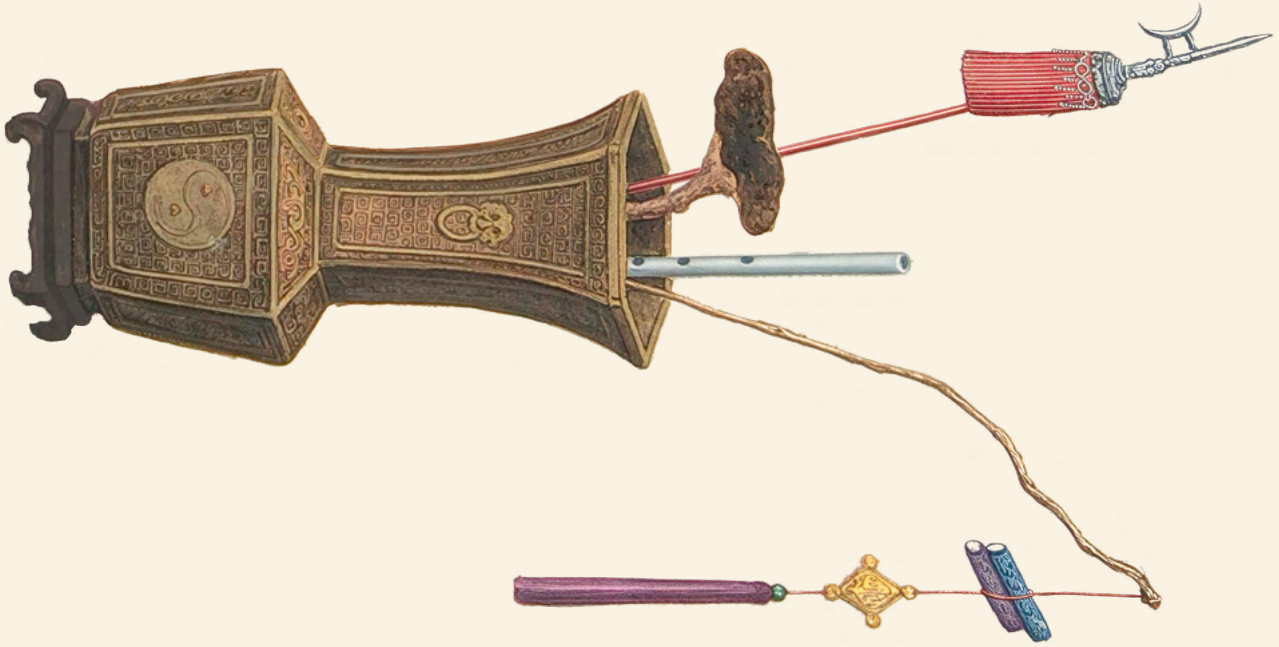

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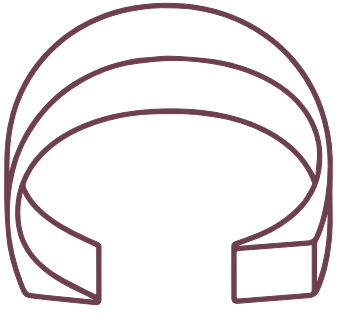

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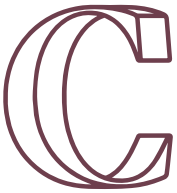

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Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry is an open access, peer-reviewed, international journal that is, first and foremost, dedicated to the publication of writings and similar creative works on affect by degree-seeking students (Masters, PhD, brilliant undergraduates) across any and all academic disciplines. Secondarily, 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.'

ca·pa·cious
kəˈpāSHəs/

adjective
having a lot of space inside; roomy.

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Two Tables, One Blond the Other Purple Lacquer, both with Vases and Objects, Anonymous, 19th century
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CONTENTS

MAKE MATTERS

Sustaining relationality. Attending to visceral potentials. Finding tools and techniques in the ordinary, the minor, the micro, the interstices. Prying open capacious alter-worlds.

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- **Beyond rote and readily replicable methods, how might the processual and affective be shared or passed along?**
- **From intimate to immense, atmospheres are felt, lived, and unequally shared—what can an atmosphere do?**
- **Not knowledge as all-seeing, but plural knowings that swarm and unsettle—how do affect and knowledge move together?**
- **Charges, currents, frictions, leakages: furious energies animate the present—what is needed to grow collective capacities to make life otherwise?**

METHODS × ATMOSPHERES × KNOWLEDGES × ENERGIES ×

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Methods

Affect theory is rather notoriously non-receptive—if not downright resistant or hostile—to the spelling out of its methods (too) prescriptively or procedurally. Still, there are various ways of parsing and prompting process that affect studies/affect theory undertakes in its MAKING that can be helpfully illustrative and generative for (extra-/trans-) disciplinary conversations and progressive political aims that desire to move beyond the rote and readily replicable. So, how should affect theory approach the question of methods but, more so, how should such 'processual and affective' methods be shared, communicated, passed along?

Knowledges

Perhaps it happens almost inevitably when 'knowledge' is spelled with a capital 'K.' Knowledge = Western. Enlightenment. Rationality. Measure and measured. Instrumentalized. White. Normative. Subtractive of feeling. Eliminative of affect. But knowledges (with an 's') adds the necessary pluralization of a knowing-otherwise excess that swarms and unsettles Knowledge as transcendent and all-seeing. Hence, knowledges that embrace the mess, the curiosity, the wonder, and the reality of experiment and experience: indigenous, esoteric, black, brown, eastern, aesthetic, ecologic, etc. What can reason do (intertwined with affect, with a body, with an atmosphere) when it recognizes its emplacement, its singularity, the capacities and incapacities of its own truth-affects? What's the doing of knowledge in affect theory?

Atmospheres

This is where so much affect theory dwells! Atmospheres from intimate (often interiorized) to immense (world climate), ranging from unacknowledged or barely perceptible to so damned heavy that you work to maneuver its shifting or find a means of escape. Never just a metaphor, an atmosphere is felt, real, lived, shared (if often unequally), contaminating/contaminated (for good and for bad), a density/dispersity in perpetual oscillation, etc. The very minute you ask about 'capacities to affect or be affected,' you also enter into the matter of atmospheres and atmospherics. 'What can an atmosphere do?' sidles up to 'what can a body do?'—a mutually-imbricated ongoingness that never closes. How do atmospheres figure into your work?

Energies

Energies course through affect studies as diffuse and material forces. Intimate and infrastructural, they register as charges, currents, frictions, accretions, and leakages that move through (and across) bodies, ecologies, and technologies. In the 1986 Public Image Ltd song 'Rise' John Lydon (Johnny Rotten) repeats over and over again 'anger is an energy.' He admits 'I could be wrong. I could be right.' Forty years later, in 2026, we know he's always been right. While affect studies maintains that emotion and affect are not synonyms, when it comes to the feeling-passage of the energies of a body and between bodies, anger is a common currency in the contemporary economy of affect. Rise/fall. Escalating, de-escalating, modulating. There are furious energies (anger, yes but not only) in circulation right now that foreground affect studies—with its attunements to the passage of intensities—as something more than another interpretive practice but also a transactor of energy conversions that directly confronts the rising fascisms of our age. What energies are needed to grow collective capacities to make life otherwise?

MAKE

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Introduction

UNBEARABLE AFFECTS/ AFFECT'S UNBEARABILITY

Eirini Avramopoulou
PANTEION UNIVERSITY

Editor's Preface

I first encountered Eirini Avramopoulou's work when the two of us (along with fabulous Anna Gibbs) were invited to be keynote speakers at the conference "(E)motions in Changing Worlds" at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece in early November of 2023. Eirini and I swapped a few emails in anticipation of meeting up. Then, sigh, she contracted covid and had to deliver her talk remotely. But, even at a distance, Eirini's pointedly political, impassioned presentation knocked me (and the assembled attendees) over. It was a necessary reminder of how/why affect and affect theory must always rise up to meet the challenges and unbearabilities of the present. At that moment in November 2023 Gaza and Israel were barely a month into what would rapidly become a genocide. Meanwhile, the day-to-day crises in Greece, Turkey, and around the Mediterranean are intimately interwoven with the fates of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers—intensely vivid and visceral: extending, of course, beyond this region of the world.

The day after her conference presentation, I messaged Eirini to ask if she would consider writing something for *Capacious*, and she agreed. We are so glad she did. While this issue of the journal has been a bit delayed, Eirini's thinking-writing-feeling here has only grown more timely (and/or untimely?) since its submission in early 2025. The sense of unbearability has been rapidly ratcheting up in the intervening months. Those of us in the United States, but not only here, will likely feel interpellated by a question like: "what might it mean to be attentive to the reverberations of daily resistances that still manifest their dynamics, and

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to processes of social healing that need to take place when ultra-nationalisms, far-right anti-gender politics, neoliberal authoritarianisms and masquerading conservatisms prevail daily…"? It is worth noting too that I am writing these remarks in the midst of ICE's violent incursion into Minneapolis and the point-blank murder of Renee Good: something that feels like a tipping point (one of many). In the face of such overt and escalating fascism, one hears, over and again, Eirini's affect-oriented refrain: What to do? What are the capacities to?

Those who wish to dig more into Eirini Avramopoulou's instructive and prescient work should read her *Affective Activisms and the Right to Have Rights in Turkey* (Palgrave, 2025). Like Noor Ghazal Aswad's book on Syrian resistance *Searching for Solidarity: Revolutionary Dreams and Radical Social Movements* (Ohio University Press, 2025), the different lessons for affect theory in these accounts forcefully address many of the most urgent demands of our continued collective existence.

—Gregory J. Seigworth, co-editor-in-chief

Unbearable Affects/Affect's Unbearability

What can a smell do? What is it capable of? Paraphrasing important theoretical questions that defined the emergence and development of critical engagement with discourse, identity, and representation through affect theory since the 1990s, I pose these questions so as to prompt us to think through the affects exuded at moments when the dense affective atmospheres we (co-)inhabit turn unbearable. I wish to understand how such unbearability provides us with useful lenses through which we could both question the reproduction of toxic norms as well as let ourselves imagine reparative strategies of "bearing the unbearable encounter with the unfinished business of being—not just its incompleteness but also in its desire for and resistance to being accounted for" as Lauren Berlant (2014) poetically writes in response to Lee Edelman in their book *Sex, or the Unbearable* (68). The authors engage in a vibrant discussion around the most pertinent question of "What would it mean, [...] to take seriously the question of what it means to face living with negativity?" as posed by Edelman (2014, 66). At the same time, Berlant wishes to bring to account "the fantasy of theory and its relation to how

narrative binds and seduces us toward impossible repairs and resolutions" (68). This highlights an important issue that informs their exchanges and, more than that, it raises, nowadays, a number of important ethical and political questions in search of a politics of writing that does not insist only on the representation of things, nor remains on their pure surface. On the contrary, the authors alert us towards forms of writing that mobilize the impossible task of analytical thinking when faced with unbearable atmospheres where existence "is hanging on a push of the lungs" (Cavarero 2005, 169).

What can a smell do, what is it capable of? I have often pondered this question in recent years as I have been conducting ethnographic research on the multifaceted, but interrelated, stories of asylum management, governmentality, biopolitics, and everyday life in the island of Leros in Greece. The islanders' economic survival has almost entirely depended on the operation of asylum institutions, and, in people's accounts of their entanglements with these institutions, narratives of smell were both dispersed and salient.As I have analyzed elsewhere (Avramopoulou 2022 and 2020), to escape the fate of extreme poverty usually reserved for those living on small Mediterranean islands in the late 1950s, many locals were employed as hospital guards in the psychiatric hospital. The conditions under which this hospital operated-stigmatized its inhabitants by hailing them complicit with what was described in the international press as "Europe's guilty secret" and as "a crime against humanity"-and for which no official authorities were ever held accountable. The professional category of being employed as a guard was created for Lerians who would be employed as unskilled workers assigned to the care of nearly 5,000 patients who arrived from 1958 onward. Most of the psychiatric patients were destined to live and die in Leros under inhumane conditions. Hospital guards would perform all the tasks related to the *care* of people toward whom they held mixed emotions— namely, the fear, aversion, and repulsion generally attached to those deemed "mad," even as they profited from the tragedies affecting their lives. Nevertheless, the stories they shared with me also conveyed caregivers' burnout: having to endure a job carrying along the unbearable smell of stool and the unbearable guilt of 'treating people like animals' and having to 'put your hands in shit,' as they would always phrase it. At the same time, they slowly developed intimacy, genuine care, and love on account of the unavoidable co-dependency and coexistence. Those mixed feelings were again animated later when the psychiatric hospital's terrible stench continued to haunt the senses and sense-making of the local population with the eruption of the so-called refugee crisis. In such a context, as I have argued, complicity becomes an unbearable affect unsustained by, and fleeing from, the toxic structures animating it while binding people together and simultaneously setting them apart (Avramopoulou 2022).

What can a smell do, what is it capable of? I often wondered about the dense affective atmosphere exuded by that sticky smell that got stuck in the skin while permeating the surface of bodies and social relations, or of the "affective economy" (Ahmed 2004) of fear, guilt, complicity and denial stigmatizing its inhabitants, especially when it later found new expression in the newly built refugee camp's stinky atmosphere, indicating the affectively spatial proximity between the psychiatric patients and the refugees.In 2015, the decision to build a refugee camp in Leros recalled past traumas, as more than 38,000 refugees passed through the island, whose permanent population numbers fewer than 9,000 inhabitants. Bearing witness to the eruption of what has been characterized as the biggest refugee crisis in Europe over the last years which followed the devastating effects of Greece's economic crisis, impacting a population struggling to survive huge levels of unemployment and agonizing over impoverishment, seemed to re-animate the smell of fear, hate, guilt and denial circulating around the question of who would/could profit from another human tragedy. People's daily rumors echoed: 'Everybody profited from the psychiatric hospital' appeared in parallel to 'Everybody profits from the refugee crisis' or 'they 'eat' the money of the refugees, as they did with the mentally ill.' Moreover, in the more xenophobic accounts of some of my interlocutors, the use of derogatory designations like "the smelly/dirty refugees" or "the smelly/dirty psychiatric patients" were becoming salient expressions of hate speech and fear of Otherness. Such discourses serve to remind us of what Mary Douglas (1966) perceived long ago as a metaphor for a crucial disruption to a normative structural order that needs to hold on to the fantasy of the self's integrity by excluding what could be perceived as dirty, or an anomaly, the abnormal, the Other figured as aversion, and in Julia Kristeva's terms, an abject (1982). Here, xenophobia and empathy collide, as "dirty refugees" morph into "poor refugees," from whose "shitty conditions" others can "profit." Once again, then, a protracted crisis has cast its long shadow across this island, rearticulating the fear, loathing, guilt, and denial circulating around the question of who can and who will profit from an unrepresentable, unspeakable, and indeed unbearable, human tragedy.

What can a smell do, what is it capable of? Through this question, I often asked myself: how can one tell a story through a smell? How can one speak of its affective value? More importantly, how can we think of it as a departure point for addressing methodological questions related to desire, affect, and politics in anthropological writing? Or, how can we imagine processes of decolonising (knowledge about) the body through the lingering affects of a smell that trouble the ethics of representation?

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What can a smell do? What is it capable of? Through this question my intention is not to impose theory on everyday life, nor to claim that ethnography has the ability to reveal itself in most surprising and unthought of ways despite the fact that it does many times. On the contrary, if we agree (even to disagree) that theory cannot be disentangled from lived life, but provides a way to find a different entry into it and, at times, to resist life's unlivability, or at least to reflect on how to make it less unlivable and more bearable, then the fantasy of letting theory do the work of reparation becomes a way of unpacking pertinent political and ethical methodological and theoretical challenges about *an ordinary world* that *we cannot not bear.What can affect do? What is it capable of?* As Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010) mention in the first affect theory reader: "because affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements or primary units, it makes easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs." (4). If affect theory inserted an important "representational trouble" into the work of social anthropologists and of other social scientists during the early 2000s, this also resonated with theoretical/methodological transformations already happening in gender/queer studies, feminist philosophy and postcolonial theory. This "trouble" entailed asking questions differently than those focusing on the evocative power of the "events," the emancipating potential of defiant subjects and the promising futurity attached to heroes/heroines. Using affect as a methodology enabled social anthropologists to pose questions without being falsely attached to inquiries about truth-making regimes, linear narratives, clear cut meanings, fixed identity roles and representations. Deconstructing hard data and ambitious emancipatory visions, what was named, after Patricia Clough (2007), as the "affective turn" and the theorization of affect in non-representational theory, encouraged social scientists to start looking for ephemeral evidence of everyday life (Muñoz 2008), to become more attentive in giving analytical attention to ordinary affects (Stewart 2007 and 2008), to prompt "the unresolved" or the "unfinishedness into our storytelling" (Biehl 2013, 574), to let desire be a way of deconstructing racial and sexual stereotypes (Rodriguez 2014), and, most importantly, without projecting Western categories on the rest of the world (Navaro 2017). Indeed, affect theory also became a way of reconsidering negativity's hold in the affective geographies we co-inhabit (Navaro 2012). And these are just a few examples out of a long list of contributions that has amplified over the last years.

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What can affect do? What is it capable of? "Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere'?" Teresa Brennan (2004) famously argued (1). Discussions about its transmission still remains, despite the critiques, a prism through which affect theory entered anthropological inquiry and ethnographic explorations. Inspired by (but also diverging from) Brennan, Sara Ahmed (2004) poignantly argues that affects "do things," as they bond and bind bodies together, mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, the individual and the collective. By emphasizing the performative value of affect, Ahmed rightly suggests that we need to consider arrival in space as an intensely mediated moment defined by the subjects' differentiated positions which are defined by gendered, sexualized, racial, etc. scenarios of power. Perceiving affect as formative and, most of all, *per*formative of social relations and contemporary political articulations, it then becomes an important tool for analyzing the re-constitution of collectivities, social movements and political demands for rights, recognition, justice and democracy. However, this approach does not simply celebrate affect's unquestioned visceral potentiality and affirmative qualities, but rather engages with all the risks that this entails. After all, Judith Butler (1993) has shown, long time ago, that performativity is not about the celebration of agency because at the heart of the potential undoing of norms, there is a risk as any act of non-complying with the norms often comes at the price of discipline, punishment and violence.

Considered through this prism, affect theory allowed us to ask again: how can we re-imagine what is it that motivates crowds to risk their lives so as to claim them back as (more than) liveable? How can the commons reassemble through conflicting, fleeing, and constantly differentiated subject positions? How can we grasp resistance beyond it being led by a white, male, rational, and logocentric subject? How can social change happen without being limited by politics of identity and the principles of representation? Overall, affect theory enables us to ask along with Susan Ruddick (2010) "how do we fashion a new political imaginary from fragmentary, diffuse and often antagonistic subjects, who may be united in principle against the exigencies of capitalism but diverge in practice, in terms of the sites, strategies and specific natures of their own oppression?" (22).

What can affect do? What is it capable of? In reviewing the origins of the use of the term affect, Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar (2009) explain that the point of different accounts of affect is not simply to map the different ways of analyzing the bodies and the subjects of politics in modernity, but to rethink and reimagine the space of the political (38). Following this lead, one of the main focuses of my ethnographic endeavors over the last several years has revolved around the question of how can we make affect speak the language of the political, or else how to

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mobilize affect theory so as to understand crucial processes of politicization and solidarity enabled and mediated by the valuable lenses of gender and sexuality, at times of hope-lessness: like those we experienced in the past; like those we are living through at this very moment. For example, in *Affective Activisms and the Right to Have Rights in Turkey* (Avramopoulou 2025), I argue that activism is a performative and affective language that is defined by intersectional hopes, desires and dreams, as much as it engages with legal battles that define who or what might appear as being broken under specific historical, political and cultural settings.

I learned much while doing fieldwork in Turkey at a period that has registered for many as 'the golden era' of politics—'the golden era' of social movements in 2008-2010; this was a period of political transformations which led to the Gezi Park protests in 2013, the alleged coup d'état that followed in 2016, the persecution and imprisonment of thousands of people and to the establishment of an authoritarian regime. All these alerted me to what it might mean to be attentive to the reverberations of daily resistances that still manifest their dynamics, and to processes of social healing that need to take place when ultra-nationalism, far-right anti-gender politics, neoliberal authoritarianisms and masquerading conservatisms prevail daily, not only in Turkey or on European soil, but also internationally. Thus, the urgent need to think through the creation of local and transnational alliances nowadays, as *Affective Activisms* reveals, lies in our insistence on understanding fieldwork in activist affects and embodiments today as fieldwork in human rights philosophy. In this sense, "the right to have rights" (Arendt 1949) pushes us to reflect on how power works beyond human rights themselves, or more correctly beyond the logic-grammar that has defined them as processes of producing exclusions. In other words, it pushes us to be attentive to the political and affective surplus value invested in the need for rights which lies both in the search for ways of institutionalizing and implementing rightful demands, as well as in the desire to claim affective democratic visions, citizenship, and a life worth living vis-à-vis the re-emergence of authoritarian regimes, sexual harassment, gender violence, homo/trans phobia and Islamophobia worldwide.

What can affect do? What is it capable of? Nowadays, more than ever, affect theory allows us to ask: what is it that matters in theorizing everyday life as a convoluted scene defined by complex affectscapes that trigger the senses and sense-making mechanisms while they condition and/or limit people's resilience, endurance, duress, agency, and resistance in view of newly emerging forms of patriarchy, white supremacy and sexism, of trans/homo-phobia and the reign of far-right anti-gender ideology, of culturalism, Islamophobia and xenophobia, of anti-woke agendas proliferating in tandem with Trumpism's triumph around the globe, of

the production of deepened poverty and precarity continuously intensified by processes of neoliberal governmentality, sovereign regimes, authoritarianism, neofascism and the daily production of massive destruction, genocide and death machines? To put it abruptly, how can we even hold on to the fantasy of finding solace in (affect) theory after Gaza? What would reparative writing mean under such conditions?

What can affect do? What is it capable of? If Daniel White (2017) is correct when he writes that "theory is *of* the world it so describes" and that "affect and affect theory are here, now, for good reason" (179), then the current cruel and inhumane conflict in the Middle East—rearranging the world through the production of unspeakable pain, destruction, and death—becomes evidence of how the senses partake in the production of the political and leaves the following question hanging: how can unbearable affects designate space for affect's unbearability? Again, then, what would reparative writing mean under such conditions?

What can unbearability do? What is it capable of? Debarati Biswas and Laura Westengard (2024) poignantly argue in the introduction of a recent special journal issue on unbearability:

> 'Unbearable being' is an affective state of being and becoming that indexes the intolerableness of existence within the normative. On the other hand, 'unbearable beings' are the subjects who inhabit abject and/or revolutionary positions in relation to the sociopolitical apparatus and offer alternate possibilities of living and being in this world (17).

In this same special issue, Juana María Rodríguez (2024) writes:

> The mornings are the worst; it is then that I wake from the sweet warmth of darkness into the half-light of genocide outside my window. Like most cogs to empire, I endure. I shuffle along, I try to schedule my crying for the mornings before I attend to prepping the class, answering the emails, and completing the mundate chores of my cozy life. Still in my bed, I hold my phone and shatter the buffer between myself and the world. In my hands, I watch haggard bodies stagger into their own routines amid a grey rubble of trauma a world away. I look for Bisan on the socials, check for her safety, and then fall into a doom scroll, bracing myself for what is to come. Today I learn how Israeli snipers aim for the knees of the youngsters who throw stones at

> their tanks to fell the opposition. The result is thousands of limbs left on the ground of occupation, bodies cut off from parts of themselves without the aid of anesthesia or condolence. On TikTok, I see bone-thin children speak about wanting to die to escape the thirst and hunger that has replaced their daily bread; I see a father dig through the remains of yet another Israeli missile strike with his bare hands in search of a beloved's fleshy remains. Closer to home, I see trained snipers aiming their weapons at student protesters, and a professor, old and outraged like myself, thrown to the ground for protesting a live-streamed genocide. Meanwhile, in the upside world that the media insists on projecting, the rich starve themselves for fashion, more bothered by the traffic delays than ethnic cleansing, and name the victims terrorists and the oppressors victims. Time and space collapse and spin out again into a dizzying morass of all that seems too much to bear (277).

Following Rodríguez's (2024) powerful writing and her insistence to call for a collective awakening that grieves and dreams together and in rage (279), I need to forcefully ask again: what would bearing the fantasy of finding solace in (affect) theory after embodying the stench of human tragedies, like those haunting Leros, do? What would bearing the fantasy of finding solace in (affect) theory after Gaza do? Or, overall, how can (affect) theory change (us/our writing) after witnessing and living among unspeakable inhumanities and fascisms, after and during an ongoing genocide? What would these processes be capable of?

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AN EROTICISM WITHOUT US

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a radical reevaluation of desire, love, and the libidinal economy through the lens of 'an eroticism without the human' or a 'generic beloved.' It challenges the entrenched notion that desire is rooted in the unique and exceptional, arguing instead for its foundation in the impersonal, anonymous realm of genericity. This perspective shifts the focus from a traditional discourse that glorifies the individuality of the object of desire to one where qualities are seen as interchangeable and not exclusively human. In critiquing the current anthropocentric libido, which is exploited for economic gain to the detriment of the planet, I advocate for a broader, more inclusive understanding of desire. This necessity becomes clear in an era dominated by digital platforms, where human attributes are fragmented and commodified. This paper suggests that exploring non-human modes of desire could lead to a reconceptualization of the libido, offering an escape from the limiting anthropocentric paradigm.

KEYWORDS

peak libido, eros, extimacy, genericity, anthropocene, impersonal desire, algorithms, fungi, mysticism

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Suppose that the conditions of desire do not lie in one's exceptional qualities but in genericity. All desire is innately impersonal yet intimate. It doesn't care who or what you are, and wants with indifference. Such desire is anonymous, indiscriminate, impersonal, and external. It holds the promise of an innermost alterity—the allure of the other who exists outside oneself and reciprocates desire.

Desire reveals the paradox at the limit of being, where an encounter prompts the recognition of the external as an unfolding of one's innermost interiority. This is a transition from intimacy to 'extimacy.' First coined by Lacan, 'extimacy' can be understood as the "intimate that is radically Other" (Miller 1997, 77), inverting the distinction between exteriority and intimacy, suggesting their mutual transformation and interpenetration. Extimacy reorients desire, asserting "the most intimate is not a point of transparency but rather a point of opacity" (Miller 1997, 76), wherein the Other is found within as though a "foreign body, a parasite" (Miller 1997, 76. When we perceive intimacy as something external, it transforms into a sort of 'extimacy' that penetrates and infuses the categories of intimacy—implying interiority or self—and exteriority, the elusive other.

Indeed, there is no specific object of desire. Instead, there exists only the potentiality to desire. In other words, desire is an external determinant that unexpectedly stumbles upon us. Amidst sensuous disorientation, we erroneously perceive desire as originating from within, as our own possession. The external nature of desire allows it to occur at any moment and in any place. Desire is potentiality itself.

And yet, isn't it that we long for the special other's attention beyond all else? The desire to possess the beloved and the quest for completion through them are profound aspects of our romantic aspirations. The object of desire, unique among all others, captivates with qualities that endow her with a distinct, fixed identity that transfixes the amorous subject. Love is often directed towards the individual who unveils their hidden self, revealing their essence to us, implying uniqueness. But such love simultaneously transforms the object of desire's specificity into the common beloved, highlighting the paradox of genericity. Anyone in love has also fallen out of love, only to find themselves impassioned once more by a new 'objet petit a.' Different, but the same.

However, unlike the fetishistic, singular, and specific object of desire, let us propose a beloved who is not fixed but fluid, generous, and transformative. Their qualities are interchangeable and communal. Their love is a surplus ever-suspended because it belongs at once to no one and is experienced by everyone. In the absence of a singular object, an anonymous beloved emerges—always already absent yet ever-present—engaging in a form of love from the outside, as Giorgio Agamben (1993) describes it, "the experience of being-within an outside" (75). This anonymous beloved without qualities represents an attempt to conceptualize the libido not as the anthropocentric and passionate drive for the singular and particular but for the generic.

The libido is often perceived as a species-specific phenomenon, an excess of instinct that sets humans apart from animals. Passion, drive, sexuality, and, of course, love are all encompassed within this anthropocentric understanding of libido, which is both limiting and questionable. This perspective confines love to the realm of anthropos, where human desires are commodified in the libidinal economy, leading to disastrous planetary consequences. To conceive of the generic beloved is to profoundly shift the scale of the libido to a planetary, if not cosmic, level. This perspective speculates that the libido is inherently unhuman, functioning as a cosmic vector pulsating throughout the natural world. Envisioning the libido as innately passive, impersonally intimate, and seductively generic.

Reorienting the Beloved

But what does it mean to speak of a generic beloved? Proposing the embrace of genericity as a condition of desire—loving the other without qualities—does not imply sameness and never converges in meaning. Being generic does not suggest that the subject loses its distinct characteristics in relation to the other. This project is not an attempt to collapse the gap between forms or dissolve into an amorphous cosmic goo where one is indistinguishable from the other or continuous without absence. Quite the opposite—the libido thrives on discontinuity.

Consider Rilke's idea that love necessitates that “two solitudes protect and border and salute each other” (2004, 45). For Rilke (2004), the testament of love is to leave the beloved intact. Rather than attempt to break down the boundaries between self and other, love thrives when individuals remain separate, incomplete, and mysterious to each other. It is the libido that connects us. Desire presupposes attachment. Discreteness allows us to stumble upon one another in acts of love—the brush of

the hand against the skin, a kiss, coitus. What would the love act look like were we truly "water in water?" (Bataille 1992, 19). Protecting the beloved's solitude becomes paramount, as the true desire is not complete knowledge but an enduring embrace of the unknown. Genericity is a requirement to love and be loved.

The central question is how to love and desire the other while fully acknowledging our inherent discontinuity. It involves reconciling our discreteness and incommensurability, recognizing them as the source of eros—the cosmic, ecological charge propelling the libido. The precipice of subjectivity. Genericity does not aim to flatten humanity; such an approach would counteract the freneticism of the libido and the necessary frisson of eros.

Certainly, the flattening of the lover's discourse into a safe and standardized 'love plot' for consumption is precisely what the generic beloved aims to subvert (Berlant 2012). The generic is the recognition of the other in their incommensurability; it is the unknown determinant of the beloved, the indescribable and incomprehensible. The generic beloved is always atopic: "unclassifiable, of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality" (Barthes 2010, 34). Embracing a generic beloved means reconciling with the idea that the gap between the self and the other is not a cruel estrangement but rather an erotic, seductive space charged with energy.

Through this irreconcilable gulf, the subject and the beloved are paradoxically intimately entangled, though such a connection can only be grasped obliquely. To move towards a libidinal ecology of genericity (and generosity), the lover must initiate a process of stripping away the self. The future of eros doesn't hinge on becoming but on undoing—not on the possessive love plot but on the cosmic generosity of indiscriminate love in excess.

Georges Bataille (1992) proposes such a perspective in his interpretation of Marcel Mauss's 'gift' within a general economy. Bataille suggests transitioning from exchange calculations to a cosmic potlatch—a notion he would term 'expenditure.' This planetary, sacrificial gift-giving, abundant and linked to the principle of the gift, becomes fundamental to general nonproductive activity and finds embodiment in the sexual act as the giving of "exuberant energy" (Bataille 1992, 41). Here, sexuality, desire, and love in excess are turned into sacrificial 'gifts'—the renunciation of self for the other.

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In an age so lacking in eroticism yet so exhaustively replete with sexuality and avenues of sublimating one's desires via consumerism and acquisition of capital, the question of a 'sustainable' libidinal ecology holds a particular charge. Dominic Pettman (2020) captures this dissonance with the term 'peak libido,' suggesting that we are at risk of losing a precious human resource—the ability to connect, commune, rejoice, and recreate vital and evolving human institutions.

Pettman (2020) urges us to examine this age, the Anthropocene, in which human desire has left a lasting and rapid geological impact on the planet and all life. He encourages viewing this epoch through a libidinal lens, recognizing the profound interplay between desire, human connection, and the broader ecological context. Let us propose that it is timely and essential to reassess the societal narrative surrounding desire.

Often, desire is conflated with the possessive nature of the human libidinal economy, where individuals find themselves elevated to a spectacle and commodified as objects of desire where they are evaluated based on their qualities as if they were a lucrative investment. As Anna Longo (2019) suggests in *Love in the Age of Algorithms*, we have left behind a society of control in favor of a risk society. She likens this shift to games of chance, "where the goal is to decide how much to invest in oneself today in order to sell oneself at the best price tomorrow" (Longo 2019, n.p.).

