speed vs. stability, for example—and it is a matter of choosing optimal configurations for different purposes. I think somewhat the same is true of critical exploration: what path one follows depends on the ultimate goal one has in mind. I am reading further into “The Assemblage Brain” and will have more to say about your approach in subsequent installments. Thanks for bearing with me in the meantime.



*Neuron inspired by Santiago Ramón y Cajal, Dorota Piekorz, 2017*

**TS:** Once again, thanks Kate. So, it seems that we have more convergences and divergences that need fleshing out here. Let's stay with affect and cognition for now. As I proposed earlier, new materialism does not totally ignore cognition, but repositions it. I can now see how you differently reposition affect as part of cognition. Interesting! Let me put forward my position on this.

One reason I think new materialism regards affect as inseparable, yet not part of cognition, is due to the differing relations it [affect] establishes with feelings and emotion. These are distinct terms that are often confused in a lot of literature associated with broader affective and emotional turns. There is, however, a specific process put forward in affect theory wherein the nonconceptual experiences of the nonconscious (registered in the intensities of affect and immediate experience) feed through to autobiographical registers of previously felt experiences and eventually emerge as a kind of emotional cognition. So in this account, affect is not cognition, but rather emotion is regarded as a cognitive aspect of emergent affect and feelings. Emotional cognition is, as such, the capture (and some say the closure) of affect. In other words, emotion is how affect becomes conscious. There is, funnily enough, a kind of Deleuzian "levelling up" process here, whereby what we think is presupposed by what we feel at some deeper level. This is what I think Shaviro means by nonintentionality: noncognitive affect.

That aside, I'm very interested in your ideas about building bridges between humans and computation, and how these bridges might be extended more broadly to other nonhuman worlds too. I couldn't agree more. The various links currently being made between heavy social media use and mental health issues like addiction and compulsive behaviors, for example, require urgent interdisciplinary attention. I therefore get what you mean about the need to effectively communicate so that those working in computing can understand the points being made by psychologists, for example. There's also an urgent need for us all to address the Anthropocene, of course. Assemblages are crucial for this task. I'm similarly interested in how the humanities can take a less aloof position and more closely engage with the sciences at the front end of a project rather than at a point later down the line when it's too late to make a difference.

There's another divergence here, however, with your choice of analogical thinking. In my opinion, there are too many weak parallels in the analogy between information machines and brains. On one hand, I can see how a computer can be regarded as uniquely cognitive. There are, evidently, many high level cognitive processes at work in computers (calculation, data interpretation and decisions). They are certainly cognizers, as you describe them, and in this respect can often outperform human cognition. The computer is, after all, a very successful product

of information science. On the other hand though, doesn't the analogy break down when we try to describe human brains in the same context? I would say yes, since unlike computers, human brains are more than mere data processors. As Damasio argues, the deciding brain is awash with affect, feelings and emotion.

For me, the technological nonconscious is all about the relationalities of the assemblage, not an analogy between computational and biological information processors. I think this is important to our understanding of human-computer assemblages since it is not the computer itself, but instead it is increasingly the *relation* between the human and the computer that is becoming nonconscious. Indeed, I've already noted the role of precognition in the technological nonconscious (see Richard Grusin's use of it in his post 9/11 *Premediation* book). I'm also interested in developments in emotional and affective computing were progress is, it seems, inhibited by the information machines' inability to feel. As Shaviro again points out, computers *read* emotion; they do not feel. Sentiment analysis and emotional AI performs like this. This is what facial recognition software and EEG also do; they read states associated with emotional cognition. Likewise, GSR (galvanic skin response) is supposed to get closer to the so-called affective valence, but similarly this technology simply *reads* a state of arousal. Of course, computers can respond to these kinds of input (they can learn, infer and anticipate), and that's where I think the danger lies, but they are like actors in the sense that they can only *express* emotions. Even if conscious emotions did emerge, and I don't see much evidence of that right now, we wouldn't know what kind of feeling was being felt.<sup>5</sup> All affective computing can do is process and act as a vector for the expression of human emotion as a data input/output. In terms of affect theory, then, we might say that computers pass on affect (in a way then they can be affected and they can also affect), but they cannot feel it.

This relational aspect of affect theory isn't solely attributable to Deleuzian rhetoric either. I work with psychologists here in London who are running digital media and mental health projects. They take a more nuanced position, for sure, but, nonetheless, refer to a very similar kind of affect theory. I also don't think affect theory is alien to others working with computers. In HCI, for example, affect plays a major role in what has been called third paradigm research (Harrison et al, 2007). A good example of this is Donald Norman's (2004) *Emotional Design*. For Norman experience is processed in the brain through three interconnected levels: reflective (cognitive), behavioral (use), and visceral (affective). He explicitly references Damasio in this book. It's an interesting account and one that has

not surprisingly been met with challenges from within HCI, and particularly those using a phenomenological approach. Some of these people criticize Norman for equating emotion with information (similar to the criticism of Damasio by Bennet and Hacker I mentioned earlier). He certainly talks about emotion in terms of information flows, which I find very problematic. Others criticize his counterpoising of cognition and emotion. They argue that emotions are not the opposite of cognition, but like cognition, they are made in social and cultural interactions. Again, for me, affect theory takes this all a step further without the baggage of the overly subject-mind-centered appeal we find in phenomenology.

**KH:** Thanks for your comments on affect theory and your view of the kind of work they enable. The terms can be confusing; what Shaviro calls affect, Damasio calls emotion; what Shaviro calls emotion, Damasio calls feelings. Nevertheless, it makes perfect sense to me that the body processes sensory and contextual information before consciousness becomes aware of it, and that the amount of information reaching consciousness is always less than is incoming through sensory channels and interior processes. Whether these processes count as cognitive or not depends on how one defines cognition. In my definition, they are cognitive, as indicated earlier in my comments about biosemiotics. The expansion of cognition beyond consciousness/unconsciousness into nonconscious lifeforms and into bodily processes for humans makes it possible to think about cognition as a broad spectrum encompassing all lifeforms. It also makes it possible to distinguish lifeforms from the nonliving, which for me is an important point, in contradistinction to others who want to see the boundary as highly permeable and in fact disappearing altogether. This is something of a nuance, because I also see the boundary as permeable and fluctuating, but I still want to preserve cognition for the living in the biological realm, and for computational media in the technical.

Which brings me to the issue that you raise about computers not having emotions, and beyond that, to the related issue of the profound differences in embodiment between computers and humans. I am in complete agreement with the point you make about computers simulating emotions but not feeling them. When we think about biological lifeforms and computational media in broad strokes, one of the prominent distinguishing features is that the living are formed by evolutionary dynamics where survival and reproduction take center stage, with functional, morphological, and behavioral adaptations to the environment emerging as epiphenomena from the primary dynamic of natural selection. With computational media it is the inverse. They are designed rather than emerging through evolutionary forces, and designed for specific purposes they fulfill in the world.

But on further thought, we might see evolution and design as background and foreground to one another. Computational media also experience evolution of a sort as their fitness for specific tasks evolves. Usually this means rendering one platform obsolete, for example, and going to another one, something that natural evolution can rarely if ever afford to do. So computers evolve artificially through different instantiations that humans design for them. There are fitness criteria of sorts, but they come from humans who imagine, construct, and implement the purposes they want computers to fulfill in specific environments. Hence the common terminology of computational media as different “generations” of devices.

You mention that of special interest to you is the relation between computers and humans. I too think relationality is key, but the problem here is that for many situations, that relation is multilayered and infrastructural, and thus largely invisible to most humans who are in fact engaged with it, although they may not consciously realize it. A good example is the control tower at a busy airport, where there is intense engagement between the humans and the computational media; aboard the aircraft, the pilots are engaged with the actors in the tower as well as with the onboard computers. A lot of information is flowing very quickly through this cognitive assemblage to make sure everything goes smoothly. On board the plane, however, the passengers see the landing strip appear and may hear the pilot's announcement, but the rest of the assemblage is largely invisible to them and probably outside their awareness altogether. So how can we think about “relation” in these terms? The passengers are certainly “in relation to” what is happening in the control tower in some sense, but this relation is indirect and highly mediated for them. If they think about it at all, they probably vastly underestimate the importance and complexity of the computational media involved. The same kind of situation obtains in most complex assemblages that make everyday life go (more or less) smoothly in developed societies, from stop light timing to water delivery to the electrical grid to millions of other goods and services depending on computational media. The net result is a kind of blindness of most people to the extent, pervasiveness, and criticality of computational media to their daily lives, of which their laptop and cell phone are only the most visible tip of the iceberg. These they understand themselves as “in relation to,” but what about all the other infrastructural mediations? These are the kinds of “relations” that I hope to address through the idea of cognitive assemblages.

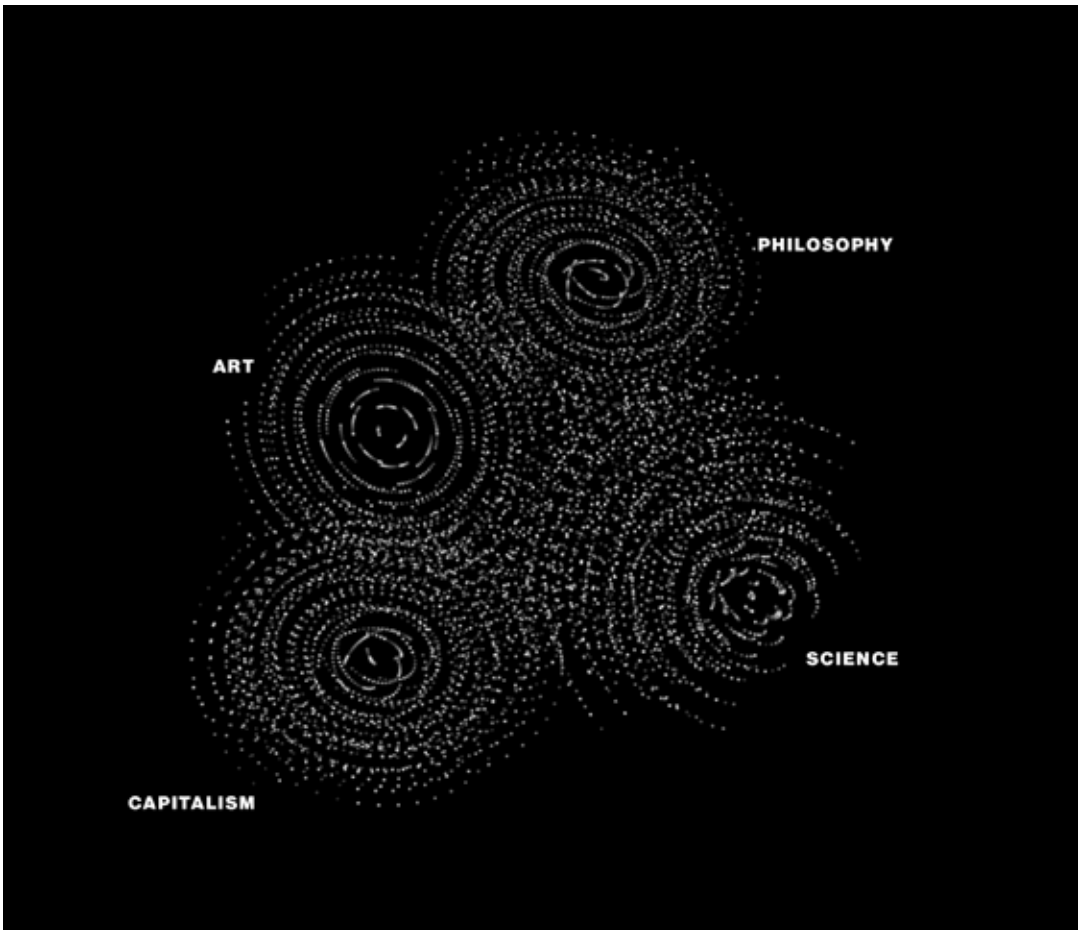
This is why I am experimenting with the idea of biosemiotics and overlapping (never entirely coinciding) *umwelten* of humans and computational media. Yes, there are profound differences in embodiment, but there are also functional homologies. A homology differs from an analogy in being far more constrained, specifically in terms of the similar functionalities that constitute a homologous series. An example of a homologous series could take the form of comparing forelimbs on a human, a lion, and a whale. The different morphologies notwithstanding, what makes the comparison work are the similar functionalities that limbs possess across different phyla. Similarly, there are functional correspondences between the kinds of cognitive activities that computers carry out and those that humans do. This is not to say that brains operate like computers as posited in the computationalist model; we know this is not the case. Nevertheless, computers have intentions, make selections, and perform interpretations on flows of information. They also have a view of the “world” as it is constituted through their designs. With an in-depth understanding of how the “world” looks to them (their *umwelten*), we can arrive at a much more precise understanding of how “relations” are constituted with humans in specific cases.

With the development of neural net architectures and deep learning algorithms, the kinds of self-learning that computers do come much closer to human processing of information, with astonishing results in machine translation, competitive play, circuit design, etc. The linchpin for me that holds all this together is cognition, defined broadly as the contextual processing of information that involves interpretations and choices that lead to meaning. I think it is important to recognize that computational media do produce and process meanings, both for themselves and for other devices, and of course for humans. That is the underlying homology that makes a cognitive assemblage work.

I welcome your thoughts on all of this.

**TS:** Thanks Kate! Again, I would say that your efforts to get to grips with the overlapping of nature, culture, technology and biology present us with another point of convergence in our discussion. This orientation toward homology, however, draws attention to two distinct assemblage theories. As you say, this is an academic matter of what course one decides to follow, and I can see how we ultimately end up in a fairly similar place, but before we move on I think it important to distinguish between these two theories.

The assemblages I'm drawn to cautiously approach the kind of resemblances established through analogy or homology. Indeed, rather than look to similarities between function, form, or structure to explain how an assemblage comes together, the focus crucially shifts to affective capacities and differential relations between bodies. We need to go back to Spinoza to fully understand how this works,<sup>6</sup> but in short, assemblages (or abstract machines) are about distinctiveness rather than similitude. It is the relational capacity of a body to affect (and be affected) that takes precedence over comparisons between bodies. This is ethology, as opposed to homology or analogy, in which it is the imbrication of relations rather than comparative mapping of forms or functions that matter. I therefore appreciate what you mean when you say that your homologies never entirely coincide. Assemblages are certainly not a jigsaw puzzle.



*Interference as Method*, Francesco Tacchini, 2016

There are a number of advantages to this approach, I think. Firstly, I doubt that comparisons can entirely predict what a body can do. We cannot know, for example, the cognitive intentions of a plant, and even if it were possible for a computer to develop intentions of its own, we would not recognize them; certainly not by way of analogical or homological comparisons with our own sense of intentionality.

Secondly, this approach is not constrained to cognizers alone, since what you call noncognizers have affective capacities too. As a result, I'm more interested in inclusive assemblages that comprise the relations established between humans and nonhumans; that is to say, human bodies, technology, geology, climate, and so on. These might be considered as nonintentional decisions made in relation to events—a hurricane responding to climate change, for example, or more specifically, a storm changing direction due to sea temperatures that are affected by human technologies. So, humans are not cut out of these assemblages. This is a kind of deciding that exists outside of the resemblances of the cognitive frame, but nonetheless implicates human cognition in relational processes of sense making.

Thirdly, through the focus on affective relational encounters we can at the very least point to the transformational interactions between bodies. In terms of power then we can see which body has the most potent capacity to affect. I'm not suggesting, however, that this is the definitive route without disadvantages. I grasp some of the problems with regard to science in particular, where I see that analogy and homology are fairly ingrained. I've attended a number of conferences where Deleuzians and scientists have attempted to dialogue. Some have been more successful than others. For my part though, I'm more interested in the cultural and political contexts in which potent capacities are assembled.

This leads us to our final discussion point (utopia/dystopia). There's been much public debate in the UK and US (post Brexit, Trump) about what kind of dystopia we are currently in. Much of this seems to be rooted in digital cultures of fake news on social media, Trump bots, and various “outside” interferences with the “democratic” process. I've followed Neil Postman, to some extent, insofar as I have compared current dystopias with Orwell and Huxley as a way to *fabulate* digital culture. I've recently read a nice piece in the Boston Review that argues that Philip K Dick provides a much more accurate dystopic model of what's going on.<sup>7</sup> I suppose it's my miserable English disposition, but I am openly dystopian in my take on digital culture. It's very refreshing therefore to find that that *Unthought* has a final utopian message.

This focus on dystopia/utopia draws attention to another point of convergence in our work in a similar recognition of the “dangerous,” and I would add, dystopian legacy of cybernetic control. Moreover, I welcome your effort to look beyond this kind of control to what lays outside of what you describe as the failed project of computable cybernetics: the incomputable, the undecidable, and the unknowable. Along with Jussi Parikka, I've similarly been interested in the accident and anomalies of digital culture. Our subsequent work on digital contagion and virality starts by theorizing the accident. *The Assemblage Brain* likewise follows this trajectory by looking at the incompleteness of control through Burroughs's influence on Deleuze's Control Society thesis.

So I approached your final chapter “The Utopian Potential of Cognitive Assemblages” with a lot of interest. Indeed, there is a lot in it that I agree with. Those in the humanities, for example, should certainly commit themselves to “ethical responsibilities and positive futures” in digital cultures, as well as making ethical interventions that fully understand how the operations of the computational media work (2017, 204). I agree that the humanities has indeed felt threatened by the pace and complexity of technological change. Not least because being technophobic often seems to lead to a submissive ignorance of how things actually work, but also since there's been a violent devaluation of the humanities and arts in terms of cuts to funding. Digital humanities seems like an understandable response to this attack and needs to dialogue with the humanities, as you say.

My point of departure is, evidently, an insistence that that we should also look beyond the cognitive frame to this differently oriented nonconsciousness I've tried to describe. I agree that most people are indeed “blind” to their relation to the operations of digital technology. As follows, the cognitive “reading” of humans, nonhumans, and their environments by, for example machine learning programs, is part of what I have similarly attributed to *experience capitalism*.<sup>8</sup> This is not so much about the cutting out of the human mind from the assemblage though, as Hansen seems to contend, but rather it is the exploitation of the mere foothold consciousness has in these technological systems. For me, it's not about rescuing human cognition from an invisible operational media (has there ever been a time when the human mind had a command post in media systems?), but instead alerting users and educating them about the ways in which their sensory experiences are operated on in ways similar to R.D. Lang's politics of experience.

The politics of [user] experience increasingly happens in the affective realm through appeals to feelings and emotions. This is why I've been interested in working with social psychologists like Darren Ellis and Ian Tucker in the UK who variously explore experience via affect, feelings, emotions, mental health, social media, and bodies in relation to technology rather than measuring discrete bodies according to normative conditions of health. There seems to be a bigger project needed here that demands that we not only get the humanities talking to the digital humanities and computer scientists; we also need to reach out to psychologists, industrial designers, HCI and digital marketing people. This is necessary since we are seeing efforts to produce habit forming experiences with social media designed to trigger intrinsic negative emotional responses.<sup>9</sup> This so-called dark UX is a part of what we might also call the nasty side of the affective turn wherein technology is designed to exploit the nonconscious through joyful and negative feelings as a mode of control.

There are a number of commercial products emerging from MIT's affective computing programme, for example, that begin with ethically motivated research into autism, but end up with applications in digital marketing or workplace surveillance that are a cause for concern.<sup>10</sup> As we have agreed in this discussion, these applications are limited to merely "reading" affect, but it's the subsequent priming of experience that I think needs attention here; how, that is, a certain kind of subjectivity emerges in the production of user experiences. So the difference is not so much in the decline of human experience of technology, but rather acknowledging how computational media experiences the human.

**KH:** In your useful clarification of the kinds of assemblages to which you are drawn, you point out these are assemblages connected not by homologies of form or function but the relational capacity of bodies to affect one another. This works well for your project of critiquing neurocapitalism and affective capitalism, showing how the affective capacities of humans are targeted for marketing purposes. However, one of the goals of my project, as you know, is to create a framework in which humans, nonhumans, and computational media interact with one another through what I call "cognitive assemblages," assemblages through which information, interpretations, and meanings circulate. The problem for me in emphasizing affective capacities over cognitive ones is that computers do not have emotions. Even the field of emotional computing only simulates emotions but does not actually create them in computers, as you point out. So any framework that leaves cognition out of account or underplays it does not work well for the integration of computational media into hybrid human networks; nor does it have much explanatory power about how human-computer cognitions interact

to create and extend the infrastructures on which contemporary life in developed countries increasingly depends. In fact, in your account, computers frequently are positioned as agents of exploitation (which of course they can be) and as reductive machines that threaten to reduce humans to the engineering terms that explain them. This is a valuable and necessary project, but it does little to illuminate how computational media play essential *positive* roles in creating the world as we experience it. It also does not allow us to see the extent to which human and mechanical cognitions are increasingly entwined with one another in everyday transactions other than those directly connected with capitalistic marketing.