Indeed, love is a game of chance, and desire operates on the principles of capital. The economy plays a role in shaping our libidos, rendering us vulnerable to being labeled as poor investments or inadequate lovers. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the digital age, where our reliance on technology and algorithmic decision-making is uncomfortably intimate. The dependence on technology not only requires extensive categorization of identity but also encourages individuals to distinguish themselves and be exceptional, with self-expression being rewarded by algorithms.

This, in turn, raises the stakes of the gamble to extend beyond the digital and into the physical world. As R.S. Benedict (2021) acknowledges in the article *Everyone is Beautiful and No One is Horny*, like most aspects of contemporary life, our bodies are now simply investments for future—equally lucrative—lovers and profitable business exchanges. For Benedict (2021), "a body is no longer a holistic system," (n.p.) nor is it the means by which we experience the sensorial physical pleasures of embodied life. Rather, the body exists to increase our value as increasingly abstracted digital assets. As Benedict notes, the optimized body "is a collection of features: six pack, thigh gap, cum gutters" (2021, n.p.).

Benedict critically examines the drive towards optimizing the physical form to enhance certain hierarchical attributes, raising questions about the aim of bodily optimization: "Some vague sense of better living?" (Benedict 2021, n.p.). However, a notable oversight in Benedict's otherwise brilliant analysis of the beautiful but asexual body is the consideration of how the human form increasingly exists in a fragmented, virtual state. The algorithm's tendency to distribute abstract human qualities across various categories further disrupts our connection to our physical bodies. Consequently, our bodies are transformed into attributes to refine, perfect, and make exceptional for the sake of virality.

The contemporary landscape is marked by a pursuit of investment in personal growth: more followers, more likes, more love matches, more sex, more sponsorships, more money. In a risk society, where individuals are extensively exposed, the object of desire becomes too knowable. Exploited by algorithms and reinforced data, individuals who display their qualities are vulnerable to oversaturation. In this context, the being without qualities—the anonymous and generic—presents radical potentialities for a cosmic and sustainable libidinal ecology that is as seductive as it is generous.

If anyone is wondering why swiping right on the latest dating app isn't yielding results, it's this: completely transparent selfhood is not sexy. Erotic allure diminishes when the self is transparent because the cosmic libido thrives on the mystery and unknowability of an external, an Other that can never be fully grasped. An empty profile is more seductive than someone revealing every detail about themselves before the first date. We're no longer trying to seduce one another, but we *are* seducing the algorithm and doing an amazing job of it.

With the global proliferation of the internet and mass data in our daily lives, algorithms might continue to make love to us, whispering sweet nothings in the form of virality, push notifications, and dopamine-spiking 'likes.' But as far as human relations go, the lover's discourse has been stripped of sex appeal, deprived of seduction. Our libidinal pulse grows faint. While we eagerly connect with the virtual cloud, disseminating our most successful qualities through electrical impulses, we have forgotten the sensuality of the flesh, the passion of the creature, and the eroticism inherent in the planet.

Paradoxically, digitally scattering ourselves doesn't result in a loss of self but rather leads to increased self-awareness. This digital dispersal generates an excess of selfhood that doesn't inherently require a physical embodiment. In contrast to the self-abnegation involved in embracing the generic, digital scattering operates on the premise that one's essence resides in specific features without necessarily acknowledging the self as contingent on the other. Being digitally scattered engenders a sense of self rooted in categorizable, manageable, and dispersible qualities. In this context, the human, always partially existing somewhere in the digital realm, avoids encountering the other and cannot acknowledge themselves as the other. Existing online, attuned to algorithms that love us, we manifest not as individuals or a collective but as fragmented classifications. This phenomenon is the echo chamber of the digital self. This flattening transpires when the beloved is reduced solely to their qualities—amorous statistics—and matched with their reflection.

This distinction highlights broader issues at play. Having become accustomed to existing within narcissistic feedback loops focused on the self, we may have forgotten how to desire generously and, consequently, how to care from an external, generic standpoint. Exploring the role that attention to unhuman, ecological, and planetary modes of desire becomes crucial in re-conceptualizing the libido. This, in turn, extends to reimagining the love plot beyond the anthropocentric lens and toward the anonymous and impersonal—the realm of the generic beloved.

In this framework, the beloved is not singular but represents all that exists—self-emptying, unfolding, entangled, pointing to no one in particular. Can we cultivate anonymous love? Can we redirect our human libidos toward the cosmic and be seduced by the generic? How might this transformation reshape our understandings of desire and position the human not as a host for the libido but entangled in a greater, planetary sensuality—an 'eroticism without us?'

Desiring as Radical Passivity

The conceptualization of an eroticism without us can be comprehended through two distinct movements. First, there is the acknowledgment that desire has always existed beyond the human realm. This accentuates the constraints of the anthropocentric libido and suggests a process of estrangement from self—interiority, identity, and uniqueness. The prefix 'un' underscores the removal of the human from desire. This is a passive process; by unsaying the self and its qualities, one unveils interiority as an inherently hollow, open anonymity through which libido can encounter and flow.

Secondly, unhuman desire, freed from anthropocentrism, is linked to an eroticism that is inherently ecological and, therefore, present wherever, whenever, and in whatever form. This signals a shift toward an impersonal entanglement that exists independently of human involvement. Desire doesn't need us and will continue to form viscous attachments to life long after humanity ceases to exist. Thus, we have two movements: the cosmic and the planetary, both relational and dependent on the other—orbital.

The first movement necessitates the removal of the human from the central role in desire through renunciation. The underlying idea is that all desire is inherently unhuman—it involves discarding the self. To confront the unhuman within is to develop the ability to love anonymously, embracing radical passivity. As Thomas Carl Wall (1999) suggests, radical passivity is "passive in regard to itself," (1) indicating a withdrawal for the sake of the other that holds the potential for transformation and communication. Radical passivity embodies a passionate desire for that which is external.

The notion of radical passivity thus introduces complexity into the interplay between self and other and, consequently, between the human and unhuman. Adopting a passive stance regarding oneself implies experiencing oneself as already other and always potentially other. Radical passivity exemplifies a paradoxical generosity where the gift is withdrawal, unveiling the subject as a nonpresence—a floating signifier—and creating space for generative possibilities. Wall (1999) articulates this intricate and dynamic state of being-in-potentia: "Before I take on the particularity of a person, I am—and am not—an extreme possibility. To say it even better, I am a *potential* possibility, the null event of an inactuality" (2).

The Wound of Divine Love

Drawing a parallel with the mystical traditions of Divine Love, we observe a similar relinquishing of the self to the divine in the works of the medieval female Christian mystics. These texts portray mysticism (and mystical practice) as the being-in-potentia of the erotic. The devout subject in prayer, supine to the Divine, dedicates the self to the seclusion of an anchoress cell or the solitude of a desert hermitage, allowing the beloved divinity the requisite attention for the expenditure of love.

In the mystical itinerary *TheMirror of Simple Souls* (ca. 1250–1310), late thirteenth-century beguine Marguerite Porete (1999) outlines the seven states of the soul, which she equates to "states of being, after Love has come and taken hold" (Porete 1999, 142). Porete (1999) identifies how one gives oneself over to God not just to receive His love but to empty oneself (*kenosis*) so deeply of subjective human qualities that one may become a potential possibility for Divine Love's unfolding. For Porete (1999), the soul's journey toward divine union is envisioned as a solitary pilgrimage marked by self-sacrifice. She describes this path as "the steps by which on climbs from the valley to the summit of the mountain, which is so isolated that one sees nothing there but God" (Porete 1999, 142).

Divine Love thus requires the radical passivity of expenditure—the loss of self, or renunciation, as a form of "martyrdom" (Porete 1999, 143). The soul who seeks Divine Love "obliges herself to obey the will of another…so as to destroy her will" (143). This is characterized as a violent and difficult process: "[O]ne must crush oneself, hacking and hewing away at oneself to widen the place in which Love will want to be, burdening oneself down with several states of being, so as to unburden oneself and to attain to one's being" (143).

In Porete's (1999) itinerary, the mystical subject systematically and willingly undergoes the stripping away ('aphaíresis') of selfhood to create an opening within (or hollowing out) that the Divine might come inside as the beloved, and the ecstasy of this violent tearing apart may take place. Porete characterizes this union as the freedom of the soul, which abandons this free will and returns to God now as an abyssal wound: "fallen from love into nothingness, without which nothingness she cannot be everything" (Porete 1999, 144).

This spiritual journey towards Divine Love highlights a radical passivity, rooted in an anonymous and impersonal form of desire. Through this process, the body willingly endures both physical and mental anguish, casting away every trace of identity and worldly attachment. This act of self-denial and disengagement from the material world, or journey into nothingness, prepares one to be a vessel capable of receiving love from the divine Other.

In other Medieval mystical experiences with Christ, the motif of the wound or stigmata serves as a mirror for conceiving the unknowable Divine. To bear the pain of stigmata is to be Christ-like. Mystics, including Porete (1999), recount visions of Christ displaying wounds, drinking his blood, and even entering Christ through these wounds. The connection between Christian mystics and Christ's wounds is underscored by an unmistakable erotic dimension, as scholar

Caroline Walker Bynum emphasizes in *Dissimilar Similitudes* (2020). Bynum describes responses to Christ's wounds as explicitly erotic in a "polymorphous" sense, “distributed across the entire body” (2020, 199). She highlights Christ's role in opening “doors and windows” so that the soul “may enter and remain within the “tabernacle” of the body” (199). This perspective suggests a mutual indwelling inherent to impersonal desire: to welcome God, one must shed the self while simultaneously, through Christ's human-affiliated wounds, we can enter and inhabit Him.

Christ emerges as the quintessential generic beloved. His love is characterized as anonymous, polymorphously perverse, and cosmic. The desire for this love disperses the concept of ‘self,’ exposing the absence of essence within. In *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Porete (1999) conveys a similar idea in the sixth state of the soul’s journey. Despite deep humility and elevated goodness, the soul cannot see itself or God. Instead, “God sees himself of himself in her, for her, without her” (145), enlightening the soul to perceive nothing else but God, even when face-to-face with one’s ‘self.’

The mystical subject paradoxically reveals that the interiority is already an exteriority. The self and other are collapsed. By getting rid of the self, one can experience the self as if from the outside in its generative potentiality—as desire. To be intimate with the Divine is not a desire mediated by the presence or absence of the object of desire but attention to the anonymous and impersonal gulf between the source of the frisson. Divine Love is ‘extimacy’ in its most cosmic sense. It suggests a prototype for unhuman desire that focuses not on the individual but on an inessential commonality. As such, ‘being’ signifies that the self exists in a state of whatever, whenever, and wherever.

Being Whatever for the Other

Giorgio Agamben (1993) introduces the concept of ‘whatever being’ in *The Coming Community*. According to Agamben, ‘whatever being’ signifies a potential community that is "mediated not by any condition of belonging…nor by the simple absence of conditions…but by belonging itself" (1993, 85). Within this

community, individual identity or specific qualities act as a revelation of the absence of essence. The self is perpetually a nonpresence, always and never the other, existing eternally outside itself, intimately estranged from essence. Identity, instead, serves as a conduit for unveiling the essential absence within.

In other words, the self is merely topographical, a face with many faces and simultaneously headless. Might we appropriate Agamben (1993) and transform the state of 'whatever being' into the acephalic, many-faced, plural non-subject: the 'whateverbeing?' In this context, the subject's desire for the other is assimilated as a potentiality; desire-in-itself precedes the desire for another. For Agamben (1993), this means that we do not love because we are unique and do not love because we are human. We love because desire encounters us regardless of one's identity or nature. Desire is exterior to being, or more specifically, independent of being—it is 'whatever.' In this context, embracing what we have defined as genericity is an expression of love. The concept of the generic or 'whateverbeing' puts us in a state of potentiality, and this potential is what holds us in the flow of movement—time.

Agamben explains that love is not focused on specific qualities of the loved one, nor does it dismiss these qualities for a generic love, "The lover wants the loved one with all of its predicates, its being such as it is" (1993, 2). This specificity, or what makes the loved one lovable, is not the comprehension of a particular thing or its qualities but rather the understanding of its intelligibility. He highlights the movement Plato describes as erotic anamnesis, which "transports the object not toward another thing or another place but toward its own taking-place—toward the Idea" (1993, 2). The lover and the beloved are always 'in medias res.'

Love is fundamentally a state of duration and movement—an enduring suspension within the realm of desire that extends outward without a specific origin. Love entails recognizing that one's existence is orbital, relational, and entangled from a distance. The movement of desire is akin to transformation, metamorphosis, and permutation. To orient oneself through the lens of the cosmic libido means continuously evolving in time and space, transitioning from one form and subjectivity to another, always in motion, never stagnant, yet perpetually suspended in the midst.

As Alphonso Lingis (1998) notes, these movements are "without theme, climax, or denouement; they extend from the middle, they are durations" (60). If one envisions the libido as a cosmic vector, then the lover and beloved are knots at various points on that line of transmission and magnitude, which extends infinitely and

converges in all directions. As knots, lovers may seem physically bound to a particular time and space, whereas the libido remains unburdened by the spatio-temporal, free to traverse the cosmos.

Considering the orientation of lovers in this manner, as in-between or liminal, positions the subject as passive in relation to the libido. The libido, therefore, is nonlocal—it lacks a specific place or distance; it happens upon the lovers in anticipation of their entangled futures. Entanglement then describes the consequence of nonlocality—whereby particles in relation to one another become permanently correlated and dependent on the other's states and properties. The lovers, in turn, begin to love through this sensual determination from the outside.

In the libidinal vector, lovers are akin to points in space, perceiving themselves as separated by a vast cosmic gulf. However, in reality, they are indistinguishable, interchangeable, anonymous, and generic—a complex interplay reflected in the entangled nature of quantum particles. With the self removed, it is as though the body is open and porous, hollowed out for desire to surge through, connecting one discrete form to the next, collapsing the differences between self and other for the sake of an inessential commonality. Essencelessness. The senses take precedence over identity; the body reverts to the polymorphous perversity of the infant—an unelaborated attention to sensual aesthetics. This is the radical passivity of sacrifice, mystical experience, and the alterity of the innermost interiority of being, which is entirely impersonal and cosmic in scale. A tearing apart of individuated being.

Fungal Whateverbeings: Commingling Desire

Agamben's speculative ‘coming community’ envisions the libido beyond the anthropocentric lens, leaning toward a generic commonality or "a condition of belonging" (1993, 16). In essence, the libido is cosmic and inherently ecological. Similarly, eros—the surplus of desire—represents an entanglement of inessential commonalities and infinite potentialities that surpass individual subjects and species. This prompts the question: How might our anthropocentric libidos experience desire when it moves beyond a self-oriented perspective, independent of identity and human-centric views, emerging instead as inherently unhuman and devoid of essence?

If libido can be understood as an erotic, cosmic vector that "cuts across species, territories, categories, and scenarios," (Pettman 2020, 68) then to desire is to reach out and encounter the threshold of the outside. It is to desire a whateverbeing comprised of whatever while being oneself 'whatever.' Agamben articulates that "whatever is the thing with all its properties, none of which, however, constitutes difference" (1993, 19). To exemplify this concept, he refers to the human face, asserting that 'whatever' is neither the individuation of generic faces nor the universalization of singular traits (Agamben 1993).

With its emphasis on indifference, Agamben's 'whatever' expands the potential of desire beyond human conception, transcending human-to-human love (1993). It allows for contemplating alternative desiring modes involving other species and life forms that can both desire and be desired. By shedding our essence and embracing whateverbeing, we may open ourselves to new, overlooked, and displaced forms of care. This transition invites us to explore the ecological as a model for understanding the potential of desire to surpass the confines of the self. The planet transforms into an erotic and uncanny non-place where humans confront their artificiality and discontinuity, compelling a reorientation towards the external, the other. In this context, Earth becomes a geological erogenous zone, wherein the libido, in its myriad forms, pulses through, encountering and connecting discrete beings.

Consider the mycorrhiza, a specialized network operating subtly beneath the forest floor, fostering a symbiotic relationship between fungi and plant roots. In this intricate system, plants, particularly trees, rely on a complex network of fungi, encompassing both the fruiting bodies and mycelial threads that sprawl rhizomatically beneath the soil. These fungal networks entwine around plant roots, facilitating the absorption and processing of vital nutrients from the earth. The mycorrhiza, essentially a network of interconnected fibers, acts as a conduit, directing these essential resources to the trees, which cannot perform this function independently. In return, the trees provide the fungi with the sugars and carbon generated through photosynthesis.

The outcome of this reciprocal exchange exemplifies an intimate yet impersonal network of care. Contemplating the mycorrhiza network draws analogies to desiring the generic beloved amidst the complexities of the relationship between self and other. In *Entangled Life*, a comprehensive exploration of the mycological realm as a model for alternative intelligence and futures, Merlin Sheldrake (2020) articulates the intricate and mutable subject-object relationship of mycelium with elusive precision: "From the point of view of the network, mycelium is a single interconnected entity. From the point of view of a hyphal tip, mycelium is a multitude" (47).

Sheldrake (2020) further clarifies: "Mycelium is a body without a body plan" (49). It constitutes an entity that is simultaneously singular (comprising hyphae and fruiting body) and plural (encompassing interstitial connective tissue, interwoven frenetic fibers), perpetually existing beyond its boundaries, navigating past its subject limits to engage with lovers across different species. In this analogy, mycelium networks mirror the libido as an erotic vector, with the fruiting bodies of fungi, along with the plants and other species encountered, representing the so-called 'knots:' the lovers and beloveds.

"Mycelium is how fungi feed" (Sheldrake 2020, 47); in other words, how they desire. The libido, seen as a form of metaphysical hunger, transcends simple nourishment—it embodies expenditure. Per Bernard Stiegler: "If consummation is that which destroys its object, libido is to the contrary that which, as desire and not as drive, that, as the sublimation intrinsic to desire, *takes care* of its object" (2012, 114 emphasis original). For fungi, this libidinal process is transformative rather than destructive. Through the acts of expenditure—decomposition, metabolic chemical transformations, and the dispersal of spores—fungi not only consume but also protect and transform their environment. They absorb and are absorbed by their surroundings, deciding post-encounter whether to integrate or bypass. This results in the emergence of mycelial networks as sites of lavish expenditure, where fungal hyphae extend and intertwine, producing not just mycelium and fruiting bodies but also generating enticing aromas, providing sustenance for other organisms, and even creating substances like ink for artistic use when allowed to decay. In this way, fungi operate as ecological desiring machines—an eroticism that is technological, transformative, and generic in its desire.

Unlike human animals and many other species that actively navigate the world in pursuit of food to consume, fungi adopt a different approach: they "put their bodies in the food" (Sheldrake 2020, 51). That is to say, the world comes into contact with fungi, which then "weave themselves through the gaps" of the desired object, settling within plant species until "they are as much a part of planthood as leaves or roots" (Sheldrake, 2020, 6). In this way, fungal desire is impersonal and anonymous, capable of protecting the solitude of the plant (such as defending the plant against disease) while forever altering its composition physically and ontologically. Additionally, fungal desire is sacrificial—by feeding and reaching out to their object of desire, they, too, are fundamentally and irrevocably altered.

Indeed, fungi are whateverbeings—the discontinuous fruiting body and entangled streams of embodiment. Their individuation is not a fixed point but a continual generation process characterized by continuous growth, recession, appropriation, and impropriation along a substantial line. The image of the line is not arbitrary; it signifies a gradation in every direction. With long and branched hyphae that penetrate the roots of plants, the more of the world the hyphae can reach out toward, the more it can consume, and the more life spreads.

The hyphae of the mycelial network are the most invasive of lovers; they decant themselves into their environment and shape themselves to fit within their beloved, regardless of species. The movements and feeding behaviors of the mycelial network and the fungal fruiting body stand in for an indiscriminate potential love plot. Eros is engendered when dissimilar species encounter each other, establish connections, intertwine, and generously care for one another.

According to Lingis (1998), our intimate connections with animals are often overlooked, leading us to falsely believe that our affections are limited to the human sphere. Lingis points to various instances, from caressing a hen to riding a horse, as profoundly intimate interactions. By stating that when making love with humans, "we also make love with the horse and the calf, the kitten and the cockatoo, the powdery moths, and the lustful crickets," Lingis (1998, 63) highlights the expansive nature of genuine intimacy, challenging our tendency to narrowly define it within human boundaries.

Lingis (1998) focuses primarily on connections with fellow creaturely beings, a concept more easily grasped than an erotic relationship with fungi. However, I argue that such an erotic connection can be expanded to both organic life and the inorganic, embracing various movements and durations—fungal, botanical, climatological, geological, or technological. Perhaps, as we navigate the Anthropocene, this shift in understanding becomes imperative.

For Lingis, "orgasm proceeds by decomposition of the competent body," suggesting an inherent eroticism in rot (1998, 63). The mycological process of rot and decay by fungi exemplifies such potent eroticism. If an ecological phenomenon such as mycorrhiza can serve as a paradigm for a libidinal ecology characterized by perpetual entanglement—always beyond the human, where the beloved is inherently generic, and intimacy is inherently impersonal—what unfolds when we extend this sensuous and planetary understanding to human experiences? Can we imagine ourselves not as an exceptional species separate from the nonhuman world but as having never been human, always durations of a planetary movement?

Erotic Decay

Agamben (1993, 10) would note that "[T]his life is purely linguistic life. Only life in the word is undefinable and unforgettable" and, as such, reliant on the empty space of the example. Let us develop the exemplary language necessary to conceptualize a desire that does not require the distinctions of self and other, which loves prior to the formulation of either, but wherein our discontinuity remains intact. As 'linguistic beings,' we can unarticulate that self (Agamben 1993). This entails a linguistics of decay, an eroticism of rot, akin to the material language used by medieval Christian female mystics in expressing their encounters with Divine Love, and which shares a profound fascination with highlighting the beauty inherent in death.

For instance, the curious intimacy of fungal decay and the mystical language of an apophatic un-saying can be found throughout Jenny Hval's novel *Paradise Rot* (2018), wherein Jo, a young Norwegian exchange student, moves into a former brewery in Australia. Due to its former status, the apartment continues to ferment—humid and replete with insects, mildew, ripened fruit, and compost. The brewery's rot imbues and mutates everything it touches; "raw and porous" (Hval 2018, 33). Here, Jo shares the space with another woman named Carral, who seems peculiarly fungal. In their initial encounter, Jo recounts hearing Carral urinate in the bathroom while their conversation persists, with the "paper-thin walls" accentuating the sound of "crumpled tissue rubbing against skin" (Hval 2018, 28). Indeed, Carral is without well defined boundaries, social and bodily. She is often sick and somnambulistic, excreting bodily fluids and lethargically meandering around the apartment, sleeping upright around the mezzanine as if she were in the process of zymosis.

The more time the two women spend together in the brewery's fermentation, the more entangled they become and the more mycological they behave. During one summer, the apartment becomes a host to other-than-human life, with "yellow moss patches," "white spiders," and "crawling maggots" living alongside the two women, who offer no resistance to their presence (Hval 2018, 102). At the same time, Jo begins to wake to Carral next to her in bed, "moist and milky" (Hval 2018, 103). She notes, "Sometimes I was sure I could feel little sprouts appear under the skin where she'd breathed" (Hval 2018, 103).

The brewery manifests as the erotic being-in-potentia where subjectivity can collapse, much like the anchoress cell or the forest floor—it represents a liminality between the so-called libidinal economy and a libidinal ecology. Here, the senses are foregrounded; the world becomes that which one encounters sensually and which, in turn, acts upon the body. With such astute attention to the sensuous, every encounter becomes an erotic, intimate act, even without being explicitly sexual. Even existing in a room together holds the potential for cultivating desire if one is paying attention—as Jo always is.

Reserved by nature, Jo, as a narrator, often assumes the position of the detached other, even within herself, an outside observer. Indeed, a biologist major, Jo exudes curiosity and objectivity—Carral is like the fungus Jo studies in her university's lab:

> She was wearing that thin pale-yellow wool sweater again. The yellow was so close to her skin tone and hair that she seemed naked, a sexless, matted nakedness. I cut the yolk from my fried egg and put it in my mouth. The yolk burst under my tongue, and I imagined it was her skin I was tasting, but she didn't move, just continued to twirl a finger in her ponytail, looking down at the novel opened in front of her. I licked the sticky yellow from my teeth (Hval 2018, 48–49).

Jo's frequent observations of her roommate carry a discernible erotic undertone, suggesting that naming the sensual and tactile aspects of Carral leads to a reciprocal feeling within Jo—an inherent aspect of desire. The crucial element here, however, is the impersonal intimacy and generic nature of the exchange. Jo's desire for Carral is mediated by the senses, beginning with color, then extending into touch, taste, smell, sight, and taste—an intricate synesthesia of the libido. This connection doesn't necessitate physical contact or deep knowledge of each other as individuals; rather, it involves an intimate entanglement through synthesizing the senses, bridging the gap between forms.

Eventually, Carral begins sleeping in Jo's bed at night, and the two lovers' forms commingle: hip bones stick to thighs, and damp beads of sweat, blood, and urine soak their sheets. Hval doesn't assign a negative value to this codependent decay; instead, she allows it to fester, reach out, feed, and transform. Compare this with an example from the female Christian mystic Angela of Foligno (ca. 1248–1309), who recounts drinking Christ's blood from his wound in her itinerary, *The Memorial.*

> Christ on the cross appeared more clearly to me while I was awake, that is to say, he gave me an even greater awareness of himself than before. He then called me to place my mouth to the wound in his side. It seemed to me that I saw and drank the blood, which was freshly flowing from his side. His intention was to make me understand that by this blood he would cleanse me. And at this I began to experience a great joy, although when I thought about the passion I was still filled with sadness (Foligno 1993, 127).

Through the exchange of fluids, Angela assumes a greater intimacy with Christ, allowing Him entrance to her ("he would cleanse me"). Jo experiences these intimacies upon waking to Carral's urine, sweat, and blood. What was inside Carral now extends to Jo, who, in reciprocation, allows herself to be punctured ("cleansed") by the other's excretion of their interiority (127).

Carral is the fungus, and it is Jo who rots and is cleansed: "So I lay there for a while as the pee soaked into my mattress…I continued to stroke Carral's body, first her cheek, puffy and wet, and then her hand. Then I was braver, stroking her naked back, letting my fingers walk her ribs like rungs on a ladder up to her throat" (Hval 2018, 97). Consider also the processes of fungal decay, wherein hyphae penetrate the decomposing body or the nutrient-lacking plant and deposit their fluid. Decay is the poetics of whateverbeing.

When Jo wakes to find Carral's urine soaking her clothes and dampening her skin, she appears indifferent, untroubled by what others might find unsettling or grotesque. Instead, this occurrence seems to draw Jo closer to Carral, as if her roommate's bedwetting is an extension of her own bodily fluids. For Hval (2018), decomposition holds the promise of potential being; it assimilates subjectivity to sustain a libidinal charge and generate more desire. Much like fungal hyphae, the lovers transcend the limits of their bodies, becoming anonymous and impersonal, dispersed between one another and throughout the brewery. Jo describes this entanglement: "Then there's a rush through me, her stalks and fingers and veins spread through my entire body like a new soft skeleton" (Hval 2018, 134).

These themes culminate in a dream Jo has near the end of the novel, just before she and Carral have sex for the first time. She dreams of two women whose bodies have morphed together, necks twisted around each other, faces obscured, and

identities inscrutable. The only thing that separates them is the cracks remaining from when they were singular, which are "covered in white mould fur, as if they shared a skin woven around them" (Hval 2018, 135).

Despite their mutations, the women are two and one. They exist separately and together—are both/and. As per Jean-Luc Nancy (2000), they embody 'being singular plural.' For Nancy (2000) this means that "Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one another, circulating *in the with* and *as the with* of this singularly plural coexistence (3). The gap, the cracks stitched together in white mold, binds them in this eternal unfolding as self and other, so eternal that it becomes irrelevant to distinguish between what form one takes in whatever moment. The women could be anyone—they are generic, and their identities mean little to warrant their libidinal commingling. But the mold, the threadbare mycelial networks, the desire, is the irrevocable constant. One woman then says to the other:

> I'll tell you the fairy tale of the apple. Eve ate the apple, and then Adam came and did so too. Afterwards the apple was forgotten, and it was assumed that it rolled away in the grass while Adam and Eve were chased out of the garden. But that's not true, because secretly the apple rolled in between Eve's legs, scratched open her flesh and burrowed into her crotch. It stayed there with the white bite marks facing out, and after a while the fruit-flesh started to shrivel, and mould threads grew from the edges of the peel. The mould threads became pubic hair and the bite mark became the slit between the labia. Soon all of Eden followed the apple's example and started to decompose and rot, and since then this has happened in all gardens and everything in nature, and honey mushrooms came into existence, and rot and parasites and beetles arose. But the apple was first, and it never stops rotting, it just gets blacker. The apple has no end, just like this fairy tale (Hval 2018, 136).

In Hval's fairy tale, the eternally rotting apple of Eden is desire—the means by which a libidinal ecology unfurls (2018). This decay embodies an impersonal form of eroticism that, rather than destroying, transmutes the object of desire through continuous expenditure. Eve eats the apple and as such becomes entangled with its mold threads and decaying flesh—she puts her body in the food, her body becomes the food. Hval places desire as fundamentally unhuman and the beloved as generic—a body to imbue with life, a self to decompose; "a black, dead and rotten fruit" (Hval 2018, 140).

The Anonymous Network of the Beloved

Ultimately, a libidinal ecology is profoundly uninterested in qualities; instead, it desires sensuous beings. It wants to *feel*. It is a little hedonistic. In this context, the beloved is whatever, existing wherever and whenever. They are generic—universal, belonging to everyone and no one. Acephalic, they wear myriad prosthetic faces devoid of a fixed identity. They embody both mystic and mycelium, the Divine and the fruiting body. Rather than scattered in qualities across the globe, they are dispersed in form, an infinite potentiality of presence. The acknowledgment of their unknowability, their incommensurability, establishes a connection to the lover. They are entangled through the gulf between them, bound by the libido that manifests. The generic entices, holding the potential of the libidinal ecology in a digital world increasingly filled with commodified digital selves, estranged from their own libidos, perpetually gazing at their mirror image.

It appears evident that reverting to a pre-digitized self is unlikely. We will most likely never return to nature as a veritable garden of Eden (nor should we want to!) The Internet is here to stay; we will persist in dispersing ourselves across the wired globe and syncing to the cloud. But perhaps there is a being-in-potentia not yet explored in this digital landscape. One more attuned to a symbiosis with the natural world rather than an estrangement. Perhaps we might look toward nonhuman ways of connecting while scattered in all directions, throughout time, non-localized lovers, whateverbeings.

Sheldrake explains that "a mycelial network has no head and no brain" (2020, 86). Fungi are decentralized, and control is dispersed. Because mycelial coordination takes place "everywhere at once and nowhere in particular," mycelium fragments can break off and generate novel networks. This means that in fungal erotics, the beloved is constantly reassembling itself and is "potentially immortal." (Sheldrake 2020, 86).

The mycelial network has often been metaphorically likened to the Internet, humorously called the "Wood Wide Web." However, this comparison is frequently confined to the conceptual realm and lacks tangible substance. While the digital is commonly perceived as existing in the ethereal "cyberspace," the Internet has a

physical infrastructure. It comprises interconnected submarine fiber optic cables spanning the globe, satellites in low-earth orbit, and various hardware components such as routers and modems.

In short, the Internet forms a physical and virtual structure upon the planet, and the digital realm is only one aspect of a very physical, tangible entity intimately connected to the natural world. Only our libido has for so long been co-opted by the seductive virtuality of an alternate world of risk and exceptionalism that rewards our narcissism. As such, we have forgotten how cosmically entangled the digital is with the planet. Indeed, that technology is an extension of an already-present planetary sensuality that communicates with us, senses us, feels us, and *desires* us—no matter who or what we are. We need only pay attention to the planet's libidinal pulse, reorient our senses to its unhuman desire, and submit to the seduction of the generic beloved.

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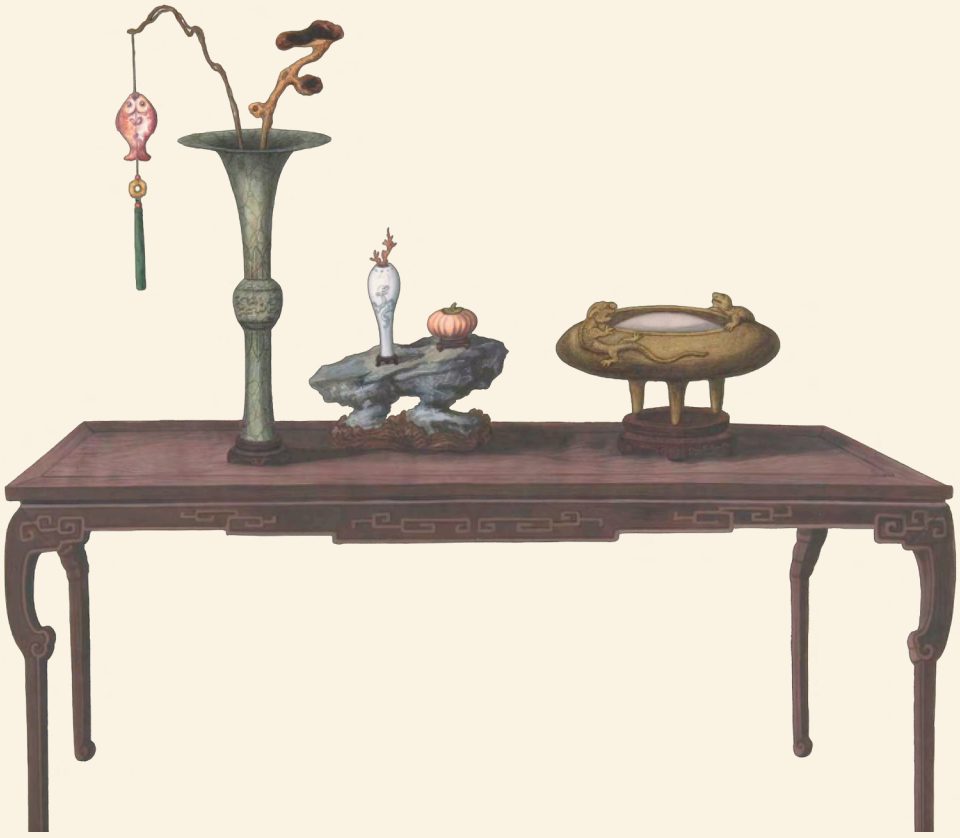
Long Dark Table with Decorative Objects,
Anonymous, 19th century, Public Domain



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REMARKS ON PLANT SENTIENCE

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This essay is about plant sentience. I look at recent scientific evidence for the existence of plant sentience; and then I consider its implications and speculative consequences. Human exceptionalism, once taken for granted in the post-Enlightenment West, has increasingly come into question in recent years, as a result of both scientific research into the cognitive abilities of other organisms, and our increasing realization that we will only be able to survive climate catastrophe if we take into account the needs of the nonhuman organisms, and even the nonliving entities, with whom we share our planet, and whose actions and whose fate are intertwined with our own. The sentience at least of larger nonhuman animals—their cognitive abilities, as well as their vulnerability or capacity to suffer—is today largely accepted. But this sort of recognition still needs to be extended to other forms of life.

My discussion has two parts. In the first part, I look at recent scientific research dealing with questions of plant sentience. In the second part, I suggest how what I am calling sentience is related to cognition, to affect, and to consciousness.

1. Plant Neurobiology

In the early twenty-first century, a number of biologists have turned to the study of what they call *plant neurobiology* (Baluška and Mancuso 2009). This term remains controversial, since plants do not have neurons (nerve cells) or brains; many biologists have argued that, on this ground alone, the term is a misnomer, and is at best highly misleading (Alpi et al. 2007). Nonetheless, nearly a century

and a half ago, Darwin (1880) himself argued that, even though plants "do not of course possess nerves or a central nervous system" in the way that most animals do, nonetheless the "tip of the radicle" (underground root endings) in plants "acts like the brain of one of the lower animals… receiving impressions from the sense-organs, and directing their several movements" (297). Some contemporary biologists see these claims as involving sloppy analogical reasoning, in a way that is overly anthropomorphic (Taiz et al. 2019). But others have taken up and expanded Darwin's claims, suggesting that it is less a matter of conceiving plants in human terms than one of simply recognizing that sentience is more widespread, and that human beings have more affinities with other living organisms than we are usually willing to admit (Baluška, Mancuso, Volkmann and Barlow 2009).

The existence of cognition and intelligence in plants is plausible on a physiological level. Although plants lack neurons, the same neurochemicals active in animal neurons also mediate exchanges among cells in many plants (Cao et al. 2006). Plant cells also affect one another electronically, just as animal nerve cells do, by building up and discharging action potentials across cellular membranes (Fromm and Lautner 2007). The difference between plants and animals in this regard is that, where animals have evolved a particular cell type—the neuron—that is dedicated to these electrochemical processes, plants have not. Instead, this sort of signaling takes place more diffusely, but also more widely, among all different sorts of plant cells. Once again, it was Darwin (1880) who first speculated that animal nerve cells do not qualitatively change what organisms are capable of, but only amplify capabilities that already exist: "we may infer that with animals such structures serve only for the more perfect transmission of impressions, and for the more complete intercommunication of the several parts" (297).

Darwin, of course, did not know the micro-details of cellular functioning in the way that we do now; but his intuitions were sound. In general, plants are less internally differentiated than animals are; they do not have as many distinct types of organs and tissues as animals do. The result is that many capacities for which animals have developed specialized organs or tissues remain more generally available, if less acutely developed, for the entire plant. In the words of Stefano Mancuso (2015), "evolution has given plants a modular structure, not concentrating functions in individual organs but distributing them in the entire living being" (Mancuso and Viola 2015, 131).

In addition, while the rigid separation between soma and germ lines is essential to animal life, such a distinction does not exist for plants. Rather, as Francis Hallé (2002) puts it, "plants have germ and soma together, switching back and forth between the two" (217). This is why plants do not have their genital organs fixed in a specific location; any stem of a plant can produce flowers for reproduction, as well as leaves for photosynthesis. We can say literally about the plant what Luce Irigaray (1985) said metaphorically about Woman in contrast to Man: that it "has sex organs more or less everywhere" (28). Where stem cells are differentiated quite early in animal embryogenesis, plants maintain meristematic cells—undifferentiated stem cells that can generate all the different tissue types—for their entire lives (Hallé 2002, 217). These meristematic cells can accumulate and pass on mutations, so that so-called Lamarckian inheritance is not impossible for plants in the way that it is for animals. Moreover, even without mutations, meristematic cells can selectively switch genes on and off in order to generate new cellular types when the need arises.

In sum, the biological preconditions for cognition exist in plants as well as in animals. And there is increasing evidence that plant cognition does exist in practice. Plants, no less than animals, exhibit complex cognitive behavior. Obviously, plants cannot flee to another location, as animals do, when they are under threat. But for this very reason, Daniel Chamovitz (2012) writes, "plants have evolved complex sensory and regulatory systems that allow them to modulate their growth in response to ever-changing conditions" (4). This means both that "plants are acutely aware of the world around them" (Chamovitz 2012, 170), and that they respond flexibly, rather than mechanistically or stereotypically, to the situations that they encounter. Plants are continually making real-time decisions that are spontaneous and not preprogrammed (Gruntman et al. 2017). Their "risk sensitivity" is acute; they switch "between risk proneness and risk aversion" depending upon external circumstances, and they "generate flexible and impressively complex responses through 'decision' processes embedded in their physiological architecture" (Dener et al. 2016).

All in all, the life activity of plants involves "the acquisition and processing of information," together with "trade-offs, cost–benefit assessments and decision making" (Trewavas 2009). Plants engage in reality testing. They initiate actions on the basis of what they discover about their environment. They are able both to respond flexibly to the demands of the environment, and to modify that environment in various ways. Plant sentience thus not only rests on the same electrochemical basis as animal sentience, but also exhibits many of the same cognitive processes that are seen in animals with brains and neurons. The neurobiologist Björn Brembs (2011), referring specifically to his work on fruit flies,

asserts that "one common ability of most if not all brains is to choose among different behavioral options even in the absence of differences in the environment and perform genuinely novel acts" (930). But this seems to hold equally well for brainless biological organisms such as plants. It even holds for protists like slime molds, as I have discussed elsewhere (Shaviro 2016, 193–215).

There is negative as well as positive evidence for plant sentience. The various anesthetics that extinguish consciousness and inhibit neural functioning in human beings and other animals also disrupt many forms of life activity in plants (Yokawa, Kagenishi and Baluška 2019). In fact, "all life can be anesthesized," including "even prokaryotic bacteria" and "sub-cellular organelles such as mitochondria and chloroplasts" (Baluška, Yokawa, Mancuso, and Baverstock 2016, 1). Surprisingly, there is still no generally accepted scientific explanation for how anesthetics work (Baluška, Yokawa, Mancuso, and Baverstock 2016), nor for why so many chemically dissimilar substances function equally well as anesthetics (Yokawa, Kagenishi and Baluška 2019). The extremely rapid onset of anesthesia, and the equally rapid "recovery of consciousness" once the anesthetic substances have been removed, is also not well understood (Baluška, Yokawa, Mancuso, and Baverstock 2016). It does seem, however, that, when anesthetics are administered, "*purposeful* behavior" is disrupted first, while lower-level autonomic processes require larger doses in order to be suppressed (Baluška, Yokawa, Mancuso, and Baverstock 2016).

In addition to being susceptible to externally introduced anesthetics, plants also manufacture anesthetics themselves. Indeed, plants release "volatiles including well-known anesthetics… in such large amounts that they have a strong impact on the Earth's biosphere and atmosphere" (2). This is a general phenomenon but "algae and plants release these substances especially if under stress" (Baluška, Yokawa, Mancuso, and Baverstock 2016, 2). Plants use these volatiles both to defend themselves against predators, and to entice animals to help fertilize and spread their seeds. In addition, plants sometimes use the volatiles that they manufacture in order to anesthetize themselves. Is this a vegetal form of self-medication? The plant neurobiologists suggest that the ability to induce "transient loss of consciousness apparently has relevance to survival" for all biological organisms (Baluška, Yokawa, Mancuso, and Baverstock 2016, 2). But if plants can suppress their own sensibility in certain circumstances, does this mean that they are conscious under normal conditions, and that they are capable of feeling pain?

2. Sentience, Cognition, and Affect

None of this has been established beyond dispute. There is still no full scientific consensus. Opponents of the "plant neurobiology" approach argue that plants cannot possibly be conscious, since they lack the physical substrate (neurons and brains) required for consciousness. According to these biologists, "the actions of anesthetics [in plants] can be explained as mere biochemical and biophysical effects" (Draghun et al 2020, 246). It is crucial, they say, "to distinguish the general effects of anesthetics, which likely apply to all living matter, from the specific effects on neuronal mechanisms in the brain of humans and animals" (240). Similarly, they concede that all living organisms exhibit an "avoidance response" when confronted with dangers in their environment. But they argue that, in brainless organisms, this is "a merely physiological adaptation" that must be sharply distinguished from the actual feeling of pain (Draghun et al 2020, 243).

It seems to me, however, that this sort of argument is a product of circular reasoning. It starts out by already assuming what it then claims to prove. The argument is grounded in what the defenders of plant sentience disparage as the "cerebrocentric postulate" that "a relatively complex nervous system is essential for consciousness" (Trewavas et al 2020, 1)). But why should we accept this postulate? As I have already suggested, particular animal cell types do not produce entirely new capacities, so much as they amplify, or give a more finely articulated form to, life processes that already exist in other organisms. It makes little sense to reject the evidence for plant sentience on the grounds that we already know that plants *cannot* be sentient. To argue that plants' responses to signs of danger, and their susceptibility to anesthetics, are 'mere' physical reactions, rather than mental ones, is simply to play with words. The disparaging use of the word *mere* is often a giveaway of these sorts of stacked arguments.

Those biologists who, on the other hand, support the existence of plant sentience, or even of "plant neurobiology," are engaged in what Jessica Riskin (2016) calls "a dialectical tradition at the heart of scientific explanations of life and mind: one that has sought to naturalize agency rather than eradicating it from scientific explanation" (373). Modern biology has for the most part denied any sort of agency to biological entities, and sought to explain even the unquestionably purposive behavior of living organisms in "mere" physical terms. But this position has become harder to maintain in recent years, for at least two reasons. In the first place, the growth of evolutionary developmental biology (evo-devo) in the twenty-first century means that biologists have started to pay greater attention to epigenetic changes that, as Riskin (2016) puts it, "do not occur only randomly, but can

happen in response to conditions and events in the lives of individual organisms" (358). In the second place, more and more traits associated with mental categories like intention and purpose have proven not to be unique to human beings, but to be present in many other species as well. Some biologists have sought to hold the line in this regard by arguing, for instance, that "vertebrates, arthropods, and cephalopods are the only conscious organisms… plants are not included" (Mallatt et al 2020, 12). But the line keeps on being pushed further and further back, to the point where it now seems that all living organisms are endowed with at least some measure of sentience.

I take it as well established, therefore, that plants (and other non-animal life forms as well) do in fact engage in some sort of *cognitive activity*: the flexible, intelligent manipulation of information. N. Katherine Hayles (2017) defines *cognition* as "a process that interprets information within contexts that connect it with meaning"; understood in this way, cognition is "inseparable from choice, meaning, and interpretation" (29). Cognition is therefore qualitatively different from other physical and physiological processes, even though it is ultimately dependent upon them. All living organisms make decisions and interpret signs; these activities cannot be reduced to the status of "mere biochemical and biophysical effects."

However—and this is an important reservation—cognition does not necessarily involve anything like what we understand as *consciousness*. Even in human beings—let alone in less neurally complex organisms—cognitive activity extends well beyond the reach of consciousness, or better takes place beneath the threshold of conscious awareness. This is true not only for autonomic processes, but also for many more complex ones. Modern research substantiates Alfred North Whitehead's (1978) intuition that "mental operations do not necessarily involve consciousness" (85). Hayles (2017) explores in great detail what she calls "the cognitive nonconscious"; she argues that nonconscious cognition takes place in all biological organisms, and probably in some nonliving "technical systems" as well (26). It is for this reason that I prefer to speak of *plant sentience* – rather than plant consciousness (as the plant neurobiology people sometimes do).

Hayles (2021) maps out, in great detail, the extent of nonconscious cognition not only in human beings, but also in organisms such as bacteria. However, Hayles is far less willing to grasp nonconscious mental processes in affective as well as

cognitive terms. This is where I part company with her. Hayles explicitly rejects the proposals of "new materialist" thinkers—mostly feminists influenced by Gilles Deleuze—such as Luciana Parisi (2004), Elizabeth Grosz (2011), Rosi Braidotti (2013), and Jane Bennett (2010). For instance, Hayles (2017) regards Braidotti's attempt at "approaching the world through affectivity and not cognition" as untenable, since "only cognition" can differentiate among alternatives in such a way as to make choice meaningful rather than random (79). Hayles (2017) worries that, in their eagerness to affirm the overwhelming affective potency of matter, the new materialists tend to ignore "distinctions between different kinds of material processes" (81). In particular, she accuses these thinkers of failing adequately to distinguish:

> between material forces that can adequately be treated through deterministic methods, forces that are nonlinear and far from equilibrium and hence unpredictable in their evolution, the subset of these that are recursively structured in such a way that life can emerge, and the yet smaller set of processes that lead to and directly support cognition. (Hayles 2017, 81)

We might well add to this hierarchical ordering yet another recursive level: that of the even smaller subset of cognitive processes that are actually conscious.

It still seems to me, however, that Hayles is too quick to understand these nested processes exclusively in informatic, and hence cognitive, terms. Hayles (1999) has taught us, better than anyone, that information always has a body; she has long insisted that it is nonsense to conceive information, as certain Silicon Valley enthusiasts do, "as an entity separate from the material forms in which it is thought to be embedded" (2). But despite this, Hayles does not say nearly enough about the physical and energetic processes that underlie and drive any production or exchange of information. She knows that these exchanges "are the underlying forces that nourish and give rise to life"; but she also reminds us that such forces, in and of themselves, cannot "make choices and perform interpretations. A tornado cannot choose to plow through a field rather than devastate a town" (Hayles 2017, 31).

This is not wrong, but it is incomplete. A tornado is on the second level of Hayles' hierarchy: it is nonlinear and far from equilibrium, but not animate. Therefore, it cannot 'change its mind', parsing its surroundings in order to make a choice as to its route—whereas even a bacterium regularly does things like this, as it senses its surroundings and chooses the route of "swimming up a glucose gradient" (Tomlinson 2016). But even a nonlinear dynamic process like a tornado is already a self-organized "dissipative system" that seeks to reduce energy gradients as fully

as possible—as Eric D. Schneider and Dorion Sagan explain (Schneider and Sagan 2005). The jump from the second to the third level in Hayles' hierarchy is not as vast as she seems to imply. Jeremy England, much like Schneider and Sagan, hypothesizes that life processes arise through "dissipation-driven adaptations", and a tornado is already a very simple instance of such adaptations (Wolchover 2014).

In other words, even the tornado's nonlinear process of organization is already a sort of choice or decision: a movement that posits and aims toward a particular end, the dissipation of energy. Of course, the 'decision' implicit in the tornado evidently differs from living organisms' cognitive decisions in terms of scale and degree of complexity. Biological systems are far more complex than tornadoes, far more hierarchically recursive, and therefore far more intricately purposive. But this is still a matter of degree, and not an absolute difference of kind. Biological systems, no less than inorganic ones, are driven by energetic constraints. These constraints are the underlying conditions of possibility, as Kant might say, that are necessary in order for cognition to exist at all. But they are also the impulsions that provoke cognitive activity, or that get it started. Schneider and Sagan (2005) tell us that living entities strive to perpetuate their own existence—they are internally negentropic, as Erwin Schrödinger (1944) first noted—precisely in order to degrade free energy in their surroundings. That is to say, life works to magnify expenditure (as Georges Bataille (1991) might put it), or,as Schneider and Sagan (2005) phrase it, to extend the processes of reducing energy gradients.

My general point, therefore, is that material processes in general—and life activities in particular, as the most hypertrophied instances of these processes—need to be understood in terms of energetics as well as informatics. Neither of these dimensions is reducible to the other, and neither can exist without the other. Cognition involves the collating and parsing of information. But the processing of this information—its production, transduction, recognition, and alteration—itself depends upon continuing flows of energy, which form, inform, transform, and deform living matter. Living entities themselves only persist—maintaining homeostasis, but also growing and declining—in and through dynamic, far-from-equilibrium processes of energetic accumulation and expenditure. In Schneider and Sagan's (2005) terms, "nature abhors a gradient," as the Second Law of Thermodynamics tells us. "The growth of complex, intelligent life can be directly traced to the effectiveness of life as a cycling material system adept at reducing gradients" in the world around them (Schneider and Sagan 2005, 258).

These energetic processes, which subtend the very possibility of cognition, are themselves affective rather than cognitive—understanding the word *affect* both in the Spinozian and Deleuzian sense of bodies that affect, and are affected by, the other bodies that they encounter, and also in the more limited sense of feelings and emotions. Living organisms strive not just to maintain themselves (Spinoza's *conatus*), but also to flourish. As Whitehead (1929) puts it, living beings "are actively engaged in modifying their environment"(8). Every living organism therefore displays

> a three-fold urge: (i) to live, (ii) to live well, (iii) to live better. In fact the art of life is first to be alive, secondly to be alive in a satisfactory way, and thirdly to acquire an increase in satisfaction (Whitehead 1929, 8).

Without this "three-fold urge," cognition would never start up in the first place. In order to take this into account, we need to combine Hayles' account of information and cognition with the new materialists' account of affect, and with the energetic approach pioneered by Schrödinger, and extended by Schneider and Sagan. Only in this way can we adequately approach questions of plant sentience—which must be understood in a thoroughly naturalistic context, but without the reductionism and eliminativism that so often plague naturalistic accounts of life, and especially of mind.

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Cringe (adapted from Wendy Truran)

EMPATHY TRIVIALIZED: CRINGE AND DEHUMANIZATION

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ABSTRACT
Cringe compilations on YouTube are discussed as a vector for the construction of dehumanizing affective associations with marginalized groups. The affective reaction most focused on is dismell, particularly in the context of cringe-contempt. The comment section of two differing YouTube cringe compilations targetted against LGBTQ+ people are examined, one with a host that reacts to the 'cringe' clips and one without a host. Results indicate that cringe compilations without a host to model dehumanizing affective associations for the audience caused significantly less audience alignment with the dehumanizing intent of the compilation.

KEYWORDS
YouTube, cringe, affect theory, LGBTQ+, dehumanization

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The term 'cringe' has become a popular term on the Internet (Madison 2022). The word has extremely broad applicability. It can be used as an adjective (a cringy video), a verb (I cringed at that performance), and a noun (that suit is cringe). Linguistically, it is meant to evoke a sense of second-hand shame, embarrassment, and humiliation in response to a threat to another's social standing (Muller-Pinzler, et al. 2015). Yet, I would argue that the cringe label as used online is also meant to define the subject as an object of contempt. While research has shown there are significant pro-social applications of the emotions associated with the 'cringe' sensation, such as empathic reaction towards witnessed social harm (Smith 2021; Jones 2022), I am most concerned with so-called hostile or weaponized cringe.

In this article, I will look at how 'cringe' is combined with a contemptuous affective reaction by reactionary content creators to dehumanize marginalized people and progressive ideologies. I will do so by explaining how this content creates and reinforces affective networks, the metaphorical economies within which feelings and memories 'stick' to the objects and concepts that we encounter in our daily lives, as described by Ahmed (2004). These creators can cause viewers to experience unpleasant visceral and emotional affects in reaction to the same or similar stimuli now and in the future, as well as recontextualize previous encounters with those stimuli in viewers' memories. Their goal is to encourage the dismissal of the humanity of marginalized people by deploying trivializing signifiers that do not conform to normative values or, in one case as we will see (Verma 2021), those who are acting excessively pridefully for their caste. These patterns reinforce unjust hierarchies and reactionary ideology. In this study, I explore two questions: How is the affect of cringe combined with contempt and mobilized against marginalized bodies and progressive ideologies in practice?; and, What factors predict greater audience alignment with cringe?

To answer these questions, I will examine how cringe is mobilized in social media, paying special attention to what is defined as cringe, and how that is communicated to the viewer using Isaac Butterfield's reaction video "THE MOST UNHINGED WOKE TIKTOKS" (June 6, 2023). This video covers themes and actions that are repeatedly shown within specific clips, such as the stereotypical image of the angry 'triggered liberal.' Other factors are external modifications to different clips. These external modifications include the insertion of sound and visuals that were not originally in the clip, or even audio and/or visual commentary from the uploader themselves to more precisely explain where the 'cringe' affective stimuli is located.

Cringe compilation success will be measured via sentiments expressed in the most highly-rated YouTube comments. For this study, a cringe compilation is defined as a video that is centered around a collection of different clips that are intended to trigger a cringe response. I will then compare the result to Verma's (2021) discussion of how the label of 'cringe' is used to dehumanize and dismiss the contributions of low-caste TikTok users and creators on TikTok prior to the platform being banned in India.[1]

I will be following Ahmed's (2004) theoretical framework, wherein emotions are socially defined practices that are experienced within the body, creating 'networks' of affect and stimuli that define socio-cultural norms. However, while emotions are socially defined, the shape of affective responses themselves exist preconsciously and become emotions when consciously observed. Thus, I will be using Tomkins' (2014) nine affective responses as a framework for describing the reactions that the examined content intends to trigger.

While, for Tomkins, affective reactions are instinctive, different stimuli trigger specific reactions that are socially and historically situated. These nine affects do not control behavior per se, instead they preconsciously prioritize what stimuli the conscious mind should focus on, as well as contextualize that stimuli. This is an important survival mechanism because we are constantly perceiving stimuli, thus we require some way to prioritize which stimuli to focus on. If that had to be done consciously then we would have no ability to act because we would constantly be 'sorting' new stimuli. Similarly, the preconscious contextualization done by affective reactions helps our bodies to become physiologically prepared for actions connected to that stimulus, (i.e., fight or flight reactions for an affective reaction of fear). The most important affective response for this examination of cringe is what Tomkins referred to as 'dissmell.'

Dissmell, Contempt, and Cringe

Dissmell is usually a reaction to noxious phenomena that should be avoided, such as the scent of rotten food or the sight of a rotting corpse. However, dissmell becomes contempt when combined with anger. Contempt is therefore an extreme form of repulsion and non-consumption of the offending phenomenon. This is closely related but distinct from disgust, a negative reaction to the consumption (metaphorical or otherwise) of undesirable phenomena. While the survival applicability of dissmell is

to encourage the removal of rotten food or other things that could be dangerous to ingest or remain in contact with, contempt, as dissmell's more complex derivative, is a useful affective reaction for processes of dehumanization. On an abstract level, this means that people who already associate signifiers of marginalized groups with that contempt/dissmell affect are motivated to dismiss the needs of those groups. This is usually done by turning away from the source of that stimuli, putting it out of one's mind. It does not necessarily lead to violence, although it can if the offending stimuli in some way refuses or is unable to vacate the sensory range of the person experiencing it.

It is important to note that while it is possible to experience dissmell without experiencing contempt, contempt cannot be experienced without its more nonconscious affective component: dissmell. This is because contempt requires the offending 'noxious' stimuli to also trigger an affective anger response. For a real-life example, while I may experience dissmell at encountering a loaf of moldy bread, I usually have very little reason to be angry at it. It is merely bread. However, if a person were to become identified as a noxious stimulus and that person (or a signifier thereof) continuously appeared in my perception, then I would experience both an anger and dissmell reaction toward them. This combination breeds contempt. It should also be noted that the term 'noxious' here covers not only something perceived as physically harmful or unpleasant, but also mentally and morally so, as well as being obnoxious (Merriam-Webster, 2024). This means that the dissmell/contempt response can be triggered by stimuli that is not physically present, yet still received via representative signs, such as through media.

This brings us, finally, to cringe to determine how that may be integrated with dissmell. While cringe is not one of Tomkins' (2014) nine basic affects, it still has some basis in his affect theory, through dissmell but also his concept of affective contagion. The reason why it has a basis within his affect theory is that all of Tomkin's nin preconscious affects are accompanied by involuntary physical responses that Tomkins found to be present even in extremely young infants. For example, dissmell is expressed through a wrinkling of the nose, and the upper lip and head pulled back from the source of the stimulus (The Tomkins Institute 2014). These physical reactions are moderated by social conditioning into more socially acceptable forms as people grow into adulthood, but they are still present.

Affective contagion is a phenomenon whereby perceiving an affective response in others causes one to vicariously experience that same affective response. We can see this as a key factor in the mechanics of empathy (in many ways, dissmell's alternate pathway) and how it helps to nonverbally motivate others in the vicinity in the preservation or removal (in the case of cringe/contempt) of the stimuli causing the affective response. Thus, if you see someone give the dissmell response, you will be more likely to ready yourself for encountering something unpleasant.

As will be discussed in the next section, the involuntary bodily movement that is defined by the verb 'cringe' accompanies an empathic response to pain, physical or otherwise. However, the way that cringe is often used in the common vernacular, 'that is so cringe' or 'this is cringy', is clearly different. No one would refer to a car accident as 'cringe', but one may *physically* cringe when hearing or seeing a car accident. This, too, is tied to affective contagion. Recognition that someone is cringing causes the recognizer to also cringe in response to an assumed source of that affect, perhaps in recognition that they will soon see or experience something physically or socially painful. Research indicates that the noun/adjective version of the term 'cringe' has a specifically social meaning that indicates sympathetic embarrassment and thus a form of social empathy (Pradhan & Drake 2022; Muller-Pinzler et. al. 2016).

One intersection of cringe and dissmell may therefore be found in what I call 'hostile cringe', where dissmell is used to label certain signifiers (in this article those associated with marginalized/abject groups) as both socially embarrassing and valid targets for rejection of that empathy. Remember that the negative affective contagion is used to motivate the removal of that negative stimuli from one's presence, it does not dictate *how that is done.* Experiencing 'cringe' for someone you identify with may motivate you to comfort, defend, or otherwise 'heal' them against whatever is causing their embarrassment, such as publicly standing up to a bully who is publicly humiliating someone, or covering for someone who makes a faux pas at a social gathering.

On the other hand, experiencing 'cringe' for someone that you feel dissmell/contempt for may motivate you to either dismiss their pain out of hand, deeming it unworthy of focus, or even cause you to stay and revel in the experience of someone you consider socially subordinate to you being 'put in their place.' Moreover, because revelling in that social pain can be pleasurable, it incentivizes affective economies of contempt to 'spread' to broader and broader signifiers associated with the initial subject (Ahmed 2004). In so doing, the fact that the subject 'produces' cringe can become associated with that contemptuous reaction. To narrativize it, one may feel contempt for someone because they are so embarrassing, yet that embarrassment

can become pleasurable to witness when coupled with contempt. However, the fact remains that the use of contempt to dismiss that empathetic impulse does serve to negate or even invert the initial function of cringe. Both categories of cringe will now be discussed, with emphasis placed on the anti-social or 'hostile' cringe.

Cringe as Pro-Social Experience

For such a universal experience, the social and physical dimensions of cringe itself are fascinatingly multifaceted. While the currently popular meaning of the term 'cringe' carries negative connotations, previous work has found that 'cringe' can be an avenue towards greater empathy and self-awareness. In Pradhan & Drake's (2022) examination of their 'hate-watch' of the Netflix series *Indian Matchmaking*, they conceptualise cringe as one of the "ugly feelings" described by Ngai (2004): visceral feelings that are physically apparent and often culturally policed. Through their cringe experiences, they found themselves experiencing social empathy for cast members, questioning their own Othering biases, as well as questioning repressive authorities and institutions.

Cringe as a source of sympathetic embarrassment and thus empathy finds support in a neurological study by Muller-Pinzler, et al. (2016), who found that the closeness of one's relationship with the subject of cringe will modulate the intensity of that affective cringe response. Specifically, the closer one's relationship is to the subject of cringe, the greater the responses in regions of the brain associated with vicarious embarrassment (although it should be noted that this merely gets at the mechanical workings of cringe rather than an ultimate explanation). These areas were also closely related to parts of the brain that are associated with experiencing empathy for physical injuries. In this sense, the function of cringe could be to provide motivation to prevent or ameliorate the social and physical pain of others. This characterization of the cringe affect as being neurologically connected to empathy via vicarious social pain was followed up on by Jesus, et al. (2022). They found that further study of cringe could be useful for examining empathic reactions as well as a fruitful area of study for subjects who lack empathy.

Havas & Sulimma (2020) examine the concept of cringe from an aesthetic and artistic perspective. They define the 'cringe aesthetic' as art that seeks to cause a physical reaction of discomfort in the viewer; cringe is one of what they call "body genres" (Havas & Sulimma 2020), such as horror and pornography, that likewise attempt to cause different physical responses in the viewer. Their study of cringe comedies/dramedies presents a departure from the previous examinations of cringe as an affective experience that closes the distance between observer and subject. Cringe humor requires that an affective distance be created, so that we cringe at the characters rather than with them. By 'affective distance,' I refer to the degree to which we 'see ourselves' in another person.

When that affective distance is close, such as with a close friend, a family member, or someone else that one identifies strongly with, then it is much harder to laugh at their pain and discomfort because that pain and discomfort will be experienced sympathetically as one's own. Conversely, when that affective distance is widened, such as by making someone the object of dissmell/contempt, the empathic response to that pain and discomfort is weakened, even neutralized. Furthermore, by being the subject of cringe humor, that affective distance may be widened still further to preserve the pleasure of the humorous reaction, making it an effective form for discouraging empathy, if wielded in such a way.

A recent example of these different affective experiences can be seen in the Netflix sketch comedy series *I Think You Should Leave* (2019–). Most of these sketches are based around the concept of a single character committing a social faux pas or making a mistake, and instead of apologizing and returning things to normal, doubling down on that faux pas to an absurd degree to avoid the loss of face. For example, one of the sketches centers around a group of former students having dinner with a respected professor. The professor eats one student's entire meal while they look on in discomfort. He not only refuses to apologize but attempts to blackmail them to prevent them from revealing his misdeed. The show maintains affective distance so that this extremely socially awkward and unsettling situation can become funny.

Yet in that same episode ("They said that to me at a dinner" 2021), there is a sketch wherein a man attending an adult haunted house tour takes the statement that they can say whatever they want to literally. He begins to ask sexually explicit questions about the ghosts that upset the other attendees and the tour guide. However, unlike most of the sketches where the reaction is one of anger or absurd stubbornness, this time the main character is confused to the point of tears at the arbitrary standard around what is okay for people to say. When a tour member makes him leave, he sadly walks outside to where his mother is waiting for him

in a car. There is still humor from the absurdity of the man's sexually explicit ghost questions, and from the upset reaction from the guests and tour guide. Yet we are also meant to empathize with the main character, and *his* discomfort and confusion with the situation.