I think this fundamental difference in goals explains a lot about our different approaches. You say, for example, that “even if it were possible for a computer to develop intentions of its own, we would not recognize them.” But computers do develop intentions of their own all the time, and the people who design, program and maintain them know perfectly well in what senses these intentions are manifested within the computers and how these intentions shape the kinds of communications that take place within human-computational interactions. For an example, consider the dictation program called Dragon Dictate. The program is designed to solicit user feedback that will allow the program increasingly to refine its sense of a user's distinctive pronunciation and vocabulary. The user does this by repeating words that the computer gets wrong and typing in corrections for the computer-generated text. The program's intention is to arrive at a textual representation that accurately reflects a particular user's vocabulary, pronunciations, and other speech idiosyncrasies. Intentions are often associated with “aboutness,” and here “aboutness” includes the program's ability to detect the modulations of air that create sound for humans. The program does not hear sound as humans do, but it has sensors and actuators to create digital representations of that sound within its memory and databanks.

This example can be multiplied thousands or millions of times, as computational devices are increasingly interfaced with a huge variety of different kinds of sensors and a similar multitude of actuators. Of course, in analyzing how these interactions take place, it is crucially important to include the affective capacities of humans, and that is why I define cognition in such a way that it includes affect.

This focus on cognition also brings up another difference in our approaches, again related to the different kinds of goals we have in mind. Your focus on relationality and the potential of bodies to affect one another tends to blur the line

between living and nonliving forces. If the question is how the forces of living and nonliving events interact, then the tendency will be to consider hurricanes, tornadoes, or even something as simple as water percolating through a rock as all instances of bodies affecting each other through the forces they exert. But in this approach, what tends to drop out of sight is the flexibility (or plasticity, as you discuss it, following Malabou) of living entities to respond to their environments. Rocks do not make choices, perform interpretations, or exhibit the kinds of plasticity that living organisms routinely demonstrate, even plants, even biological entities as small as a cell; (I would say, incidentally, that plants do have intentions, and that their intentions have been studied extensively by plant biologists). By contrast to the plasticity of living systems, the behaviors of nonliving entities can be explained as the resultant of all the forces involved in the interaction without needing to take choice and interpretation into account. Indeed, this is precisely the goal of fields like materials science and stress engineering, which have developed sophisticated methods to account even for critical phenomena so fickle they cannot be accurately predicted but can be successfully modeled using simulations.

My comments [above] are not intended to imply that my approach is better than yours, but rather as an observation that we each have certain goals in mind and have devised approaches that we consider appropriate for those goals. These differences notwithstanding, it is interesting that we both arrive at similar endpoints, although by fairly different routes. I have enjoyed our discussions and want to thank you for your generous engagements with my lines of thought (lines of flight?). Speaking of utopia/dystopia, I will conclude by noting that the implicit utopian hope performed through our discussions is that we can have reasonable and illuminating conversations with others whose agendas and interests partially overlap and also significantly diverge from our own. Thanks for making this possible.

**TS:** Well, it's very agreeable that we end here on such a fine utopian note. I agree—open dialogue is essential. That is to say, we need a dialogue that is not just limited to the humanities and the digital humanities, but moves outside of these subject lines to the so-called interdisciplinary nexus. We began our discussion here in such a fashion by noting the influence of the neurosciences, and the idea of the nonconscious in particular, on the humanities. I hope you can join us in London in the near future to carry this important discussion forward, and further consider the role of the nonconscious in our encounter with the brain sciences, computer science, HCI, industrial design and so much more.

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## Book Review

# Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion



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### KEYWORDS

transnational religion, assemblage, intersectionality, copresence, feminist theory

Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha M. (2015) *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 304 pp., \$32.00 (paperback).

Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús' book, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*, seeks to fill a gap in contemporary and historical religious scholarship, noting that "translocal connections within emerging global experiences of Santería has yet to be explored ethnographically" (6). While the translocal and transnational experiences of Santería practitioners are front and center throughout the book, what struck me was the theoretical apparatus she constructs and mobilizes to historicize and contextualize these religious experiences. In this short paper, I focus on three theoretical concepts that Beliso-De Jesús employs throughout the book: diasporic assemblages, copresences, and transnationalism. Beliso-De Jesús offers a layered reading of the dense theoretical concept of assemblage, which was first developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in 1987 and then later reinterpreted by Jasbir Puar in 2007. Beliso-De Jesús builds

her reading of assemblage via Puar's interpretation so it is useful to first map out how assemblage operates in Puar's work before examining Beliso-De Jesús' theoretical intervention.

In "I would rather be a Cyborg than a Goddess" Jasbir Puar provides a detailed exposition of the concept of assemblage. The term has different understandings in European and North American contexts due to translation issues, but Puar narrows its scope to mainly convey a layout or organization of circulating and unstable relations, with a particular emphasis here, on understanding the patterns of these relations, rather than on their content (57). There are no relational constants in an assemblage, "but rather 'variation to variation' and hence the event-ness of identity" (Puar, 58). Puar thereby argues that assemblage theory poses a challenge to the dominant framework of critical theory – intersectionality – making the claim that not only is a particular identity outcome not guaranteed based on certain inputs, but that this "intersection," or more accurately *intersections*, of multiple identities is always in motion, always becoming, and thus any attempt to map a coherent and fixed grid usually proves futile. Assemblage theory, then, takes a step back from the scene of the event and attempts to understand the moment before the collision, asking questions like what were the conditions and dynamics that opened a window of possibility for the accident, within a particular intersection, to take place? How were certain potentials confined and others foreclosed in this becoming?

Puar suggests that assemblage theory provides one alternative avenue to explore social and cultural relations outside an intersectional framework. This is not to say, however, that we should abandon the well-established intersectional approach. Scholars who do leave behind what they charge as the 'outdated and old' methods of intersectionality construct the very thing that assemblage theory seeks to avoid — a binary. Instead, Puar urges not to see these two methodologies as oppositional, but rather she argues that they should be used together to undertake a "frictional" reading of an event or identity (50). Puar thereby pushes the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge by offering a theory of becoming-intersectional, refusing to choose a theoretical 'camp' and opting for, instead, a frictional reading of the unfolding "event-spaces" we find ourselves in.

Beliso-De Jesús develops and applies Puar's analytical tool of assemblage to contextualize the modern religious and cultural formations of Santería practitioners. Combining Puar's theory of assemblage with Christopher Johnson's concept of

“diasporic horizon” (8), she coins the term “diasporic assemblage” to mark out “a wider range of entities, materials, and affects without presuming pre-existing relata” (8). Rather than relying on the limited representational model of horizon’s, she develops the concept of diasporic assemblages to focus “on the connections and disruptions that erupt as intensities or feelings of spatial-temporalities” (8). She argues that this concept thereby provides “a critical rethinking of diasporas as assemblages ... [which] emerge through alliances and disputes over transnational religious power” (8). The diasporic assemblage is mobile and emerges in often disparate social, cultural, and economic locations.

These diasporic assemblages are sensed through the what Beliso-De Jesús terms “copresences,” ontological impressions that are experienced as a kind of “electric intensity” (2), which travel through a wide range of spiritual, physical, and technological channels. More specifically, she deploys the term “*copresences* to reference the complex multiplicity of racial spiritual embodied affectivity that... are sensed though chills, shivers, tingles, premonitions, and possessions...” (7, original emphasis). Beliso-De Jesús further complicates the concept of copresences by arguing that they are:

exploding sites of flight and rupture that can be mapped, embodied, and disarticulated at various points of coalition. They are not always strategic or unifying. These diasporic assemblages that reconfigure the phenomenology of transnationalism through rhizomatic schemas, however, *do not presuppose unity, cohesion, resistance, subversion, or pristine origins*” (14, my emphasis).

The framework of diasporic assemblages thereby opens the possibility of mapping the complex transnational flows of Santería practitioners as well as their haunting copresences – a project that, she argues, would be “less interested in tracing identitarian formations ... but [would] instead focus on the micro-intensities that emerge affectively through various linkages and ontologies” (13). We can see, then, the similarities here to Puar’s argument about the political possibilities of assemblage as a valuable tool for social theorists. Beliso-De Jesús builds off Puar’s theoretical apparatus to approach the transnational religious practice of Santería, maintaining open circuits for the emergence and disruption of complex raced, gendered, colonized, and sexed subjectivities. Beliso-De Jesús carries this dynamic constellation of competing forces, vectors, and magnitudes throughout her study, including in her groundbreaking theory of transnationalism.

As a graduate of a women's and gender studies program that explicitly specializes in transnational feminism I was taken aback by Beliso-De Jesús' innovative approach to transnationalism. Often I found in my studies that transnationalism serves as a crutch to signal criticality around the porousness of borders and boundaries. What actually happens in most of this work, however, is the construction of a rigid and fixed system of social, racial, or cultural 'intersections.' While Beliso-De Jesús does temporarily hold her objects in place to examine a scene of becoming, she immediately loosens her grip allowing these the transnational assemblages of Santería to again flow in organic ways. Most importantly, I think, her theory of transnationalism does not rely upon a transcendental signifier. Drawing on a few different scholars of religion, she argues:

that the “trans” in “transnational” is the very same “trans” in “transcendental.” In this formula, transnationalism involves an inherent Othering process where a disavowal of self is enacted by the production of “locals” envisioned as “the here” or “earths” of the transcendental Other world, “the global” ... Transcendental transnationalism [thereby] envisions nations as closed-circuited, bounded “heres” and “theres” (216).

In Beliso-De Jesús' framework, the diasporic assemblage of Santería “ontologies actually shift transnationalism, where the ‘trans’ of transnationalism might be better understood through the ‘trance’ of copresence” (98). The power of these copresences to impress upon all facets of social and cultural life is not to be underestimated, nor taken for granted. She suggests that:

the framework of copresences leads us precisely to these microintensities of erupting power. *Santería does not offer utopia*. Rather, it assumes the terrors of violence and negotiations with negativities as part and parcel of the everyday. Copresences are haunting conjurings of seething imperfections, partialities that link injustice and marginality but also produce new problematic relationships. In their analytic capacity, copresences provide visibility and opportunity but also might be complicit with new lines of power (102, my emphasis).

Beliso-De Jesús thereby opens her study of Santería to a more fluid notion of transnationalism, one which can account for the competing systems of power that these religious practices not only operate within but also produce. In this framework of transnationalism, then, the vexed terrain of Santería ontologies are

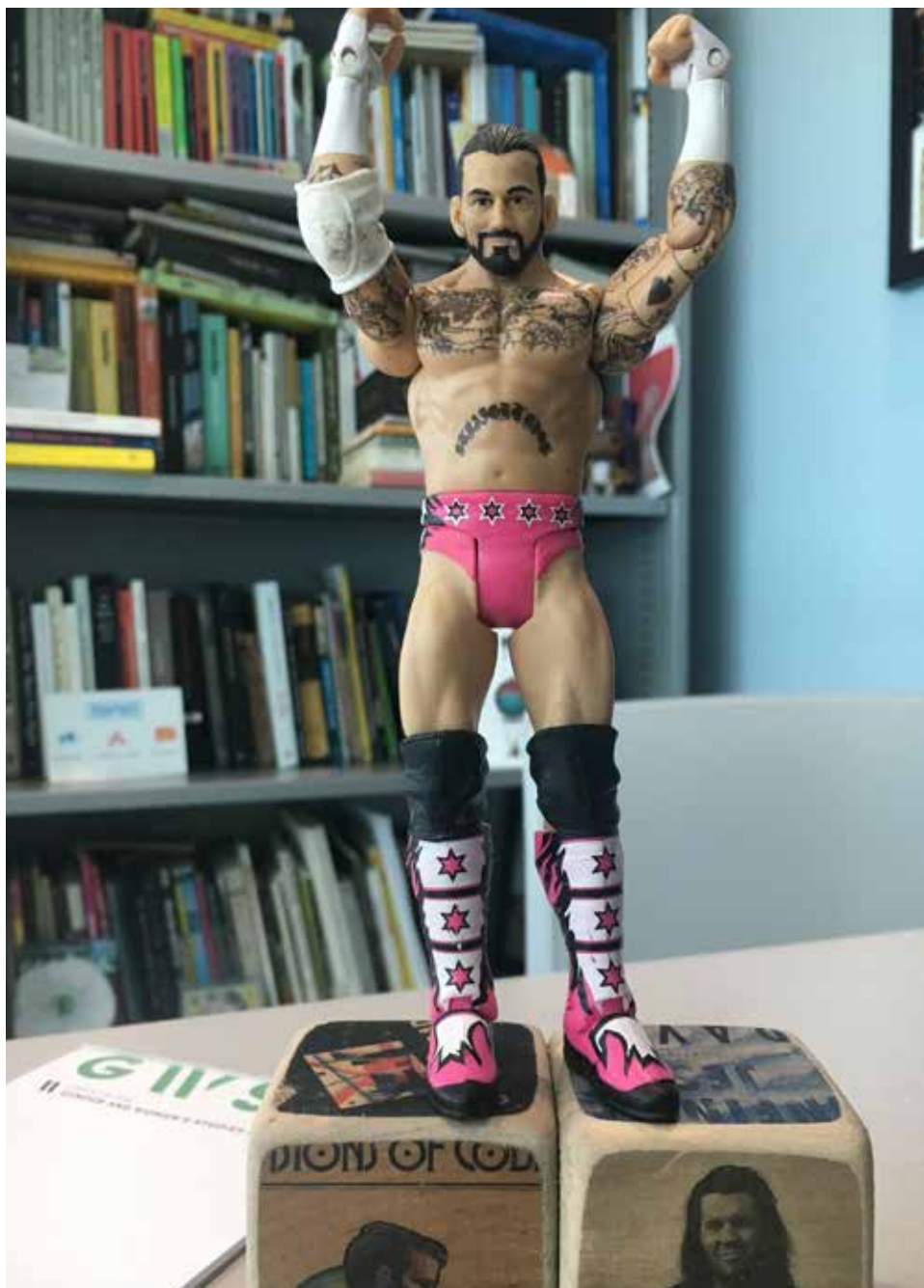
situated as “entanglements” (75). Beliso-De Jesús urges us, in light of the ontological “fact” of these various entanglements, to begin

allowing Santería’s epistemology to *guide* our understanding of these... copresences that emerge within unique histories of violence colonial and imperial encounters and their interarticulated bodily postures... I suggest leaning towards Santería copresences... [-] a somatic experience of *walking with* (copresence) rather than solely a mind that is *reaching toward* an unobtainable (transcendence) (75, original emphasis).

Beliso-De Jesús’ *Electric Santería* thereby offers the reader a unique opportunity to *travel with* the copresences that are conjured by and within her work, allowing us to get a brief glimpse of the diasporic assemblage of Santería ontologies. More importantly, for me, is how the book’s theoretical apparatus provides a critical intervention into the field of transnational feminism – a bringing together of the frameworks of assemblage and transnationalism to provide a truly expansive theory of the social world.

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*CM Punk figurine*, Guillermo Rebollo Gil, 2017  
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# The Awesome Ordinary: Notes on Pro Wrestling



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This article offers a critical, idiosyncratic take on the staging of sincerity in pro wrestling. It engages this popular cultural product as an athletic performance event, with the intention of highlighting the affective underpinnings of fans' interest in and connection with the medium. Specifically, it is argued here that the lack of legitimate competition in wrestling allows for images, meanings and feelings of cooperation and complicity to come to the forefront. The article serves, also, as an off-beat reflection on essay and poetry writing.

## KEYWORDS

pro wrestling, sincerity, the ordinary, everyday life, poetry

## Pro Wrestling: The Basics

At the heart of pro wrestling sits this basic fact: it is sincere. Performers play the role of legitimate opponents, who willingly put their bodies in peril in choreographed, yet largely improvised, bouts. Bouts feature damaging and daring maneuvers that, in order to be executed properly, require subtle and timely assists from those who sustain the brunt of the blow. Sincerity here is understood as performers' engagement in assisting their slated opponents in telling a compelling story by way of their "execution" in the ring. Execution here is understood as the measure of a performers' ability to dramatize the extent of the damage sustained (and/or given) while efficiently (and convincingly) delivering the bout to its pre-determined result. Combatants must work in tandem to give the impression of true animosity and utter disregard for each other's well-being. The success of a wrestling match thus depends on the care, coordination, and cooperation between opponents (Smith 2014). In this very precise sense, pro wrestling is an affair of the heart.

This essay's opening sentence is adapted from *CNN*'s Chris Cillizza's column "Why Pro Wrestling is the Perfect Metaphor for Donald Trump's Presidency"; the original reads: "At the heart of pro wrestling sits this basic fact: It is fake" (Cillizza 2017). Cillizza, a self-identified wrestling fan, wants to make a point: not about wrestling, but about Trump's presidency. Particularly, about the President's feigned disdain for mainstream media, when a large chunk of his success (entrepreneurial, political or otherwise) can be attributed to his deep-seated obsession with the media industry. Unfortunately, according to Cillizza, some proportion of America's general public fall prey to Trump's fakery, as they—like many wrestling fans—are much too prone to believe anything they see, read or hear. And so, wrestling as a metaphor is "perfect" insomuch as President Trump, like wrestling promoters, relies on staged conflicts to captivate audiences. The problem, of course, as Cillizza puts it, is that: "[w]restling is fake. Being President isn't. Trump seems not to know or care about this distinction" (Cillizza 2017).

This essay does not care about Donald Trump. It cares about wrestling. Specifically, it cares about the careless manner in which some critics and commentators, like Cillizza, point to wrestling's fakery to identify a problem, both in the medium itself and as a metaphor for social and political processes outside of it. As with other modes of performance, that wrestling is staged is the least intriguing

of its basic facts. Moreover, as R. Tyson Smith (2014) argues, “the fakery fixation distracts from other important meanings” (2). In particular, the fixation with fakery *as a problem* of professional wrestling distracts from fakery's own important meanings as they may become apparent during a match. While, yes, wrestlers *fake*-hit their opponents, who in turn *fake* the harm caused by their aggressors, the fakery of the hit and/or the harm isn't what, ultimately, distinguishes wrestling as a performance form. Inasmuch as mostly everything that happens in the ring is staged at one level or another, what stands out is the, at times coordinated, at times improvised, but, always cooperative motion of wrestlers' bodies. What stands out is the *work* being done by performers to make each and every fake hit and fake harm flow into another for purposes of the performance. Thus, wrestlers don't so much fake in-ring action as they—through great effort—embody fakery, set it in motion as part of a live-action event. One important meaning that fakery acquires in pro wrestling, then, is how necessary it might be for the sustainment of human life. At least as it pertains to scenarios when bodies come into quick, violent contact with one another. Fakery is what makes it possible for bodies to grab, press, and slam into one another without causing *real* harm.

There is, I think, sincerity in this. In the manner in which bodies are only made to look as if they're harming one another inside the ring, all the while each and every move performed is intended to keep the bodies safe (Smith 2014). The action in the ring is sincere inasmuch as the poses, holds, and maneuvers that make caring possible during a match and which make wrestling matches possible over time, are never truly hidden from view. The intention then is not to deceive audiences. Nor does the medium, in order to be enjoyed, truly require fans to willingly suspend their disbelief and let themselves be taken by the storylines. It is both more complex and more illuminating than that: it is about the interplay between what seems to be going on in the match and what is actually happening between performers. In-ring conflict compels audiences only in so far as wrestlers manage to work together; to help and care for one another. Audiences, in turn, applaud at the end because their favorite performer won a thrilling clash. Or they applaud out of appreciation for the thrills of the dance—or both.