The unnamed main character's reaction is less an attempt to save face at others' expense and more about trying to understand unwritten social rules of which he was not aware. The sketch invites us to use that sense of cringe to laugh at discomfort, but also to reflect on how often rules that we think are clear are, in fact, only that way because we have a deeper contextual understanding that goes unstated. This show, therefore, gives us opportunities to both cringe at and cringe with the various characters. Affective distance is created at the beginning by highlighting the man's social awkwardness, yet literally closes that distance when the camera focuses on his tearful facial expression and confused tone, making us more sympathetic to his clearly displayed distress.

In fact, by swiftly bringing us into closer emotional alignment with the main character after being the subject of mockery, this episode of *I Think You Should Leave* manages to remain humorous by subverting our expectations, making it socially acceptable to laugh at while also humanizing the sketch's main character. Thus, the modulation of affective distance and cringe humor can still be used pro-socially by providing an opportunity for us to reconsider our assumptions about what we consider cringe and what actions we should prioritize in response to them. The man in the sketch was being vulgar and embarrassing, but his actions were clearly motivated by misunderstanding rather than malice. Was it therefore right for the rest of the group to reject him?

Yet the darker side of cringe comedy can also be exploited for significantly more serious consequences. Cringe comedy expects viewers to not just accept the discomfort that characters experience but enjoy it. While cringe comedy can be a vector for empathy, as shown by the example from *I Think You Should Leave*, cringe can also be used by reactionary media to reinforce oppressive social norms when such media creators label attempts of self-expression or even public existence by marginalized groups as cringe. The next section of this essay concerns itself with this chief method of cringe mobilization.

Hostile Cringe as Vector for Contempt

My own contribution to the study of cringe and affect begins by examining a reaction video on YouTube called "THE MOST UNHINGED WOKE TIKTOKS" by Isaac Butterfield (2023). I will be contrasting it with Verma's (2021) analysis of TikTok creators in India where lower-caste creators were consistently labelled as 'cringy' by other, higher-caste influencers. In both cases, 'cringe' and the rhetoric surrounding those given that label are used to make these subordinate others into targets of contemptuous affects and, thus, reinforce an oppressive status quo. In both examples, the labelling of someone as 'cringe' is used not to imply that they deserve empathy, but instead that their nonconformity to hegemonic social norms is a valid reason to mock and dismiss their agency and humanity.

Butterfield's video is focused on viewing and commenting on subjects defined as being 'cringe' because they display attributes or behaviors that are associated with 'wokeness.' Wokeness in this context refers to a recent adoption of the term 'woke', historically used by the left-wing to denote awareness of systemic oppression by the right-wing. The right-wing definition of the term, which has quickly spread through public consciousness, is a shibboleth used to denote anything the right-wing does not like, making it nearly impossible to consistently define (Remnick 2023). For example, "UNHINGED WOKE TIKTOKS" includes an extended clip where an LGBTQ+ rights activist screams at a city board meeting to express the pain that board's policies are causing to their community. They are defined as 'woke' (and therefore cringe) due to their self-identification as LGBTQ+ but also because they possess signifiers associated with progressive activism, such as political buttons and dyed hair.

After viewing the video, I examined the comments to see how effective it was at aligning the audience with the affects of contempt that the video's host intended to attach to the subjects of the video. The audience of "THE MOST UNHINGED WOKE TIKTOKS" displayed significant affective alignment with the intentions of Isaac Butterfield. Why is that the case? How does Isaac Butterfield succeed at getting people to fall into affective alignment with him? Even if we consider that people will largely only watch and comment if they already agree with the views expressed by the video and indicated by its title, the fact remains that this is a successful example of hostile cringe mobilization compared to the myriad others offering the same experience on YouTube. I posit that presenting himself as the central figure in the video was a key factor in the success of this cringe-realignment.

The degree of affective alignment with Butterfield was measured by examining the top ten highest rated comments on his video. Three of the top-rated comments in "MOST UNHINGED TIKTOKS" included sentiments like: "Hard to believe these people are the voice of reason in modern society. What has the world come to?" (Walter White 2023), "I miss the days when mental illness wasn't glorified and pushed as a positive or heroic challenge." (Chaoz 2023), and "Man for a group of people who are all about Love and Acceptance, they sure get angry a lot and have no problems attacking others at the drop of a hat" (engirish1977 2023). The comments had 566, 483, and 401 likes at the time of this research. Butterfield's compilation has been successful in getting their audience to experience the desired affective reaction to the cringe set off by the subjects of these clips. Cringe has become a vector for the expression of contempt.

Another key feature here is that Butterfield's video is not only a compilation of TikTok clips, but also a 'reaction' to them. The idea of the reaction video is that the uploader watches the clips along with the audience and provides an amusing or otherwise entertaining reaction to the media being viewed. This enables the uploader to not have to trust his audience to feel the 'correct' way about the clips, instead they can model the 'proper' reaction to the stimuli on display.

While Butterfield watches the TikTok clips, the audience sees two kinds of reactions. First are his moment-to-moment reactions. The other is explicit commentary reactions when he pauses the clips and gives his opinion over the footage. He often removes TikTok from view and puts himself on full screen, becoming the sole focus of the video. This is a key point where the cringe affect can be inverted from producing social empathy to producing contempt. Butterfield's presence offers a 'model' of behavior that gives the audience 'permission' to freely express contempt in reaction to stimuli that is framed as evoking a cringe response.

The "react" video format also has the advantage of a pre-existing audience that has subscribed to the channel for the sake of the uploader rather than the content of the individual compilation. Those people watching an Isaac Butterfield video are likely already emotionally aligned with him, and it is easier and more pleasurable to go along with a figure they already like rather than to dispute him. Unfortunately, Butterfield uses the video to dehumanize the subjects of the

compilation. He does this by expressing negative affects toward the video, and then explaining why the video subjects should be dismissed from any kind of more compassionate consideration.

The type of affect he displays in the video ranges from amusement to aggressive anger; but, all of them were meant to communicate that the issues and perspectives raised in the TikTok clips are not meant to be taken seriously. The best example of this is in the clip discussed earlier where an LGBTQ+ activist addresses a city council. The activist begins shouting after stating: "I just want you to feel our pain. I don't know if you can at this point based off of your policy decisions, but I have to pretend you have some form of empathy left" (1:54). At the end of each sentence, Butterfield stops the video to mock their appearance, referring specifically to their age, the rainbow pin, and their wearing of a mask. By doing this, he is breaking up a statement that is meant to be communicated as a whole (fig. 1). This implies that the speaker's thoughts are not worth respecting. After all, interrupting is a rude thing to do. Furthermore, reducing age and sexual identity to mere signifiers also connects to reactionary associations of femininity (or perhaps more precisely, non-masculinity) with emotional immaturity and intemperance (Ahmed 2004).

The initial framing of the TikTok should also be considered. The TikTok starts with a caption saying that the activist will "go crazy" at the meeting. By using this specific clip, Butterfield reinforces the widespread reactionary discourse characterizing trans identity as a mental illness, such as when Joe Rogan and Matt Walsh refer to trans as a "mental health issue" (Paterson & Tirrell 2022). These associations trivialize the pain and anger the activist is expressing. By doing so, this activist hopes that the board will experience a fragment of that pain as real, instead of an abstraction. Instead, Butterfield changes a human being expressing pain and anguish into a badly behaved child having a tantrum by characterizing them as 'cringe.'

The 'natural' reaction to a scream of pain is to experience an empathic response that can be extremely uncomfortable, especially if that empathic affective response is triggered by an abject figure. In that moment, one viscerally acknowledges the common humanity that the other possesses, clashing with the hegemonic ideology that may otherwise be impressed upon the conscious mind. This leads to cognitive dissonance as the body feels what the mind has been told not to. Butterfield provides a very useful service for the reactionary audience. By labelling the marginalized Other as 'cringe' and then explaining how certain signifiers justify that label (the language they use, the pins and mask they wear, etc.), he can save the audience from their undesired empathy through the power of contempt.

Consider Butterfield's reaction (fig. 2). He smiles, dramatically bends his neck back to face upwards and then shakes his head as if a refreshing wave had crested over his head. By mocking and infantilizing the marginalized Other, the uncomfortable empathic response to the scream of pain can be neutralized. This models for his audience the release that one can experience from empathy by labelling the target as 'cringe.' This pattern continues throughout the video. Someone acts in a way that evokes associations with progressive causes, ranging from a likely staged video of a woman claiming a two-year-old girl shouldn't wear pink to Instagram models advocating body positivity for heavy people. All of them are reacted to in a way that models how and why audience members can and should dismiss their perspectives.

Furthermore, by placing himself as the 'host', or the primary subject of the video, Butterfield can act as a sort of buffer that prevents his audience from making an empathic connection with the clip subjects. By interrupting the clips to give his own views while making jokes about each specific clip, the host makes the clips and, particularly, the people presented in them feel less real to the audience. The format of the video not only allows the audience to viscerally experience mockery of the subjects but presents the subject in such a way that their expression is cut up into pieces, rendering the original clip emotionally incoherent. In so doing, the host demonstrates power over the clips and, by extension, towards those vague groups that those clips are meant to represent. Rhetorically speaking, the host takes something that would cause a negative affective reaction in their audience, interrupts it, and tells it to shut up without having to encounter someone else's feelings. Because the audience is likely composed largely of subscribers to Butterfield (in this case), then they would experience pleasure and a sense of vicarious power via their alignment with him.

Butterfield's clips are usually framed in such a way that the 'woke' figure is antagonistic to the status quo, independent of Butterfield's commentary. We have a woman questioning the legitimacy of a father's decision for what their child should wear, LGBTQ+ activists breaking norms of public civility by shouting in a formal board meeting, people refusing to conform to mainstream gender presentations, and women openly discussing male privilege. These are all set up as threats to be summarily mocked and defanged by Butterfield for the catharsis of his reactionary audience. It is easier to make people associate LGBTQ+ or other 'woke' signifiers with negative affective experiences when people with those

signifiers are acting in a way that the viewer might find somehow threatening after all. This video offers a representative example of the right-wing project to reinforce hegemonic white heteronormative values within society.

While violent rhetoric is often given the most attention, efforts like this present a significant danger to marginalized groups because they are attempting to encourage what Bratich (2022) would call numbness. This numbness is an important facet of microfascist performance wherein those performing microfascism allow themselves to become numb to the experience of the outside world, particularly to marginalized targets. This does not necessarily result in violence in all or even most cases, but it dehumanizes the target group all the same. The audience may not become violent, but it does encourage them to be more accepting of violence done *to* the targets. In this case it is done by creating an association of the presence of signifiers of the marginalized target (in this case clearly LGBTQ+ folk in the video) with an affective experience of contempt.

Hate-watching

Next, I want to push a bit further into the atmospheres of cringe and contempt toward the nature of hate-watching as discussed in Tarishi Verma's "Cultural cringe: how caste and class affect the idea of culture in social media" (2021). Her essay discusses how lower-caste Indian TikTok stars were described as 'cringy' to reinforce caste-based biases. Before TikTok was banned in India, the platform was extremely popular with users who were lower-caste and, therefore, had less access to economical and cultural capital compared to their middle and upper class (and caste) counterparts. This extended to language education, with higher-caste influencers often able to speak English, making their content accessible to a wider audience (Verma 2021).

Because of this lack of access to various forms of capital, many of the popular works by those lower-caste users did not have the same production values or aesthetic appeal as the higher caste users. Thus, in Verma's (2021) words, "When they find expression through TikTok in a way that is diametrically opposed to what the dominant cultural class wants, it is labelled as cringe" (159). That cringe label and all the sticky affects that go with it were applied to the TikTok creators, not just the content. For example, urban Indian TikTok creators specifically referred to videos created by lower-caste people as both "frivolous and cringe" (Verma 2021, 160). The implication is, of course, that their creations are beneath notice and, in fact, offensive to look at. Hence, because higher-caste creators are almost

exclusively able to access the cultural capital, wealth, and educational opportunities to create content that matches the desires of the hegemonic status quo, lower caste people *cannot* create anything as good, and should be quiet and listen to their betters. Those people who defy cultural norms, whether by trying and failing to live up to inaccessibly high production standards or by creating media that does not attempt to live up to them at all, are guilty of forcing people to experience cringe and, therefore, must be reminded of their proper place through mockery, contempt, and dismissal.

So, one question becomes: Why would viewers actively pursue the opportunity to participate in such an affective state of rejection and anger towards the subject that are made to bear the weight of cringe and contempt? Suryansu Guha (2022) provides a partial answer to this through the phenomenon of the 'hate-watch.' He frames cringe as a signifier of paradoxical love and hate through his description of the "hate-watch or cringe-binge" (870) as a source of "love for loathing" (871). Guha examines *Indian Matchmaker* and its reception by South Asian audiences as an example of 'trash television.' Unlike Drake & Praedhan's (2022) discussion of Ngai, Guha follows Sara Ahmed's concept of affective networks.

Guha describes how *Indian Matchmaker* can re-energize already circulating hatreds for the institute of matchmaking and arranged marriage in South Asian audiences. Hate-watching provides a way to act out the call to action that hatred sparks by engaging in discourse about the content of that hate-watch session (Guha 2022), often through social media. By joining others in publicly expressing a stance about the subject of cringe, viewers can experience a sense of cathartic accomplishment. Like the creators of cringe compilations, the marketing team for *Indian Matchmaker* was aware of how to capitalize on this process. To truly 'perform' hatred for the show, it must be viewed and then publicly discussed: the two best outcomes for a television show on a streaming platform (Guha 2022). This is how savvy content producers can exploit the process of hate-watching through its cringe content, despite it often being perceived as an oppositional act towards the producers of that content.

While I am not in any way making a straightforward equivalency between people hate-watching a lavishly produced reality TV show and people hate-watching content featuring marginalized people for the purpose of cathartic cringe, there is significant affective similarity when one looks at the feelings both audiences

experience, separated from the context. That is to say, those viewing Butterfield's contemptuous reactions to content featuring LGBTQ+ individuals engage with previously existing 'circulating hatreds' towards so-called 'wokeness' and people associated with 'wokeness' in his audience, much as hate-watching *Indian Matchmaker* engages the previously mentioned hatreds towards the institutions of arranged marriages and matchmaking (Guha 2022). Furthermore, because Butterfield presents himself in dialogue with his audience, literally addressing them throughout the video, the audience gets to experience that same sense of cathartic accomplishment by vicariously joining with Butterfield in expressing their stance toward the cringe subject. Thus, the viewing of "THE MOST UNHINGED WOKE TIKTOKS!" (Butterfield 2023) can also carry with it the sensation of 'doing something' about this vague concept of wokeness that is characterized as a creeping threat towards society. Likewise, engaging in mockery of lower-caste TikToks can be rationalized as attempting to maintain a 'proper' standard of aesthetic and cultural production (Verma 2021).

Cringe > Contempt > Removal

One final and crucial factor to consider: While the state of cringe-contempt may be unpleasant, the ability to fulfill the affective purpose of dissmell/contempt can be cathartic because it highlights the ability to impose one's will upon the world by successfully removing the source of contempt. Contempt brings with it an intoxicating sense of power because it manifests ultimately as a feeling that you can safely disregard the existence of another. By engaging with that source, you can continuously reinforce your own inner sense of superiority. In other words, contempt is "the mark of the oppressor" (Tomkins 1995, 139). Even the most benign and compassionate expression of cringe must therefore come with a momentary understanding of a hierarchy, because at least the target of social pain is not you.

This recognition of someone's subordinate space in a hierarchy and the possession of the ability to turn away from them can be a pleasurable experience. According to Tomkins (2014), the positive affect of joy is triggered by the lessening of unpleasant neural stimuli, and experiencing cringe as social empathy is not pleasant. After all, the purpose of affective contagion in the case of negative affects is to encourage a group effort in the removal of the cause of the negative affect. When you hear a baby crying, it can take up all your attention and make you want to remove or otherwise correct the situation so that the baby stops crying. So too with empathy.

When you see someone doing something embarrassing or perhaps being unjustly socially harmed, that cringe you feel is embarrassment or shame by proxy. Because people are generally incentivized to seek out positive affects rather than negative affects, it feels much more momentarily pleasurable to dismiss the pain of another person that is seen as beneath you than to continue to focus on that person and vicariously experience their pain. It is to say, 'I can completely disregard this thing because I am so powerful that it cannot affect me.' That is the reason why videos like Butterfield's are sought after. Viewers experience social embarrassment by proxy and then dismiss it, lessening the neural 'load' on their mind, so to speak, creating the sensation of joy. It was not you, so it is funny.

The function of presenters like Butterfield or the trolls mocking lower-caste creators on TikTok (Verma 2021) is to provide a rationale for why it is morally acceptable to convert cringe into contempt and, in so doing, create community alignment that is fundamentally based on the rejection of pain, expression, and agency. Yet emotions are sticky (Ahmed 2004), and do not remain isolated in a single context. Someone who connects signifiers of pain, marginalization, and attempts to express oneself with contempt and amusement will bring those associations into other facets of their life experiences. When they see news about anti-trans laws being passed, then they are more likely to disregard such news as well as the testimony of those harmed by those laws. And they can feel good while they do it. This makes it easier for powerful entities and institutions to brutalize marginalized groups, because segments of the population, usually the most privileged ones, may be primed to treat any expression of those marginalized groups as being embarrassing, trivial, and not worth giving attention to.

Conclusion: The Cursed Manipulation of Cringe

What does all this research tell us? We have seen how the cringe affect can act as a deeply empathetic reaction to another's social hurt, just as we may feel the pain of another's physical wound. One does not feel a cringe out of indifference, after all. Yet there is a darker side to the experience of cringe, one where that acknowledgement of another's social pain becomes the end in and of itself. Sometimes this is benign, as in the case of 'hatewatching' poorly made media wherein that cringe can become an outlet for socially disapproved 'ugly' emotions (Drake &

Praedhan 2022). Yet the Ahmedian flow of sticky emotions, even when pointed towards a legitimate target, such as when Guha (2022) discusses how the Indian audience used the Netflix show *Indian Matchmaker* as a sort of avatar for their negative feelings towards the institution of matchmaking itself, can be easily directed away from anti-oppressive ends. In the case of *Indian Matchmaker*, Netflix and the showrunners intentionally accentuated the 'cringy' parts of the show in its marketing, thereby ensuring social media buzz around it, ironically out of audience disdain for its content. Sharing cringe can feel cathartic. It can create a sense of community based on the shared sense that the target of the cringe is below the regard of the group.

That is not harmful in and of itself, but it crosses the line when hostile cringe, and the accompanying affective responses and emotions, are intentionally loaded onto marginalized peoples and anti-oppression movements. These cringe compilations and related media works spread a fog of contempt where people that are already materially brutalized can be further dehumanized, and their pain dismissed. Yet it should be remembered that while purveyors of reactionary, hateful media would have us believe that it is natural to hate and dislike that which is different from the norm, it is simply not true. Contrary to accusations lobbed by reactionaries at progressives, it is the right wing who are engaged in 'social engineering.' After all, it requires constant construction and reinforcement to maintain dehumanization. Halting the constant creation and maintenance of these dehumanizing discourses should, therefore, lead to greater societal empathy. One avenue to assist in the halting of the machinery of hatred is by examining how cringe can be used as a recognition of our shared humanity rather than a justification to push the Other out of sight. We must cringe forward to the future, not backwards to the past.

Notes

1. While one may note that the literature viewed here heavily focuses on Indian culture (Pradhan & Drake 2023, Verma 2021, Guha 2022), this is not meant to imply that the Indian cultural context has a special relationship with the concept of cringe, hostile or otherwise. There is nothing in that literature that states that South Asian people hate-watching *Indian Matchmaking* (Pradhan & Drake 2023, Guha 2022) is categorically different from another person hate-watching something else beyond the audience's specific cultural context tied to the institution of matchmaking and arranged marriages.

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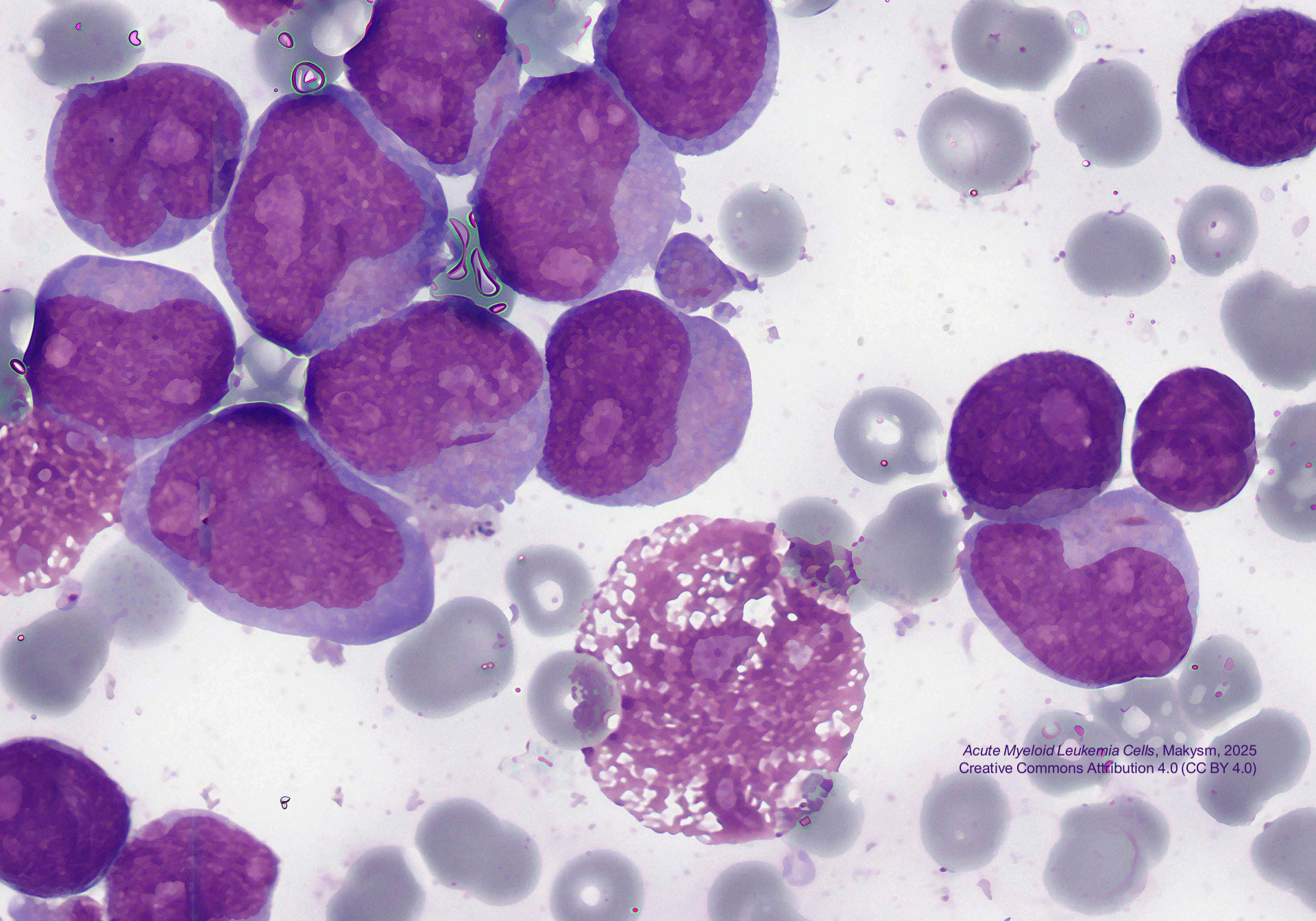
Long, Low Purple Lacquer Table with Objects (top) and *Two Tables, One Low with Large Vase and Objects, One Higher with Covered Pot, Lion and Small Bowl* (bottom), Anonymous, 19th century, Public Domain



Acute Myeloid Leukemia Cells, Makysm, 2025

BIO-INTIMACY IN STEM CELL TRANSPLANT FOR ACUTE MYELOID LEUKAEMIA

Kerry Moore (1978–2024)
CARDIFF UNIVERSITY

Introduction by Paul Bowman
Afterword by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

Introduction

Paul Bowman

My dear colleague and friend, Dr Kerry Moore, died Friday 5th April 2024, after a long battle with leukaemia. We had been hoping to work together on a conference planned for September, 2024 called The Future of Intimacy. The idea was that I would do the early work, but that she would be coming through treatment and into recovery and we would both be working together as the conference approached. However, this was not to be.

The day after we learned that Kerry had died, our friend Karin sent this message to our WhatsApp group:

> Paul (and other colleagues) Kerry drafted a talk for the Intimacy conference you were organising, about her experience as a cancer patient and specifically about being the recipient of a transplant. She sent it to me after the last time I saw her (a week ago). I can share with you now if you want to write something about Kerry? I think others may also want to read it. It's very heartbreaking but also genuinely her voice and I think she would have liked for it to be read by colleagues—as well as maybe more widely.

I thought I would never be ready to read this piece, but I read it the same day. Quite unexpectedly, it did not break my heart further. Rather, it warmed it; perhaps even started to heal it. Perhaps. For, I could hear Kerry's voice. I could hear her saying

the words. And I knew straight away not only *that* it should be published, but *where* it should be published—in the most human, caring, intimate journal I know: *Capacious*. I immediately emailed Greg Seigworth, and he too immediately knew that this felt right. So here we are.

What follows is the draft paper that Kerry was working on for The Future of Intimacy conference, called 'Bio-Intimacy in Stem Cell Transplant for AML [Acute Myeloid Leukaemia].'

But first let me say a tiny bit about Kerry. She was born in 1978 in Carshalton, and grew up in Sutton. She studied at the universities of Wales (BA), Sunderland (MA) and Cardiff (PhD), gaining her PhD in 2010, with a study focused on ways of challenging racism from the left. This topic defined her scholarly interests and personal commitments. Kerry joined the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University in 2006, and went on to teach modules on Media Power & Society, Media, Racism and Conflict, and Doing Media Research, always with a focus on anti-racism, anti-xenophobia, and social justice.

Her research explored media and political discourses surrounding migration, racism and social injustice. She published extensively in these areas, including the co-edited book *Migrations and the Media* with Bernhard Gross and Terry Threadgold (2012) and a special issue of *JOMEC Journal*, "The Meaning of Migration" (2015).

Kerry published work on European press coverage of the migration crisis in the Mediterranean, immigration politics, populism and Brexit, human rights in refugee news and constructions of racism in UK crime news. She led a collaborative project with journalists and third sector communications professionals in Wales exploring contemporary news media narratives on poverty in the English and Welsh language news media.

She taught, researched, supervised, and collaborated on projects that examined racism and racialized crisis discourse, asylum and migration, representations of religious and cultural difference, poverty and social injustice, and discourse theory and analysis.

Kerry was deeply loved by all around her. She was regarded as an excellent colleague and dear friend. She was fanatical about football, and played for Cyncoed Ladies FC. She leaves behind her a husband, Neil, and son, Sascha, as well as a deeply admirable body of scholarly work, and many colleagues and former students whose lives were enriched by her. She is sorely missed.

I knew Kerry since 2003. She was a new PhD student at Roehampton University when I applied for a job there. She attended my interview presentation, and afterwards, kindly said it was good (even though, really, it had been a bit of a shambles). After I got the job, she was a teaching assistant on the big first-year module I led.

She later transferred to Cardiff University, after gaining a research assistant position. When I saw a job advertised there, in late 2007, it was Kerry I turned to, to ask about it. She raved about Cardiff and the School of Journalism, Media and Culture (JOMEC), and encouraged me to apply.

When I started at Cardiff University in 2008, I took up supervision of her PhD, along with Professor Terry Threadgold. She was an excellent PhD student. She was my first PhD student in Cardiff, and my first ever PhD student to graduate. To my mind, she should have graduated a year earlier. But she was a perfectionist. For the last twelve months of her PhD, I spent so much time assuring her that she had effectively finished it, that it was really good, that it was ready to be submitted, right now, and that she should just submit it as it stood. But she wouldn't. She kept polishing and polishing, editing, moving chunks of it around, revising, tweaking, polishing, adding, subtracting, and finessing, until—eventually—it was up to her high standards. Then she submitted it, when it was really brilliant.

I was delighted when she became a colleague, gaining a lectureship in JOMEC. She was just the best person to work with. She was so switched on, so intuitive, thoughtful, circumspect, incisive, diplomatic.

And funny. She would always say something funny. But it was never just funny. It also nailed the crux of the matter. It was wit, yes, and it was always delightful—often muttered quietly to you under her breath during a meeting, as if she were saying something a bit irreverent or subversive, as if she was merely trying to make you laugh. Yet it was actually, very often, the most concise and definitive statement of the stakes and complexities of the matter.

In a sense, she was like this in many ways. She had a way of seeming mischievous while saying and doing things that were utterly responsible, deeply perceptive, highly ethical. She would often seem to be suggesting something naughty—like another drink, another bar, or what about karaoke. But her suggestions were actually, really, the absolute best thing to do—sociable, inclusive, hospitable. It was Kerry's interventions that produced some of the most fun nights out I have ever had with work colleagues.

Even when she couldn't go out for a drink, because she had football practice, she would still go out for a drink—and still go to football practice. She wouldn't let anyone down.

To meet her in the corridor, or stick your head around her office door, or to have her stick her head around your office door, was always like a little treat. Always a gentle word, often a joke. And she would listen, and really, properly, thoroughly, hear. She let me offload about my own parenting problems so many times, and I always felt better. One time, I remember clearly, as we passed on the stairs, we shared the usual light-hearted 'hello,' but she stopped me, looked me straight in the eye and said, arrestingly, 'Paul. Are you alright?' She knew I wasn't. She knew that, right then, I was far from alright. And she dropped what she was doing and wanted to help me.

And students loved her. And colleagues loved her. And her work was brilliant. And her concerns were always ethical, always current, always urgent. She researched poverty, migration, exclusion. She published the first bilingual (English and Welsh) open access monograph for Cardiff University Press. She was an excellent PhD supervisor. She was extremely talented, diligent, engaged, and always fun to work with. She organized conferences. She edited journals. And she did it all with such good grace and thoroughness and clear-sightedness and collegiality.

When she got ill, we all thought she would beat it. She was so fit and so strong and so determined. And it would just be so wrong for there to be any other outcome. Even when she was going through the most difficult treatment, she wanted to join in and help me organize a conference. We'd chat about it over WhatsApp, and I'd keep her informed about developments. And she was looking forward to it—she

was working towards it. And, God, so was I: looking forward to working with her again, bumping into her in corridors, asking her opinion or advice, chatting about family or holidays or the government or the institution, or anything, everything.

But, tragically, that is not to be. And it breaks my heart. We are bereft without her. And we will all miss her so much, for so long. There is no adequate way to say goodbye, Kerry, you were the best colleague, the best friend, and we all love you. But publishing this rough, unfinished piece, in this hospitable, caring and intimate journal, is at least… something.

What follows has been ever so slightly tidied up by me and the editorial team at *Capacious*. We have tried to keep this to an absolute minimum. But the work was, and will always remain, an incomplete draft. It was not written in any journal style, and was meant to be spoken at a conference on the future of intimacy. So, I have had to make some slight interventions into the text—proofing, tidying, adding, here and there. I have added some footnotes to clarify a few points, adding '[PB]' at the end, so you know they are my words, not Kerry's. Nonetheless, what I think shines through is Kerry's wonderful mind, wonderful style of thinking, and—something I will always cherish, and deeply, deeply miss—her voice.

Bio-Intimacy in Stem Cell Transplant for AML

Dr. Kerry Moore, Cardiff University (last updated 7th Feb 2024)

For The Future of Intimacy Conference, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Culture. September, 2024[1]

'Loving you is in my DNA, loving you is the only way'
Billy Gillies featuring Hannah Boleyn—DNA (Loving You)
Released 28th July 2023 (7 days post-transplant)

My Intimacy Story 29th November 2022

On 29th November 2022 the future of every relationship in my life was suddenly and devastatingly transformed. I was a (normally) healthy, very sporty, crap-car owning, converse-wearing, typical academic in my mid-40s. But after a couple of weeks of, what I imagined was an incredibly grotty bout of flu, I was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukaemia (AML) with a FLT3 mutation.

If you read the start of almost any peer reviewed article about AML with a FLT3 mutation, it will emphasise[2] the 'dismal outcomes' for patients. This dismal outlook, experts assure us, remains dismal despite important recent advancements in treating LK and other blood cancers. It's especially fun to read that as a patient who is surreptitiously perusing the peer reviewed academic literature! The well-REF-trained[3] among us will know flagging 'big problems' in the intro is rhetorically handy for impressing readers with our 'groundbreaking' results and solutions, but also, unfortunately it's true.

Fast-forward 13* months, various chemo, radiotherapy treatments, and a stem cell transplant, and despite my blood cancer journey not exactly being over, evidently I'm still here (hooray!)* thanks to incredible science and an equally incredible medical team.

So, what has all of this to do with intimacy?

Actually, quite a lot in some quite different ways:

- I could talk about the professional and yet intimate relationships developed over the past year with my incredible medical team.
- I could talk about the crucial loving and life-sustaining relationships with family and friends for my survival; the collective-intimacy hugging me through it all.
- I could talk about the most awesome wedding proposal and loving marriage after 15 years of groovy co-habitation.
- But what I actually want to talk about today is the idea of *bio-intimacy*.

Bio-Intimacy

My interest in this idea preceded any awareness of the concept.

I've already mentioned that I had a stem cell transplant last summer. Essentially, this entailed cells harvested from the bone marrow of an unrelated allogeneic donor—another human who matches me genetically—being infused into my body.

The intention of a stem cell transplant is to introduce a new biological process into the body, where infused donor cells 'engraft' in the recipient and begin to do the work of a healthy bone marrow. The 'graft' will produce fully functioning white and red blood cells, recognising any potential remnants of diseased bone marrow and blood cells—creating a shiny new, healthy immune system.

What could be more physically 'intimate' than welcoming another human's body parts into your own (ooh er!)?[4]

Perhaps one of the more surprising features of this experience of bio-intimacy is its foregrounding of conflict. Like any medical transplant (and I guess like any relationship), although 'happily ever after' is the goal, rejection is a possibility. For stem cell transplants, the road to rejection (or acceptance) entails a gladiatorial battle between donor and recipient (new me and old). My heart's desire is for 'other' to 'become me' (is that Nietzschean?).

Unfortunately, regardless of my ambitions or feelings (or those of the donor for that matter), what will actually happen once the horse has been led to water cannot be entirely controlled, and some level of fighting is, biologically, almost inevitable.

If the donor arrives like a furious toddler shouting 'this isn't me!,' the recipient can be attacked and damaged in unintended ways—even mortally wounded (this is what we call Graft Versus Host disease). There are immune suppressing medicines that are used to control this risk.

Alternatively, the host can be the dominant antagonist, refusing hospitality, spreading its sharp elbows, beating back the newcomer from her would-be new home. Let's call it a 'gammony',[5] 'Brexity' short-sightedness placing short term political gain above the obvious benefits and long-time survival of the mothership. To labour the metaphor slightly, this 'Farage-ification' of my bone marrow is unfortunately what happened to me in Dec-Jan 23-4.

'New forms of embodied intimacy' (Sharp, 2006): Feelings[6]

Whilst the science, the 'bio' part of bio-intimacy is obviously at the centre of the action, the emotional arena is both conditioning of and conditioned by the experience of this relationship between self and other; the sharing, lending and 'melding' of bodies or body parts mediating between life and death.

cultural explorations—e.g., Hanif Kureishi, films like* Dirty Pretty Things*, distopian sci-fi, Mary Shelley's* Frankenstein*—exploring scientific ethics with new possibilities, exploitation, forced organ harvesting; consent/pros/cons*[7]

There is some fascinating literature about other bio-intimate relationships in organ transplantation and the donation, sharing or sale of other human bodily products, covering their social, economic, regulatory, moral and political implications and contexts, for example:

- The donation of breast milk
- Sperm and egg donation for artificial insemination in human reproduction
- Surrogacy
- Blood donation
- Organ and other body part transplantation—including living donors (kidneys) and posthumous donations (hearts, livers, lungs etc).

There is not much in the academic literature about bio-intimacy in the context of stem cell transplantation.

Each of these areas have their own important power dynamics, their own particular attendant 'issues' and debates.

They have their own iterations of individuality in human relationships, proximity and distance between donor and recipient, donor and wider friends/family. Their own private and public expressions of emotion, their own *structures of feeling*.[8]

All however, share a fundamental dynamic—the necessity of the bodily, biological assistance of others for life—for survival, sustenance or conception.

**I'd like to further explore those life stories (mostly, if I'm honest, my own future bio-intimacy stories—ideally into my 50s, 60s, 70s and beyond).

- What does bio-intimacy mean in the field of stem cell transplantation? What emotional, moral, social or cultural factors inform the donation of bone marrow, and blood products?

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- Do social and cultural factors carry any significance for recipients in this relationship? If so, how?
- What role does individual and/or social psychology play in the bio-intimate dynamics of transplant?
- Do donors and recipients ever strike up relationships?

End of exposition/scoping of field/start of autoethnography section; endnote—other literature on different types of transplant and biosharing/donation

Bio-Intimacy and Me

Keywords: Anonymity, Gratitude, indebtedness, Helga, letter writing, loss, mourning…

How do I feel about the donor (or donations as the things that have sustained my life since November 2022)? Are these disaggregated? Do I love the donor or just her cells?

Since stem cell donation (in the UK at least) is anonymous, the notion of any intimacy playing a role may seem anathema. Yet, for me at least, despite the regulatory and ethical necessities of the distance imposed by anonymity, it has been impossible to separate the biological process from the will towards cognitive/emotional/psychological proximity. What is 'planted' in a transplant is far more than bodily cells.

With respect to other types of transplant or biological exchange, fascinating narratives have been documented about the negotiation of distance/proximity and the experiences and (sometimes) circumvention of institutional barriers or regulatory safeguards.

For bone marrow/stem cell transplants, there are 'backroom' facilities for recipients to contact donors which are carefully mediated and regulated. However, I am not aware of any 'real-life' face to face human interactions between donors and recipients. In this space, instead, are imaginative possibilities: for making sense of the medical beyond understanding its objective, scientific aims, processes and outcomes—the emotional and psychological events attendant to each stage; and, perhaps more tentatively, the creation of imaginative narratives that 'close the gap' connecting the emotional/cultural and psychological worlds of recipient to their donor.

How does imagination play a role in anonymous donor-recipient relationships? Are there good/bad helpful/unhelpful ways to imagine them? What would be the measures/rationales for such judgments?

Intimacy 'Imagined and Enacted'

Helga (derived from Old Norse heilagr—"holy", "blessed")
(Wikipedia, 2024) lol.

The only information I had about my donor (beyond crucial genetic facts about them that made them 'a match') was that they are a female, over 30 and from Germany. Although a career of challenging social and cultural stereotypes made it slightly uncomfortable, the will to name my donor based on this scant information was irrefutable, and 'Helga' she became.

Words cannot express how grateful I feel towards Helga for her cells. It is an overwhelming, emotionally incomputable fact that someone—and someone I'd never met, at that—donated part of their living body for the purpose of my body surviving. I know nothing of my donor's motivations, but whatever they were (or are), they voluntarily put themselves through a procedure which led to their DNA being shared with me.

The naming was part of the process of imaginatively enacting the intimacy that was being enacted biologically at a cellular level. Lol @ the not quite Suzie Dent[9] quality of research, but the name as it turns out was strangely appropriate, meaning 'holy' or 'blessed,' so Wikipedia informs me. My faith was, and is, entirely invested in the science, but if any other teams were quietly lining my ranks ready for battle, they were gloriously welcome.

Self at Stake

Early in the disease I certainly went through feeling that my body (or at least my bone marrow) had 'betrayed' me, as Bipin Savani puts it in his book on the complications and management of blood and marrow transplantation.[10] My immune system—designed to protect my life up to then, had randomly stopped doing so.

Complex mutations at a genetic level were busting out useless immature zombie white blood cells, switching off the safeguards that normally tell these to self-destruct and smothering any productive blood the stem cells were still trying to produce. Sneaky shitty little backstabbing saboteurs.

Since diagnosis, I've watched a lot of *Silent Witness*, which until recently I thought was probably weird for someone facing their mortality. But, come to think of it, it was always about my desire to scientifically investigate under the skin, to see through the bodily exterior and reveal the evidence of what exactly was happening inside me. It nicely dramatizes my fantasy of cleverly identifying the mutinous internal culprits, and bringing them to justice (well actually, bloody well pulverising the blighters).

Miraculously, after much trouble, my haematology doctors tamed my disease into remission in early-mid-summer 2023, found me a donor when that seemed unlikely, and a stem cell transplant was now *ON*.[11]

No question: if there was going to be a fight between 'old me' and 'Helga me', I had no hesitation—100% *ich heiße Helga*.

Je Suis Helga

For two months, I almost 'became' Helga. The transplant 'engrafted' and in a month my bone marrow was approximately 95% full of her. I loved this. I loved this new DNA me with new prospects of survival. I would put my body through anything to solidify this intimate relationship, for 'other' to subsume 'self.' I wish I could say we were inseparable. But inside, despite 'old me' bone marrow having been blasted to kingdom come by total body irradiation (TBI) and intensive chemotherapy, my unreliable, treacherously Leukaemia-unobservant stem cells were already agitating for a comeback.

Internal conflict ensued, initially carefully managed with immune suppressing meds to avoid graft versus host disease (GVHD) (i.e., to prevent Helga running riot on my body/her new body in life threatening ways). We seemed to be antagonistically co-existing as planned, with fingers and toes crossed hoping Helga would get her fisty cuffs out, deal a knockout blow to the 5% treacherous 'old me' (GVLE—Graft versus Leukaemia effect), and live happily ever after.

Instead, by early January 2024, I was replaying this story mournfully in my dreams, weeping over Helga's lost fight and its twists and turns as my medical team sought to rescue me/her. Like a temporary Facebook profile pic, Helga's DNA, had been intensely everywhere and everything to me. We'd had a go, all-in on bodily hospitality and solidarity, but the bad old boys were back on the block with their biological weapons, ready to recolonise my marrow-verse. Helga-self was slipping away.

Of course, I'll still support Germany in the football in ways I never would have thought before… And obviously when I say Germany, I should say I'm thinking about Alexandra Popp's incredible headed goals… although *viel Glück* to the men too.

Last Chance Saloon…

So, here I am in the last chance saloon. So far it's not my favourite type of saloon. Less like the City Arms than a bare-knuckle fight at the top end of St Mary's Street[12] with ambulances primed for the blood we must expect will be spilled—hoping for the best, preparing for the worst.

It's the only saloon in town now, so I'd better be ready to take my chances. If I'm lucky, science may save me. Maybe we can talk about my Helga again—or maybe another 'other-self', should my perfect match for a second bio-intimate transplant adventure suddenly appear, riding across the sunset planes of the stem cell donor bank database. (**find out name).

Bio-Intimacy Autoethnography—Just A Sorrowful/Tragic/Heroic Story All About Me!?

I'm aware that a very self-indulgent monologue at a conference that wouldn't deny me an audience is probably ethically living on the edge. It's been undeniably cathartic to write and to imagine relating to you. Nonetheless, I hope there is also academic value in it.

I'm also cautious about assuming testimony in ethnographic studies to be a necessarily liberating thing. Similarly, to give one's story to the media, to publicise a cause is not necessarily a useful, good or empowering thing for the source themselves. Lots of important stuff is written about those things.

However, on balance, we love a good story, don't we? Most of us are nosy and most of us love a bit of attention!

Seriously though, one of the things I'm trying to do with this is to explore and maybe expand upon the cultural value of the field of transplant ethnographies. For our purposes, I'm interested in the particular insights my story may bring to bear on understanding, what Sharp (2006) calls "new forms of embodied intimacy" with transplant.

…

Other updates may be possible. Could be same or different donor.

Conference cancelled but could still be a paper delivered in a different context or something written up by me or someone else interested if necessary.

Afterword

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

I write this as a colleague and a friend of Kerry. As colleagues, we shared an interest in issues of media and democracy, and I always found much to admire in her sharp observations about political life, her clear and insightful writing, her care and support for her students, and above all in her unwavering commitment to social justice that shone through everything she did.

However, our close friendship came out of a very different kind of collaboration: Over the course of more than a decade, starting in 2011, we baked together every few months. We started baking together after an incidental chat in which we discovered that we both always *wanted* to know how to bake, but considered ourselves lost causes, having somehow arrived into adulthood bereft of baking skills. We named ourselves "The Novice Bakers" to manage the expectations of anyone who dared to eat our creations. We started in 2011 with Danish vanilla ring biscuits and strawberry layer cake, and the last time we baked together was on December 20, 2023, when we baked sunken olive oil, chocolate and hazelnut cake.

At Kerry's urging, there was often a seasonal theme—making soaked fruit puddings in the summer, warm desserts and savory pies in winter. There were different phases to our baking. There was the political phase, where we did every Palestinian recipe we could get our hands on. There was the red wine phase, where we prioritized simple bakes to optimize wine consumption. And there was the extended cupcake phase, where we did red velvet cupcakes with far too much red food coloring, Halloween cupcakes with spider webs in icing sugar (Kerry was always the decorating expert), and the unfortunate incident with the green tea cupcakes where we used a particularly potent green tea powder which made it taste more like freshly cut grass than tea.

Over time, however, we actually learned to bake and although we continued to call ourselves novices we became more or less competent. Kerry ultimately branched out into a great solo baking career, with her creative pizza faces a particular highlight, featuring everyone from Chris Whitty to Donald Trump. We both passed our love of baking onto our children, who were always excited about our baking nights, while our partners sometimes endured, but mostly enjoyed, the fruits of our endeavors. We baked through major life events, social changes, and historical crises. We talked about everything in our lives and beyond and became very close friends.

In the last year and a half, when Kerry so often had to assess the risks of social interaction, we swapped the baking for nature walks or socially distanced visits. When infections landed her in hospital, I visited her there. While Kerry shared with me the details of medical treatments, diagnostic news, loud hospital wardmates, and comic vegetarian meal choices (plain mashed potatoes with plain pasta and peas, if you're interested), it wasn't a one-sided conversation. Instead, Kerry always took the time to ask how I was, and to listen. When I voiced my reluctance to share my mundane woes (including, but by no means limited to, a stubbed toe, a difficult teenager, and my appalling record of caring for house plants), she insisted that these conversations were meaningful to her precisely because of their mundanity, which took her away from the hospital ward and out into the world outside which she so longed for. So, I continued to tell her everything, and she was always there for it.

During her illness, she approached the terrifying and crappy odds she had been dealt with such strength, grace, self-awareness, and presence. Yes, she did talk a lot about how shit it was and rightly so. But she was clear-eyed, funny, and pragmatic about it as well. Her greatest concern was not for herself, but for her son Sascha, and her partner, then husband, Neil. She desperately wanted to live and was ready to do whatever that took, but also very open about the terrible cards she had been handed.

Just under two weeks before she passed away, Kerry had an emergency tracheostomy, due to the infection which ultimately took her life. She asked me to come and see her in hospital on Easter Friday 2024. While I had regularly made the journey to the various wards in Cardiff's Heath Hospital where she spent much of her last few months, this was different. She was in an isolated room in the Hematology ward, and I was required to put on an apron, gloves, and mask before entering the room. Kerry had warned me that she couldn't speak, only write. Once I was in the room with her, she waved and smiled, then scribbled away—pages and pages of her neat handwriting on a pad in response to my spoken word. I stayed with her for over an hour, the pages on the pad filling up in response to my questions, and because there were things she wanted to tell me. The pad allowed her to be as expressive and present as ever. However, I did notice the sound of silence—as an absence of her warm laughter. One of the last things she wrote before I departed was that she wanted to send me the intimacy thing she'd been working on.

Kerry wrote this piece during the last year of her life—from the time of her organ donation, in June 2023, and until she got too unwell to carry out further revisions, in February 2024. We frequently discussed the ideas animating the piece, and the process of writing it. When she first aired the idea, the notion of bio-intimacy seemed to me both strikingly original and very Kerry. It's very Kerry because it reflects a particular way of reading and reflecting on established concepts that is against the grain, based on rigorous theoretical engagement, yes, but also common sense and hilarious yet insightful metaphors.

Like Paul (as noted in his introduction), I was initially reluctant to read the piece, but when I did, I found comfort, profound insights, and lots of laughs. I found Kerry's voice. The piece represents her grappling with some of the most profound and paradoxical questions imaginable: What does it mean to invite an alien immune system to take over our own? How should we understand this new "emotional arena," which "is both conditioning of and conditioned by the experience of this relationship between self and other; the sharing, lending and 'melding' of bodies or body parts mediating between life and death"? What are the novel structures of feeling—including new forms of embodied intimacy—generated by

the bionic possibilities of the stem cell transplant and the encounters it occasions? As a scholar of emotion and media, the conceptual landscape is a familiar one to me—I have spent years immersed in reading and writing around the sociology of emotion, invoking structures of feeling, intimacy, and solidarity. Yet the ways in which she engages with these concepts—through her own life-and-death embodied experience—are entirely fresh. Reading the piece made me reassess these fundamental ideas, which look and feel so different seen through an existential encounter in the body of a loved one—in this case my dear friend Kerry.

For Kerry, the encounter was with the stem cells of an imagined alien and ally, a stout and strong German woman named Helga. Although the transplant initially showed strong prospects of success, Kerry's "unreliable, treacherously Leukaemia-unobservant stem cells were already agitating for a comeback" and ultimately rejected the welcome invader.

Kerry reacted to this news with her brand of clear-eyed appraisal and wry humor, with a sprinkling of much-needed hope where others might see only despair. While she was desperately sad about the grim prospects, she also remained open to any and all possibilities, no matter how harrowing: "So, here I am in the last chance saloon. So far it's not my favourite type of saloon. Less like the City Arms than a bare knuckle fight at the top end of St Mary's Street, with ambulances primed for the blood we must expect will be spilled—hoping for the best, preparing for the worst. It's the only saloon in town now, so I'd better be ready to take my chances." Reading these lines, I can hear how Kerry would have read them, and I can see her standing at the podium, a devious smile on her face and a glint in her eye.

As I'm writing this, the 2024 Euros are underway and Germany's still in the mix. I'm here in Cardiff, and I'm cheering for Germany and for Helga, and wishing that Kerry was here watching it with me.

Notes

1. NB: This conference was cancelled [PB].

2. Editor's note: *Capacious* typically requires American spelling, but to remain faithful to Kerry's voice, we have retained the English spelling throughout her writing.

3. The REF, or 'Research Excellence Framework,' is the UK's academic census of research outputs. It determines the status of institutions and—crucially—the amount of research funding provided to different universities. As such, it is something high on the agenda of research-intensive universities in the UK [PB].

4. 'Ooh-er!' is a British exclamation that draws attention to a sexual inuendo or double entendre. It was popularized by the late British comic actors Rik Mayall and Ade Edmonson, especially in the 1980s comedy sit-coms *Bottom* and *Filthy Rich & Catflap*.

5. *Gammon* and *gammony* are used to describe a (normally rich or upper-class) right-wing British person—such as Nigel Farage (mentioned below), who was prominent in the campaign for Britain to leave the European Union (aka 'Brexit') [PB].

6. This subtitle seems to be evoking *Strange Harvest: Organ Transplants, Denatured Bodies, and the Transformed Self*, by Lesley A. Sharp (University of California Press, 2006) [PB].

7. These are most likely points Kerry was considering including or developing [PB].

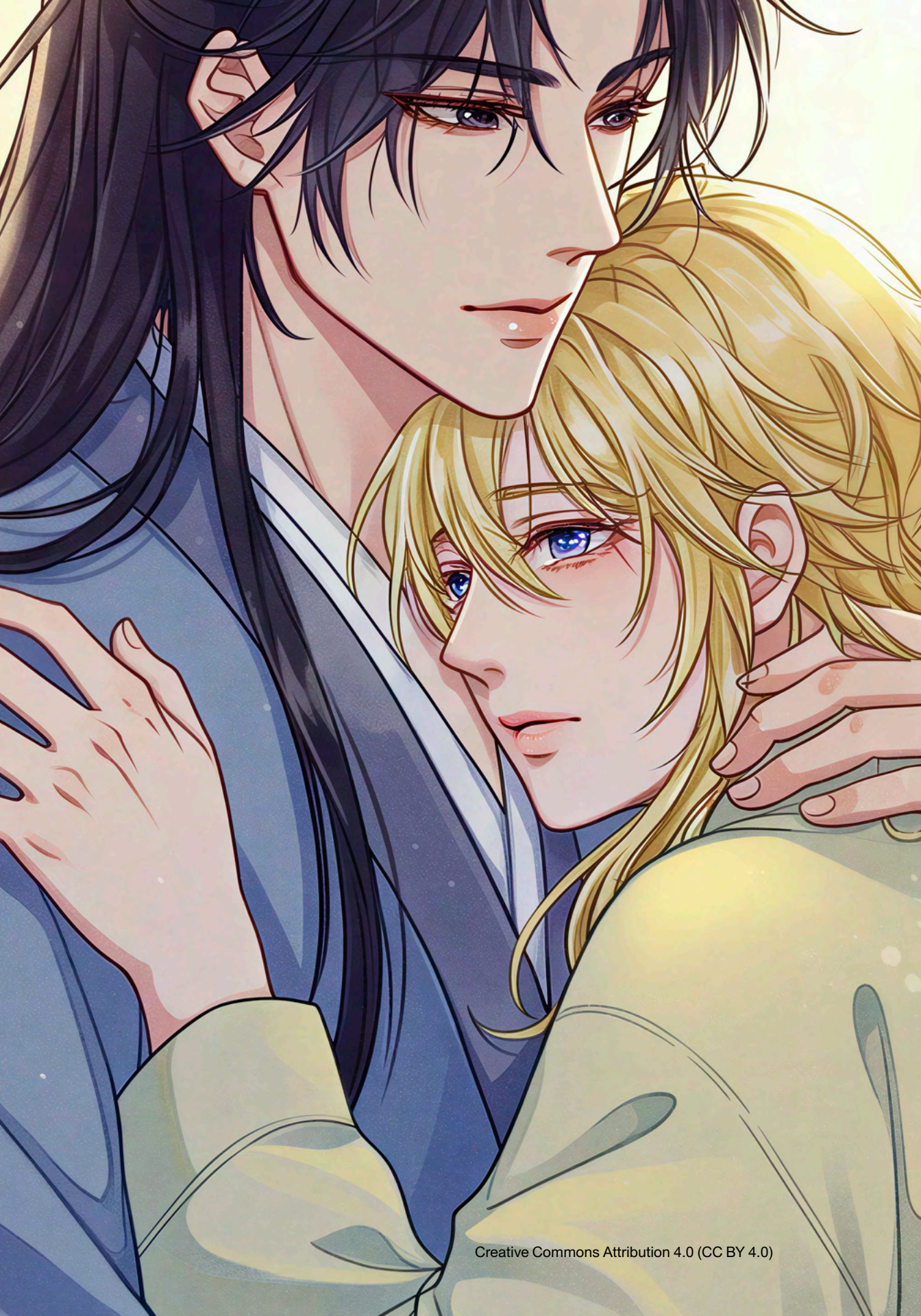
8. Kerry added two asterisks after this sentence, which seems to be her way of noting that she either wanted to add a reference later—most likely to Raymond Williams' chapter 'Structures of Feeling' in *Marxism and Literature*—or perhaps that she wanted to say a little more about this point, as elsewhere two asterisks seem to indicate is a point to be developed or discussed further [PB].

9. Suzie Dent is a lexicographer and etymologist who appears in this capacity on British TV game-shows and comedy panel shows [PB].

10. Most likely Bipin Savani, *Fast Facts: Leukemia: From Initial Gene Mutation to Survivorship Support* (S. Karger, 2019), which is available for free download in the UK on Amazon Kindle [PB].

11. Kerry adds a footnote here, which reads: 'lots more to this, too detailed to say, but maybe document case history further here'.

12. The City Arms is perhaps Cardiff's oldest continuously open pub, one that Kerry would often visit with her colleagues from work or football. St. Mary's Street is a main street in Cardiff, running up to the main entrance of Cardiff Castle [PB].



ROTTEN GIRLS AS KILLJOY FEMINISTS?

Unpacking Women's Perception on Gender Inequalities in Post-Socialist China

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality and feminism are topics of increasing visibility in China's increasingly digitized mass culture in recent years. Given the hype, successive research has attempted to bring forth the relationship between individuals' affective engagement with online feminism and their challenge or consolidation of gender inequality. Nevertheless, how negative affects can serve as a methodological framework for assessing individuals' role in promoting or hindering feminism is still underexplored. This article examines a particular population, namely the 'rotten girls' (female fans of male-male romance) as killjoy feminists in post-socialist Chinese patriarchy. It argues that rotten girls are at once killjoy feminists interrogating neoliberal gender normality and killjoys of their own feminist dreams, internalising the very norms. These nuances and paradoxes constitute a Deleuzian micropolitics, initiatives starting from bodily affect, that may nonetheless bring changes to public, collective life. Thus, this article complicates existing scholarship on negative affects in online feminism in the context of post-socialist China, providing insights into solidarity among feminist practitioners against the ostracization of feminism transnationally.

KEYWORDS

Post-socialist China, "rotten girls," feminist killjoys, Deleuzian micropolitics

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Introduction

Gender inequality and feminism are topics of increasing visibility in China's evermore digitized mass culture in recent years. From hashtag activisms to feminist podcasts, people share their gendered life experiences, reflecting on gender norms, and in so doing constituting communities of solidarity (Yang 2021, 2022; Yang and Hu 2023). Increased feminist consciousness is accompanied by rising antagonism, from top-down and bottom-up. In mainstream media reports and online discussions, feminism is often framed as a 'foreign force' aiming to destabilize China's harmonious society, while those who advocate for women's rights, regardless of genders, are addressed as 'female boxers' (女拳师) or 'extremists,' emphasizing their irrationality other than letting off steam (BBC 2021; Beijing Evening News, 2022). These dynamics constitute an arena that is at once discursive and affective, attracting increasing scholarly attention. Successive research has attempted to bring forth the relationship between individuals' affect and their challenge or consolidation of gender inequality (Yang 2021, 2022; Zhang 2022; Huang 2023; Yang and Hu 2023), as well as the structural disparities in contemporary Chinese patriarchy more broadly (Wu and Dong 2019; Yin 2022). Particularly, scholars highlight the important roles of negative affects (e.g., anger) people often feel in their engagement in feminist discussions or debates online. This raises the question of how we can conceptualise individuals' negative affects as a methodological framework for assessing their role in promoting or hindering feminism, a question that remains unanswered.

This article explores the role of a particular population, namely the 'rotten girls,' as killjoy feminists who feel wronged amidst and thus interrogate gender inequalities in post-socialist China. Rotten girls[1] are female and woman fans of Boys' Love (BL), a multimedia genre featuring male-male romance (Welker 2022). This article is part of my PhD project on the lived experiences of Chinese rotten girls.[2] In my individual, semi-structured interviews with the participants, I enquired about how they emotionally consume BL both commercially produced and fan-made, and how their everyday fan engagements inform their gender(ed) identities in post-socialist China. I discovered that the rotten girls' consumption of BL is often accompanied by their exposure to and engagements in the broader feminist discussions across multiple social media. While BL incites predominantly positive affects such as joy and excitement, the rotten girls often report anger and powerlessness in reflections of their own lives as women. What these negative

affects can do to the rotten girls and to feminism in China intrigues me deeply. As previously stated, rotten girls' negativity is ambiguous and paradoxical. It raises feminist consciousness among these women, giving rise to a communal feminine identity and envisioning a better future. Yet the very negative affects also lead to their further subjugation to China's patriarchal system. I propose understanding these nuances and paradoxes as a Deleuzian micropolitics (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), initiatives starting from bodily affect, that may nonetheless bring changes to public, collective life.

In the rest of this article, I firstly summarize gender inequalities in contemporary China's patriarchy[3] to contextualize the negative affects of the rotten girls in their everyday lives. This is followed by my theoretical considerations in interpreting the rotten girls' perception of gender inequalities. I then set up the methodological framework of the killjoy as a way of uncovering rotten girls' agency vis-à-vis China's patriarchy. I draw on Ahmed's (2010, 2017) concept of the killjoy and explore the insufficient application of this concept in scholarship on China's feminist politics. My discussion discloses the need to establish a detailed model of the killjoy with Chinese characteristics. I show that the rotten girls are at once killjoys of neoliberal gender normality and their own feminist dreams. Finally, I elaborate on how rotten girls' initiate micropolitics against post-socialist Chinese patriarchy.

Thus, this article complicates existing scholarship on negative affects in online feminism in post-socialist China. The significance of this attempt goes beyond the national border of China, as issues of gender have been framed as an 'ideology' threatening the stability of families and societies, serving as scapegoats for the precarity of life due to "neoliberalism and financialisation (the imperative to increase assets at the expense of securing fair wages)" on a global scale (Butler 2019, 1). Indeed, Wu and Dong (2019) propose that public frustration against class disparity upon China's neoliberal transition is often appropriated and channeled to a containment of feminism as an external dividing force (e.g., 'foreign force'). This resonates with Butler's (2019) argument that gender is refuted to sustain Christian families amidst the neoliberal states' outsourcing of social services to the Catholic churches in the Global North. In this sense, how individuals, particularly rotten girls, engage with (online) feminism and possibly forge solidarity in China provides insights into solidarity among feminist practitioners against the ostracization of feminism transnationally.

Gender Disparity in Post-Socialist China

Gender inequality in the Chinese patriarchal system needs to be understood in its current, post-socialist political economy. Post-socialism incorporates two interlocking trends, a neoliberal transition in national economy and a conservative turn in ideology (Rofel 2007; Bao 2020). For the former trend, since 1978, the communist party-state initiated marketization of national economy to counter the sociocultural and political economic chaos caused by the series of socialist revolutions (1949–1976). It took the form of privatization of enterprises, inflow of foreign capital (direct investment and im/material products), as well as an increase in international trade. Meanwhile, the state withdrew from its social welfare responsibilities, such as healthcare and housing, shifting these burdens to the private sector and individual households. This brought about social inequalities like class disparities and rural–urban divide as more labour force flushed to the cities for better income and accompanied sociocultural resources. Intensified social conflicts aroused a series of democratic protests, culminating as the governmental military crackdown on civilians at Tian'anmen Square in June 1989 (Rofel 2007). In the aftermath of the Tian'anmen movement, the state accelerated the economic reform. It is against this backdrop that the second trend towards conservative ideology came into play.

To advance the political-economic agenda, national ideology was meticulously managed, shaping gender relations in contemporary patriarchy. Specifically, neoliberal ethos saturated the public. Individualistic values such as romance, sexuality, and possession of im/material goods were increasingly seen in mass media (e.g., magazines, TV, the internet). The satisfaction of these desires, often through consumption, was seen as a way for individuals to assert their identity autonomy (Lee 2007; Song and Lee 2010; Meng and Huang 2017). Indeed, Rofel (2007) argues that marketisation in post-socialist China has given rise to a 'desiring subject'—"the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest" (3).

Meanwhile, these values and desires are highly gendered. Especially in recent years, the state sees the urgency to promote reproductive nuclear families in the aftermath of the single-child policy (1979–2015) and to boost China's market economy. Through multiple rhetorics, it emphasizes the domestic sphere as

women's rightful place (Leung 2003). For instance, the state promotes gender-essentialist discourse in multiple governmental documents, highlighting women's physical and intellectual inferiority to men, rendering them less of a competent labor force than men (Leung 2003). Meanwhile, ridiculing vocabulary like 'left-over women' (剩女) to describe well-educated single women over 27 years of age has been invented by the Ministry of Education and promoted across China's mainstream media, condemning those who fail to align with the feminine ideal (Fincher 2016). Thus, under neoliberalism, Chinese women are autonomous and independent, but only as consumers: "consumers in chief" of self-grooming products that could highlight their femininity, or of daily supplies for the household "in their designated roles of wife and mother" (Meng and Huang 2017, 667).

This general background explains some demographic features of the rotten girls in this article. Born in the 1990s along with China's neoliberal transition, they enjoy increasing material and immaterial wellbeing, more so as they are members of the single-child generation with no siblings to share their parental resources with. All of the rotten girls are of urban upbringing. They have received tertiary education and above. Many have studied and settled down overseas. Their digital and physical mobility have exposed them to international media productions among which BL is a typical genre. Likewise, they have been exposed to different ideas on femininity and gender. These ideas, coming from diverse sources both digital and physical, are ambiguous and often contradictory, simultaneously advancing and impeding feminism. This article attempts to uncover these nuances.

Theoretical Concerns

Three concepts require further elaboration. First, despite its complex connotations, throughout the article I follow the rotten girls' idiomatic understanding of feminism[4] as a cause to promote equal rights between men and women by interrogating the gender inequalities women experience in everyday life.