This is, I think, what is always there to be seen in wrestling. The confluence of the fake and the sincere as embodied by those who step inside the ring, and as

experienced by those watching. Unfortunately, critics often get distracted when they turn their attention to wrestling and end up treating it as a metaphor for, or a symptom of, something purportedly more serious. Like the state of American culture or of the American Presidency. On the occasions in which wrestling is broached with no ulterior motives, critical appraisals are frequently plagued by moralistic concerns regarding the almost always crude, and often downright offensive, storylines and their potentially harmful effects on the viewing public. In either case, wrestling remains at the threshold of critical consideration: we look to it in an effort to look past it, toward something of greater social and/or political consequence.

It takes a fan to look at something like pro wrestling and make a “critical and joyful fuss” (Haraway 2016, 3) solely about the action in the ring, and be content with that. That is why Cillizza's article is so disheartening. He treats wrestling as a proxy for politics. In doing so, wrestling is reduced to the one thing that those unfamiliar with, or uninterested in, the medium can claim to “know” about it without ever having watched a match: that it's staged. Such a reductive analysis amounts to an act of dispossession. To reduce wrestling to its fakery as a problem not only distracts from its other (more important) meanings as outlined above, but it obscures performers' bodies from view ridding them of their agency, and disregarding the effect that their bodies in motion may have over fans. At the heart of this essay sits this basic fact: I am a wrestling fan. This is my sincere attempt at writing like one.

## The Impossible Question: Wrestling and Writing

In his treatise on the essayistic form, Brian Dillon (2017) considers the possibility of writing an essay “simply out of the things at hand at the moment” (123). As such, the essay becomes an exercise in both constraint and indulgence: I turn to write with whatever I have on me, and what I have on me I have because it is my favorite. I have sat down to write this essay with a poetry book by W. Todd Kaneko open face down across my lap. I've also hit play on a recording of the most recent episode of WWE's weekly *Smackdown Live* wrestling program. On my desk there is a CM Punk action figure. If I manage to close this essay with elegance, I'll treat myself to raising the doll's arms in victory.

Kaneko's poetry book is entitled *The Dead Wrestler Elegies*. It's mostly the same poem over and over again, chronicling his relationship with his dad, a huge wrestling fan; his dad's relationship with his mother, she left; and pro wrestlers' relationship with pain and fame and life in general, they all die in the end. My favorite lines of verse in the book reads as follows:

the impossible question—  
*have you ever won?*  
 (l. 23–24)

The question is posed posthumously to famed female wrestler Judy Grable. After my initial reading, I searched for but could not find Grable's win-loss record online. There is something bizarre about responding to a poem by searching for the facts. It is an impossible response, for nothing I potentially uncover could ever debunk (or confirm) a single line of poetry. Yet, the exercise was necessary inasmuch as it allowed me to get a better handle on Kaneko's wrestling themed verses and, through them, on wrestling itself.

Pro wrestling isn't about winning or losing. Regardless of how successful a record, or how lengthy a title reign, no performer has ever really won a pro wrestling match. Smith (2014) explains: “From the standpoint of the performers, the objective is not winning *per se* but winning the crowd over with a great story” (102). Critics thus position wrestling as a *sui generis* athletic performance event that draws from both sport and theatre, but escapes the basic principles, confines, and conventions that define and legitimate each (Chow et al 2017). Wrestling is unlike sport in that there is no actual competition, and it is unlike theatre in that there is an ever present, and often purposely exacerbated, uncertainty regarding what is scripted, what is improvised, what might be real, and what is accidental amongst everything that goes on in and out of the ring. The loose structure of bouts, which allows for performers' on the spot coordination and decision making, sets the stage for the unexpected: the deliberate strike from a disgruntled opponent; the inadvertent harm from a miscalculated blow or fall; the unexpected and ill-advised fan intrusion into the ring; the inclusion of real life controversies in performers' scripted verbal jabs against each other or in their commentary to the crowd; the collusion between promoter and performer to “screw” the latter's counterpart. The ring, as a performance space, is open to a much wider array of happenstance than traditional theatre. This is further heightened by wrestlers'

historical penchant and, also, contractual obligation to (more or less) remain in character when in the public eye. Former wrestler and sociologist Laurence de Garis (1999) explains:

Professional wrestlers are trained to be convincing and often stay “in character” when people whom they do not know are around. [. . .] In fact, veteran pro wrestlers themselves find difficulty in interpreting exactly what goes on when others are in the ring. The problem arises when attempting to summarize, conclude, or otherwise “nail down” events or behaviors (69).

Poet Russell Jaffe (2016) echoes de Garis, locating wrestling's appeal in “the subtleties, . . . The way a wrestler runs his thumb through the top of his tights—tired, in control, taking a breather, adjusting to continue” (n.p.). de Garis and Jaffe focus on performers' bodies and their effect on onlookers. How wrestlers work in the ring, following de Garis, is often cryptic. One watches bodies enter into motion with each other, without necessarily being able to discern the motives and understandings that drive such motion. It is the motion that keeps us watching. Even the least spectacular gestures, such as the wrestler who suddenly stops for a breather in the middle of the match, can be captivating. People stop for breathers all the times, but it is not often that we stop to notice it. Then, of course, the wrestler will get hit from behind with a “death-defying” maneuver and end up losing the match in the most devastating fashion, only to, miraculously, show up the following week, ready for a new challenge. Each move in wrestling leads to another move, and each battle-to-end-all-battles leads to another match scheduled down the road. As Nicholas Sammond (2005) explains: “[w]restlers never learn from their mistakes, never see the error of their ways in retrospective regret, nor conquer the external forces that oppress them. Instead, the cycle repeats, over and over; the same mistakes, the same betrayals, the same evanescent victories and defeats” (6). In this very precise sense, wrestling matches are impossible to watch insofar as each is, more or less, a repetition of the previous one. Yet, if you're a fan, you watch because wrestling makes you feel *something*. This something, I think, is the ordinary.

## Pro Wrestling: This is Ordinary

The cyclical nature of pro wrestling enacts the ongoing character of daily life perhaps better than any other performance form. After all, most people, like wrestlers, never learn from their mistakes, never see the error of their ways in retrospective regret, nor conquer the external forces that oppress them. Instead,

the cycle repeats, over and over: the same mistakes, the same betrayals, the same evanescent victories and defeats. This is the story that performers tell with their bodies in the hope of winning the audience over.

For all its fakery, wrestling is what ordinary life looks like when stripped down to, well, Lycra bottoms, some face paint maybe, and a pair of boots. While critics love to highlight the out-of-world physiques and larger-than-life conflicts that pro wrestling is most notorious for, what the medium specializes in is making the struggle of everyday life, appear (almost entirely) in the nude. Wayne Koestenbaum (2013) writes: “[p]ut *nude* in the adjectival slot, and the noun automatically gets upgraded” (201). I think wrestling gives fans a glimpse into the nude-everyday. So much of the everyday is about subtleties, that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for one to summarize, conclude, or otherwise “nail down” events or behaviors. Wrestling offers its fans a staging of the subtleties that constitute the ordinary. Fans, in turn, make a joyful (and often critical) fuss about it because, in the ring, the ordinary looks, and makes you feel, truly awesome.

Kathleen Stewart, in *Ordinary Affects* (2007), writes of this feeling as that which “catches people up in something that feels like *something*” (2). Something like the succession of moves in a match. She writes: “[o]rdinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences” (1-2). Stewart, here, proposes an engagement with the ordinary that requires us to be attentive to our heightened, though perhaps un-, or under-acknowledged, vulnerability to be won over (or beaten down) by whatever may be going on in our life; even if, or rather, especially if there is nothing really going on in our life. Other than the fact that it continues, of course. Outside the ring, the simplicity of the ongoingness of life may very well cause weariness. But, inside the ring, the very same thing will, if you're a fan, catch you up in a sensation.

For Barthes (1957), the sensation that pro wrestling offers audiences is “the transient images of certain passions” (1). For me, as a fan, what each individual match draws our attention to is the considerable amount of passion involved in just going through the motions day after day; of our willingness to be affected by life as it continues. I'm not saying that this is the most awesome part of life, but it is the part of life that is most present in and most vital to, a wrestling match. In this sense, neither the images nor the feelings they provoke are transient, for they make up overwhelming majority of the what goes on inside and outside the ring. In the ring, they get an upgrade; outside, they often become grating.

## Pro Wrestling: This is Awesome

The most awesome part of a wrestling match is this: opponents' cooperation and complicity always trumps the conflict between them. The truth is that no matter how well timed, it is impossible to hide one opponent's assistance in the other's attack. There is, I think, sincerity in that. In the expression, for example, of the wrestler who patiently waits on the outside of the ring, feigning injury, for his opponent to run, push off against the ropes on the far side and come flying out of the ring to land on top of him. If the sequence is executed properly, the wrestler on the receiving end of the blow always appears as if he were catching his opponent to break his fall; because he is. Then, once back in the ring, the one who leapt to the outside, or the one who broke his fall—it doesn't really matter who—will lie still with the other on top of him until the referee counts to three. One of them will celebrate and the crowd will jeer or cheer. But, again, there is no winning as such. There is only making as if one or the other won. There is only making *with*, in order to win the crowd over.

Critics often miss this part or pick up on it only to poke fun at the medium's fakery. But this is the part of the wrestling match fans and non-fans alike should most look out for: the making *with*. Which in my reading is very much like a “making do”; or, more precisely, a “making due.” Each move executed in the ring is premised on a shared expectation, that it will be willingly received and assisted to ensure that the performing body lands safely. Wrestlers, on the surface, exchange strikes. But, on a more profound level, they trade opportunities for one another to be there for the other. It is how wrestling continues to be possible and why many of us, outside of the ring, sincerely wish and root for its continued practice. Moreover, this is the one part of the show that is very much a fixture, and that can most easily be performed outside of the confines of the ring, and yet, it often goes unnoticed or unremarked.

As a result, the type of questions wrestling makes possible are rarely ever posed, for example: have you ever wondered how one body can be forced, pressed under the weight of another; how it might be painful to be twisted by another's hands; how it can be willed into the brink of submission, until, suddenly, with the inexplicable help of the offending body, it rises? It is, in truth, an improbable scenario. And yet, each and every wrestling match offers audiences the opportunity to witness how the body of your slated opponent can turn towards you, in your favor. And insomuch as this turning is repeated time and again, in-ring

action does not demand to be viewed, enjoyed and interpreted as the staging of an actual conflict, but rather as a live-action model of what collaboration might look like in the most unlikely of circumstances. In this vein, Ashley Souther (2007), in her article on a community based pro-wrestling program, argues that:

the very mechanism that allows an audience to believe that a man can be beaten so as to be unable to move while his opponent climbs the ring ropes to deliver a diving elbow—yet minutes later musters the inner strength to mount a stirring comeback (suspension of disbelief)—could also be used to believe what, in the current social context, would seem equally impossible: reconciliation of enemies, respect between rivals, and a new broader sense of community (273).

While for Souther, this mechanism is audiences' willing suspension of disbelief, I would venture to say that the mechanism she is referring to is fakery. Not as a problem, but as a contextual, embodied practice, by which the wellbeing of others is safeguarded—no matter the odds. This, at least, is one of the principal effects that wrestling has on me. It clarifies, in a manner that no other cultural-commercial production can, how starting with or from, our own body, we continually come up against and must turn to other bodies in order to continue day after day. There is, I think, sincerity in that. In the recognition that the seemingly impossible moves that wrestlers perform find correspondence in our mundane twists and turns. It's just that everyday life, contrary to wrestling, is not premised on a principle of willing collaboration amongst those we encounter. Thus, we often presume them to be our opponents and prefer to avoid them.

Often, in the everyday, when one for example, tries to make a life “simply out of the things at hand at the moment” (Dillon 2017, 123), it feels like there is no one there to turn to; to make something with; to break one's fall. The ordinary, one could argue, often feels lacking in feelings of complicity and cooperation. It is as if a subtle, but ever-present, conflict trumps everything else. And so, if you're a fan like me, and if you happen to have your favorite wrestling program playing on TV while you write, there is something that comes over you when you turn your attention from one screen to the other and see one performer catch another, both landing hard, but safely, on the outside of the ring. To borrow a sentiment from W. Koestenbaum's work, “Responding, I squint, sigh, snort, clench my molars. I jot a note on my private pad, or I comment aloud. I point. Elucidating, I play tour guide. I proclaim [wrestling's] triumph over depressing circumstances.”<sup>1</sup> Simply put, I make a fuss. This fuss is as joyous as it is critical. And most of all, it is sincere. I likely will not be able to close out this essay with elegance, but I'm going to raise my CM Punk doll's arms in victory anyway.

## Endnotes

1. The original reads: "I proclaim art's triumph over depressing circumstances" Kostenbaum, W. (2013). *Why Art is Always Emotional. My 1980s & Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Girraux, 238.

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*Two dancers captured in blurred movement*, Jorge Royan, 2007  
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# Desiring Connection: Affect in the Embodied Experience of Kizomba Dance



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Kizomba is a partnered social dance originating in Angola that is rapidly gaining worldwide attention, particularly in Europe and North America. Discussions and advertisements about kizomba employ words such as ‘connected,’ ‘sensual’ and ‘intimate,’ creating dance experiences and a wider scene laden with affect and an underlying eroticism. New and non-dancers often interpret kizomba as sexual or sexy, and, like other dances that have moved transnationally to the West, kizomba is crosscut by issues surrounding relations of sexuality, race, class and gender. This autoethnographic paper draws on my embodied experiences of dancing kizomba to consider the multifaceted types of cultural work that dancing does. With an attention to affect and the desiring intensities that are bodied forth on the dance floor, kizomba, and its affective sphere, is (re)explored outside of critical frameworks of analysis. By delving into the feelings that arise during the dance, the paper demonstrates what kizomba does to bodies, and what bodies do, in turn, with kizomba. While the adoption of kizomba in the West can reinforce problematic ideologies, the types of sociality offered through dance are also transgressive of hegemonic and normative social institutions. Kizomba, it is argued, offers a site to reimagine what it means to be self/other, sexual and connected.

## KEYWORDS

Dance, Affect, Embodiment, Sexuality, Autoethnography

A gentle touch, the smallest gesture of a hand pressing rhythmically into the small of my back, illuminates my entire body which is open to sensations. Lungs expand to breathe in my partner and our breath aligns with the beat. Stomach muscles contract under skin. I wait for a thigh to rub against mine to direct me to move. I feel for our energy, transmitted through connections at our chest, hands, and temples. Continually working to transfer our weight with a never-ceasing skin-to-skin connection, we are getting there. I can feel us dropping deeper. More intense energy comes from their body as their arm tightens around my back. My body tenses as they grab me and move me three fast steps backwards. Pause. They take my leg between theirs, isolating my hips and twisting our lower bodies to the right. Pause. We wait. They place my arm around their neck, tracing its contours and sliding all the way to that spot on my lower back. A small burst of sensation follows. Only the smallest movements keep us dancing. This is kizomba connection.

This paper reflects on my embodied experiences, as a white Canadian female, dancing kizomba, an Angolan partner dance that is rapidly gaining worldwide popularity.<sup>1</sup> The kizomba rhythm and movement is derived from an up-beat Angolan genre called semba, meaning “a touch of the bellies,” which is a characteristic posture of the dance. Semba became popular in Angola in the 1950s but began to change during the 1980s as Caribbean rhythms such as zouk traveled back to the West coast of Africa. The slower and calmer rhythms merged with semba to create kizomba, and the dance took on a different feel, becoming “more intimate, sensuous, and slower” (Oyebade 2007, 156). As kizomba has moved through other Lusophone countries and beyond, elements from R&B, tango, hip hop, zouk, dancehall, Afro house, and tarraxinha, among others, have created diverse fusions.<sup>2</sup> Kizomba's reterritorializations in Europe and North America have typically happened through pre-existing Latin dance scenes, giving birth to the European style, which I have studied most extensively. European kizomba is danced to slower, bass-heavy, zouk-inspired music and employs a very close embrace between (typically) male and female partners, although women often dance together, as well. The kizomba I participate in is for social dance purposes, as opposed to performance, and over a three-year period I attended dance lessons and socials where people move to music mixed by a kizomba DJ in a participatory atmosphere. The socials are attended by people of diverse ages, ethno-cultural, and racial backgrounds, and typically have thirty to fifty people in attendance.

Creating connection, sometimes called “kizz connection,” with one's dance partner is at the heart of the European social style. People will usually dance at least two songs together before switching partners to try and establish some degree

of affective connection. In some kizomba encounters, a very intense connection can be brought forth which is so overwhelmingly enjoyable that it is not uncommon to see two people dance as many as ten songs together if they have found “it.” While not every dance has the same level of intensity, those heightened dance experiences are sometimes referred to as reaching “deep kizomba.” Discussions about kizomba connection tend to be inflected with utopian sentiments, which Western dance studios, teachers, and socials play on: “This dance is all about connecting the mind, body and soul: moving as one” (Steps Dance Studio). Given these sentiments, and the style of the dance, new and non-dancers often interpret kizomba as sexual or sexy, but, “It’s not about *that*,” teachers maintain.<sup>3</sup> The debate about whether kizomba is sexual or sensual is an infamous point of discussion, and kizomba’s sensuality (rather than sexuality) is almost always highlighted and officially encouraged. I have, however, seen people kissing, caressing, and grinding to the beat on many occasions, and I have experienced dances that cross the precarious boundaries between sensual enjoyment and a sexual encounter. In turn, dance socials and lessons often utilize this underlying erotic potential with titles that play on the slippage between kizz and kiss, such as the “Kiss to Kizz Kizomba Night and Workshop” (Bailemor De). One gets the sense that there is some transgressive potential that creeps at the edges of the of the dance, even if it is carefully controlled with (sensual) language and notions of appropriate technique and posture, such as a straightened frame which ensures that groins will not touch.

My initial inclination when I began to dance kizomba was to critically analyze what I felt was a fetishization of ‘connection’ as a romanticized colonial and Eurocentric notion that invokes sexuality, race, gender, and class in problematic ways. Dances that have moved from marginalized, and often black, communities to Western centers typically undergo problematic processes of change as they are appropriated, approximated, and assimilated (Dixon-Gottschild 2003, 21). The techniques, postures, and ethos of dances such as salsa, bachata, tango, and rumba, among others, have been “refined” through straightened frames and codified steps, and de-sexualized to meet the ideals of white Western acceptability (Cresswell 2006; Delgado & Munoz 1997; Desmond 1997; Dixon-Gottschild 2003; Garcia 2013; McMains 2006). These dances, however, are also often inscribed with sexuality for marketability; discourses that employ words such as “hot,” “intimate,” “connected,” and “fiery” to describe dances, and particular movements, are produced through colonial desires to consume and experience Othered emotionalities and sexualities (Bosse 2008; Desmond 1997; McMains 2006; Savigliano 1995; Tornqvist 2013). The adoption of these partnered dances in the West, it is argued, reproduces desires for racialized, heterosexist, and heteronormative versions of coupling, masculinity, and femininity (McMains 2006; Schneider 2013).<sup>4</sup>

I am confident that a critical analysis of the European style of kizomba, and kizz connection, will uncover similar problematic dynamics. Indeed, an ethnography of the Dutch kizomba scene finds that the dance is a stage for white dancers to reproduce racialized and sexualized imaginaries (Belijaar 2016). Critical studies of social dance, like those cited here, have typically analyzed discursive representations and envisioned bodies as 'social texts' that signify particular meanings and form relations within pre-constituted forms of power (Desmond 1997). While important, these perspectives tend to reduce the materiality of the body, often to its visible physical form, without fully taking into account the complexity of the felt components of bodily movement and embodiment. As Kelly (2014) argues, the ephemeral and affective sensations experienced and produced through dancing bodies are themselves generative of culture, power, and connectivities. Thus, the dancing body's expressivities must also be considered as part of the body's productive corporeality. While conscious of the ways in which kizomba is problematically represented and adopted in this new context, exploring the feelings of a body *doing* kizomba offers a more nuanced view of the cultural work that happens on the transnational dance floor; attending to danced sensations reveals how people learn to negotiate feelings in conversation with other bodies, experiences, and memories.