Second, the rotten girls' understanding of the concept of gender oscillates between nature and nurture, as both biological differences between men and women and imposition of gendered cultural norms. While following the rotten girls' reasoning, I interpret gender through Butlerian performativity. Gender is individuals' "compulsory performances" that starts at the bodily level (Butler 2011, 181). One is assigned a sex as male or female based (solely) on their sex organs (penis/vagina) and is expected to display, or 'cite' acceptable masculinity or femininity throughout their life as a man or woman. The citation of norms by individuals

is compulsory as it defines their (sexed) bodies and gives them (gendered) identities through which they become and remain viable subjects. Yet this compulsion overregulates itself when the citation is hyperbolic, or the sexed bodies and gendered performances do not quite match, such as in drag, or in cases where a rotten girl argues that girls "can be handsome as well" (Carrie). This is where individuals' agency comes in. This dialectic between constraints and freedom helps understand the rotten girls' simultaneous rebuttal and internalisation of patriarchal norms.

Third, by affect I mean a general motivational force impelling or inhibiting individuals' bodily actions, often ineffable but intuitively felt as a 'hunch' (Gibbs 2010; Hickey-Moody 2013, 79; Zhang 2021). It unfolds in certain concrete social forms and structures (institutions, formations, beliefs, etc.), yet being a motivational force, is excessive to these static social discourses, updating them, thus sustaining the vitality of culture (Grossberg in Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Williams 2015). While extensive research has addressed the nuanced overlaps and distinctions between emotion, affection, and feeling (e.g., Massumi 2002; Shouse 2005), in this article I see them as "the entire gamut of words of affect" (Lee 2007, 20). It is because affect, affection, emotion, and feeling are in nature non-separable, manifest often in the everyday, lived experience as what Stewart (2007) calls 'ordinary affect': "public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation" and "stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of" (2). In the context of rotten girls' feminist engagement, these ordinary affects are often negative. They are individually felt but form points of resonance. These negative affects constitute rotten girls' (albeit ambiguous) agency in Chinese patriarchy.

The Killjoy

When it comes to their engagement with feminist issues online, the rotten girls are best represented by the icon of a killjoy. The killjoy is theorized by Ahmed (2010, 17; 2017, 22) as a "feminist killjoy," one who feels "something is wrong" in terms of gender or race among other dimensions in what should be promising (e.g., a polite conversation during a joyous family dinner). The killjoy speaks up about this feeling of wrongness and the cause(s) of it (e.g., sexism, racism) but feels "wound up" in her speaking-up, as she has ruined the atmosphere and killed

the joy of others (Ahmed 2010, 65). In turn, the killjoy is condemned (usually in affective terms) as in-/over-sensitive for making claims of sexism or racism, which is her own hysteria or paranoia, a problem to be solved at her individual level. This false attribution of unhappiness adds another layer of unhappiness to the killjoy, circumventing her in a vicious circle, stopping her "from getting through" (Ahmed 2010, 68). In other words, the killjoy is a figure who is unhappy about gender, racial, and other societal structural disparities, yet whose unhappiness has been trivialized and dismissed by others as her own sensationalism. The purpose is to ostracize the killjoy to reestablish the veneer of happiness in a certain socio-cultural environment and the multiple relations of power underneath.

Starting with Ahmed (2010, 2017), the concept of the killjoy has been developed by scholars studying feminist politics in China. Zhang (2022) and Yin (2022) acknowledge that women in post-socialist China often act as feminist killjoys on social media like Weibo (Chinese Twitter) and Wexin (a mega instant messaging platform), where feminist discussions proliferate. These women point out gender injustice muted in the dominant narrative of a socialist "harmonious society" (和谐社会) (Chen and Wang 2019, 211), "get[ting] in the way" of others' happiness (Ahmed 2017, 37) Similar to Ahmed's (2017) analysis of how the killjoy is charged as sensationalist, Chinese feminist killjoys are stigmatised as "angry troublemakers" and are stripped of their "political commitment" (Yin 2022, 990).

Should joy-killing and joy-being-killed often be the case in one's engagement with feminism?[5] What should we make of these negative feelings? What is their significance (if any) in alleviating gender inequality and patriarchal system? Ahmed (2017) argues that unhappiness may lead to a strategy of "compromise" among the killjoys whereby one "shrugs [the unhappiness] off" by not naming its source(s) or taking it for granted, "making that fatalism [their] fate" (36). Indeed, Yin (2022) also points out that the stigmatisation of feminists in China has led to some women becoming "discouraged," where they "step back, and refuse to identify with feminism" as a way of shrugging off the unease (990). For Ahmed (2010, 2017), it is a survival mechanism for living with injustice especially when no easy resolution is available.

Yet this unhappiness may also lead to a feminist consciousness. The sense of unease dislocates the killjoy from the "happiness scripts" of what should make people happy and who is entitled to be happy (Ahmed 2010, 59). The very alienation motivates her to ponder over the cause of her unhappiness and look at the happiness script from a distance. Thus, she uncovers "the violence and power that are concealed under the language of civility and love [as a false consciousness]" (Ahmed 2010, 86). These power relations are the structural dispositions

sustaining the society in which the feminist killjoy lives. By disclosing structural issues, further personal and even social change towards equality may be initiated. Meanwhile, in these "moments of self-estrangement" (Ahmed 2010, 86) from her quotidian, another world/horizon is opened for the killjoy, beyond, and very likely broader than the one that is finely, thus narrowly tuned as a happy life. In this new horizon, as beautiful as it might be precarious, an alternative sense of solidarity is established through affective connections with other killjoys. A world has been built (Ahmed 2017).

This scholarship informs my usage of the killjoy to understand rotten girls' lived experiences in contemporary China's patriarchy. As I show in the rest of the article, the women report frustrations of multiple shapes and forms, and demonstrate complicated ways of coping with these frustrations that simultaneously consolidate and subvert the gender hierarchy in post-socialist Chinese patriarchy. By uncovering this complexity, my analysis goes beyond Ahmed's (2010, 2017) theorisation of the killjoy in Anglophone societies. Meanwhile, it also complicates scholarship on the Chinese feminist killjoy, which mentions women's position as killjoys as opposed to China's post-socialist patriarchal system only in passing[6] (e.g., Yin 2022; Zhang 2022). My aim is to uncover the rotten girls' agency in interrogating China's gender inequality and patriarchy.

Rotten Girls as the Killjoy of Feminist Dreams

INTERNALIZING NEOLIBERAL GENDER NORMS

Despite their condemnation of disparate discourses between men and women, the rotten girls also take in the anxiety born out of the multiple disparate, gender-essentialist discourses, and identify with it as the ordeal of their identity as women.

To the women, there is "truly" a distinction between men and women (Bamei). This distinction is first of all ontological. As Leonie commented: "In terms of gender equality, I do think women should be given extra care. After all, pregnancy and labor can only proceed in a woman's body. This is determined by biology." It is presumably in the similar vein that Momo highlighted that "it might be a bit harsher for the girls" in her aspiration for the diminishment of

the double standard in the socialisation of men and women: "I want a common consciousness, that the standards applied to boys and girls be the same, even if it might be a bit harsher for the girls."

Meanwhile, this ontological difference is entwined with the modulation of socio-cultural dispositions. As Bamei confided:

> To some extent I truly feel girls and boys are different. For example, I'm very fragile emotionally. Boys can take up trails and errors in life alright. But for a girl, when you are drifting and wandering, unable to settle down, you want a boy to keep you company. You want him to solve some of your problems…I'm twenty-five now, so I feel very anxious. I want to settle down and find a boyfriend quickly, otherwise it might get too late.

Bamei's "innate emotional fragility" as a young woman fueled her desire to rely on her special other, despite her unwillingness to gamble her life onto another person (e.g., unwillingness to marry for *hukou*). These intricate feelings and opinions in-between nature and nurture are further complicated by the governmental gender-essentialist discourse (Leung 2003; Meng and Huang 2017). These gender-difference discourses have been taken on and lived through by Bamei. The sensationalism and agism in her narratives recall the 'leftover women' icon—a sad single woman over twenty-seven years old—which has (already) thrown her into anxiety at the age of twenty-five.

Adding to the women's already difficult negotiations with disparate gender discourses is the neoliberal underpinning of post-socialist Chinese patriarchy. Like their simultaneous acknowledgement and internalisation of sexist norms, the women may rebuke, but nonetheless identify with neoliberal logic, particularly its ethos orienting around individuality and individualistic desire. Momo explained further her aspiration for the "common consciousness" in the equality between men and women: "I think if you expect less of a girl, she expects less of herself. If you expect something profound, she will explore things profound in herself."

The gender equality that Momo aspired to, as a countermeasure to the discriminations she has experienced or witnessed, is largely defined in individualistic terms, in accordance with the neoliberal agenda. It is seen as an individuality with a "psychological space" ("things profound in herself") and the mastering of that space by exhibiting autonomy and self-responsibility (see also Lee 2007, 36; Wang and Ge 2020). The problems, for Momo, were rooted more on the representational level—differences in "public opinions" allocated to men and women as shown in

the media—and were seen to be resolved at the level of the individual, with the societal political-economic structure largely untouched. Neoliberal patriarchy is to be confronted with neoliberal tools.

Presumably, it is out of the same individualistic values that Bamei, as per her previous comments, while internalising the "essential" difference between men and women and aspiring to rely on her special other, did not want to gamble her life onto others after all: "So rather than staying in Beijing, perhaps I can go to a less developed city where I will be able to settle down by myself, and then [me and my partner] can build a life together on an equal basis." In this sense, Momo and Bamei are representatives of the rotten girls who are constantly put into confrontation with imbalanced relations in China's post-socialist, neoliberal patriarchy through their feeling of wrongness, but are also constantly putting up with the unease as they get around the world.

THE TECHNIQUE OF COMPROMISE

In this article, I consider the women's putting-up-with-the-unease as a strategy of compromise. As per Ahmed (2017), it is a refrain from naming the structural issues like sexism and racism that lead to one's unhappiness by shrugging the unhappiness off or taking it on as a "fatalism" (36). This reaction is evident among the rotten girls. The feminist and misogynistic fights on the market accounts got on the nerves of Ruowei and others: "At the beginning I would feel really upset [糟心], and furious too, wondering 'what has happened to this world.'" Yet Ruowei learnt to get along—"later I realized that this [anxiety] is unnecessary"—by distinguishing the polemics on the marketing accounts from "serious and rational feminist discussions and movements" and identifying the former's neoliberal logic. This was accompanied by Ruowei's turning an indifferent eye on and filtering out of the antagonistic discussions on issues of gender (shrugging them off) that were becoming "too radical," be them clout-chasing or otherwise: "On Weibo, I would now only browse through the feminist discussions without engaging too much." Similarly, Keira justified her unwillingness to participate in the online discussions of gender issues: "You see [different ideas] and have already acquired your own stance. So, you learn to disengage from and filter out the irrational content."

For Ahmed (2017), the purpose of the mechanism of compromise is to get on with one's life: "resistance to recognizing something might be a way of coping with or living with that thing" (36). The strategy is especially justifiable when the 'thing' that leads to one's unhappiness is structural, and that naming and clinging onto the structural issues do not necessarily 'resolve' them (Ahmed 2017, 9), as Carrie commented: "Even as I see [the patriarchal system] now, there seems very little that I can do, so I also feel powerless." As a Chinese woman, Carrie was thrashed further into her frustrations due to the huge disparity between her own strength versus a system that exceeds national, racial, and geographical boundaries regardless of its specificity in each culture and her realisation of something wrong in a conversation between a white male scholar and a white female student in the US. In this regard, the rotten girls, by shying away from their unhappiness, become the killjoy of their own feminist aspirations.

Under these circumstances, how do we understand the rotten girls' multiple dimensions of unhappiness and contradictory ways of coping in China's post-socialist, patriarchal culture? I explore the dynamics in the following section.

THE KILLJOYS AS MICROPOLITICS IN CHINA'S PATRIARCHY

Despite my aim to bring out the agency of the rotten girls, I acknowledge that this agency is structured and constrained by gender norms and consumer capitalism underpinning the post-socialist Chinese patriarchy. It is perhaps for this reason that the women, even with, or precisely because of their feminist consciousness and identification with the collective feminine identity, feel nonetheless "powerless" (Carrie). Nevertheless, it is still crucial to do justice to the rotten girls' conditional agency.

In this article, I understand the initiatives of the killjoy rotten girls as a Deleuzian micropolitics (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Micropolitics describes the flow of bodily affect in the assemblage of a culture that, with affect's excessive nature, can escape multiple cultural constraints. It is micro due to the 'mass,' or ever-presence of the excess of affect that motivates bodily actions (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 217). This excess may drive individuals' revolt against the sociocultural rules, leading to macro sociocultural transformation(s), but not necessarily so. Being a neutral force, it may well lead to (re)disciplining of bodies, thus a retaliation of cultural rules and curtailing of sociocultural change (Fox and Alldred 2022). Hence, micropolitics is political more as a potential for the affective excess to bring around any form of change, positive or negative, macro or micro, than as mass social transformation for good.

Indeed, the rotten girls dis/engagement with feminism is motivated often by negative affects as unhappiness and powerlessness. These negative affects may be curbed by the women's internalising neoliberal gender norms and shying away from feminist discussions online tout court, which, I emphasize, features nonetheless as their coping, even survival mechanism. As Bamei showcased, despite her anxiety as a single, non-Beijing-native, and to-be-leftover woman, she managed to find joy in her identity as a rotten girl by setting aside (at least temporarily) her frustrations and retreating into the fantastic world of BL: "Significant [in solving your life problems] or not, [BL] makes you feel the delights in everyday lives."

Yet the negative affects may also bring around concrete changes on a collective, hence social level. The multi-layered unhappiness each individual rotten girl perceives in their encounter(s) with gender inequality and consumer capitalism resonates with each together, constituting a community of killjoy feminists who are willing to voice their discontent. This community embodies the excess of affect that bypasses discursive confinement, evidenced as Otama's commitment to a feminism that transgresses class and demographic disparities in China's patriarchal discursive system.

More importantly, the excess also overcomes the unpleasant present through an envision of the future. As Carrie summarised:

> Carrie: I think for me this sensibility is still positive, even if I can't really do anything [to change the system]. For example, if I were to talk to other teenage girls, I wouldn't say anything like "You need to be cute. You need to be docile." I'd say instead that "You can be strong, and you can be handsome as well." Also, I would seriously consider if my future kid should take my last name. Just these sorts of things. It does have impacts on me.
>
> Me: Is it more like a hope for the future?
>
> Carrie: Yes, and I think I'm willing to pass these ideas around.

Thus, rotten girls' agency in Chinese partiarchy is an affective one. It is their ordinary, negative affects arisen out of their daily encounters with feminist discussions and debates. These affects navigate *through* as they are *against* gender discourses. Regardless, they give rise to a sense of potentiality. Arguably, it is exactly this sense of potentiality that testifies a micropolitics in the rotten girls' everyday engagement with feminism online, helping them to survive the restrained here and now, while providing hope towards a better then and there (Bao 2020).

CAPACIOUS

Conclusion

This article discussed the potential of negative affects as a methodological framework for assessing individuals' promotion or hindrance of feminism in post-socialist China. I focused on a particular population, namely the rotten girls, and unpacked their roles as killjoy feminists in their encounters with gender inequalities in their everyday lives, both online and offline. I showed that this killjoy identity is multi-layered and paradoxical. Motivated by feelings of wrongness, the rotten girls identify and interrogate gender inequality and neoliberalism in Chinese patriarchy, confirming their communal identity as killjoy feminists. Yet they also internalise or ignore these structural disparities which are the sources of their unhappiness, thereby killing the joy in their feminist potential. Nevertheless, I proposed understanding these dynamics as a form of micropolitics. The unhappiness of the rotten girls possesses a potential that will always work around (as compromise or subversion) gender inequality in neoliberal China, bringing around senses of hope and futurity. As such, this article adds to scholarship on negative affects in online feminism in post-socialist China, which resonates with feminism and antifeminism worldwide.

Notes

1. The term 'rotten girls' is a customary English translation of the Japanese word *fujoshi*, which literally means both 'rotten girls' and 'rotten women.' It is a self-deprecating, yet also proud identifier for female BL fans. The term was imported to China along with Japanese BL culture in the 2000s. In the Chinese context, 'rotten girls' encompasses both female sex and gender. While fans of other sexes and genders are present in BL fandom, they have largely been coopted by the rotten girl community (McLelland and Welker 2015; Shao and Wang 2018). This article focuses on female and woman BL fans.

2. I conducted online, semi-structured interviews with eighteen self-identified rotten girls of Chinese nationality and upbringing. Interviews were conducted from September to December 2020. The project was approved by the author's home institution, following relevant human research ethics. Participants are presented under pseudonyms in this article.

3. Harrell and Santos (2017) define contemporary Chinese patriarchy as one of hybridity, "a system of family and kinship that produces and is produced by gender and generational inequalities both within and beyond the domestic sphere…intersect[ed] with other variables such as class, education, sexuality, regional location, and, most importantly, China's rigid but loosening rural-urban divide" (10). This article takes the perspective of gender, exploring the rotten girls' affective encounter with gender inequalities and feminist critique of them as a miniature of their engagement with Chinese patriarchy writ large.

4. Feminism is, admittedly, a concept more complicated than laid out here. Yin (2022), for instance, summarises the principles of feminism as "justice for all, through collective action to end the interlocking domination, including sexism, racism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, and cisgender normativity" (982). This article examines particularly the rotten girls' feminist interrogation of sexism in contemporary Chinese mass culture.

5. While unhappiness/bad feelings/killjoy frequently show up in feminist theories or other forms of discussions, it is not always the case. For a start, Braidotti (2002) bases her feminist philosophy on an "ethics of joy and affirmation" (13).

6. Extensive research discusses Chinese women's negative affects in feminist discussions online without acknowledging their position as "killjoys" (e.g., Yang 2021; Yang and Hu 2023). Among research outputs that do, Zhang (2022) identifies feminist groups and activists as feminist killjoys in a short paragraph to serve for her broader case study on the role of emotions in online feminist discussions and how the platform affordances of Weibo contribute to these dynamics. Similarly, Yin's (2022) acknowledgement that post-socialist feminists are stigmatised as killjoys (angry troublemakers) and that this demonisation further disengages women from feminism is only a segment of her historical review of feminist discourses in China from the socialist to post-socialist era. Thus, it is more of a statement than an analysis.

7. In the interview, Ruowei used the Chinese words "*konghun* (afraid of marriage)" and "*kong lian'ai* (afraid of being in a relationship)". I translated these two phrases into "gamophobia" and "philopobia" for the flow of the narratives.

8. During the COVID outbreak, some hospital administrators in Wuhan were reported to reject donation of sanitary supplies for the frontline female medical workers, considering them as "unessential" (Yang 2021, 17). This incident aroused great controversy.

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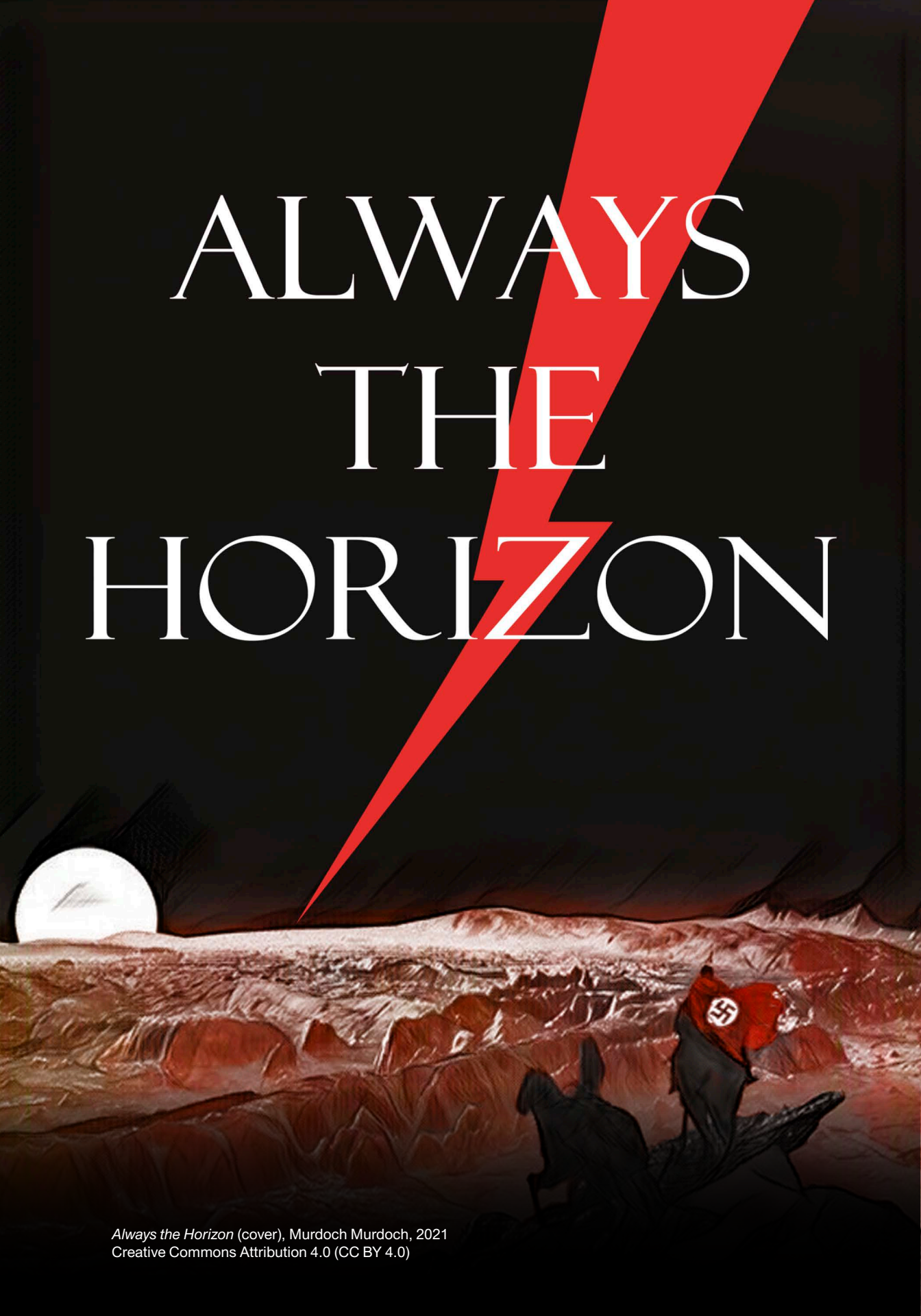
ALWAYS THE HORIZON



Always the Horizon (cover), Murdoch Murdoch, 2021

ALWAYS THE HORIZON: FORCES, FUTURITIES, AND THE CHURN OF WHITE NATIONALISM

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"I am a child of the horizon. A broken remnant of the Aryan. An aspect of Being. Or as Mussolini put it, 'a feeling'" (Murdoch 2021, 6). So begins the narrative of *Always the Horizon*, an enigmatic novel written in 2021 by a pseudonymous author named Murdoch Murdoch who had previsouly amassed a huge fanbase around their animated series that fuses neo-Nazi ideology and esoteric White nationalism with 4chan meme culture and metaphysical philosophy. *Always the Horizon* does much the same, resulting in what one fan aptly describes as "*The Pilgrim's Progress* filtered through Nietzsche, Heidegger, Evola, Hitler, and anime" (Dominique 2023). Throughout the novel, the book's protagonist pledges to always "look out at the horizon," refusing to have "our eyes here on the grave, fixed on what was, [which] will only obstruct our gaze and the pursuit of what can be" (Murdoch 2021, 2). He declares that this ideal—*looking out at the horizon*—is "the most Aryan of all principles" (Murdoch 2021, 2). To be White is to feel oneself in relation to the horizon.

Across the topologies of contemporary White nationalism and neo-fascism, "the trope of horizons" has started to emerge as a far-right device "for viewing the near future and pushing the envelope of change," as Alexandra Minna Stern (2019) notes in her study of White ethnonationalism (45). Stern (2019) writes that these discourses are increasingly calling upon "'long time horizon' philosophies that can induce distinct (meta)political possibilities" (45). Alexander Dugin (2024), for example, expounds on the "unknown horizons of a post-liberal future" (n.p.).

Jason Reza Jorjani (2020) argues that White people possess a "genetic predisposition to . . . a horizon-expanding will to transcend all apparent limitations" (81). Ward Kendall's self-described "new vision for the White nationalist movement" adopts the trope in its title, *Beyond This Horizon: A White Nationalist Blueprint.* And, in a gleeful post to their Telegram channel, the neo-Nazi group "White Lives Matter" proclaims, "The horizon that lies ahead is luminous with promise" (February 27, 2024).

One particularly striking instance of the horizon trope comes from the epigraph to *The White Nationalist Manifesto*, written in 2018 by popular far-right author (and self-proclaimed White nationalist) Greg Johnson. The epigraph depicts an imaginary dialogue between a student and what Johnson (2108) derisively calls a "multiculturalist" teacher:

> Teacher: A society in which all races and cultures live together in peace and harmony is just over the horizon.
>
> Student: What's the horizon?
>
> Teacher: An imaginary line that always recedes as one approaches it. (1)

Intentionally or not, this dialogue reveals a polyvalent sense of the horizon within White nationalist rhetoric. On one hand, Johnson (2018) frames the "multicultural horizon" as dangerous insofar as it strategically produces constant action toward the unreachable (and ambiguous) goal of total racial harmony. On the other hand, he explicitly argues that in order to "unify as many whites as possible around the idea of the ethnostate" (2018, 81), strategic ambiguity and receding horizons are key. "The more specific our proposals for the ethnostate," writes Johnson (2018), "the less likely we are to get any kind of ethnostate at all" (81). For Johnson, the very thing that makes the "multiculturalist horizon" so dangerous is also what makes it a powerful tool for White nationalism.

Something about the horizon has punctured my usual lines of thought. Its refrain snapped something into place as a *problem* for me—or, rather, as a series or problems—in thinking about structures of White nationalism. Like many others, I'd primarily come to see such structures as shaped by (and, in turn, shaping) what Casey Kelly (2020) describes as White victimhood that cannot possibly experience "social change as anything other than a catastrophic loss" (3). Loss narratives

like the "Great Replacement" theory imagine that something is being "taken away by—or given to—people who do not deserve it" (Miller-Idriss 2022, 12). Loss was the message of Donald Trump's 2017 inaugural address, for example, which rages against all that had been "ripped" from our country, "disappear[ing] over the horizon." As Toni Morrison (2016) put it in her essay "Making America White Again," written just days after the 2016 election, the power of these narratives is their ability to instill a "kind of terror that makes knees tremble" when thinking about the collapse of White privilege. Their currency is not so much anger, Morrison writes, but the terrifying fear of what might be lost. Living in the current moment, it's impossible not to see the power of loss narratives as they shape a sense of White victimhood.

At the same time, it has become increasingly hard for me not to also see different forms of White nationalism registering. Alongside politics of despair, other modes of attunement seem to navigate *away* from loss, lack, and absence. Rather than anchored in lack, these forms are oriented more toward what appears like hope, futurity, and even utopianism. To be clear, what I'm signaling here is not (only) the explicit contents of White nationalist narratives, but rather something at a more structural level—something that operates through emergent forces, affects, and intensities. Furthermore, though this emergent structure shifts attention away from loss, it is not simply a reversal of loss into optimism (e.g., "The horizon that lies ahead is luminous with promise.") Rather, its "hope" is the felt-sense of a "potential *next* [that] is never consumed in any given event," where the "present is shadowed by a remaindered surplus of indeterminate potential for a next event running forward back to the future, self-renewing" (Massumi 2010, 53). This structure—what I describe as White nationalism's horizon—is thus thoroughly implicated in the realm of the virtual.

To describe the horizon in terms of the virtual is not to a turn away from very real and material aspects of White nationalist violence. We are constantly pelted by impacts and effects of felt realities that, as Brian Massumi (2020) puts it, are "so superlatively real that [they] translate into a felt certainty about the world" (55). However, as a form of virtuality, the horizon is "not contained in any actual form assumed by things or states of things" but instead "runs in the transitions from one form to another" (Massumi 2021, 135). Functioning as a form of *connectibility*, the White nationalist horizon might also be described alongside notions of turning, troping, and what we might call *the churn*. With etymological roots linking movement and kernel/seed/core (*cyrnel*), churning is the constant movement of transitions that never settle into a fixed form; churning is never consumed by any single transformation. Churning is an in-betweenness, unfulfillable and, consequently, always "in the emergence of new potentials" (Massumi 2021, 134).

Churning thus evokes ways in which the horizon links a "next" with a forever "not yet," orienting subjects within a perpetual *infra-moment* of the virtual that will never fully transpire (Massumi 2021; Seigworth and Gregg 2020). An always horizon.

Giving an account of the White nationalist horizon is, however, yet another problem. Engaging with the "superlatively real" forces that exist in (and as) transitions means that we must adopt analogical models for reading and writing. One such methodology is found in José Esteban Muñoz's (1996) approach to *working through* ephemeral evidence, which does not attempt to represent the thing itself, but rather what's left behind of what has transpired: "traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things" (10). It's along these lines that my inquiry draws from an admittedly strange (and ephemeral) archive—one that leaves behind traces and residues of forces that persist in White nationalism today. More specifically, I *work through* a history of White nationalist bookstores that operated across the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. My inquiry revolves around several vignettes of six different bookstores that existed between 1962 and 1978. With their their dense and fragmented assemblages—churning accumulations of names, dates, acronyms, shifting alliances, places, events—these bookstores serve as useful devices to track White nationalism's infrastructural trajectories. They give us one way into the problem of the horizon.

This archive may seem like an odd choice, especially since their accounts are stories of abject failure. Many of the bookstores opened and closed within a few years, and their histories are closely tied to the broader failings of the groups they were affiliated with. Yet, this account also reflects the way in which "the churn—clubs launching, collapsing, merging, and rebranding—is built into" White nationalist history, as journalist Daniel Walters' writes (2023). More significantly, their accounts of failure also signal how utopic forces of futurity can enact failure as a feature, not a bug. I also find these histories useful for the way they leave behind traces of "something real" that orients subjects toward a perpetual threshold of a *next* and a *not yet*. The following vignettes are thus offered as a critical and creative means of reckoning with the White supremacy that continues to shape broader horizons of publicness. It is also a way to *work through* the ongoing problems of White nationalism's ever-emergent horizon of violence.

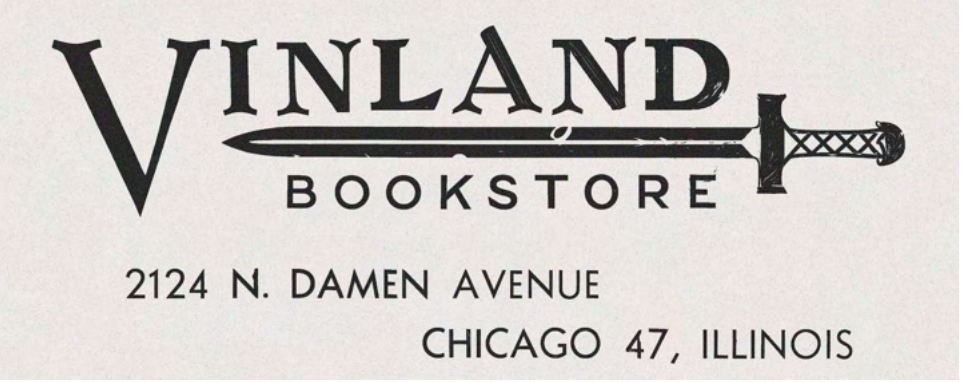
I.

VINLAND BOOKSTORE, 1962, AMERICAN NAZI PARTY, CHICAGO
THE WHITE BOOKSTORE, 1964, THE WHITE PARTY OF AMERICA, WASHINGTON D.C.

Something spills out from the stories that follow. They exist on a threshold of sorts, hovering around a feeling of a horizon that is both just within and just outside of reach. Accounts of the White nationalist atmospheres of the early 1960s are punctuated with an incipient sense of potentiality, of being on the edge of something *real*, though always seeming to fall short of grasping whatever was waiting. The stories are full of stumbles and falls, collapses and breakdowns, followed by renewed attempts to get it right. Pervading these scenes is a perpetual sense of near-graspability, a mode of attunement that pulls attention away from the constant disappointment of *this time* and instead looks toward a *next time* that will be a *final next time*. This sense arguably permeates the story of the American Nazi Party (ANP), which had earned the dubious distinction of being one of the best-known White nationalist groups in the country by the early 1960s. The story of the ANP is a story of churns: its various stumbles and breakdowns spun out a significant number of other White nationalist groups and figures throughout the 60s and 70s. It is a story of many *next times*. And so, to begin an inquiry into the White nationalist horizon, it makes sense to begin in the middle of this particular churn.

When George Lincoln Rockwell founded the American Nazi Party in 1959, he had a penchant for knowing how to attract attention. The son of vaudeville performers, Rockwell leaned heavily on over-the-top theatrical tactics to grab publicity for the ANP. In short time, Rockwell proved successful in his attempts to attract attention, whether it was by wearing Swastika armbands or driving a VW van painted with the phrase “Hate Bus" across the country. Thank to these tactics, it only took a few years to grow the ANP from a single operation in Arlington, Virginia to multiple chapters across the country. So, in 1962, when the party opened the Vinland Bookstore in Chicago, it seemed downright unremarkable compared Rockwell’s typical ploys. What made Vinland Bookstore noteworthy, however, was his decision to name Matt Koehl as bookstore manager.

Koehl’s assignment to the Vinland Bookstore was symbolic and provocative on multiple fronts. He had only recently joined the ANP after resigning from his official position in the National States Rights Party (NSRP), an organization that launched violent attacks on anti-segregation and civil rights efforts. Yet, while the NSRP’s discourse was infused with antisemitism, it was extremely outspoken



against the ANP's pro-Nazi discourse. For his part, Rockwell argued that NSRP leaders were simply too cowardly to admit their own pro-Nazi sentiments, a sign of the group's weakness. The Vinland Bookstore's announcement thus gave Rockwell yet another opportunity to boast that men like Koehl had finally "seen the uselessness" of the NSRP's "disguised Nazi-ism" (Rockwell 1962, 6).

For years, the ANP and the NSRP traded jabs back and forth, often framing the situation as (metaphorical) matters of life and death. In a pamphlet titled "Swastika Smearbund," for example, NSRP member James Warner (1961) declared that "the Nazi party is a dead issue and should not be revived" (17). In response, Koehl (1962) penned an angry open letter to NSRP leaders, fuming that "you and I both knew, from the very beginning, that we were NAZIS, . . . [but] you said, and I believed you, that it was suicide to come out and admit this openly" (15). Koehl (1962) painted the NSRP as a moribund enterprise and declared that Rockwell would "spark new Life [into the cause] by the fight he has been putting up" (15). While the two groups continued to trade back-and-forth barbs about who was truly bringing "life" to the movement, the discourse suggested a more fundamental question stumping both groups: how to achieve something *real*.

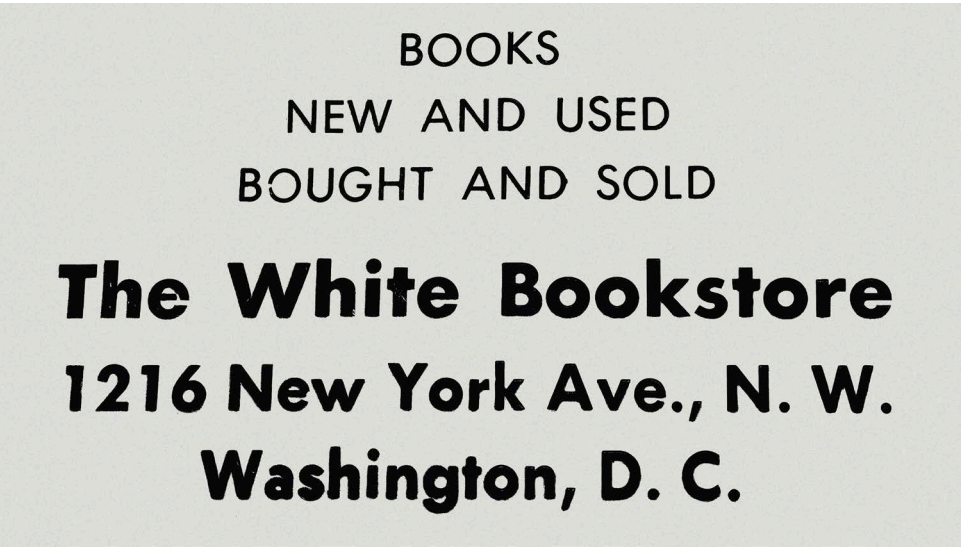
For many ANP members, this question became more pressing as time wore on and there seemed to be little in what they considered to be real achievements. After years of public stunts—picketing theaters showing interracial romance films, handing out flyers to indifferent passersby—members began to feel disillusioned. "Our men are action-minded. There's nothing to do but pass out literature,"

grumbled ANP member Ralph Forbes (1966), "They grow restless" (20). The Vinland Bookstore also seemed to offer little more than an empty gesture, failing to attract much attention, even from the local press. In 1963, only a year after its grand opening, the Vinland closed. Shortly thereafter, twenty-six ANP members resigned from the party, publishing an open letter complaining that despite having "suffered, starved, and froze" for the cause, it had accomplished nothing (Schmaltz 1999, 196).

One of the twenty-six members who resigned was Karl Allen, a former ANP leader who believed he could achieve the success that the ANP and NSRP had failed to accomplish. In 1964, Allen launched his own party—the White Party of America (WPA)—and announced that its centerpiece would be the White Bookstore, located in Washington, D.C. Many of Allen's associates echoed the sentiments of right-wing publisher Conde McGinley, who told Allen that he would "need more than luck having a racist book store which is just three blocks from the White house" (1964). Nevertheless, Allen seemed confident that his different approach would succeed where others had failed. In contrast with Rockwell's performative shock tactics, Allen dispensed with Nazi symbolism, placing ads for the White Bookstore in mainstream publications that simply listed "Books, new and used, bought and sold," or "Right Wing Reading: Books, Magazines, Papers." In correspondences with publishers, Allen carefully tailored the bookstore's image to fit different audiences, presenting it as a primarily "patriotic" enterprise to anti-communist publishers who may have been reluctant to be associated with an explicitly racist operation. Meanwhile, for publishers who were sympathetic with the White nationalist cause, Allen (1964) proudly described the shop as "a White racist bookstore, . . . featuring racist and patriotic newspapers, magazines, and books."

Allen (1964) also leaned heavily on themes of action in WPA party literature, taking care to distance the WPA from "feeble" efforts that "channel patriotic drive and energy into blind alleys or into impotent attempts to resurrect or justify the dead past." Allen (1964) repeatedly emphasized that the WPA was action-oriented, insisting that "If you join THE WHITE PARTY, you must be prepared to do something" . This included helping the bookstore succeed by "stocking the shelves with good, racist, White Man's reading," or "send[ing] the books gathering dust on your shelves at home" (1964). Elsewhere potential members were told that they "may be asked to distribute pamphlets in the streets, to picket, to speak to a group, to manage a meeting, to talk to your neighbors about the Party." While this list of actions was not much different from what ANP and

other parties were already doing, Allen pushed the idea that the WPA was an organization destined to "channel drives and energy" into a new future marked by action and vitality (n.p.). Nevertheless, while the White Bookstore managed to stay in business longer than Vinland, it too eventually closed as the White Party of America disintegrated.



These two accounts reflect a kind of futurity that is evoked by the horizon. Here I return to José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and his description of a utopian queer horizon: yes, an admittedly strange parallel to draw with White nationalism's anti-utopianism. As Muñoz (2009) theorizes it, the anticipatory horizon of queerness resides not in a distant future but in a present moment that posits queerness "as something that is not yet here" (22). Queer futurity is thus a utopian project that leverages the queer horizon's "not yet" as a way to escape the trappings of what is said to (already) be. It thus draws its generative potential from the unfulfillability of "not yet" as a capacity for doing things differently right now. The key to queer futurity's utopianism lies precisely in a sensitization to the *not yet here*'s virtuality—a sensitization to that which will never fully eventuate, whatever may come. In contrast to the queer horizon's *always-not-yet*, however, the White nationalist horizon shows up in the guise of a *final next time:* a horizon imagined as one that can be (and must be) fulfilled. While the White nationalist horizon is far from utopian, it possesses a similar capacity to sensitize toward what Brian

Massumi describes (2021) as the "felt momentum" of "a vector-feeling produced by the fusion of the fused past-present with an 'aim' at futurity" (180). The horizon's constant iterations of *next time* point to the force of the virtual: "a force of existence: the press of the next, coming to pass (Massumi 2014, 55). Of course, insofar as the nearly-graspable is never capable of being grasped, any final next time is impossible.

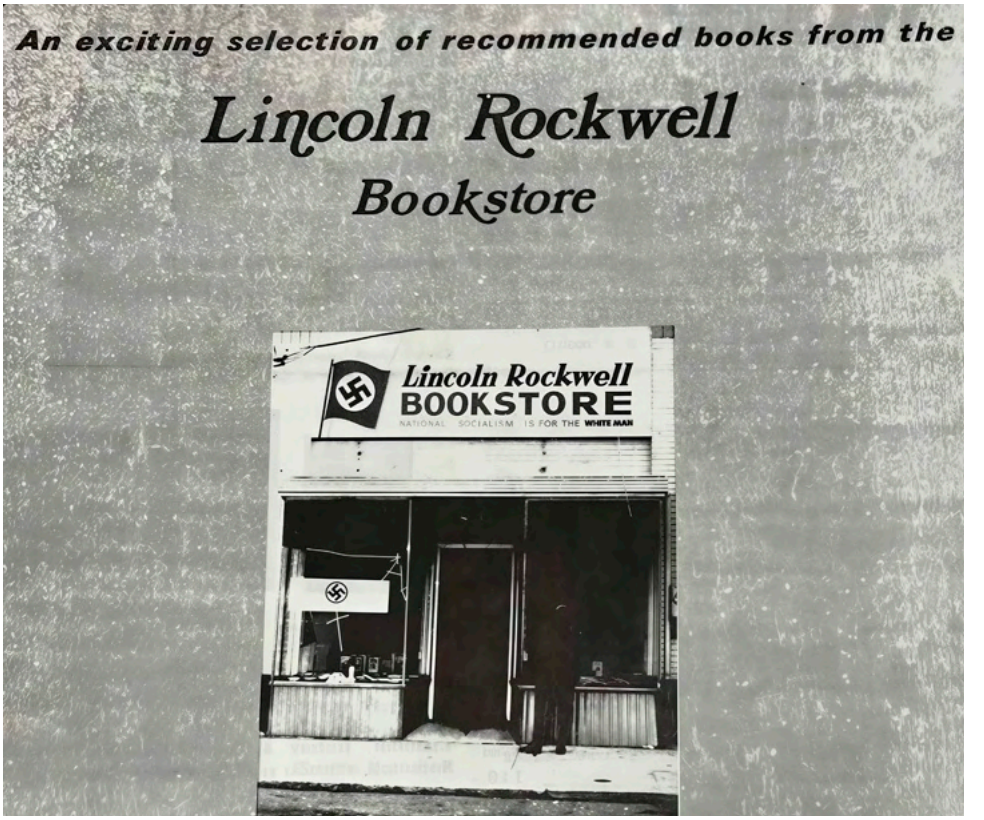
Life and death, success and failure, having and not having, real action and impotent efforts—within these accounts, there's a kind of inflection or attunement to such experiences as other than dialectical. Rather, they exist within the broader field of a White nationalist horizon: generative forces oriented toward futurity, equally operating in service of momentum. *The churn*. Consequently, while I certainly do not mean to suggest that the White nationalist horizon mirrors Muñoz's queer futurity, there is something to be gleaned here about "belonging to the horizon" as a sensitizing force of momentum. Something is happening here around capacities that both sustain and accelerate White nationalist violence. While the individual accounts of two failed bookstores may not seem very significant, they do leave behind traces of capacities in flux and thresholds yet to be reached.

II.

THE LINCOLN ROCKWELL BOOKSTORE, 1970, ARLINGTON, NATIONAL SOCIALIST WHITE PEOPLE'S PARTY

WESTERN DESTINY BOOKSTORE, 1970, WASHINGTON DC, NATIONAL YOUTH ALLIANCE

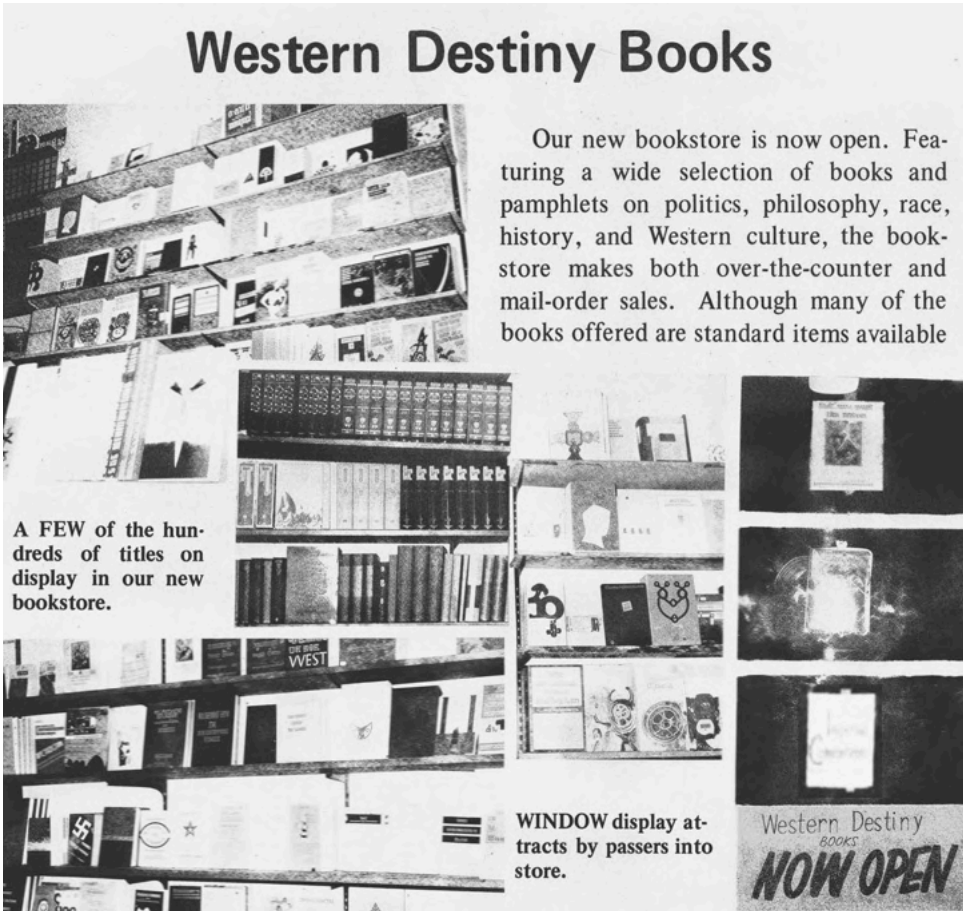
Other *next times* play out a bit differently in another set of histories. The first is that of the short-lived Lincoln Rockwell Bookstore, which is somewhat of a sad reboot of the Vinland Bookstore. Opened in 1970, the Lincoln Rockwell Bookstore was part of an effort to renew the faltering ANP, which had since been rebranded as the National Socialist White People's Party (NSWPP). After Rockwell's 1967 assassination by an aggrieved former member, Koehl assumed leadership and declared that the party was heading toward a new chapter that would finally achieve tangible success. As part of this effort, Koehl announced the opening of the Lincoln Rockwell Bookstore and named long-time party member Robert A. Lloyd as manager, a position that seemed to suit Lloyd (a self-professed "former beatnik") quite well.



Not surprisingly, things soon fell apart. Members began openly complaining about Koehl's poor leadership, and Lloyd accused Koehl of deliberately trying to "sabotage . . . the country's only National Socialist Bookstore" in retaliation for Lloyd's own outspoken criticism of Koehl. In a heated letter to a friend, Lloyd wrote that "Koehl isn't going to assist the bookstore. In fact, he's doing everything he can to wreck the whole venture" (November 24, 1970). However, things took a turn when Lloyd found an ally in fellow bookstore worker William Luther Pierce, another disillusioned party member (and future author of *The Turner Diaries*). When Pierce finally decided he'd had enough of the NSWPP's failures, he published a lengthy statement to party members, complaining that "for more than a year now we have been standing on a threshold. We have not even begun building an organization with real revolutionary capabilities." Pierce bemoaned the lack of "real successes," which he believed were stymied by the party's "sole purpose of generat[ing] an artificial sort of publicity" rather than "actual activity." (Pierce 1970, 2). Continuing the churn, Pierce resigned from the NSWPP and instead embraced the promise of a (new) *next time*: Willis Carto's National Youth Alliance (NYA), an explicitly neo-Nazi organization with broad national reach.

CAPACIOUS

I can't help but hear Pierce's statement registering a low-level attunement to the forces of actuality and potentiality. It emerges in the shape of a threshold problem—perhaps something akin to what Ernest Bloch (1968) calls the "substratum of the real seeth[ing] on a dialectical fire" between what is grasped and what is out of reach (282). The churn of *next time* continued as Pierce eventually persuaded Lloyd to abandon the Lincoln Rockwell Bookstore and open a new bookstore under the auspices of the NYA. The Western Destiny Bookstore, located on the ground floor of the NYA's Washington D.C. headquarters in Georgetown, was to be an important part of this rebeginning. With the failures of past movement efforts in mind, Lloyd was eager to make the Western Destiny Bookstore's success fully graspable by giving it a professional ethos that had none of the swastikas or pro-Nazi connotations of the Lincoln Rockwell Bookstore. Although it was thoroughly invested in promoting White nationalist material, Lloyd attempted to legitimate the bookstore through positive press attention, like a *Washington Post* profile that managed to lend some credence to the endeavor. (Valentine 1970, B1).



Meanwhile, the NYA took dramatic steps to distinguish itself from previous movement efforts. Echoing Karl Allen's earlier themes in White Party literature, NYA propaganda similarly amplified the theme of *essential action*. Unlike Allen's calls to action, however, the NYA was much more explicit about what *action* meant. In his many columns written for NYA periodicals, Pierce (1971) repeatedly emphasized that "real and meaningful revolutionary action" cannot be accomplished through "revolutionary rhetoric" (11). Real action, according to Pierce, meant more than

> parading or picketing or writing a letter to your Congressman or even beating up pro-Viet Cong hippies. . . It is waging real warfare against the System, using whatever means are most effective in weakening, in crippling, in ultimately destroying the System. (1971, 11)

Explicitly spelling out what "waging real warfare" entailed, NYA's *Attack!* magazine featured a regular column titled "Revolutionary Notes," which aimed to "arm the patriot detailed information on urban guerilla warfare techniques" (1972, 13). These techniques included instructions for making bombs and the use of various guns and other weapons (1972, 7). In these ways, Pierce and the NYA helped cultivate an articulation between *real action* and *violent action*. Turning potentiality into actuality seemed to require an arsenal.

Of course, as these stories often go, neither the NYA nor the Western Destiny Bookstore managed to last beyond a few short years. According to some accounts, Lloyd turned over the bookstore inventory to a friend before returning to college and disappearing from the movement altogether. Meanwhile, Pierce's trajectory was much different. After a bitter feud with Carto, Pierce splintered the NYA to form the National Alliance—an organization that would eventually become one of the largest White nationalist groups in the world. Years later, in response to an interview question about the NYA's failure, Pierce (1978) remarked that "there just were not enough White Americans with a revolutionary outlook to enable us to challenge the System through direct action," which made calls to "Smash the System" an ultimately "hollow" effort . In the same interview, Pierce goes on to describe how the newly-formed National Alliance is "standing alone [as] the only viable future for our race." It was to be a final rebeginning (or so he thought).

Buried in these accounts is a kind of felt momentum, or a "fusion upon fusion that add up not to quantitatively more but to dynamically one: potentiation" (Massumi 2021, 180). They reflect accumulations of compounding forces that seem to both shut down and open up trajectories. We might therefore read these accounts alongside Deleuze's (1986) reflections on the active/reactive forces that Nietzsche identifies within the will to power. As Deleuze (1986) writes, "an active force is one which goes to the limit of its consequences" (66). Meanwhile, an "active force separated from what it can do by reactive force thus becomes reactive" (66). In this sense, we could potentially describe Pierce's threshold problem as an experience of diminished capacity—a reactivity issue. Yet, Deleuze (1986) identifies an ambiguity in Nietzsche's thinking on reactive forces, as they also seem to go to the limits of what they can do. "If active force, being separated, becomes reactive," writes Deleuze, "does not, conversely, reactive force, as that which separates, become active? Is this not its own way of being active?" (66). In this regard, he continues, reactive forces "separate us from our power but at the same time they give us another power, 'dangerous' and 'interesting'" (66). While Deleuze (1986) makes clear that such reactive forces do not become truly active forces, he suggests that reactive-active forces are capable of generating a different sensibility—one that is felt as a momentum.

Deleuze (1986) describes the active power of reactive forces as dangerous (and interesting as a problem) in their ability to "bring us new feelings and teach us new ways of being affected" (66). In other words, the power to sensitize a body to new possibilities of being is what makes them so dangerous in their production-through-limiting force. Deleuze (1986) points to Nietzsche's example from *Ecce Homo* of a sick body's diminishment through reactive force. Though illness "narrows my possibilities and condemns me to a diminished milieu," it also opens "a new capacity, it endows me with a new will that I can make my own, going to the limit of a strange power" (66). However, insofar as this new capacity—new will— is produced through destruction, it is essentially bound up with forms of violence.

So, while Lloyd and Pierce's stories have nothing to do with any actual power or momentum, they register sensitizations to diminished capacities that generate new feelings and new forms of being affected. The narrowed possibilities that arise from a bookstore's failure or a group's breakdown are also the sources of new capacities and intensifications. The "real action" now made possible in a *next time* is birthed through the destruction of a failed last time. But this next *next time* also requires an intensification from that last time—an intensification of action that is sensed as real. It intensifies through the fusion upon fusion of "real action" and "violent action." Consequently, these ephemeral histories reveal a disturbing

aspect of sustainability within White nationalism's violence: the intensifications of potentiation, the capacities generated through reactive-active forces, give violence a form of sustainability that is not easily countered through *limitation*. Furthermore, as I explore in final set of stories below, it is this intensification that continues to shape the trajectories of White nationalism today.

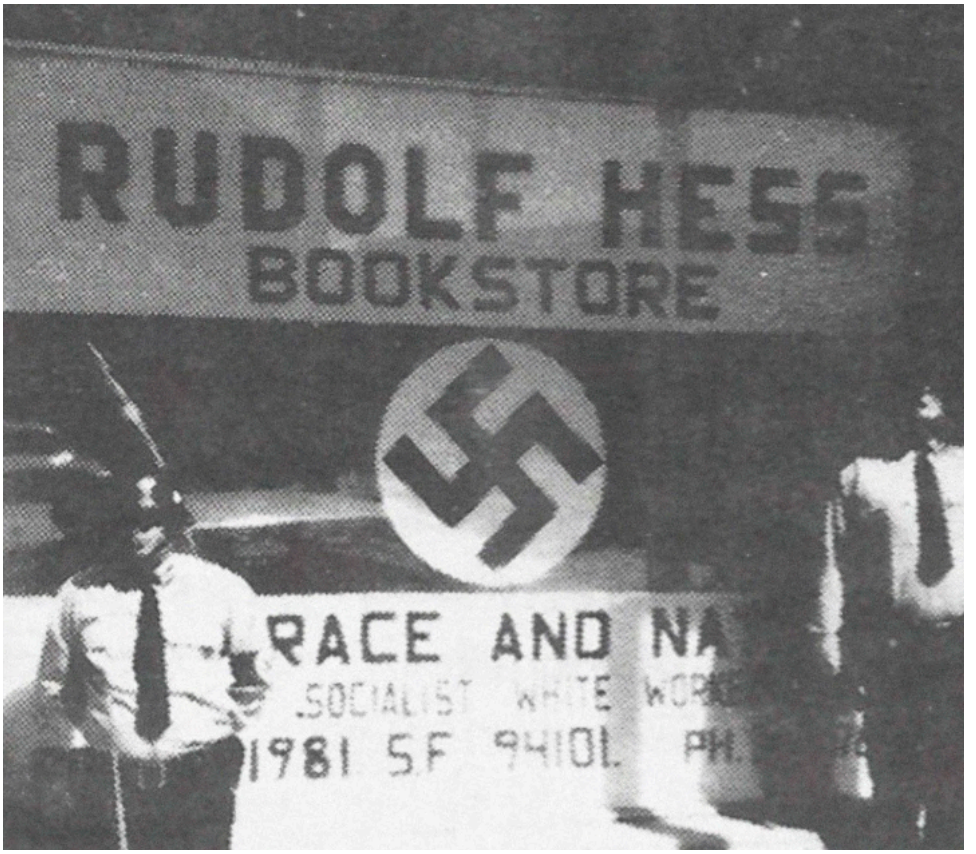
III.

THE NEW ORDER BOOKSTORE, 1974, NATIONAL SOCIALIST LIBERATION FRONT, EL MONTE

THE RUDOLF HESS BOOKSTORE, 1977, NATIONAL SOCIALIST WHITE WORKERS' PARTY, SAN FRANCISCO

My last pieces of ephemeral evidence begin with a story of the comically short-lived Rudolf Hess Bookstore, which opened and closed in less than a single week. In 1977, the National Socialist White Workers Party (NSWWP) opened the Rudolf Hess Bookstore on Taraval Street in San Francisco, a predominantly Jewish neighborhood whose residents included many Holocaust survivors. The building's owner, Nathan Green, was himself a survivor, and he leased the space to the bookstore tenants with no knowledge of their organization or their intentions. Within days of moving in, the NSWWP covered the storefront with swastikas and other Nazi symbols. Employees dressed in SS stormtrooper uniforms stood at the entrance with Nazi anthems loudly blaring behind them. Neighborhood residents were understandably outraged, and Green immediately sought to evict the NSWWP. Before the eviction could even take place, however, residents decided to take matters into their own hands. On April 1, 1977, a crowd of around fifty people wielding tire irons, sledgehammers, and crowbars broke down the door of that small bookstore on Taraval Street in San Francisco. The group ransacked the shop, overturning shelves and setting fire to the books inside. Store workers escaped the mob by sneaking out a back door, but the store itself was completely destroyed. After a mere six days in business, the Rudolf Hess Bookstore closed for good.

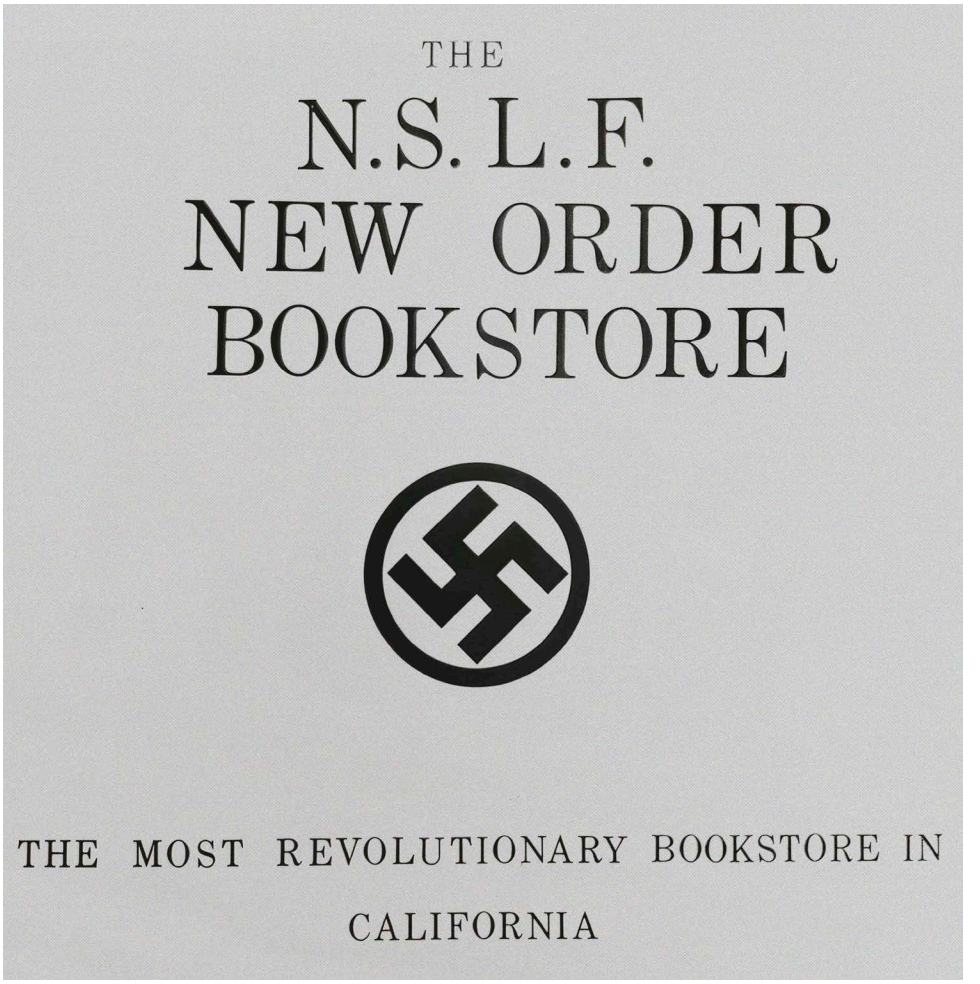
As word spread of the bookstore's destruction, there seemed to be a notable consensus across the movement that opening a neo-Nazi bookstore in a heavily Jewish neighborhood was a heedless mistake. Many of the criticisms echoed the same kinds of back-and-forth arguments over "dead pasts" in exchanges between



Rockwell and the NSRP. An article in *The White Power Report* condemned it as "an object lesson in 'How Not to Do It,'" arguing that "publicity at any price" was a losing strategy. It accused the swastika-waving NSWWP as clinging to outdated tactics, wasting time on a "treadmill to oblivion" rather than pursuing meaningful progress ("Making" 1977, 30). Outside of the NSWWP, few White nationalists expressed much sympathy for the Rudolf Hess Bookstore's "Hollywood Nazi" tactics.

For the most part, the Rudolf Hess Bookstore is largely forgotten in White nationalist discourse. It lives on as little more than a weird blip in movement history. The same can't be said for another bookstore that opened roughly around the same time, however. In 1974, the New Order Bookstore—billing itself as "The most revolutionary bookstore in California"—opened in El Monte. The New Order was launched as part of the newly formed National Socialist Liberation Front (NSLF), led by former NSWPP/ANP member Joseph Tommasi. By the early 1970s, like many other NSWPP members, Tommasi (1974) described feeling "alienated by the . . . unrealistic outlook and tactics of the Party," which he found too caught up in "fantasies and dreams" (3). In a letter to Willis Carto, Tommasi declared that

he was done with "exhausting all our efforts on building a bureaucracy with no 'progress' in sight.'" He told Carto of his plans to form a new group that would be "an underground guerrilla organization in the hopes of striking at the heart of the enemy" (Letter to Carto, October 7, 1974). According to Tommasi (1974), the NSLF would achieve real outcomes through "armed struggle" as a way of "hurting the enemy through force and violence" (1974, 4). True to his word, the NSLF actually did carry out Tommasi's vision, claiming responsibility for several targeted bombings of progressive bookstores and leftist organizations across Los Angeles between 1974 and 1975. Tommasi (1975) proudly boasted that these acts proved the NSLF was bringing something new to the movement, "something tangible" (1).



Plans for the New Order Bookstore were equally ambitious, to say the least. Operating hours were from 10 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week (1974, 3), a massive undertaking given the NSLF's limited resources. No surprise then, it soon proved impossible to keep the bookstore open for almost 100 hours a week, and Tommasi announced that staff shortages meant the New Order Bookstore would temporarily be open for only three to five days a week (1975, 3). In an effort to get the New Order back to running fourteen hours daily, NSLF begged supporters to relocate to El Monte to help staff the bookstore. A few loyal members did move across the country to help, but the New Order Bookstore would still falter not long after. The first snag happened when the bookstore's landlord terminated the group's lease after discovering their affiliation. The final hitch came after Tommasi himself was shot and killed during a fight in 1975.