McCormack (2014), in his work on the coproduction of moving bodies and spaces, contends that researchers should avoid framing events or objects of study through a pre-defined issue that renders a particular judgment. Instead, and following Massumi's notion of exemplification (2002), he suggests employing a framework that is able to capture what is "unruly and excessive" of examples (2014, 12). Employing exemplification as an approach to study movement practices requires "a sense of the specifics of participation while also holding onto the possibility that participation has the potential to transform the sensibility that shaped it in the first place" (McCormack 2014, 12). In the context of kizomba, this entails delving in to the bodily intensities of movement to understand what is in excess of some of the issues uncovered with critical analyses. Thus, I focus on the affective ephemera of dance as important 'specifics of participation' to develop an in-depth exploration of what kizomba sensations do to bodies, and what bodies, in turn, do with these sensations. The approach should not be viewed as one that seeks to forget the critiques, and my own whiteness. Rather, these aspects should be held in tension with the discussions here.

This research is centered within my body and follows the insights of dance scholars who use the moving body as a primary tool of research (Potter 2008; Sklar 2000, 2001).<sup>5</sup> The methodological approach centers on kinesthesia, a sense of feeling one's body in motion (Potter 2008, 449), and a proprioceptive awareness which is “the reception of stimuli produced within one's own body, especially in movement” (Sklar 2000, 72). I do, however, deepen this corporeal awareness and focus not only on the movement of my muscles and bones, but also on those affective intensities that arise through dancing. In conceptualizing affect, I follow scholars who are influenced by the work of Spinoza, such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Brian Massumi (2002), and others who build off that work (Brennan 2004; Gould, 2009; Gregg & Seigworth 2010; Manning 2006, 2013), and view affect as an intensity that moves a body to action or to inaction. Affects are often discussed as pre-cognitive sensations that differ from emotions which attempt to capture felt intensities to bring them into the realm of socio-cultural meaning (Massumi 2002, 28). Importantly, while affects are produced by bodies, they are not only contained within them; they are dynamic and move among and between bodies, destabilizing notions of discrete and static subjects (Brennan 2004; Henriques 2010; Manning 2013). While affect is physiological, it has the potential to become disembodied and static when rendered in text. Dance, similarly, can cease to be an event of unfolding experience as it is given a discursive structure. This stasis can result in murky theories and unaddressed questions, particularly surrounding what affect does, and how exactly it moves a body. To this end, I invite readers into the embodied dance experience, and I continually draw attention back to the feeling of kizomba by interspersing narratives of my body dancing throughout.<sup>6</sup> While recognizing that my bodily experiences are different from others', this affectively attentive approach demonstrates how dancing offers opportunities to (re)negotiate bodily tendencies and memories (Fuchs 2012; Massumi 2002), and to develop new capacities to affect and be affected (Latour 2004). These capacities open bodies up to the inter-embodied nature of being, that is, the relationality that shapes social worlds both on and off the dance floor.

## 'Acquiring' Kizz Connection

I straighten my frame and pull up my body to move into the “hug” embrace. I concentrate on feeling the 'intention' of my partner, as teachers say. I try to focus on the energy transmitted through our sternums. My thoughts take me away: Is my position correct? Where should I place my arm? Can they feel the nervousness flowing through my body? My muscles want to pull away and make a slight barrier between our touching. My partner leans in closer and I

drop deeper into our bodies. I move my concentration to their temple against mine, so I can feel the connection. There is an excited and quiet vibration. The DJ starts and the pulsations of the kizomba beat vibrates through my body: feet, legs, knees, hips, belly, spine, ears. It moves the excitement through me: *Oooom ga Gaa ga, Oooom ga Gaa ga*. A thigh muscle twitches to signal for our bodies to pull up together with the rhythm. The long drawn out first beat as we both push off the floor feels like caramel being pulled from the ground. Close your eyes. Relax. Drop. Feel. Their hand presses on my back to signal which way my body should move. I tingle, and my body is on edge from this small bit of contact. They continue guiding me through this small piece of back. My legs drop from my body and I am only my back. I fall deeper into my tingling skin and our connection.

Discussion of “connection” is not simply a discursive fetishization; it is an essential modality for dancing kizomba and a prism of dance floor feeling. The embrace employs much body-to-body connection through touch—chest, bellies, temples, hands, thighs, knees, arms—and requires a heightened sense of kinesthesia and proprioception in order to move with your partner. There are few predictable patterns and the lead has a near-endless repertoire of combinations to draw on. Because of the closeness of the embrace, one cannot rely on visual cues and must be hyper-aware of, and responsive to, their own and their partner’s body to interpret and respond to the most minute changes, anticipations, and hesitations. As a follower, I must be with my partner in a more focused way than in other partner dances I have studied, such as salsa and bachata, for instance. My attention is in our muscles, bones, breath, and skin. Many of us close our eyes to better attune to the marginalized senses—smell, touch, taste, sound, motion—which assist in our kizz connections.

Dancers develop a “felt bodily knowledge” (Sklar 2000, 70). This way of knowing is not solely centered in feeling and enacting correct movements, but, as Parviainen relates, dancers become more “bodily sensitive” to the qualities of movements (Parviainen 2002, 20). The drawn-out feeling of the caramel-like pull of legs in the kizomba step is known precisely this way, as is the way I straighten my back and elongate my neck as I move into the hug embrace with my partner. I am sensitive to where my body is connecting and how the speed at which I place my hand around their neck will affect our dance. This sensitivity helps form connections, but it extends beyond touch and bodily movements, and into the territory of affect as we feel for the smallest of shifts of intensity in our bodies.

Kizz connection is an affectively somatic way of knowing. Bodies connected through kizomba learn to engage with intensities in new ways and develop a greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, those split-second firings of affect that make our bodies move, act, and feel. Latour (2004) argues, in the context of scent, that bodies must learn to be affected, and that certain body parts are “acquired” as they tune in to this realm of experience (Latour 2004, 207). The kizomba body “acquires” sensitive skin, muscles, and veins as blood and hormones rush to respond to sensations. It is a body that feels its reactions in relation with other bodies, deep inside the visceral experience of movement. I had to learn to feel my body in this more sensual way. In the beginning, it was semi-connected, and not yet fully engaged in the movements of affect that rise up. At times, thoughts about my moving body would pull me out of this deeper sensual engagement. After a year of dancing, I was able to drop into my body and attend to the expressions of muscles twitching, the chills on my skin when the perfect intensity builds, the surge of excitement in my belly or the movement of ‘intentions’ through our sternums. This is a more deeply attentive proprioception that registers not only the movements of muscles, skin, and joints, but also ephemeral expressions and their qualities. While affects are pre-cognitive essences, they are nevertheless felt (Massumi 2002). The minutia of intensities working on and through our dancing bodies are registered and stored in our physical knowledge. It is how I know to feel at spots such as the temple or my lower back for an excitement that might reside there and enact a bodily response that will complement the affect of my partner. The visceral sensations that instantiate the responses are not necessarily named or categorized, but they are known—sometimes as tingling skin—and stored in our bodies to be recalled again when creating connections. In this learning to be affected, my body became more “articulate” in its ability to affect and act in response to new differentiations and sensations (Latour 2004, 210). This type of affective communication is paramount for the bodily navigation of kizz connection, particularly given its erotic potential.

## Deeper Kizomba

They take my hand. The connection is there immediately in our fingers as we walk together to find a space. Our bodies remember from before and move into our comfortable hold. I keep my eyes closed and feel for them—the gentleness of their touch, a deep inhalation, a spark that passes through their temple to mine—to gauge the depth of our dance. They subtly walk me through different steps and back towards our corner, where we “went deep”

before. It envelops us. They stop me and draw up in the slowest kizomba step. And again. My back releases my upright posture and the weight of my body rests on their temple. Energy sparks in my core. I move my thigh closer and brush harder against my partner's. Our hips move forward, and I anticipate the brush from our groins. I can FEEL them, and I grind my body there again. The rules from lessons wake up my mind: keep your upper body stiff; "this is not a sexual dance; it's not about THAT." I shouldn't be doing this! But, I fall back into our bodies and we rub up against each other again, slowly and methodically. My skin flushes with the smallest quivers of nervousness, but we continue into the deepest kizomba.

"This is *not* a sexual dance. It is a sensual one," teachers and dancers must officially say. Yet, experiences, movements, and affects leak outside of these neat renderings. I recognize these discussions as ways in which people struggle with how an Angolan dance gets articulated as "sexual," and how invoking "sensuality" helps to express some of the intensities that are felt. But, of course kizomba *can* be sexual. Sensations arise, postures slip, groins brush, and people are moved in ways that do not neatly align within the boundaries of acceptable connections. Any movement practice where people share time, space, and bodies has the potential to invite a multiplicity of bodily feelings, some of which may be erotic. While I cannot speak for other dancers' sensations, and the meanings they draw from them, I have witnessed and felt dances that cross back and forth over the constructed line between sensual and sexual feelings. Indeed, most kizz connections I experience float on this precipice, changing moment-to-moment.

Kizomba connection is primarily a felt experience, and thus it requires us to think through its moments of eroticism outside of strictly representational frameworks that analyze how sexuality operates through discursive spheres of meaning. For Deleuze and Guattari, sexuality is understood as a field of intensities through which it is "transformed from a 'dirty little secret' into a productive energy" (Beckman 2011, 9). This stands in contrast to the ways it has been internalized, relegated to the privacy of the couple and pathologized (Foucault 1978). Deleuze and Guattari use the concept of 'desire' to communicate the productiveness and dynamism of such felt intensities (1983). Desire is not always erotic, although it *can* have a sexual component; this is not, however, created from lack nor is it always oriented toward specific objects. Desire is a free-form affect that initiates movement, change, and connection. It "naturally seeks multiplicity and creation," and establishes relations among bodies, objects, or other desires so as to proliferate its flow (Goodchild 1996, 5). Desire is a bodily experience tied to a whole field of sensations that push and pull bodies to align and move with others on the

dance floor. To desire is not to be drawn towards an object, but “*to be drawn into another world expressed by that object*” (Kerslake 2010, 51). To desire in kizomba is to desire the feeling of connectivity, in whatever form that may take. It is the affective glue of kizz connections.

Thinking through desire in kizomba opens up space to view what is in excess of the issues surrounding sexuality in the adoption of transnational dances. Rather than position kizomba as another example of sexualization, there is much to be explored in the affective corporeality of danced desire. As referenced previously, the corporeal turn in dance tends to bracket out the sensational ephemera of the body and embodiment (Kelly 2014), and research at the intersections of dance and sexuality has, in turn, not fully engaged with the feelings of eroticism (i.e. Hannah 2010).<sup>7</sup> Approaching danced sexuality as a bodily experience—of desiring intensities—offers insight into how eroticism is produced and negotiated through bodily performances on the dance floor. We can attend to the shifting nature of dance floor encounters without drawing a boundary between sexuality and sensuality; kizz connection can be both sensual *and* sexual. The meaning of movements and sensations, as they are brought into consciousness, shift and change throughout the dance. It may begin as a shallow kizz connection, and through a small spark or a sensed memory in the room, shift to a different desiring feeling that engenders a different connection. Importantly, the body is the site where these intensities connect, and where the flows of desire are shaped and negotiated.

Expressions of, and reactions to, desire are part of our affective bodily knowledge and memory (Fuchs 2012). Fuchs states that the body is “the ensemble of organically developed predispositions and capacities to perceive and to act, but also to desire and to communicate. Its experiences, anchored in body memory, spread out and connect with the environment like an invisible network, which relates us to things and to people” (2012, 11). Our bodies enter the dance floor with particular tendencies for how they will desire that are built into a body's past (Massumi 2002). For some people, kizomba might entail a (re)learning of how to connect with others in a deep way. Developing new bodily capacities to affect and be affected, and to feel and move with flows of desire are part of this (re)training. While it is undirected, our bodies learn through desire, and come to remember how to differently connect with people and dance spaces. Our dances, and the depth of kizz connections, become embedded in bodily memories held in the skin, bones, muscles, and organs, and also in our affective and sensational circuitry. Certain sensations might draw us back to a previous experience that influences our dance. Particular spaces, smells, movements or partners might come to encompass an erotic pull or a familiar comfort that is danced back into being. An instant deep kizz connection, fueled by a particular corner of the room or the

faint smell of someone's skin, is brought forth each time our bodies remember. "Body memory does not represent the past but re-enacts it" (Fuchs 2012, 19), and thus we (re)live and (re)produce desires through a sensational bodily remembering.

Given the porousness of kizz connection, and the unknown tendencies and pasts of the bodies we are desiring with, negotiating this expressive unfolding requires astute affective communication. My deep proprioceptive awareness is fully engaged to feel the inner sensations of my body in response to my partner's. Our temples, pressed against each other, is a space I return to in an attempt to enter this realm of attunement; my head is usually buried in the side of their face with a hand on their chest to catch a passing vibe, so as to feel the flow of our desire. This sensational communication is how we slightly adjust our kizomba movements so we can push into or pull away from particular desiring encounters. Of course, we do not always do this correctly, and I have certainly had uncomfortable dances and initiated movements that have made others hesitate. But, importantly, dance is a way that we learn to adapt our bodily enactments of these affective expressivities with others. In so doing, we expand our own capacities to desire comfortably and safely. This type of affective knowledge and memory-building, and the bodily sensitization it requires, has ethicopolitical potentials in that we are exposed to new ways to feel our bodies with others. Our materiality is opened to new modalities as we "acquire" (Latour 2004, 207) a body that is aware of its desiring entanglement with others.

## Becoming Undone

Every gesture before the dance begins is drawn-out and in-line with the rhythms that float in the room. The summer heat washes over tired moving bodies, making for an especially slow and sensuous night. There is a smoothness with which we follow our leads to the floor. The DJ begins, and the sound melts us. I collapse into my partner, close my eyes and tune in. Flickers of excitement in quiet bodies. We feel with each other, and our desires, to create a connection. Our bodies slow down together—simple, repetitive rhythms. A surge of intensity rages up through my feet and into my belly. They feel it too; I can sense it in the way we wait and breathe together. Our sweat soaks our chests. Our bodies respond to our muscles and vibes, moving before a thought actualizes, before it travels to and from the skin. Only response. I am in my partner's chest, breathing with them and taking their rhythm inside me. I am in their hand, which melds into my shoulder. I am in my left arm which wraps around and fuses with the back of their neck. I feel

our belly as the center of our collective. We are becoming undone, drifting deeper and deeper inside each other and those surrounding us as the sounds, smells, tastes, and energy of the room entangle our bodies. I can feel the buzz of others around us. We feed off it in our small piece of the dance floor.

Social assemblages are formed through desire, which Bonta and Protevi refer to as “the material process of connection, registration, and enjoyment of flows of matter and energy coursing through bodies in networks of production in all registers, be they geologic, organic, or social” (2004, 76). Desire connects all dancing bodies in the space. It does not only draw us toward different depths of encounters with a dance partner but brings forth a dancing collective through which we are offered opportunities to (re)imagine self and other. People seem to touch in specific ways on certain nights in the dark lounges of socials. The DJ feels the crowd and creates mixes that encourage particular intensities and qualities of movement, which work to generate the dance space (McCormack 2014); together we build the feeling of the atmosphere (Brennan 2004). Sensing and responding with the flows of desire and movements in the room allows one to experience the self as part of a larger formation in which bodies, affects, and space are co-constitutive, unstable, in-flux, and connected. We become what Henriques (2010) refers to as “an entirely corporeal, but at the same time *collective* subject” (2010, 67). Sounds, vibrations, and desiring intensities extend beyond the individual and into the atmosphere, creating larger entities of connected kizomba dancers. I often feel for others around me and can sense how deeply they are in their connections, which influences my own. In these sensual entanglements, we glimpse the instability and undoing of our bodies as we become an “open, fluid and multiple whole” (Henriques 2010, 67).

Manning (2006) argues that moving with others showcases the relational nature of being. She states, “Sensing bodies in movement are not individual bodies; their individuations are always collective” (2006, xviii). Becoming attuned to, and feeling with, kizomba's desire opens us to the relationality through which bodies and subjects emerge as a “one” that is also a “many,” that is, a body that is always “more-than its taking-form” (Manning 2013, 19). Manning states, that “the body cannot be seen as that which holds together across space and time in a kind of beyondness of the event. Body *is* event, known as such only in the collusions of a process shifting” (2013, 18). In dance, as we take each other in—through sounds, vibrations, energies, sweat, smells, tastes, touches—we disrupt our-selves and feel the wider collective through which we eventfully emerge (Manning 2006, 2013). In some dances, I can feel not only a sense of being “in” a particular part of my body, as I concentrate on feeling sensations there, but also as being “in” my partner's body, or as a small node through which desire moves in the dance floor collectivity. This is not to say that a self or a discrete body disappears, but rather,

that the process of forming and reforming is registered. In kizz connections, we disrupt Eurocentric constructions of the person as a self-contained and individual entity, and are offered opportunities to feel our inter-embodiment, that is, the relational nature of our being-in-the-world.

Inter-embodiment is not a utopian revelation of shared subjectivities or experience (Ahmed and Stacy 2001). It is also a way of understanding differentiation as diverse bodies emerge in relations of power and in assemblages that categorize in particular ways. Manning employs touch in tango dance to showcase this fraught relationality and its ethicopolitical potentials. She contends that “Touch is an ethical discourse” (2006, 9); bodies reach toward each other “each time challenging and perhaps deforming the body-politic, questioning the boundaries of what it means to touch and be touched, to live together, to live apart, to belong, to communicate, to exclude” (2006, 9). Like the touching of skin in dance, shared affects and expressivities of desire are forms of reaching toward and touching. Each kizz connection offers moments to ponder and remember—through our bodies—our mutual emergences and movements in different spaces. Dancing kizomba is a reminder not of an intertwining equality, but rather, that we are not “structurally equivalent...but in a relation of asymmetry and potential violence” (Manning 2006, 48). Connecting through desire, thus, entails responsibility.

## Desiring Potentials

In kizomba, desire connects us across spectrums of social difference. Dance socials have an incredibly diverse collective—in terms of race, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and nationality—and we are given opportunities to reimagine the self and the social (Hamera 2007). What is important here, and what many critical studies of social dance gloss over, is that dance floors are spaces in which people come together across various categorizations to practice sensing, responding and emerging *with* each other. Hamera posits that dance communities foster 'queer intimacies' for the ways in which they bring diverse groups of people, who may not otherwise interact, into contact and conversation (2007). Technique functions as the “social and aesthetic bedrock” through which they engage (Hamera 2007, 18). Technique in kizomba extends beyond movement and posture, in that we develop capacities to desire and connect together in ways that might be unimaginable in other social realms. Ideologies persist within official kizomba

technique to police how our bodies should engage, feel, and align. Attempts are made to orient desire and control its proliferation. Technique, however, is molded to stretch these protocols of sociality and to manifest the affective intensities and connections of desire we produce. We use the “diversions and reappropriations [that] hide in the light of official syllabi, training regimens, and spectatorial practice, redeploying technique in service of relationships and fantasies that ideal, strategic visions of the body could not, or would not, condone” (Hamera 2007, 22). Desire is delinked from the individual on the social dance floor; it circulates in the room changing and moving our bodies, allowing us to responsibly shape our dances and the collective experience. Given how this knowledge becomes embodied, we must consider how these experiences and new capacities might be more than fleeting moments of affective attunement and negotiation, but that they may be productive and generative in social sites and spaces beyond the dance floor. How might “learning to be affected” (Latour 2004) through dance (re)shape practices and interactions in the everyday eventfulness of being with others? How might moving and desiring with others expand our embodied knowledges, and thus, our capacities to be with others in more responsible and meaningful ways?

Reading kizomba through a deeper bodily engagement does not make politically problematic elements disappear. What this approach demonstrates, however, is that the act of dancing might be a transformative experience that can destabilize normalizing notions surrounding sexuality, bodies, and social difference. Attending to the body's deeper corporeality—one that includes the affective sensations of movement—provides insight into the different ways that people relate, interact, socialize, and encounter each other through bodily performances. At each dance social, we come together to share affects, bodies, fluids, touch, hormones, movement, and rhythmic musical vibrations; we take each other in and we push the boundaries of what it means to be self/other, connected, sensual, and sexual. These elements of dance experience are what leak outside of examples. Through this excess, the transnational dance floor, and the bodies that coproduce its space, become sites of potential for the production of alternative socialities that are brought forth through shared desires, and affectively-attuned knowledges and memories.

## Endnotes

1. Oyebade (2007) notes that there are debates about whether kizomba is originally from Angola or Cape Verde, but it is widely referred to as Angolan in the dance scene.

2. In the Netherlands, Belijaar notes that kizomba has become an overarching term for many styles of music such as the slower Cape Verdean cabo-love, cabo-zouk, ghettozouk (2016, 41). This parallels the descriptions in the scene I have danced in.

3. All quotes that are not cited are stock phrases I have learned at public lessons, socials and in

online forums.

4. The male-female formation which we see in the majority of social dances is a colonial import to West Africa, where historically there was a preference for separate-sex or non-partnered dancing (McMains 2006, 116).
5. I recognize that the experience of my body doing kizomba will be different from others and do not purport to speak on behalf of all dancers' bodily experiences and the meanings they garner from them.
6. I am inspired by Stewart's (2007) approach in *Ordinary Affects*, in which she relates the textures of the everyday through combining storytelling, critical analysis, and observation.
7. Two scholars do briefly acknowledge sexuality as a felt experience that can be enhanced by movement in the context of club cultures (see Jackson 2004 & Tan 2013).

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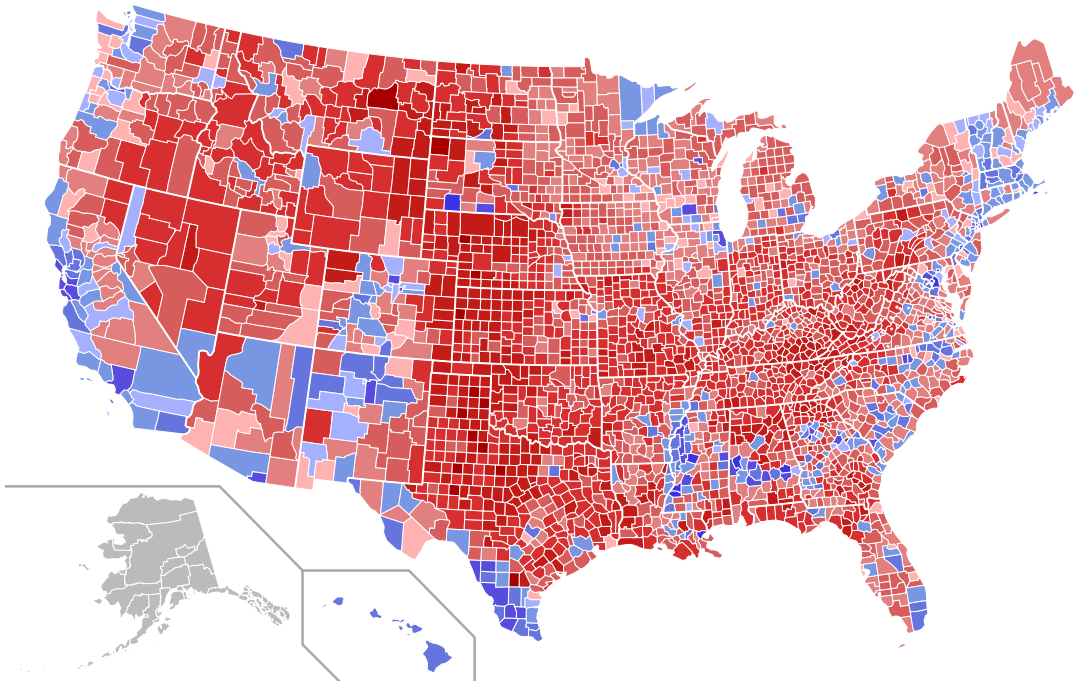
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# Affective Politics: Two Scenes



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ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

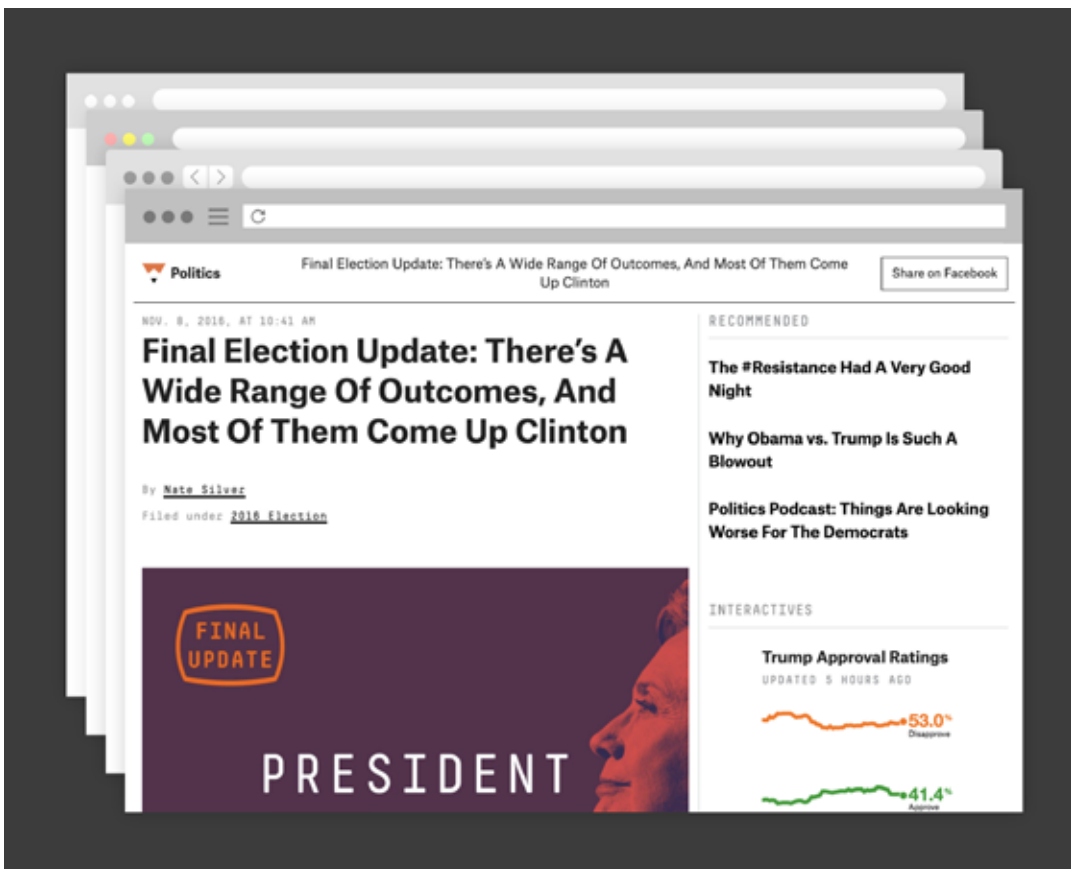


## Algorithmic Citizens

### “Final Election Update: There’s A Wide Range of Outcomes, and Most of Them Come Up Clinton.”

Nate Silver, November 8, 2016, 10:41am, fivethirtyeight.com

Early November, 2016. Stats multiply. CBS News reports a close race: 48–43%, with Clinton barely leading, but 55% say she’s better qualified, 58% says she’s got a better temperament. That’s not the whole story, though. She’s up by 7 or 8 points on “empathy and moral character,” but Trump’s winning by 4 on honesty (Langer 2016). Charts and tables and maps parse the candidates and the country in every imaginable way: ratios of working-class white to Hispanic voters, state-by-state voting histories, polls-only forecasts, polls-plus forecasts with margins-of-error,



changes in undecided voters over time. Data points blur across the screen, the red and blue and purple maps chop the country up: counties, electoral votes, demographics, psychographics. We're meant to see something in all of this.

**“Programmed visions...extrapolate the future—or, more precisely, a future—based on the past.”**

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, November 8, 2016

Election night. Fear and anger and tears are streaming. As the results roll in, emotions roll over our screens. America, WTF. I bet Hillary is in fucking tears. I'd love to see that. Tonight, we see hate. White, rural, patriarchal, straight hate. I'm gonna give the peace-loving, butthurt liberals participation trophies. That'll make 'em feel better. Don't underestimate the foolish idiocy of angry white Christians. By the end of day one, a few folks have had enough. Stop complaining, they post. We're hiding your gripes from our feeds. Bring back your boring kid pics, your humblebrags about workouts and calories burnt, your food photos, your pets. Make Facebook cute again. People like these entreaties. They post lots of pictures of cats.

#### Online Attention

Mouseover for Online Attention Data



Social sharing infographic from MIT Press' page for Chun's *Programmed Visions*

**“Let our formulas find your soul.”**

Vienna Tang, The Hymn of Axiom

Suddenly, our small town is on the national news. We're not used to this, this recognition. It's the Rust Belt that's done it, we're told, and we live in one of those long-blue counties that's turned red. NPR, CBS, and *The New York Times* come knocking. Middle-age white men tell earnest reporters about lost jobs, retraining programs, service-sector work, failing schools, broken promises. Frustrated with this bad publicity, the local tourism agency launches a hashtag campaign, and social media erupt with photos of the vibrant sunsets that local lore calls the best in the world (even better than Hawaii!). A photographer adds his bit, circulating

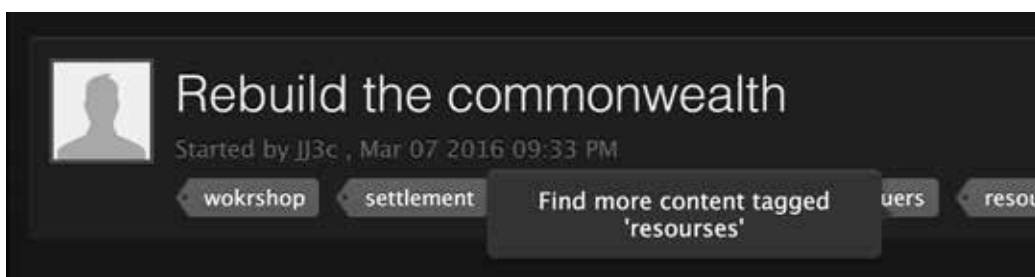
his hometown pride and photographic chops in a triumphant montage of images and videos of work, play, sports, and nature throughout the area. On a new “Raise our town’s self esteem” Facebook page, members share events and news: community board game night, calls for volunteers to distribute Thanksgiving turkeys, photos of public art projects, community wellness classes. Meantime, it turns out Cambridge Analytica was right there on our screens all along, harvesting our credit card histories, social media updates, retail loyalty cards, Facebook surveys and more. Feeding that data back to us in slickly crafted and shrewdly distributed campaign messages. While it seems like the big data firms know us better than we know ourselves, it’s all so opaque. Still, a few ‘alternative facts’ emerge here and there. Much of Trump’s win appears to have stemmed from white middle- and upper-class women, none of whom were featured on those national news stories. And while our county went red, the city, home to 10,000 refugees and 20,000 immigrants, voted for Clinton in every single one of its districts.

The screenshot shows a search interface with a navigation bar at the top containing links for 'All', 'Videos', 'News', 'Shopping', 'Images', 'More', 'Settings', and 'Tools'. Below the navigation bar, it indicates 'About 39,100 results (0.49 seconds)'. The main content area features a search result for the book 'We Are Data: Algorithms and The Making of Our Digital Selves' by John Cheney-Lippold, published in 2017. The result includes the book's title in purple, its ISBN link in green, the author's name, and a snippet of the book's description: '20 The complexity of our individual histories cannot be losslessly translated into a neat, digital format. Likewise, our selfassessments come from layers upon ...'.

The badness continues. Furious dispatches from our town detail racist, sexist, and homophobic encounters. There is certainly plenty of raw material to work with. Confederate flags. Aggressive Trump signs covered in barbed wire and protected by security cameras. Disgusted friends document bumper sticker politics: pickup truck tailgates blaring “Lock Her Up!,” minivans plastered with Trump slogans and “Trump that Bitch!” dot our screens. Some commenters rage at the imagined drivers: ‘Why should we even try to understand the racist, sexist, homophobic, self-righteous jerks who feel comfortable enough to drive around town launching these personal attacks?’ Others mock: ‘Joke’s on the white middle-aged woman who probably drives that van. Stupid people are stupid. I bet she’s a big bitch too.’ When politics are personal, everything is clear and sharp and going nowhere.

## Community Warriors

November 8, 2016. It's election night, and people are gathered at the local bar to support a comrade. He actually did it. Raised money from strangers. Made a logo. Printed yard signs. Knocked on doors. Debated a zombie capitalist. Fielded questions again and again, each time re-tuning the answer, trying to make it land. And now here we are. Fifty or sixty of us, wearing our purple and gold t-shirts with the slogan: 'Rebuild the Commonwealth.' It's a rainy and cold night, but we've come here to be together, eating spinach dip and cheese plates provided by the place, watching the national election on television, checking our laptops for local results. Everybody knows he doesn't have a chance: the district has been perfectly constructed to make sure of it. Yet. It feels like he has a chance. In the



air. In the way people move. The place is bouncy with possibility. So many of us have canvassed for him, given money, time, hope. Then the numbers start to come in. Turns out there really was no chance. Not in hell. You must understand: our town has been grumbly for a long time. Trump happened here decades ago, after all. Of course, some are still attached to the fantasy he peddles. That doesn't matter, though. Not really. Most people are on one page. Fix this shit. However. Whatever. We aren't picky. Our comrades sense the collective desperation. They are doing, fixing. Monthly neighborhood clean-ups. Pop-up parties in abandoned public parks feature all the local community services, firetrucks, churches, free pizza and ice cream, games, and music. A DIY youth center involves kids in making music, growing gardens, creating art and theater. Just come and help. It doesn't matter who you are. One thousand people showed up for a free Pumpkin Party at the local automotive shop. They painted pumpkins and raced them in the Pumpkin Derby, ate popcorn, went on hayrides, made balloon animals. The local newspaper reports that this was all in the name of making community, reclaiming public space, finding common ground. Something is happening. Energy is everywhere, focused and unfocused all at once. What are we doing? Who are we all together?

**“Mixed-up times are overflowing with both pain and joy . . . with unnecessary killing. . . . but also with necessary resurgence”**

Donna Haraway

A decade ago, a comrade couldn't wait to get out of here. Manufacturing jobs were drying up, the town was dying, and things at home were a dead end. Fleeing was the only choice. But, eventually, he was drawn back. Tempted to get tangled “in the middle of all the trouble,” he and his wife dreamed of opening a coffee shop, something our town has been clamoring for for years now. Trouble, of course, isn't easy. Walmart got a big tax break to set up shop here decades ago while our comrade couldn't even get \$25,000 from a local bank that is supposedly invested in community. So we rolled up our sleeves, raised money online, donated furniture and time cleaning, painting, decorating to open up a “10k cafe.” And here we are. Strumming guitars. Waiting for our coffee. Chatting with one another about what else needs to be fixed.

**“The knowledge of what will help you survive and thrive and what won't, isn't given in advance, or not with any certainty.”**

Ben Highmore

A Facebook message pops up for “community warriors.” We get things done. Today the task is simple. A friend needs help. He's committed his living labor to keeping the local main street trash-free, a commitment to community and his own well-being. He needs a place to store his cleaning supplies. A couple of clicks and problem solved. We secure a closet in the parking garage, make sure our comrade has unlimited access. Without a lot of official politicking, we have managed to take over many public spaces. Some people probably hate it; they are quiet though, so maybe they don't even exist. It definitely feels like most people appreciate our efforts. After all, here we're so over liberalism and its unreliable promises of the good life. In fact, we're united against it, albeit in a disunited way. When politics are community, future horizons are hard to pin down. But we keep moving anyway.

“The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.”

Mark Fisher

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*George Segal's Holocaust Memorial at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, Eekim, 2014*  
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# Traversing Sites of Affective Immersion



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This paper analyzes diverse moments of affective immersion, traversing the intergenerational legacies of the Holocaust, affective mobilization of Bangladeshi sweatshop laborers, and the conversations held in an undergraduate Serial Killers and Homicide course. What draws each of these moments together is the shared space of affect. The author synthesizes various understandings of affect and analyzes the ways in which affect theory bridges the mostly inarticulate places of memory, trauma, and imbibed violence.

## KEYWORDS

memory, intergenerational trauma, affective mobilization, pedagogy

Jiko looked out across the ocean to where the water met the sky.

A wave is born from the deep conditions of the ocean,” she said. “A person is born from the deep conditions of the world.

A person pokes up from the world and rolls along like a wave. Until it's time to sink down again. Up, down. Person, wave.”

—Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2017, 194)

Welcome. Before you are a set of meditations upon a few affective encounters that I have been moved to understand. Through each analysis we—you the reader and me the author, together now, for this—can catch a glimpse into the realms of the felt. The terrains today are the mostly inarticulate places of memory, affective listening, and imbibed violence.

Of interest in this article will be the ways in which we encounter affect within disparate spaces: as inheritance, and within memories, congregations, bodies, classrooms, and our very sociality. Affect has varying meanings and encompasses somewhat diverging ideas. In our definitions of affect we will focus firstly on affect's corporeality, moving then to its intersubjectivity, and, lastly, to how it can be mobilized socially and politically. Each of these definitions mirror the sites that we will then traverse. Site I is an examination of affect as part of the intergenerational legacy of the Jewish people. In this we will explore the affect that resides in the body and in inheritance. Site II is an analysis of a convening between Aklima Khanama, a Rana Plaza survivor, and the college students who hear her story. This allows us to examine how affect is shared and negotiated between people when trauma is spoken and a response is expected. And lastly, in Site III, we explore a class entitled “Homocide and Serial Killers” offered at a university, where we consider how affect can be a powerful tool if intentionally integrated into classrooms and pedagogy.

While you might seek guidance for each immersion, Immersion here means not just reading for affective moments, but experiencing the affective moments as much as you can allow yourself to. Let it surround you, breathe yourself into the

moment, and then see what is there for you. Addressing the affective moments I offer demands an immersion that can feel like drowning—that leaves you breathless and confused, frustrated yet unguarded, and present to what Kathleen Stewart describes as the “spreading lines of resonance and connection that become possible” (2007, 4). I hope the immersion will elicit in you an alertness to that which is subtle, unsaid yet somehow, also, “there.”

## Affect is

For the sake of cohesion and in an attempt to provide conceptual moorings, we will begin with definitions. In the scope of this article, one cannot encompass the immense literature on affect—a theory that has captured the interests of fields as diverse as cultural studies, communication, media studies, gender and sexuality studies, sociology, psychology, cultural geography, anthropology, neuroscience, cognitive science, philosophy, politics and so on—and in this, no one can quite agree what it is. There is not a single, unified “theory of affect”, as Seigworth and Gregg call attention to, but many “swerves and knottings” (2010, 5). Theories can overlap, compete, or narrowly elucidate finer and finer points. For our purposes we are focusing on how affect is corporeally experienced, how it is shared, and how it can be mobilized.

Brian Massumi, one of the most influential contemporary theorists of affect, offered the description that formed my first understanding of affect. Massumi states that affect is a “transpersonal capacity which a body has to be affected and to affect” (1995, 28). For Massumi, who generally embraces Spinozan-Deleuzian ideas about affect, affect is a visceral, raw pre-feeling, the shock that is felt before the electric chair has been turned on, a sense of pain before the feeling of pain. Affect, here, is a manifestation of the body's reaction to information in its environment. It is non-cognitive and unintentional, consisting of corporeal processes or states; *intensities* that influence thinking and judgments but are also separate from these. If emotions are considered subjective and signifying, affects here are unconscious intensities that are almost unprocessed but nonetheless affect us (27). Operating under a similar definition of affect, Nigel Thrift writes that, “individuals are generally understood as effects of the events to which their body parts (broadly understood) respond and in which they participate” (2004, 60).

For others, affect is not necessarily a pre-feeling, but it is that which is felt, shared, and intuited. Teresa Brennan, in *The Transmission of Affect*, draws upon biology to argue that the emotions and energies of one person or group can be absorbed

by, or can enter directly into, another by way of a physiological shift that accompanies a judgment. These affects have the capacity to energetically enhance or deplete another affect (Brennan 2004, 6). Affect can be transmitted—sometimes biochemically, sometimes in thoughts—because “our energies are not exclusively ours” (6) and we are “not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the 'individual' and the 'environment'” (5). To Brennan, affect is continuously flowing between bodies, which allows affect to be shared. Social interaction and the sharing of affect shapes our anatomical makeup, alters our very biology (74). Seigworth and Gregg emphasize that attending to affect allows a subtler awareness of our relationality, because affect is something that “arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relations as well as the passages (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves” (2010, 1). If emotion is likened to an object possessed by a subject, affect would be that which defies possession, because affect does not reside solely in one subject, body, or sign. It is that which is between us, that which we know about in messy, and sometimes muted ways. In this way, affect interrupts the Western conception of ourselves as discrete beings, isolated, and impervious.

For our impending immersion into sites of affect, I shall draw upon descriptions of affect that focus not just on affect's corporeality and intersubjectivity, but on how it is mobilized socially and politically. It is both something done unto you and something you can create. One can harness the potential of affect without ever naming it as such. Sara Ahmed writes that affects are not autonomous, but instead, “work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation” (2004 a, 120). National and collective discourses are shaped by emotion, and it is this that sustains and preserves the link between ideas, values, and objects, such as how “Arab, Muslim, Middle East” following 9/11 was affectively linked by the emotion of fear of the “terrorist” (2010). Even if it is modified by 'could be' or 'potentially' or 'found to not be,' the affective link is there and remains there, and was used effectively to rally popular support for entering into the 'War on Terror.' Dian Million considers affect an intensely potent force, separate from emotion. Emotions are

simply “individual expression, affect is the larger charged sociality of emotions, traces of a vitality being prior to and not reducible to thought. ... Affect eludes, present before and beyond any singular consciousness. Affect has transformative power wherein building intensities electrifies moments of potential” (2013, 49).

These definitions give you a sense of the layered terrain that we will be walking through in this article, and to outline a bit of the process by which I have come to my own definition of affect. It is that moment of pause when you enter a room and get a sense of tension (Brennan 2004). It is the look that passes between friends or between strangers, where, still silent, you suddenly understand something about them. It is your stomach tightening, your heart racing, and it is, equally, a feeling of looseness in your limbs when your body knows itself to be safe. I know it as that feeling on my chest, that heaviness of a heart cracking open, pushing through. What we have so far then is a sense of affect as an intensity, affect as shared, received and transferred, and, although it is often divorced from language or interpretation, or intent, it nonetheless potent and, importantly, malleable. There exists a sociality of emotion (Ahmed 2010) – affect is not solely internal, nor does it exist externally only when expressed. It is the experience of the invisible (though sometimes perceivable) space that emanates through, between, and of the material world. Affect often exists prior to and beyond words; it inhabits liminal spaces between words; it inhabits liminal spaces between words and their definitions, between emotions and feltness, and between you and me. And when manipulated, affect can be deployed politically to mobilize warfare or propagate hate (Ahmed 2004). But what the idea of affect ultimately allows us to see is that we are inherently constitutive, that we share certain states of being, and that our subjectivities and perceptions are deeply influenced on subtle levels by one another's affective state. Ahmed writes that in order to study emotion one “begins with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near” (2010, 30). And so together, let's walk through some moments and memories, to sites of affect.

## Site 1

### Based upon, living with, building through

On Pesach, Jewish people tell a story of liberation from slavery. As we narrate it, we oscillate in voice and tense and location—at once telling a story that is somewhere between Jewish history and Jewish mythology. Simultaneously, Jews assert that it is our personal story, our personal history. We are commanded to tell the story of Passover as though we ourselves were enslaved in Egypt, imagining our bodies subject to whip and lash, and our babies to infanticide. It is I who broke

the chains that gripped me, I who left Pharaoh and his army to drown in the convulsing Red Sea. It is us, we recite each Passover, who crossed the Sinai desert into freedom, who felt the desert wind burn our faces as we turned, together, toward our freedom. The slavery is mine and it is ours, and the freedom, too, is mine and it is ours.

This is a curious habit of the Jewish people, characteristic of how we integrate the many histories of Jewish persecution into a legacy we come to inherit and then transmit. These stories that we did not experience become the words and deeds and moments by which we frame ourselves. When we claim the stories of our ancestors as our own individual stories, we collapse the past and reject linear, self-centered time. Thus, as a Jew, the story of Exodus is my story, and as a Jew, the story of the Holocaust is my story. Felman and Laub contend that the Holocaust “is an event without a witness” (1992, xvii), because the Nazis enveloped their Jewish victims in delusions as to what was actually happening, because they destroyed the evidence of their genocide, and crucially, because the world does not have the conceptual framework with which to make sense of the enormity of the Nazi crimes. The after-shocks of this historical trauma, as it registers in the minds of the survivors and those who struggle to hear their testimony, is a “crises of witnessing” whereby true testimony becomes almost impossible when the Nazis destroyed the possibility of a “community of seeing” (Felman and Laub, 211). Grace Cho, in *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* (2008), suggests that trauma can be distributed through a whole cultural diaspora trans-subjectively, through an unsaid “haunting,” the circulation of what cannot be assimilated (2008, 11). According to Gordon, the difference between trauma and haunting is that “haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something to be done” (1997, xvi). Modern Jews are entreated not just to reenact these histories, but also the affect of the histories. If affect is an “impingement” as Seigworth and Gregg (2010) tells us, that resonates across time, then affect is also the *intent* of the telling of trauma. In other words, the intent of the transmission of these stories is the affect, the impact and the intrusion of these stories into the subconscious of those inheriting them. In such a way, it is affect that is carried within, and carried through generations. Affect helps us become our own witnesses.

And it is for this reason, for this momentum created by the affect, that the Jewish tradition entreats us to place ourselves in these moments, to be the Jewish people in the desert, and be the victim killed in the Holocaust. Indeed, the *Haggadah*

*HaShoah* (the telling of the story of Exodus), takes the commemoration a step further, urging us to recite together on Pesach: “We couldn't believe it; we didn't want to believe the evil end the Nazis had in store for us...The Nazis fed our hopes with lies and deception. Their program was called 'Resettlement to the East' as we were packed into cattle cars. Finally, we were told to strip for 'delousing.' We waited for water from the showerheads, but no water came. It was gas—farm pesticide Zyklon B gas—gas that ended our lives” (Adelson 2005,1). It is us who went through Egypt—do you feel the sun burning your cheeks? And it is us who entered the cattle car, never to return home. Do you feel the air tightening as the doors close around us?

It is rare to find a Jewish American family that can claim to be untouched by the Holocaust. We also cannot. My great-grandfather, that is, my mother's grandfather, came to the US when he sensed hostility in the air at home. He was born in a *shtetl* in a place that no longer exists, somewhere we now know only vaguely as the fickle border between Russia and Poland. He immigrated to New York in the early 1920s, well before the Holocaust. He worked as a tailor and struggled to bring his family to the United States while raising my grandmother and her siblings. He had heard his village was raided; he had heard rumors that Jews were their targets. He struggled to get his siblings and cousins and parents out, to obtain all the visas (those magic documents that allow mobility and thus security), but he also never imagined that it would all move so quickly or that his people would meet such an efficient end. He did not succeed in saving his family. When my great-grandfather learned that his entire family—every single member—was murdered in the Holocaust, he had a heart attack, right then, right at that very moment. He died instantly, this great-grandfather of mine. The telegraph, I imagine, fell limply from his hands.

When other children marveled at the strangeness of their existence and wondered why they were brought into this world, I never needed to speculate. My parents, from before I can consciously remember, told me that the reason I exist is because of the Holocaust. I knew this before I knew what it meant, before that word would evoke piles of naked bodies strewn across rooms and the eyes of skeletal men and women, their features protruding and their skin waxen—and yet, I was told, it was for them that I was born. You see, my mother explained to me that in planning our family, my parents decided that they wanted three children. My brother and sister, both elder to me, would be like my parents in body, and perhaps in mission, when my parents left this world. And I, the youngest, was brought to earth to replace a Jewish person murdered in the Holocaust. That was always the word she used to describe the reason that I am here—that I “replace” them. “So that the Jewish people continue,” she said, “so that the Holocaust will never be

forgotten.” These two things are always in tandem. Aurora Levins Morales writes about how we hold our ancestors' past within our bodies, that their histories we “take in like heavy metals, to reside in the slow moving, fatty tissues of our sense of self” (2013, 41). If that is so, does the one I replace also move within me? Their ill fate or the potential their life once held?

I find I cannot remember a time when I did not know about the Holocaust, nor can I remember learning about it for the first time. For me the world always held the specter of the Holocaust victim, and humans always had the capacity for genocide, for determined and inventive and efficient evil. Searching for recognition, searching affectively for the faces and personalities of the Holocaust specters (Gordon 1997), I took it upon myself as a child—or did my parents encourage it?—to consume everything I could find on the Holocaust. My favorite books were first person narratives. Anne Frank, of course, became an intimate friend; but so too were the stories of *Rebecca's Diary*, her musings on the fences, and oh, that moment when Elie Wiesel gave up on God and refused to observe *Yom Kippur*. Primo Levi, I felt, should only be read if hungry.

When I was around 4 or 5 my favorite book was *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm* by David Adler (1987), a children's book that my mother uses to introduce 4<sup>th</sup> grade Jewish students to the Holocaust. It tells the story from the point of view of a granddaughter who notices strange markings on her grandfather's arm while he washes dishes. Normally, her grandfather wears long sleeve shirts— always, in fact, he has his arms covered. She asks him what those strange numbers are, and he hesitates. He has a conversation with her mother, and his daughter tells him, “It's time you told her.” And so, he sits his granddaughter on his lap. He speaks softly. Describes a time before Adolf Hitler, a time when he played with his sisters and brothers and friends in the fields around his village, all sunlight and laughter. He then describes the changes that started once Hitler started speaking: the loss of jobs and rights, the synagogues destroyed, the beatings in the street. He talks about being rounded up, nearly suffocating in the cattle cars, starved and made to labor in the camps. How he became a number, how his whole family, all his friends, didn't leave those camps alive. The granddaughter holds his hand while he talks and they both have tears in their eyes. After he finishes speaking they sit in silence. In the end of the book she urges him not to hide the numbers, not to be ashamed because he had done nothing wrong: “Grandpa hugged me. Then he looked at me and smiled. He wiped his tears and said, 'Let's take care of those dishes now.'”

I wonder now why I found that particular telling of the Holocaust so compelling. Perhaps it was because the granddaughter's position, her role in the intergenerational transmission of trauma and affect was so clear. She was there to receive, believe, and comfort. Tell him not to be ashamed and to imply that she will keep his story now. Because it is her story too. The affective transmission was complete. She held him, she held all of them. In reading all these Holocaust texts so young, I suppose I was trying to live by the indictment of all the survivor-writers: do *not* forget this "because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices" (Wiesel 1986, 118).

Primo Levi, a survivor of the Holocaust, describes a dream he had while imprisoned. He is with his sister and with friends, surrounded by people. They are all listening to him and he is telling the story of Auschwitz, the hunger and the lice and the Kapo who beat him. He writes that in this dream he feels an intense pleasure "physical, inexpressible" (1969, 60). He is glad to be finally home and among some many friendly people, and able to tell them his experiences. And yet, slowly, he notices that his listeners are not listening to him at all, they are indifferent to his story, and they act as though he is not there. His sister, he writes, looks up at him and goes away without a word. With this dream, he describes that "a desolating grief is now born in me, like certain barely remembered pains of one's early infancy....my dream stands in front of me, still warm, and although I am awake I am still full of its anguish: and then I remember that it is not a haphazard dream, but that I have dreamed it not once but many times since I arrived here, with hardly any variations of environment or details. I am now awake and I remember that I have recounted it to Alberto and that he confided to me, to my amazement, that it is also his dream and the dream of many others, perhaps of everyone" (60).

It is us who haunt him. The idea that he will be unheard—that we will not hear him—is what keeps him up at night while confined. Leah Gilmore asks, "Where does harm done in the past end? The power of trauma to outlast the duration of its infliction is crucial to the sense of wounding that makes the term so resonant. For example, as a historical event the Holocaust is over, *but its power to harm is not*" (2001, 29). Its power to harm is not over. Marianne Hirsch argues that we can never stop mourning the Holocaust, because of the "endlessness of the tale" (1992,23) and the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust destruction. This is a profound idea—that we cannot stop mourning because we cannot fully understand why it happened. So, the children of Holocaust survivors—and, I would extend, most post-Holocaust Jews—live in the shadow of loss and with unbearable memory. Hirsch calls this process post-memory and argues that post-memory

is a constitutive force in the makeup of children of the survivors. It is they who must block the work of forgetting, whose life is dominated by memories that are not their own and who live with “a fragility, a woundedness that defies all healing” (25) because all they know is fragments of a history that they cannot take in. For us then, there is only ambivalence. We live within inherited frames of remembrance, seeking communities of memory (Owen 2010). And yet the imperative therein is not just to remember, but it is to watch, to be wary, to seek, and to transform. Because we hope, deeply, for Maya Angelou's missive: “history, despite its wrenching pain/ Cannot be un-lived, and if faced/ With courage, need not be lived again.” (Angelou 1993). Not by us and not by anyone.

## Site II

### Now you hear me

There is a tightness in her face as she prepares to tell us her story, and when she speaks she looks at a space above our heads. The translator watches her closely, then speaks for us her quiet words. She doesn't look at the translator but watches us as we listen.

She is sitting on a raised platform with a bottle of water next to her, wearing a *kamise* of every color. Her audience is nearly 150 college students; the room is crowded with people who fill the chairs and line the walls. Her translator says these words:

“My name is Aklima Khanama and I am 20 years old. I started working at the garment factory when I was 14...I began working at Rana Plaza on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013.” Her father was ill, she explains, so she started working to support her parents and four siblings. “We made clothes for Wal-Mart and Children's Place. Managers would say “This is for Wal-Mart, you need to make it beautiful.”

“If I spent too long in the bathroom, they would pull my hair, kick me off the stool, call me 'whore' or say 'your parents are children of pigs' or many other kinds of bad language.” The translator pauses, but only briefly. “My normal workday was from 8am to midnight. Sometimes they kept us there until 2am or 3am. I worked 7 days a week. The whole time January 3<sup>rd</sup> to April 24<sup>th</sup>, I was never given a single day off.”

April 24<sup>th</sup> hangs in the air. The student next to me shifts in his seat. I feel nervous for Aklima. I suddenly don't want her to speak. I feel as though she'll hurt herself by telling us this story, and I find that I'm holding my breath, thinking, "it's ok, you don't have to tell us. I believe you anyway. It was only a year ago; it's too soon to tell us. You don't have to." She continues, and her voice is flat, her eyes hovering above the audience as she speaks, and, again, she watches us closely as we listen to the translation of her words, "On the morning of April 24<sup>th</sup>, the management forced us into the factory using physical violence and said that there was a shipment of 24,000 pieces that needed to go out. People had noticed cracks in the wall the day before, so we went home early, but the 24<sup>th</sup> they—they said we would be fired and not paid for a month if we couldn't meet the target. They forced us back inside. Soon after we started working, the power, it went out. Then the generator went on."

Aklima looks at the translator, who then continues, with the same bloodless tone. "Moments later the building collapsed. A machine fell on top of me. I was trapped under it. A man next to me died immediately. A . . . a . . . beam went through him. I saw it. The roof, then the machines, it fell on me . . . I was stuck under the machine for 12 hours until they found me. I waited for them. I had a head injury, my chest hurt, my hip hurt, my ankle hurt. I can't work now." But she survived, 1,134 people did not.

Aklima takes a breath. She looks at us, and then she speaks to us in English, directly, without the translator. Her voice still without inflection. "Now you hear my story, are you going to help me?"

The room is silent. Collectively waiting, it seems. She waits too. The activist from Bangladesh who will speak after her, leans over and whispers something in her ear.

Another minute—could it have been two?—in that terrible silence. Then she asks again, with the same words, "Now you hear my story, are you going to help me?"

There is a shuffle, a nervous laugh from the girl next to me, and then someone says "Yes" weakly and the students begin to clap, nodding and saying, "Yes. Yes!" She watches us and is silent. Does she see in the sea of students before her the many, many garments that she stitched together, joining sleeve to torso, leg to waist? Were other students unsettled by her gaze? Was she unsettled by ours? Was affect what was shared in that space between us? Was that why I suddenly felt so uncomfortable for Aklima, a corporeal reaction to her sharing a trauma

that is both intimate and political? Considering our above definitions, it is exactly affect that was transmitted and received then, flowing inside that room, inside those shifting in discomfort, inside her disquieting gaze. Affect is what fills that *space-between* that is generated by the sharing of trauma, that which creates subtle and nonverbal felt links between the sharer and the receiver.

Now, the question becomes: If we are all sharing a “something” in that room, can affect mobilize us to “help” Aklima as she so directly asks? Aklima has come to Arizona State University from Bangladesh through the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), as part of the national “End Deathtraps” workers' tour, which urges universities to divest from apparel companies that refuse to sign the Bangladesh Safety Accord (BSA). When I see her, it is her second time speaking in front of an audience, and an organizer tells me that she has 22 more schools to speak in before she returns to Bangladesh. Their most recent campaign agenda is to place pressure on the VF corporation, which has over 100 factories in Bangladesh and yet refuses to sign the BSA, thereby refusing to ensure that their factories are safe enough for workers to enter without fearing for their lives.

The president of ASU's chapter of USAS, Jonathan London, a Transborder Studies senior, speaks after the Bangladeshi women, declaring that, “Students have the power to change what is happening to garment workers in Bangladesh. The University is tied to these issues and, being tied to these issues, they hold a responsibility in being the change for them. ASU can certainly be the solution!” (Bankhead 2014). The event culminated in our signing a petition that urged ASU's president Michael Crow to “Make Alta Gracia ASU's spirit tee! Help us be a world changing university and make strides toward living wages in the garment industry by supporting Alta Gracia and getting their brand seen by students.”

Her trauma moves us to sign a piece of paper? Perhaps that is too cynical a reading, perhaps it is unworthy way to describe the affect that was shared in that room? Because with affect we do need to leave open some ambivalence, some space for different readings. Maybe something subtler happened in the student audience, maybe that silence was not a silence of hesitation to act and support her, but a silence in which they let it hit them, let her narrative and presence affect them. Maybe they were running all the clothes in their closet over in their mind, wondering if anything was made in Bangladesh. Maybe they were overwhelmed in that moment with how thoroughly capitalism and imperialism have

destroyed lives, and how profoundly it alienates us from each other. You never know, because, as Cathy Caruth claims, “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (1995, 11). Because we slowly come to recognize that history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, because “history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma” (1996, 7).”

I felt uncomfortable watching Aklima speak because it felt indecent that she had to come here and narrate that awful day in order for us to care about her, or about the multitudes of Rana Plaza victims, or the hundreds of thousands who currently labor in an industry that cripples their bodies and exploits their poverty. Aklima's story felt too intimate, too fresh, too soon to be spoken. There was a fragility in the way she held her body, the waver in her voice as she spoke. Yet we must also situate this moment and my reading of it within the question that Sneja Gunew poses (2009), namely, to what extent can we think meaningfully about affect outside of the concepts, terms, and theories of mind of Western psychoanalysis? Can affect be read—and assumed to have been read accurately—as the “expressive armory of the human body” (Thrift 2004) if the speaker of 'trauma' is non-Western? When we view emotions as discursive public forms, deeply embedded in specific cultural logics of expression and interiority, we must ask if affect is decipherable, if it is translatable, across cultures. Western theorists see trauma as a “wound,” as a self-altering, self-shattering experience of violence that is not quite representable, that exists slightly separate from memory and language (See Caruth 1996, Seltzer 1997, Leys 2000, Casper and Wertheimer 2016). Is trauma to the Bangladeshis conceived of as a “wound”? Perhaps, but perhaps not. But we do know a few things: signing a petition may have given students “unearned and incongruous spiritual uplift” (LaCapra, 2000: 51) by feeling that they are part of altering the deadly and exploitive garment industry, but it doesn't feel like an adequate response to Aklima's question that began with “now you hear my story.”

I felt that we were still exploiting her—this time behind a microphone, before from behind a sewing machine—and wondered, continuously: what does it do to her to perform her trauma? I name this a performance because within the telling is the intention: I speak my pain, so that you will care about me, so that you will support me. Aklima and the organizers of the USAS are employing her story, instrumentalizing it in order to produce a certain affect. Yet in doing so, she must balance the audience's expectations and desires, such that it moves us to support her cause. Leah Gilmore writes that narrativizing one's story is an act of self-production, and “testimonial projects require subjects to confess, to bear witness, to make public and shareable a private and intolerable pain” (2001, 7). Because even as she produces herself, we produce her. She gives both her story and her feelings as an offering (Hochschild 1983), and it gets converted, warped into currency

in an affective economy, whereby feelings do not reside in subjects or objects alone, but “are produced as effects of their circulation” (Ahmed 2003, 3). It may cause, for some, what Dominick LaCapra refers to as “empathetic unsettlement” to denote an affective involvement in which one feels for another without losing sight of the distinction between one’s own experience and the experience of the other, “without taking the place of—or speaking for—the other or becoming a surrogate victim who appropriates the victimizers’ voice of suffering” (2000, 51). It is when her audience understands Alkima’s sharing as an encounter—a chance for her to meet us and us to meet her (not just consume her), that affective listening can take place.

Kelly Oliver also examines the question of response, and, by proxy, the question of recognition. Oliver takes the position that those othered by (and oppressed within) dominant culture seek not only, and not even primarily, recognition by that dominant culture, but something “beyond recognition” (Oliver 2001, 78). Recognition, in this definition, comes from the idea that only those with power can confer recognition, and thus granting recognition reinforces differentiated and hierarchicalized power. She sees the need for one to demand recognition as an indication of the “pathology of oppression” (2001, 23) —that those who demand recognition see that it can only be given by those outside and with power over them (as in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic). She suggests instead that one can bear witness to “a truth about humanity and suffering that transcends those facts” (2001, 80). Bearing witness, she advocates, is a powerful alternative to recognition, in that it re-conceives the subjectivity of the oppressed person and reorients the subject position of the oppressed person as one able to structure the “addressability and response-ability” of the other (2001, 105). In coining the phrase “response-ability,” Oliver asserts that all subjects are necessarily and inherently social, and thus necessarily and inherently obligated to the other. In this, everyone has the ability to respond, to witness, and to meet.

But in order to hear Alkima’s story, in order to listen to it, we must be willing to be “at the edge between fear and outside, on the edge of my skin, listening, asking what new thing I will hear, will I see, will I let myself feel....I try to say to myself: To acknowledge the complexity of another’s existence is not to deny my own” (Pratt 2001, 69).

## Site III

### The Most Prolific Serial Killers

I wonder what it feels like to stand before 192 students and teach them about serial killers and homicide? To hold in your hands the way they consume that violence? I know what it feels like to TA that course—that is, I know what it feels like to sit silently in the amphitheater-like classroom and watch the faces of 192 students as they learn about serial killers, to help when technology problems inevitably arise, and to ease student's concerns about their attendance or quiz grades. I also know what it feels like to listen to the lectures, an hour and a half twice a week, about which serial killer wore the skin of his victims (that would be Ed Gein), and who specifically targeted sex workers in Seattle, killing 71 women before he retired (Gary Ridgeway, of course). Held in the beginning of my graduate studies, this class, the students taking it, and the professor teaching it, got me thinking.

The pedagogical observation that struck me in this class was that, despite the obvious and deeply disturbing nature of the course material, it was taught in such a way that the affect, the *feltness*, of the material was ignored. Students memorized paraphilic behavior, the who-did-what perverse sexual act to whose decaying corpse, but there was no discussion of what it felt like to have these killers dwell in your head at least long enough to answer test questions about them. How much space did these killers take up in the minds of these students? Did the awareness of them leak into other parts of their life? Do the students find themselves more wary of people after learning this material, and are we to consider this a triumph if they are? The objective of the course was simply to learn how to profile serial killers, mass killers, and spree killers; to learn their individual stories, their unique brand of evil, their impulse to kill, and their eventual arrest and trial. Through powerpoint slides, every day we met a new killer.

Near the end of the first class on the first day, the professor gave the students a warning, saying, “Listen, so, some of this is going to be hard to learn. If you find yourself feeling things, then take the time after class to go get a smoothie or watch a non-crime related show. Hang out with your friends, take care of yourself. You know, self-care.” This was the last time the professor mentioned that this material might become part of you in a way that was uncomfortable, and yet, each day that I walked into the room I felt a wave of wariness about what I would learn that day. I resisted letting new stories enter my mind. I began to develop different methods of arming myself against this class. Some days, discreetly, I would sit in front of the students, in my little corner at the front of the room, and position myself so that I would not be forced to face the presentation on the screen. I would instead watch the faces of the students as they watched the

movie. And, to be honest, most of the faces were impassive, blank. They no longer cringed like they used to, they no longer watched the movie with an expression of disgust, their bodies tense. They simply sat, notebook in hand, and jotted down the facts they were mostly likely to be tested on. Over the course of the semester I began to feel like I was the only one disturbed by the content and grieving the loss of life we daily described. For most of my students, this class was a way to be a more informed viewer of *Criminal Minds*, *Cold Case*, *CSI New York*, *CSI Miami*, *Dexter*, *Bones*, *Law and Order: SVU*, *The Following*, *The Killing*, etc. Maybe the students who did have nightmares from the material couldn't find a way to speak it.

To me, urging the students to practice self-care once, but framing the class in such a way that it ignored the affect of the material, was a dangerous pedagogy indeed. Because listening, as Megan Boler remarks, is “fraught with emotional landmines” (1999, 179). She writes that students have learned emotional selectivity and inscribed habits of inattention to that which brings them discomfort. I would extend that by noting that it is, of course, not simply the students who are selecting what to hear because they don't want to feel. Dahlbeck (2014) asks us to understand that the goal of affective pedagogy would not be “academic success,” but something else entirely:

Affective learning pertains to the idea that generating (and being sensitive to) bodily affects— understood in terms of force and capacity rather than emotion or feeling (Watkins, 2006, pp.270, 273)— can be thought of as the very hotbed of learning, where learning is understood as a creative process of experimentation with an exploration of one's bodily capabilities— of exploring the as of yet unknown — rather than as a purely reflective process of developing one's supposed natural ability to recognize and identify that which is already known. (2014, 20)

The classes I have taught (on racial politics in the US, on genocide and human rights) often have violence in them: both in subject matter and in subtle, interpersonal dynamics. But classrooms can also be “productive spaces in which to name, distribute, produce, and practice expressive resources that enable a witnessing, and which establishes living memories and admits the dead into one's moral community” (Simon and Eppert 1997, 187). Returning to Massumi's definition of affect, we see that affects are often ungovernable, and that affective responses are autonomous; they live in the terrain as forces of energy. Negating the affective implications of the course material—refusing to allow that it does pull us

affectively— continues that tradition of dismissing one's emotions as a kind of knowledge. Because students are not sieves where they can let in the information and strain out the affective impact of it, what affect theory tells us most concretely is that even if it is not conscious, the affect is there, and it affects.

This also misses the opportunity to form a pedagogy around affect, to use affect to propel learning. As Zembylas writes, attending to and through matters of affect can provide a way of getting to the ethical and political implications of the material, because attending to “affect opens up possibilities that may cultivate political and ethical relating in the classroom” (Zembylas 2006, 308). Let us take a minute to think about what that means: Could a class on serial killers, taught in such a way that it registered the affect of the material, change the way the students in the class related to each other? Could affect be used to teach tenderness to each other's feelings—rather than reinforcing the message of 'stranger danger' and 'victim facilitation'? Could affect be used in this class to strengthen lines of empathy and communication, such that, maybe, if we have a burgeoning psychopath in our midst—as is statistically likely, given there is said to be 1 psychopath in every 100 people, and the class has nearly 200 students—then maybe speaking through and with affect could provide an opening for them. A chance for self-reflection and a community with which to do it.

## In Closing and Opening

Since we dove into the realms of affect theory and the spaces of affect—are they caverns or are they oceans?—then it is only appropriate that we climb out of the immersion to catch our breath and reevaluate where we are and where we were. This article provided beginning introspections on three sites of affective immersion. It was about witnessing as the Jewish inheritance and of the Jewish inheritance, a witnessing that occurs through affectively embodying and emulating ancestors. It was about the affectively charged *space-between* that is theoretically generated by the sharing of trauma, and the seeming impossibility of an adequate response. And it was about a classroom that attends to violence while painfully ignoring affect. Yet to end we inevitably have more questions: Does each site exemplify affect in the same way? And what do these small, fragmentary moments reveal about affect?

If affect is the flowing within and between bodies of certain intensities, each site does not, and would not, manifest affect in the same way. Instead, each site exemplifies a different aspect of a theory that still largely eludes us. Yet affect theory also opens up something in these moments that couldn't be understood

without attention to affect. In the first site, listening to the way Jewish tradition teaches Jews to keep the past alive, affect becomes something that is felt through intentional repetition, from collapsing time, and from making a role for the young in the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Affect is experienced inside bodies, and affect is shared between them. In the same way, affect is in the audience shifting in discomfort and the searing gaze of the survivor—and it is also between them. So that what is shared is more than her story and more than the tenuous response and meager action her story elicits. Instead, the affect inside that room brings everyone to the same tremulous plane of feeling. It links the room in a different way, in a way that supersedes what is verbally acknowledged. And lastly, the affect that is ignored by the both sensational and dull memorization of startling violence leaves a gap, a fissure, in how we can use that information proactively and effectively.

Eve Sedgwick writes that the most useful work “occurs near the boundary of what a writer can't figure out how to readily say” (Sedgwick 2003, 4). There is a certain power in existing on the boundaries of what can't be fully articulated. It forces us to bypass the brain's conscious apprehension, because maybe affect is not the stuff of words, even though we have just expended so many in our effort to unearth it. As such, the pages you have before you do not presume an absolute coherence in word and idea. But from them, and together, I hope we opened up these seemingly disparate moments and this confounding theory in order to feel that 'something' that imbues the air, our bodies, and the spaces between us. Moving forward in a complex and confusing world, we need to intuit how affect links us to each other. We need to open our senses to it, because attending to affect allows us to glimpse spaces and openings and needs that might otherwise be invisible.

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*Comet Ping Pong in Northwest Washington, D.C., Farragutful, 2016*  
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# There's Something Going On



Michael Richardson

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*“There’s something going on,” said the President-to-be. “Believe me. People are saying. There’s something going on.”*

On December 4 of last year Edgar Welch drove from his home in North Carolina to Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, DC. He was armed with an assault rifle and determined to ‘self-investigate’ the child prostitution ring he believed to be operating in the restaurant’s basement, part (of course) of a nationwide sex trafficking operation run by Hilary Clinton and other leading Democrats. This was neither rumor nor fantasy: he had read countless articles and delved deeply into the sub-Reddits and fringe discussion boards dedicated to decoding and documenting the conspiracy. What he sought to investigate was an all-too-real crisis, a crisis to which he had been witness online and with which he would now come face-to-face. Yet what Welch had witnessed didn’t happen. The conspiracy he’d witnessed was what would soon become known as ‘fake news:’ an emergent phenomenon with the capacity to distort and amplify the affective realities of those with whom it resonates.

Paranoia is woven into the fabric of American politics. In his classic essay, Richard Hofstadter (1964) calls it the paranoid style: a “sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (77). Writing in the turbulent aftermath of

the assassination of John F. Kennedy, but also in the long wake of fevered imaginings about Masons, monarchs, and munitions-makers, Hofstadter grasped the capacity of conspiracy to capture the mind completely. To be more than simply secret knowledge; to quake the epistemological and ontological ground of reality itself. Here is what he wrote of McCarthy and Goldwater and what seemed to many like a passing madness but was in fact the birth of contemporary American conservatism: “the paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms - he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point” (82).

*“There’s something going on,” said the President-to-be.*

Edgar Welch knew something was going on, and he wasn’t alone, and it wasn’t just Comet Pizza. It was Hilary Clinton and the murder of Vince Foster. It was Satanic rituals hidden in risotto recipes and Saudi money and hidden jihadis and towns across the Midwest where Sharia law now held sway. It was a black President born in Kenya, a secret Muslim and a traitor to boot. Conspiracies, certainly, but something more, too: realities not just seen but *witnessed with furious veracity* through digital media. To witness in, by, and through media is nothing new. Mass media, with its promise of bringing events as they happened into living rooms across the globe, made witnessing a “generalized mode of relating to the world” (Frosh and Pinchevski 2009, 9). Mass media promised to bring its audience alongside distant events, to relate the truth, to make possible a mode of witnessing the world from the comfort of one’s home. Yet even as 9/11 collapsed the event and its mediation to “interpellate its audiences as the ultimate witnesses” (Frosh and Pinchevski 2009, 9), digital technologies and social media made mediation ubiquitous, but in doing so fragmented its claims to veracity. What John Durham Peters (2009) calls the “veracity gap” in all witnessing could now widen to a chasm (32).

To bear witness is to become responsible to the event; to bear witness to something that didn’t happen is to become responsible to an event that exists only in and through media. Today, that means media that has settled into a new intimacy with everyday life, or what Mark Deuze (2012) calls life not *with* but *in* media. Media, in fact, not as a discrete set of objects – posts, images, stories – but as mediation, as the process through which meaning and experience are changed, felt,

known and communicated. In the work of Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, this is mediation as life, as “being-in and emerging-with the world” (Kember and Zylinska 2012, 23). Within the ubiquitous embrace of social media, Edgar Welch and countless others are not mere false witnesses: what they witnessed is inseparable from their affective realities. Such an affective reality is no mere filter bubble; at issue here is not homogenous sociality, or media diet, or the flow of information, but the warp and weft of the world itself, its coherence and cohesion as it emerges within and through lively media.

While narrative content and emotive language matters, images – the bioweapons of network culture (Terranova 2004) – provide ‘fake news’ with affective force, form and focus to shape and reshape perception. Whether of Clinton’s blood-stained hands, or illustrating false statistics about race and crime, or of apparent secret codes hidden in emails, images are crucial to the reshaping of affective realities. Such images grant credibility and coherence to what might otherwise be dismissed as fantasy; they are proof positive, even when Photoshopped and aestheticized to be clearly *unreal*. Even if what is visible is not factual as such, images give form to affect: what did not take place can still be seen. The dynamics of social media – the flattening of authority, the visual sameness of sources, the homogeneity of networks, the algorithmic delivery of content – contributes to the repetitive, looping refrains (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010) through which these affective realities are produced and deeply held. Not one story but ten, not one meme but one hundred. Bubbling up from the darker reaches of the digital to the credulous spaces of Facebook, such images simmer in the infectious stew of incipient outrage, ready to catch and stick to the affective flow of life in media.

*“Believe me,” said the President-to-be. “There’s something going on.”*

It could be argued, persuasively, that the phrase ‘fake news’ has already been emptied of meaning, become yet another partisan slur, a convenient mode of dismissal, a shorthand for all that is post-truthy about this historical moment. Witness the swift proliferation of the term, the speed with which it cropped up in context after context, tweet after tweet, country after country. Anything could be fake news, and so could nothing. But to simply consign the term to partisan wrangling is a mistake. Such claims don’t recognize the strenuous work that ‘fake news’ does in US politics, where it is affectively attuned to partisanship and conspiracy, but also to crises of community, economy, and sociality. ‘Fake news’ became possible not because people became more credulous or prone to conspiracy, but because lively processes of mediation melded with more and more meaning-making in daily life – even as the platforms through which information flowed ceased to rest their authority on guarantees of veracity. ‘Fake news’ was, in short, an economic

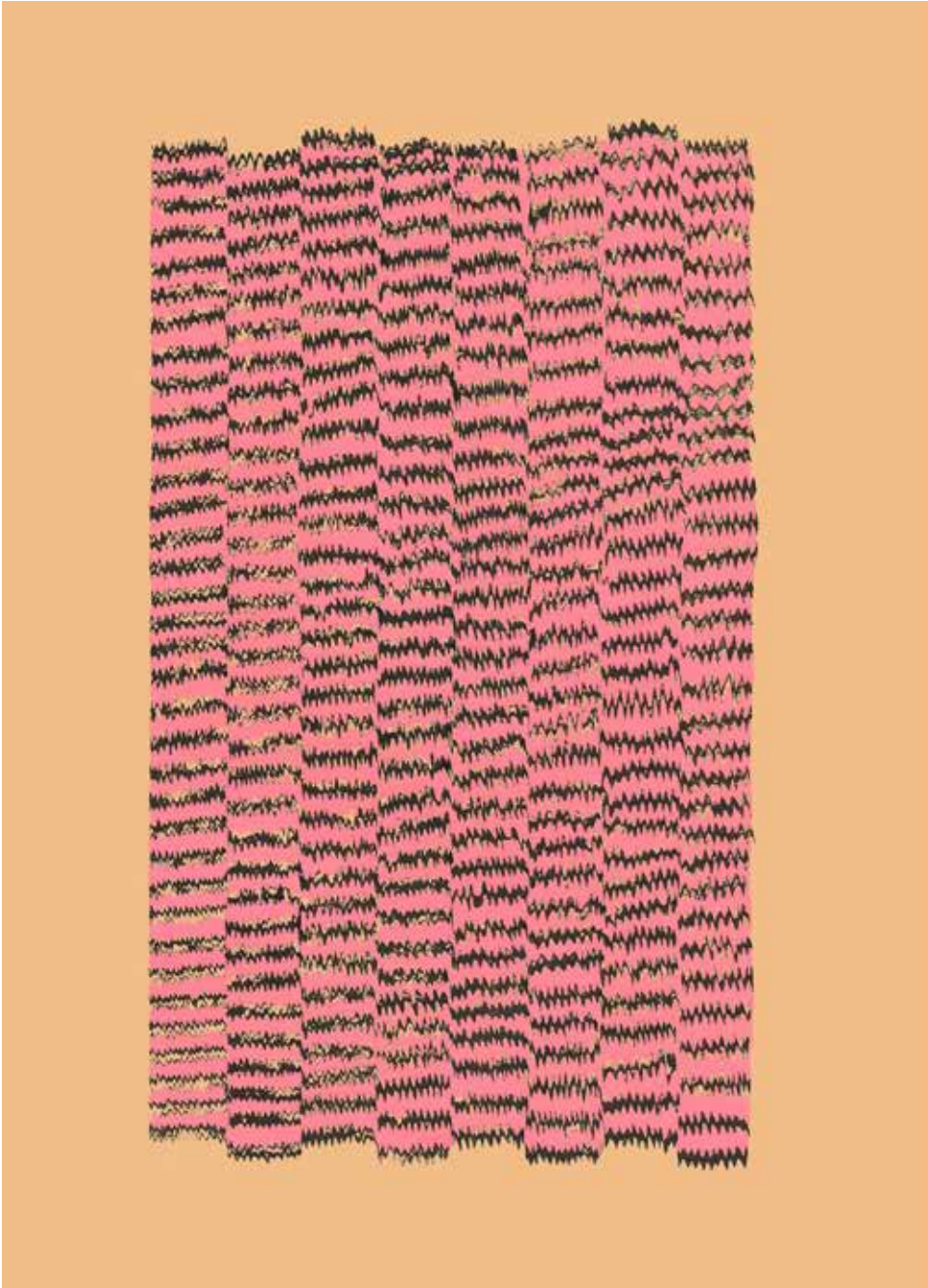
proposition long before it was a partisan slur: 'fake news' sold and continues to sell. 'Fakes news' sells because it slips the depoliticizing tendencies of what Jodi Dean (Dean 2005) calls communicative capitalism, the economic mode of contemporary technoculture. 'Fake news' makes politics what you want it to be: outrage is always righteous, beliefs always validated, values always affirmed. Within the crisis ordinariness that defines the texture of everyday life (Berlant 2011) and in response to the neglect and disenfranchisement of late liberalism (Povinelli 2011), 'fake news' offers the possibility of making sense of upheaval and uncertainty, of transforming murky resentment into clarified meaning. In an increasingly complex, intractable, and injurious globalized world, as the digital pervades so much of life while transnational forces and flows bless and break communities, 'fake news' promises a kind of imagined agency. It offers an escape from the grim burden loaded onto citizens by the false belief that aspiration and desire mattered more than material reality. How sadly ironic, then, that the material conditions most improved by fake news were surely those of the Macedonian town for whom its production became a cottage industry. For those captured by it – "entangled, vulnerable and delirious" as Rey Chow (2012) describes captivity in the trap of art – fake news can only pull at the affective textures of the world (47). But that is not nothing: it provides answers, joins the dots, and, perhaps most dangerously, offers up scapegoats.

To witness what didn't happen is to remake relations between the witness and the world. It is, in a very real sense, to render actual the paranoia of conspiracy: mediated intensity that might otherwise have looped in on itself or else dissipated suddenly becomes veracity. Edgar Welch drove 350 miles and entered a pizzeria with an AR-15 assault rifle and a revolver. Customers and staff fled. Police arrived, surrounded the restaurant and arrested Edgar Welch. In court he said that he had acted "with the intent of helping people I believed were in dire need of assistance" (Gresko 2017, n.p.). Others of the conspiratorial persuasion were quick to point out that Welch had occasionally been employed as actor. This might, they speculated, be a false flag operation designed to shutdown their inquiries and so they must continue their work, quietly seeking the truth. Easier by far to witness what did not take place than allow the unravelling of the affect worlds of mediation upon which livable life depends.

*"There's something going on," said the President-to-be. "Believe me."*

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*Untitled*, Anna Loy, 2016  
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## Genre Flailing



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I'm an editor of a journal that publishes literary criticism. What's always moving and interesting to me is that most of the work we receive isn't at all bad or failed, as most of it opens up a world of fresh associations around what seemed a dormant or misframed object or problem.<sup>1</sup> But often what distinguishes a successful work from a less successful one—and I'm not at all excepting myself from this—is a confusion on the writer's part about whether the writer is trying to open up the object or close the object, extend a question or put it to rest. It's as though it's impossible to distinguish a defense against knowledge from its production, and here's the thing—you can *never* know. The aim is almost certainly always mixed—to control the object enough to say a thing about it and to change it enough that it comes to organize surprising kinds of exemplary association. Most of the time people hide their confusion about stabilizing and moving their object in the shadows of definite statements that the critical work then goes on to contradict, convolute, or dilute.

Then, sometimes, we have to face in public a crisis of the object distinct from our own ambivalence toward its transformation, when *circumstances* alter it before our eyes—whether it's the value of literary criticism, pedagogy and identity triggers, public education, or the failure of the political world to be worthy of

our attachment to it. Under those circumstances, when one's defenses are made manifestly insecure by an uncontrollable disturbance in the object's stability, we do what I'm calling "genre flailing."<sup>2</sup>

Genre flailing is a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one's confidence about how to move in it. We genre flail so that we don't fall through the cracks of heightened affective noise into despair, suicide, or psychosis. We improvise like crazy, where "like crazy" is a little too non-metaphorical. We see it in the first gasps of shock or disbelief, and the last gasps of exhausted analogy. But it's not always a wildly inventive action. When crisis is ordinary, flailing—throwing language and gesture and policy and interpretations at a thing to make it slow or make it stop—can be fabulously unimaginative, a litany of lists of things to do, to pay attention to, to say, to stop saying, or to discipline and sanction. Often in the pinch of a crisis we return to normal science or common sense—whatever offers relief in established clarity.

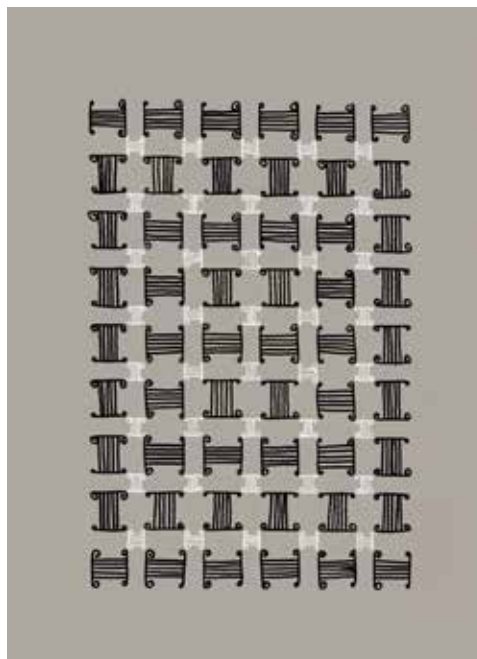
Countless encounters since the Trump election hiccup into the genre flail in the riff on *what's happening?* Anything anyone writes in the ongoing periperformative eddy of his world-shaking thud, whether it's hard, mournful, or pastoral in the sense of "preach!" is a genre flail.<sup>3</sup> Protest is a genre flail; riot, sometimes too, and so is whatever we do off the cuff or in a last minute insert when we're giving a conference talk and cannot not comment on the present moment, in which the speaker presumes that we're all disoriented or in crisis and wanting to fix the world.

But what does this representation of the genre flail have to do with critical humorlessness? In the book about it I'm working on, the experience of humorlessness involves the encounter with a fundamental intractability in oneself or in others.<sup>4</sup> In affective terms, it's typically associated with a bracing contraction of relation. It is often associated with a tone drained of whatever passes for warmth or openness. This is why humorlessness is associated both with political correctness and the thing it responds to, the unbending anti-PC privilege that casts inequality as the appropriate order of things, and the freedom to enjoy it as a core tenet of freedom. Humorlessness wedges an encounter in order to control it, creating a buttress of immobility and impasse. People on the top of social hierarchies use humorless performativity to produce the fear that protects power; people on the

bottom perform it to refuse to extend and legitimate the top's self-pleasure. But assessing humorlessness in a given encounter is much trickier than its ordinary American association with one-sided woodenness, flat affect, or severity would predict. Structured by their commitment to protecting a relation or object/scene from transformation, people can express their humorlessness in many ways: as affectlessness, passive aggression, seriousness, bitter mirth, a fixed grin, or any kind of warm gesture, a touch or a smile. What constitutes humorlessness is someone's insistence that their version of a situation should rule the relational dynamic; but no particular way of sounding confirms its social presence.

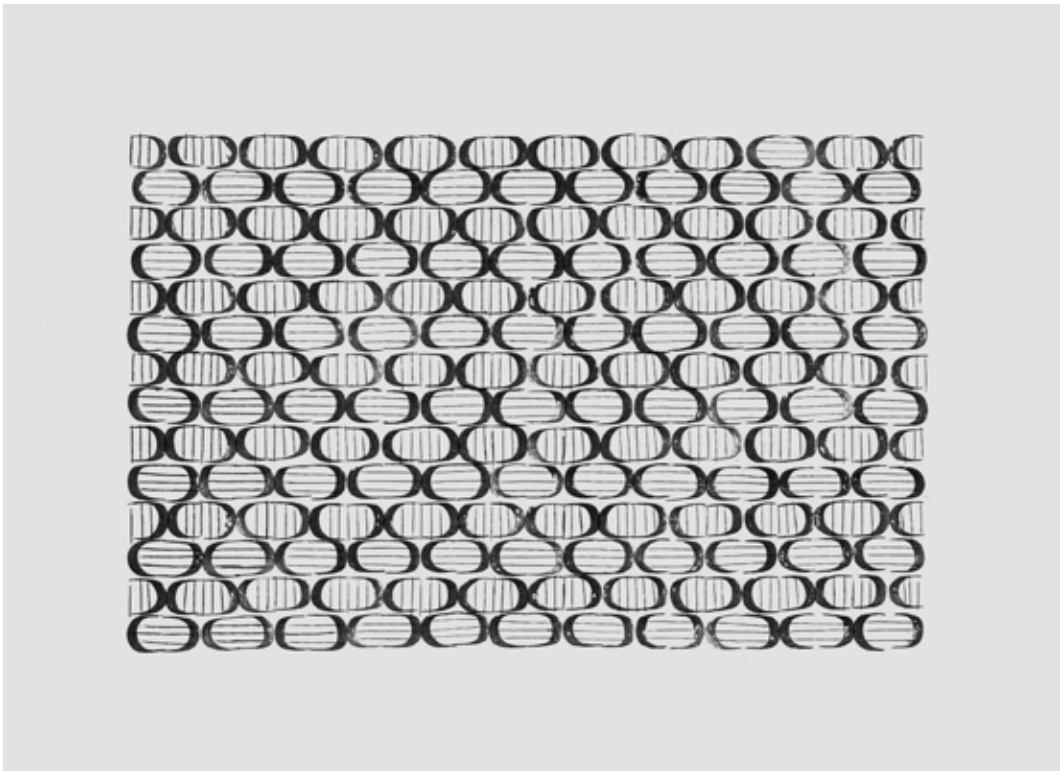
In literary criticism the work of humorlessness is evident whenever, for example, we hear the accusation that "x critic is 'self-indulgent,'" a phrase that negatively judges work that feels out its object in the analytical space, often by way of a personal voice, rather than by making direct arguments or truth statements about the state of things. At the same time, it is often a feature of such exploratory work to be humorless, insofar as that work polemicalizes against common sense, normativity, or consensually expressed emotions like empathy and intention, rationality and disinterestedness. To give some other examples, let's take antithetical operations in the current arguments for and against critique.<sup>5</sup> On one side, one could

call much of the reparative reading movement that has arisen after Eve Sedgwick's prompt humorless anti-humorlessness work, by which I don't mean it's not witty or funny, but that it's careful, sensitive, sincere, and searching, committed to stopping a condemnatory tone it doesn't like and inducing a reparative tone it does. On the other side, take the brilliant writing of Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o, for example, at the *Social Text* and *Bully Bloggers* blogs, where some of the best (most powerful and delicate and courageous) aesthetic criticism of our moment is on offer.<sup>6</sup> This work tends to be funny and explicitly playful, foregrounding intensities of acerbic play and pleasure that conjoin the judgmental, the extreme and the ordinary. See also the manifesto set called "30@30: The Future of Literary Thinking," just published at the journal *Textual Practice*.<sup>7</sup> All of this work on all sides demonstrates a powerful belief in what analysis can do to capture and transform the usual associations with their commonly held problem, which



Untitled, Anna Loy, 2016

is the problem of social/aesthetic form in relation to the mass vulnerability lived by persons, populations, and nations. All of this work can seem anti-humorless because it's arguing against the unimaginative stuckness of privileged others, polemic against polemic. All of this work seems to value alternativity in a world that's defunding it. By performing criticism as "literary thinking," such works see the task and desire of criticism in this light to extend the world-bending work of art as such.



*Untitled*, Anna Loy, 2016

Nonetheless, as Juliet Mitchell has written in her wonderful essay, "Theory as an Object," such projections of the other's humorlessness are defenses, the kinds of projective identification that put one's own aggressions and irrationality and out-of-scaleness onto other objects, while viewing one's own commitments as non-distorted, flexible, receptive, and thoughtful.<sup>8</sup> In the Winnicottian tradition, to play with an object is to test it, and to test it is to destroy it, because one has

changed its qualities. Mitchell thinks it would be better to say that one disturbs the object, rather than destroys it. Therefore, as makers of transformative concepts, she argues, "though the [object] may be, to all extents and purposes, the same before and after my attempted destruction of it, when it survives it will be in a different place" (2005, 32). As, Roland Barthes would also have said, to work with, on, and around an object is to rough it up: to change what it can do.

But at the same time, I would argue, whenever one is destroying some things in the object one is also trying to protect something else in it that matters, that deserves a better world for its circulation, or that constitutes a crucial anchor. And this is the non-place, the space of both holding and disturbing, from which the humorlessness of the critic—or anyone, really—comes.<sup>9</sup> This is how critique can seem humorless while post-critique does not, but I would argue that the literalism about tone one finds in much post-critique argument disavows the operation of the will and desire that in psychoanalysis is called, non-judgmentally, aggression. This literalism of tone is often a mask of reparativity that can hide its own humorlessness in sincerity or play.

The inutility of any distinction between a sincere seriousness and play was at the center of literary theory from its current beginning, coming out of the debate in Derrida's "Signature Event Context" (1972) about whether it's even possible to distinguish serious from playful speech.<sup>10</sup> Derrida argues against any claim that it is possible to distinguish writing that's self-integrated as to meaning, intention, and tone from reflexive or ironic writing, like the joke. This salvo set off decades of punning and play in critical work and induced many barbs at sincerity and other forms of false unity and liberal good intentions.

My claim is that taking one's *tone* of critical openness as *actual* intellectual openness is a mistake. We can never be certain about the distinction between the serious and the humorless. We cannot presume that there is a thing called reparative affect that trumps self-evidently mechanical or paranoid or anti-relational thought and ideology. We cannot presume our defenses aren't also aggressions, and just because we think we are open to being educable doesn't mean that we are. Another way to say this is at the current debates about tone and critique think they know whose literary criticism is humorless, and therefore unethical or unkind. But in this clash, one sees a battle in which all sides elevate their seriousness against the other's humorlessness.

For criticism not to be delusional, engendering debate as a clash of humorless titans, we need produce more than just a little performative self-skepticism. Rather than attacking the so-called humorless rigidity of others to mask our own

aggression, we can ask ourselves, where is the humorlessness in my work, what am I protecting from exposure to change? Rather than assuming that a unity of intentionally empathic, careful, or playful tone is evidence of anything, unmixed in its reparativity, we need to see the work of style and tone both as hard-shell charismatic defenses *and* affective openings that make the way for concepts to emerge. The question is at what cost, to what end?

Conclusion: Another way to see this is, people still want to read with things. "Reading with" is an ethics of collaborative critical engagement I introduce at the end of *Sex, or the Unbearable*.<sup>11</sup> I learned it from reading with Eve Sedgwick's "White Glasses": you see with the perspective of an object, while also moving through the world in your difference from it.<sup>12</sup> The *Textual Practice* thinkers take a related, but different angle on critical attachment and attention. They demonstrate a hunger to write sentences that will enable us to continue reading together so that we can feel at once and en masse how unbearable it is to be nothing before the text, and yet to want to make something different by reading with it, whether in texts or the world. What we share, in their view, is reading as aspirational co-being, not necessarily belonging. David Marriott and Simon Jarvis think of such practice as central to the aesthetic and to the collapse, in our time, of the distinction between art and craft, criticism and its objects.<sup>13</sup> The exteriority of the aesthetic and critical object resists them, matters to them, changes them as members of an "us," collectively, and recognizes the need to reinvent how criticism appears, performs, and engages. They are not seeking proof of the value in this transition in the self-evidence of tone, though.

The violence of the world makes us flail about for things to read with, people to talk to, and material for inducing transformations, that can make it possible not to aspire to, feel at war, or to be right; but to be disturbed together, thrashing with, and creating value through a shift in the object. The value of recognizing the aggression in desire is that people who desire to be good won't inadvertently secure it through a disavowed humorlessness. Our critical ambivalence toward opening our objects to a transformation whose effects are not foreclosed might make us better at holding the objects that are also changing.

## Endnotes

1. By "object" I mean the anchoring interest that's organizing the research and the writing: it could be a question, a literary work, a genre, an event. I often use "object/scene" or "object/concept" in my written work to amplify this dimension.

2. A different version of the following paragraph can be found in the post, "Big Man." Berlant, Lauren. (2017). Big Man. [blog]. *Social Text*. Available at: <https://socialtextjournal.org/?s=big+man> [accessed 19, January, 2017].

3. "Periperformative" is of course Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term for the context-extending effects of performative actions. Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. (2003). *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 67-91.

4. This paragraph steals from "Humorlessness (3 monologues and a hairpiece)." Berlant, Lauren. (2017). Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece). *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2), 305-340.

5. For the strong argument against critique, see Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski eds. (2017). *Critique and Postcritique*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

6. The *Social Text* blog is available at <https://socialtextjournal.org/> and the *Bully Bloggers* blog is available at <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/>

7. Boxall, Peter et al. (2016). 30@30: The Future of Literary Thinking. *Textual Practice*. 30 (7) 1149-118.

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9. "Non-place" is Marc Augé's term for the transitional spaces that loosen up ordinary identity. Augé, Marc. (1992). *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe. London and New York: Verso.

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# Contributors



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TIFFANY POLLOCK is a PhD Candidate in Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies at York University. She has an MA in Ethnomusicology and has spent much of her life moving, dancing and making music in various parts of the world. Her research has typically examined how intimacy and social difference operate within dance communities. Prior to beginning her PhD, Tiffany was a music teacher in Thailand, where her dissertation project is situated. Her recently completed ethnographic research focuses on Thai and Burmese fire dance teams who perform for tourists on the Southern Thai islands. The project explores how notions of belonging and social difference are mapped affectively, spatially and temporally by dancers.

MICHAEL RICHARDSON'S interdisciplinary research investigates the intersection of affect and power in media, literature, politics and culture. He is currently working on a project about drones and witnessing in warfare, activism and the arts. He is the author of *Gestures of Testimony: Torture, Trauma and Affect in Literature* (Bloomsbury 2016), which won the Dean's Research Award for an Early Career Monograph in his Faculty, and co-editor of *Traumatic Affect* (2013). Before entering academia, he was speechwriter to The Hon. Jack Layton, former leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada.

TONY D. SAMPSON is reader in digital media cultures and communication at the University of East London. His publications include *The Spam Book*, coedited with Jussi Parikka (Hampton Press, 2009), *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), *The Assemblage Brain: Sense Making in Neuroculture* (University of Minnesota Press, Dec 2016) and *Affect and Social Media*, coedited with Darren Ellis and Stephen Maddison (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018). Tony is the organizer of the Affect and Social Media conferences, a co-founder of Club Critical Theory in Southend, Essex and Director of the EmotionUX Design Lab at UEL. He works with students from design, technology, media and communications and fine art.

FREDRIKA THELANDERSSON is a PhD Candidate in Media Studies at Rutgers University. Her research is situated in the fields of media, culture, gender, and affect studies, with a focus on representations of sadness on social media and in popular culture. She has previously written about Tumblr feminism and the potential of this media platform to create alternative affective spaces for counterpublics and marginalized groups.

ALANA VEHABA is a doctoral candidate in Justice and Social Inquiry, Arizona State University. Her ethnographic research focuses on self-immolation in Tibet, and the impact that self-immolations have on Tibetan refugees in India. Broadly, her work focuses on social resistance movements, the aftermaths of martyrdom, violence and nonviolence, and the idea of freedom as it is imagined around the world.

JULIE WILSON & EMILY CHIVERS YOCHIM are Associate Professors of Communication Arts at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania where they teach courses in feminist media and cultural studies. They are the authors of *Mothering through Precarity: Women's Work and Digital Media* (Duke University Press, 2017) which explores how mothers in the Rust Belt navigate neoliberal precarity through mundane engagements with digital media. Julie is author of *Neoliberalism* (Routledge, 2017), an introductory textbook that approaches neoliberalism from a cultural studies perspective, and Emily is author of the award-winning ethnography *Skate Life: Re-Imagining White Masculinity* (University of Michigan Press, 2010). Their individual and co-authored work has also appeared in a number of peer-reviewed journals, including *Cultural Studies*, *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies*, and *Television and New Media*, and edited collections.

CONFERENCE

# ***CAPACIOUS***

AFFECT INQUIRY / MAKING SPACE

AUGUST 8-11, 2018

*Forms Passing*, Claire Gilbin, 2016  
Acrylic and mica on canvas, 48 x 60"



***#capaciousAIMS***

# CAPACIOUS

AFFECT INQUIRY / MAKING SPACE



AUGUST 8-11, 2018  
MILLERSVILLE UNIVERSITY  
WARE CENTER, LANCASTER, PA

This conference has capacious aims! In and across the diverse practices and studies of affect, how might we continue to ‘find room’ or ‘make space’ and under what circumstances might such a framing for affect study be problematic? In August 2018, let’s meet up and endeavor to find out.

Modeled on the same ethos of community building, mentorship, and intellectual generosity that guides *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*, this conference will be open to all (students, faculty, non-academics, and others) while emphasizing the crucial role of graduate students and early-career researchers in shaping the scholarship in affect study.

Like the seriously awesome #affectWTF event of 2015, the three full days of this conference will be largely structured around proposed panel streams. Submissions that tend toward more the un-disciplined, evocative / provocative, and aesthetically-oriented—what we are calling ‘interstices’—are also encouraged. Spotlight panel sessions and seminars / workshops with a dozen brilliant up-and-comers, including a few established scholars, will provide stirring evidence and useful insights about the latest trajectories of affect inquiry.

Let’s get capacious!!

## CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

- Opening reception on Wednesday, August 8 from 6-11 pm
- Three full conference days: August 9-11, 2018

## QUESTIONS?

[capacious@millersville.edu](mailto:capacious@millersville.edu)

Of special note/incentive: If you are a published author in the journal *Capacious* by the date of the conference, your registration fee for the conference will be waived

[capaciousjournal.com/conference](http://capaciousjournal.com/conference)



# ca·pa·cious

kə'pāSHəs/ 

*Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* is an open access, peer-reviewed, international journal that is, first and foremost, dedicated to the publication of writings and similar creative works on affect. The principal aim of *Capacious* is to 'make room' for a wide diversity of approaches and emerging voices to engage with ongoing conversations in and around affect studies.

**Cover image:**  
*Courbes Gravées*  
Isasza, 2017