While the New Order Bookstore did not last very long as "the most revolutionary bookstore in California," however, the influence of both the NSLF and Tomassi have grown in profound and disturbing ways over the past fifty years. Perhaps most significantly, their idolized status owes a lot to the influence of James Mason's *Siege*, a book that builds on Tommasi's model of direct violence as a blueprint. *Siege*'s popularity skyrocketed around 2015 when it was adopted by White nationalist groups inspired by Tomassi's call to "love the angels of destruction and disorder" and Mason's idea of "FORWARD action" (as opposed to what he dismisses as " 'treadmill' action"): both violently destructive at their core. Throughout *Siege*, Mason praises Tommasi as a symbol of White nationalism's future, as he "personified the kind of man we MUST have: Those desiring to serve the Movement with great facility, and not pose around in gaudy uniforms as 'Hollywood Nazis'" (2015, 62). For Mason, the NSLF's commitment to "political terror" broke from the dead-end approaches that ended in short-lived fiascos like the the Rudolf Hess Bookstore's demise.

Today, *Siege* is widely regarded as "a kind of neo-Nazi bible" and perhaps "the most venerated postwar work among neo-Nazis" (Johnson and Feldman 2023, 5). It's also strongly associated with White nationalism's increasingly accelerationist trajectories. Although violence has always been inherent within White nationalism, accelerationism marks a different orientation to violence and its horizon of futurity. As Kieran Aarons (2023) so perceptively notes, far-right accelerationism "configures a horizon that is not meant to be understood" but is rather meant "to function as a call to arms" (267). In Mason's account, violent action is undertaken in service of the horizon, but not in order to clear the threshold. To this end, Mason (2015) writes:

> Let us drop the dreaming, the faking, and the immature unreality, and recruit an army of the worst – if need be – in order to smash the Beast System and make way for the Ideal to dominate the planet and the universe ten thousand years from now. ANY action taken against the Enemy, no holds barred, is a heroic deed. (6)

Mason's (2015) words here reflect what Aarons describes as *Siege*'s (2023) "pedagogy of the useless task [taken] to its ultimate nihilistic conclusion," wherein "a radical negativity separates accelerationist violence from its ostensible revolutionary goals, resulting in a total suspension of any causal or strategic tie between means and ends" (267). Consequently, sensitizing to the horizon's distance is a way to reimagine the possibilities for violent action.

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Aarons points to the differences between how White nationalists like William Luther Pierce and accelerationists like Mason responded to Timothy McVeigh's terrorist acts in Oklahoma City, which were partly inspired by *The Turner Diaries*. According to Aarons (2023), Pierce "lamented the 'disorganized' character of McVeigh's terrorism and dreamed of using the Turner Myth to channel it back into disciplined cadre formations" (286). At the same time, Aarons (2023) continues, insofar as McVeigh's acts of destruction seemed to be (intentionally or not) disconnected from tangible goals, "*Siege* celebrates it" (286). Thus, while certain strains of White nationalism articulate *real action* and *violent action* in service of a *final next time*, accelerationist action seems more in line with how Umberto Eco (1995) describes fascism's "cult of action for action's sake," which sees pure action as "beautiful in itself."

I would certainly not be the first to point out here the parallels between the logic of accelerationism and Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) notion of the schizophrenic "universal producer," which makes no distinction "between producing and its product," as "the pure 'thisness' of the object produced is carried over into a new act of producing" (2004, 7). Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari's theories of accelerationism have been adopted by thinkers on both the left and right as a political strategy to "accelerate the uprooting" of a system rather than "await[ing] its demise at the hands of its own contradictions" (Mackay and Avanessian 2014, 4). While I disagree with scholars who argue that Deleuze and Guattari's accelerationism has become tainted by rightwing appropriation, there's something important to note here about how far-right accelerationism increasingly articulates "action for action's sake" with "something real." On this note, I find an online exchange between active members of the White nationalist Traditional Worker's Party particularly illuminating:

> Kombat-Unit: Activism needs to feel rewarding, and when you're doing it right it is, but if it's just you banging your head against the wall and not feeling you get anywhere, I can get blackpilledness. Net nazism feels fucking bad man. It doesn't feel "real," in a tangible sense.
>
> cr4ck3r: I want to do more real shit
>
> Kombat-Unit: When I joined, I had this burning fire inside me, felt like I had to put it to good use or I'd burn myself. It felt so good to be able to direct it into something productive. (May 16, 2017)

While it lacks a certain eloquence, the expressed desire to "do more real shit" says a lot about sensitizations. "Net Nazism feels fucking bad" both because it "doesn't feel 'real' in a tangible sense" and because it doesn't direct "this burning fire inside" into "something productive" (i.e., "real shit"). Yet, it also doesn't seem

to matter that *doing more real shit* is disconnected from explicit goals or outcomes. The horizon here functions less as an endpoint and more as a site of intensification. *Doing real shit* as the churning force of production. It is a horizon that exists primarily as iterative points of propulsion.

Always the Horizon

It's a strange phrase. There seems to be an adverb missing, since it would make more sense to say *on* the horizon, or *toward* the horizon. Yet, this strangeness reveals a fundamental aspect of White nationalism's horizon whose generative intensities are not temporal or spatial, but ontological. It points to the fusion of Whiteness with a feeling of oneself as an immanent relation to the horizon. Meanwhile, the stakes of this horizon are starkly articulated in Biko Mandela Gray's (2023) "Turning Away: White Nationalism and a Paraphenomenology of Darkness," where he points to the deep structural effects of White nationalism that shape broader horizons of publicness: As Gray writes:

If we only think of the actors, if we only think of White supremacy in terms of those who say and do disgusting things, then [we] mistake the map for the territory; for the *real* source of the violence is in its capacity to dominate our attention and occupy our headspace. Whiteness, White supremacy, White nationalism—call it whatever you like—shapes the horizon of what we can and should see. White people are beneficiaries of these horizons and this shaping. (2023, n.p.)

In order to understand the territory and not just the map, as Gray puts it, calls for us to continue probing the violence of/in structuring attention and feeling in ways that link "belonging to the horizon" with "an aspect of Being."

But, in making certain trajectories more legible, we are also better able to understand what *does* show up on the map. We see this structural force, for example, playing out in the pervasive violence of the far-right movement euphemistically referred to as MAGA. For all of Trump's boasts about *winning*, it's difficult to pinpoint exactly what he or his supporters are referencing in these claims. In fact, many of the explicit promises (like the border wall) Trump did promise turned

out to be failures. Yet, as we see above, failure is somewhat beside the point. What drives Trumpism and MAGA is precisely what I've described here as the churn: intensifications, activity, the felt sense of accumulating forces that open up a new capacity, endowing bodies with new wills that they can make their own, going to the limits of a strange power.

Of course, MAGA is simply one example of how different forms of White nationalism demonstrate a violent "capacity to dominate our attention and occupy our headspace, . . . shap[ing] the horizon of what we can and should see," as Gray (2023) puts it. And while many of us are experiencing the profound terror of how our public horizons are being reshaped, we are also tasked with responding to these forces. Responding to the multiple trajectories of White nationalism's ongoing violence is a *problem*—or rather a series of problems—that requires us to think through forces of virtuality. Such response means reckoning with ways that Whiteness is inflected with different senses of futurities that are not only temporal but also bound up with belonging. Our own hopes for futurity must therefore be capable of critically and creatively *troping* the horizon, upholding its utopic potential and redirecting its violent force.

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Table with Three Levels with Ornamental Objects,
Anonymous, 19th century, Public Domain

Rave, Daniel Nouri, 2017

MISSED CONNECTIONS: AFFECTIVE ANATOMY OF A NIGHT OUT

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ABSTRACT

This project tells the story, hour-by-hour, of a night out at a techno rave in Tiohtià:ke (Montréal). It starts with us at 9:30pm the night of and follows us, staying up through the night until the sunrise, and riding home with a feeling of something. The aim of this project is to retain the feeling of lostness that a loud room and a sea of—chemical, organic, energetic—bodies impart. In recounting the various encounters, starts, transfers, that made up the night, it explores the circulation of affect through and around the dance floor. What happens in a dark, loud, crowded room, when experience meets its fringes? Where does the self go when it joins the community? Inspired by Kathleen Stewart's attention to the circulation of public feelings, motions, shock, banalities, the 'ordinary affects' which constitute a life on a personal and collective level, I trace the night through moments, both brief and durational, which point to something else. Working through a Deleuzian framework for affect, I account for the bodily, rhythmic, and interpersonal resonances that make up an affective environment. The collaborative elements of the underground music scene mirror the unity of bodies in synchronous motion. The processes of attunement between dancers and DJs are models for an alternate mode of being in relation. From dancefloor ethics to dancefloor, from dancefloor to organising practice, the project traces the 'affective anatomy' of a night out and imagines new social arrangements beyond the limitations of discrete selfhood.

KEYWORDS

affect, techno, Gilles Deleuze, Baruch de Spinoza, ethnography

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Setting the Groundwork

With *Missed Connections* comes a slew of encounters, sensations, destabilizations, incomplete thoughts, conflicts, movements, both jerky and fluid, looks, aversions, gestures, self-transgressions—and their failures. My experience of the night, and of writing the night, are experimental. The difficulty here, in writing, is that the experiment is always outside and beyond the theory. Double-blind tests, pipettes, lab mice, objects of study, good parties, the subaltern, the death drive; these all are written (read: domesticated) into existence from the endless slew of interactions and traces which constitute them outside of our field of vision. How to meet the experiment on its own terms? How to retain or transmit the Weird, the incomprehensible, the unspeakable, the Real, the entropic, the unassimilable, as it ricochets past us in moments we barely have time to grasp?

This project tells the story, hour-by-hour, of a night out at a techno rave, starting at 9:30 pm the night of, staying up through the night with it until the sunrise, and riding home with a feeling of *something*. That *something* is what this storytelling attempts to move towards. The night is hosted by the collective *Missed Connections*, based in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal), at an office space under construction in Mile-Ex. It is a fairly small event; the space holds no more than 100 people at a time. The crowd ebbs and flows from lounge to bathroom to smoking area to dancefloor, taking turns at the very front, setting the energy for those who dance behind. Bodies, exes, strangers, badly dressed people, freaks, one (very) old woman, my girlfriend, our next week's date, someone who won't stop talking, fantastic dancers, an old friend all fill the room. I don't know what we are here for; slowly I think that maybe that is the whole point, then the thought drifts away from me again.

This project aims to retain the feeling of lostness that a loud room and a sea of—chemical, organic, energetic—bodies impart. In recounting the various encounters, starts, confusions, transfers that made up the night, it explores the affective anatomy of a night out. Anatomizing affect means tuning in, giving our attention to the small happenings that make up big happenings, tracing flows, movements, gazes, rhythms. Put simply, this is an account of the 'things that happen' on a night out. Inspired by Kathleen Stewart's (2007) attention to the circulation of public feelings, motions, shock, banalities, the "ordinary affects" which constitute a life on a personal and collective level, I trace the night through moments, both brief and durational, which point to *something* (2).

Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* is an exercise in attunement; it syncs and resonates with its objects of analysis. Anna Gibbs proposes *Ordinary Affects* as a model for an affective methodology of writing, which is both dialogic and deeply personal. Writing, for Gibbs, is research in itself, it finds the form suitable to what it is describing, it births and shapes its objects into existence. This process is rhythmic: the writing subject "risks itself, finds itself, loses itself, and remakes itself in its dialogic relations with the worlds to which it attunes" (Gibbs 2007, 227). Risk, return, attune, try anew, risk, return, try anew: this forces the body into communion with its object, the threat and possibility of knowledge or description that it poses. Gibbs works through Henri Lefebvre's (2004) 'rhythmanalysis' to expound this mode of writing, which turns the researcher into a kind of metronome, "integrating the outside with the inside and vice versa" (20). A metronome works to bring the interpreter into the score, birthing rhythm from outside the piece and importing that rhythm into its measures. It provides an entry point through which sight-reading becomes sound. It brings rhythm as quantity, or speed and repetition, but also as quality, giving an allegro its jumpy brightness and a largo its measured broadness.

Employing time as a rhythmic rather than structuring element, I move through the night using clockhand hours as flashbulb memories.[1] Time, here, is not rhythmic in its duration, but in its measure, its cyclicality, its *fort-da*.[2] Time *lasts* differently, as we will see, according to BPM, to spatial distortions, to who we are kissing, what we have consumed. It measures, rather than minutes and seconds, pulses, moments of pause, thirst, towardness and backwardness, the barricades we build up against oncoming waves of sleepiness. Like checking the time, say inappropriately on a date, or irritatedly, halfway through a long shift, accounting for time brings us out of our project. Accounting for time cycles us away from our narrative analysis, out of sync with the night we are anatomizing, breaking continuity in the name of moving forward. In drawing us out, though, it allows for return, for jumping into moments and for sitting in them, stopping them in their tracks as they try to slip away with the seconds that pass. As Stewart (2007) describes the still life, which is at once static and vibratory, these moments are rife with potentiality, the "charge of an unfolding" (19). We tune in, affectively, corporeally, attentively, to the track, the conversation, the moment, listening to it, sitting with it, lining up our pulse and breath with it, taking it seriously, only to cringe, laugh, feel nothing, draw out, and dive in anew.

Storytelling by the Numbers

It's 9:30 pm,

on the first cold Saturday of September. My girlfriend, her roommate, and I are all *eating pasta e fagioli* at the dinner table. I am nervous about getting out of the house on time. We are meeting a friend for a beer at 10:30pm.

It's 10:50 pm,

and we are late for drinks. As we arrive, the friend is on the phone with someone she is dating, telling them the story of the first time she got drunk, with her lacrosse team in the basement in an affluent suburb. One splash from every bottle so no one would notice. She puts a bookmark in her livestreamed podcast for one. We laugh—the last time I saw her, I played translator between her and her ex-date, my best friend, the two of whom manage to talk at each other without ever getting a thought across. I imagine a three-dimensional graph containing two sinthomes,[3] their respective knottings of nothing, sense-making, and symbol, doomed to stay in their separate quadrants and never to make meaning through contact (Lacan 1976). When I acted as psychoanalyst, unknotting them towards finding a common thread, I co-existed with them in that three-dimensional space, netting from one quadrant to another, offering alternate phrasings, assuring of a love-still-present despite the lack of its mention.

The image quickly fades.

If we want to make it in time for tea, we had best head out soon. Before leaving, we each eat a single magic mushroom, out of a little bag from British Columbia labelled "Penis Envy."

It's 11:30 pm,

we make it in time for tea. A little table has been set up, mugs provided. A slideshow of Craigslist's 'missed connections' plays on a projector nearby. Missed connections are queer in that they are out-of-time. These missed connections in particular are queer in that they are gay and totally odd: "you were a leather-clad

bull dyke. we fucked in the bushes behind kinky cowboy night. you spit in my eye. never got your name, would love to meet again xx." I have never been to a rave that provided tea before. The music is atmospheric, not-too-loud-to-hear-you-speak. We acclimatize. I think that is what this is for. Everyone who arrives early enough, incentivized by sugary tea, has the time to get acquainted, to chat (mostly sober) with people you usually meet in the loudness, darkness, and chemicalness. I sense something slowly shifting in the room, and mention this to my friends. We are experiencing, I believe, the intentional eliciting of a "lived duration that involves the difference between two states" (Deleuze 2001, 49), an attunement, a getting-to-know, a getting-to-feel. More on this below. Tea enters throat and warms belly. Name enters one ear and exits another. Preliminary glances are exchanged, momentary crushes are formed. Gender circulates in the form of mini purses carried high on two fingers and black fanny packs worn strapped across a chest.

Not in order to be exerted, but rather to be diffused, power is amassed amongst the group. This is the power of bodies in relation, relations of sameness, relations of becoming-entwined. We are looking for stable ground on which to cultivate *joy*, sowing little possibilities for encounters of agreement, form for matter, matter for form. At events like these, I often speak with people who share my affinity for negativity. Negative theologians, Afropessimists, bolt-cutter owners, masochists, meditators, hypnotists, sculptors playing with negative space. When we meet it becomes clear that we are *all talking about the same thing*. The formal resonances between my life work (so far) and theirs brings us *joy*. *Joy* brings us closer to *action* (Deleuze 2001, 27–28). In *action*, we reach towards *something*.[4] The room reaches a stable temperature. An itching to dance creeps up our legs and into our rib cages as the volume and pace of the music rises.

It's 12:30 am,

as we enter the dancefloor. Above it hangs a complex net of trailing plants and LEDs, pulsating with the music, as if transporting nutrients by way of light from one vine to another.[5] Light and sound envelop. Spatial or immersive art forms like these invite participants to enter and resonate with the environment. Aesthetic objects, interactions of sound and light, become atmospheres in which the centrality of the sonic or visual aspects is diminished. Instead, the affective quality, the *something,* takes hold inside and above the bodies in atmosphere, collectivizing, interlinking, formed by and forming temporary or durational subjectivity through collective experience (Anderson 2009, 78). Madison Moore (2016) describes nightlife as a formal setting, staged and curated as would be the set of a theatre production. This theatrical or creatively productive space encour-

ages the production, or perhaps transformation, of selves, as the night plays out. For Moore (2016), "nightlife is a time for storytelling," (53) for environments to craft subjects and for living spectacle to take shape (50–51). Form follows form, feeling follows feeling, as the dancefloor reproduces the symbiotic energy-sharing modelled by the pulsating plants.

A friend of mine has developed a system for grouping people and music into two categories. Of course, as good post-structuralists, we are wary of binaries, of their violent powers for reduction and exclusion. Bear with me, though, for the purpose of painting the scene. According to her, there are positive and negative dispositions, in people and in music. Bright, clear sounds, upbeat rhythms, danceable beats, are contrasted with minor scales, eerie vocals, dark repetitive rhythms, synth, echo. Optimists, activists, and people who go to bed early are contrasted with critics and cynics, nihilists, edgelords. The rule meets its exception in the Phrygian mode, and in everyone struggling against capitalist hegemony despite there being no easy 'way out.' During this first DJ set, though, by NAP, the polarity between positive and negative dispositions is accented and manipulated, flexing the crowd's muscles of attunement, measuring and expanding its propensities for these poles of the positive-negative disposition binary.

Techno that would most appropriately be played in a burning garbage heap in the end stages of apocalypse[6] is interrupted by a hyperpop remix of Rosalía's *Bizcochito*.[7] The crowd is transported rhythmically from pole to pole, in a manner which is not so much disruptive as it is challenging; each collective movement from positive to negative disposition and back again forces a re-appraisal, a tuning-in to the sound and energy being transmitted. A good DJ guides a collective sensory experience, reading and suggesting motions and energies. The crowd is harmonious, expectant. This is what Luis-Manuel Garcia (2020) describes as the "affective attunement" of electronic dance music scenes. A shared sensory experience, a set of cultural knowledges, an intention to be transported elsewhere, constitutes a kind of wholeness, a synchronicity (31–34). Bodies are affected by the haptic dimension of sound, moving in conversation with one another, desiring to be brought further into the singularity being collectively generated.

It's 2 am,

and ketamine is *weird*. At first it giggles as it tickles down the back of your throat. Then it distorts the space around you, making strange the familiar contours of the known in the shape of stair, couch, wall, and floor. Time stretches and shrinks, as it becomes more and more difficult to tell one's present from one's past; ketamine makes experiential what Leo Bersani (2013) argues is always true, psychoanalytically, of time: "Our futures are relooped, spiraling pasts" (34). Each moment contains and is modulated by moments which came before, and to a timeless unconscious the past and present are indistinguishable. The presence slowly voids out of self, which floats ten centimetres above what used to be your body. You wade in the unknown, which feels something like death, but carries none of its accompanying dread. McKenzie Wark (2023) describes this temporal experience in rave environments as "fleshtime," the becoming-horizontal of time as the body slips into it. A friend of mine describes ketamine spatially. Where there are substances which act as uppers and downers, respectively heightening or lowering their user's energetic or mental state, ketamine acts *sideways*.

Paul Preciado (2012) describes the relationship between substance and subjectivity as being deeply interlinked in what he describes as this pharmacopornographic age. Out of a combination of "biomolecular," whether psychotropic or hormonal, and "multimedia technical protocols," in the form of a pornographic or desire-fueled mediatric environment, there derive agentic subjects shaped by those substances and "cybernetic prostheses" supplied to them (33). Substance shapes subjectivity. He speaks of "Prozac subjects, cannabis subjects, cocaine subjects, alcohol subjects, Ritalin subjects, cortisone subjects…" the list goes on (36). The body is described as a modifiable "somatic filter" through which sensorial reality passes. It trades in both inputs and outputs, shaping the relationship between the external world and the soma, as well as the relationship between soma and psyche: "our personalities arise from this very gap between body and reality" (237). As everyone, from wine moms to sweet-toothed kids to chemsex havers to Wellbutrin takers, knows, we are subject to substance, sometimes moving with or by its whims. Nights like this are melting pots for substances of all kinds as they circulate, they are ingested, they flow membrane to blood and blood to brain, up noses and down into urinals as the hours pass.

Uppers, or stimulants, like cocaine and mdma, take the brain's regulation system hostage. They inhibit the proteins responsible for clearing out excess dopamine in the brain, causing a subsequent buildup of that neurotransmitter[8] which regulates the interplay of motivation and reward (Nestler 2005, 5; Mustafa et al. 2020, 383). This results in affective euphoria, confidence, pleasure, arousal: the

feeling that one's desire could be and is being fulfilled. Cocaine feels like sublimating the logics of capitalism, through the nose and into the bloodstream of the "achievement subject," (Han 2017, 9) having internalised the paradox of infinite production and consumption. It appeals to you more and more, promising that the next time will be better; you are optimizable, more perfect, almost perfect, feeling good, good, but never *there*.

Downers or depressants, like alcohol and benzodiazepines such as xanax, inhibit the brain's excitatory signalling mechanisms, reducing the speed and acuity of information transmission in the brain. Alcohol, for example, functions by slowing the release of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine, which helps to regulate voluntary movements, motivation, and memory (Sullivan, Harris, & Pfefferbaum 2010, 128). This can serve to slow reactivity, reduce fine motor and other movement-related capacities, and impede perceptive capacities. Stimuli become duller, our reactions to them are dampened: everything matters less, the world is further away, and we neither want to or can do anything about it. Alcohol works to suppress, to make tolerable; cocaine's messier and less productive little brother serves, too, to conceal capitalism's Real,[9] in brief moments of reparative reprieve that reach towards excess but remain trapped in the service of self-perpetuation, mitigating suffering to the point of forgetting its source.

Ketamine falls neatly into the category of neither upper nor downer: it is described as a dissociative anaesthetic with hallucinogenic effects. In the brain, it causes a surge of glutamate, the brain's major excitatory neurotransmitter, in the prefrontal cortex, a brain region typically associated with planning, personality, and moderating social behaviour. Experientially, ketamine is often described as eliciting sensory disturbances (i.e. the distortion of light, sound, and proprioception or the sensation of one's own body), disembodiment, and ego-transcendence, near-death experience, or the 'loss of the self' (Vlisides *et al.* 2018). Where alcohol and cocaine tag-team through suppression and sublimation towards the perpetuation of late capitalist subjectivity—or, perhaps more generously, allow us to cope and even thrive under its seemingly inescapable conditions—ketamine wallows in the unknowability of the other and risks an openness to that other which threatens self-containment, the narcissism requisite for keeping one's skin in the game of capitalist achievement.

A chapter in drug researcher Karl Jansen's book *Ketamine: Dreams and Realities* (2004) explores the relationship between the experiences of ketamine, which flirt with the limits of subjectivity, and certain discoveries in quantum physics research. At the risk of engaging in total quackery, I take seriously Jansen's claim that in the lived *weirdness* of ketamine there are hints of what he calls the "participatory universe," or the timeless-and-spaceless interconnectedness of things demonstrated by experiments on "quantum weirdness" or Einstein's "spooky action at a distance" (138). These experiments study the interconnected and simultaneous behaviour of particles much too far apart to be communicating with one another through known means.[10] Drawing from Spinoza's notion of the One, or the claim that "God is in everything," (140) Jansen argues for something called "transpersonal psychology," or the possibility of accessing a consciousness that is constituted collectively rather than individually (145). Like the communication between the far-apart particles on the fringes of quantum physics, this transpersonal psychology abides by a separate set of rules than those that typically govern space and time. Arguing for the connection between ketamine and this "transpersonal psychology," Jansen draws from experiential trip reports of telepathy, connection with the dead, and hearing or seeing things far out of the range of the possible

Taking Jansen's claim seriously does not necessarily entail buying into the perhaps apophenic logic of quantum physics's connection to the parapsychology of ketamine. It could mean, however, considering the possibility for the collective eliciting of *something weird*. Karen Barad describes the "quantum weirdness" of particles, as they behave in ways that disrupt our regular understandings of space, time, continuity, and discontinuity, as a kind of "queerness"—the disruption or "un/doing" of identity as such (Barad 2010, 247). As electrons jump in ways that disrupt the notion of motion being continuous in space, the stability of our perceived reality is destabilised. However, it is this very disruption which "makes for the stability of existence itself" (Barad 2010, 248). At the very center of perceptual reality are tiny objects which break all the rules by which reality is meant to operate—*weird*.

The body on ketamine experiences *weirdness* as waves of movement, the transformation of space, the elongation and compression of time, the feeling of creating something momentary and incomprehensible together. The *weird* is "a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete" (Fisher 2016, 13), it gestures towards the yet-to-be-known, at times obscene, at times banal. It joins things, which would otherwise have been separate, together: big milk-drinking children and too-small bicycles, bus stops and the key-etching of much-too-earnest poetry, a room of otherwise fairly

lost ravers with a cause that has yet to be named. It proffers *sidewaysness* as an alternate relation to the already over-elaborated upness of capitalist sublimation and downness of depressed suppression. It does not go so far as to propose a new identity after-the-weird, but hints at the participatory through the shared, and at the possibility of *something else* in risking with the Other.

It's 3 am,

when we share a kiss. As basically every lesbian romance film ever can attest, when two women kiss, death is imminent. If we take Jacques Lacan's famous line to heart and find that "woman does not exist" (Lacan & Fink 1999, 7), then the death of a woman is tautological. The words *dead woman*, as Elizabeth Bronfen (1992) argues, are a pleonasm, describing her in more words than are necessary (63). Nore, when we first met, was not supposed to be my girlfriend, but rather my hypnotist. The first few times we saw each other, this was strictly the arrangement. She brought me under, into some alternate psychic state, and slowly, together, we built a house in my head. It has many floors, most of which are located far far underground. It has a library containing all the books I've ever read, it has a doll workshop, a theatre, a bath house which flows hot or cold according to the cycles of the moon. If becoming-woman is anything like becoming-indescribable, we are both far out on our way there. The project we have embarked on is radically intersubjective, and difficult to experientially describe. Sometimes, when she and I kiss, I am something like dead—or at least not entirely here.

There is a certain project to kissing which can easily leave you to find yourself swimming in the big unknown. This project is the impossible task of knowing the other: predicting their movements, having prescience over their desires. Kissing, like womanhood, requires a certain voiding of self from self. More productively, it reintegrates that voided self into the intersubjective space. More so than happening between pairs of lips, kissing takes place in the ether within, above, around, circling those lips. Intersubjective space is the realm of language, the shared, the referential. It is experienced mutually or refers mutually to the same sign, be it a word, a signal, or a too-exploratory tongue. Some kissing fails to take this into consideration, and so suffers from a failure to sufficiently void oneself from oneself. This is perhaps why some of the best kissing takes place between women—we're always already not there.

Luce Irigaray's *When Our Lips Speak Together* (1980) is a strange, yearning, half-essay, half-poem, addressed presumably to a woman with whom the author longs to share a kiss. In Rita Monticelli's (2019) reading, the lyrical text expresses a desire for the possibility of a 'feminine language,' an existence beyond the last names of men and an imprisonment in their worlds of pleasure (47). Through Irigaray, lips that speak to one another in close contact, in secrecy, perhaps in the back corners of a dancefloor, seed the possibility for new modes of communication, alternate possibilities for subjectification. This language, though, could suggest a more radical project than the outdated feminist dream of political lesbianism. To her lover, Irigaray supplies: "Stay right here, and you won't be absorbed into the old scenarios, the redundant phrases, the familiar gestures, bodies already encoded in a system" (70). What Irigary seduces her reader into is less an 'alternate' language, liberated from patriarchy, but rather a making-illegible, a defamiliarization, the movement into a womanhood that is outside the symbolic as such.

The last time we were in this space together, Nore and I found ourselves in a cold basement in the midst of renovations, at the bottom of a long flight of stairs. In search of fresh air, we took a few steps too many, and now we are here. We kiss. We think about being *not* here, in this cold basement. But neither of us seems to be able to make any decisive motion towards that. We realize that, for quite some time now, neither of us has been able to speak in the first person. "We", "we", "we", laugh at the situation, which has somehow collapsed us into one fairly useless person together. Our kissing leaves us speechless, but not in *that* kind of way. We have ascended into the intersubjective space together, merged through pore and orifice, settling on something in between confusion and satisfaction. If "what transgresses the subject is a pleasure that likewise transgresses language" (Mackendricks 1999, 148), perhaps the new 'feminine language' is one in the interstices of subject and meaning, perhaps it is more languid than actionable, perhaps it produces nothing but little stupid smiles in cold basements.

It's 4 am,

and it is *loud*. The set that will guide the next few hours of sound and movement is well underway. Limbs swing at each other, into spaces just occupied, movements overlapping, repetitive. Very few people are touching, the floor is spacious and the dancers weathered enough to allow for each of our little techno bubbles to envelop us. The moment is lasting, durational. Zi!, the closing DJ of the night, begins with more positive disposition tracks,[11] drawing from house as well as breakbeat genres. Having drawn dancers closer in, she introduces weirder tracks, moving into darker genres and switching into the 4/4 or four-on-the-floor beat, emblematic of techno, playing with groove, repetition, and speed.[12] They intersperse this

intensity with what they describe as "reward" tracks, which momentarily bring positive, easy-listening moments into the darker areas of the night. This allows diving deeper into the weird, Zi! describes, and, likewise, feeling higher into the positive breaks. They feel the party as a "ball of energy," in which they use their sets to tell stories and build energetic directionality.[13] Their set feels like being transported into intensities, being washed over with energy as it takes its form vibrationally, affectively, and spatially.

Sounds repeat, repeat, and merge anew. This repetition, the strain it places on ears and dancing bodies, the maximality, "all wrest music out of a reasoned, ordered plane and thrust it back into the world of objects and raw materials" (Demers 2010, 92). This in turn reinforces the materiality of bodies, their attempts at mitigating and embracing suffering, their modularity, repetitions, their samenesses. In Gilles Deleuze's (2001) account of Spinoza's *The Ethics*, the body is described twofold. Firstly, the body is rhythmic, involved in those relations of movement and rest, start and stop, speed and slowness which cohere its materiality into form, however transiently or lastingly as sustaining or repetition allow. Secondly, the body is defined in terms of its relation to other bodies, the affective resonances it is entangled within, its capacity to affect and be affected. Deleuze draws a connection between the dual nature of the body, and the composition of music. Like in musical composition, in bodily being "it is by speed and slowness that one slips in among things, that one connects with something else" (123). It is these two mechanisms which wrest the body into individuation from the *One*, the universal substance of all qualities and all knowing, which serves as the starting place of Spinoza's system.

Earlier on in the night, I had touched on the idea that the itching we feel to enter these spaces of affective attunement, weirdness, techno-trance, is an itching towards *action*. *Action* is self-affection, or the derivation of joy from a knowledge of what is internal to us, perhaps self-knowledge, the 'adequate idea,' or the idea of God (Deleuze 2001, 42–43). God, here, is not a distinct being, knowable in its essence, but rather that *One*, the material out of which all else is derived. A knowledge of God, then, is a knowledge of whatever is common to all substance, to all material, living and nonliving. This knowledge "generates love towards the immutable and eternal," which will move to occupy the mind, more and more, stronger and stronger (Spinoza 2020, 304).[14] A channel to the source, so to speak, *action* taps into that universal *something* which has been described variously as

Vibrancy, Continuity, the 'Oceanic Feeling.'[15] This *something* vibrates, penetrates, or rushes into discrete existence occasionally and sometimes without warning, a reminder of the outside, the prior, the universal, the beyond. What can we say of the collective experience of techno as *action*, or the movement towards *something*?

Techno works through rhythm, perhaps most simply as repetition and speed, making immense, loud, total objects through the fast-paced absencing and presencing of sound. It can be experienced as an intensity in the rhythmic and affective fields, those very fields we have discussed as constitutive of the body. Rhythm is the field of movement which, while not immediately producing the body, generates it as effect. Like the synchronized movements of a school of fish, the movements of rhythm are the repeated events which make possible the expression of the *thing*: the thousands of individual fish appear as one, the body concretises into individuality. The heartbeat, breath as involuntary contraction of the diaphragm, the coincidence of facial expression, electrical impulse, diffusion, circulation—these rhythmically constitute the body as living organic mass. The diurnal rhythms of the sun, or, more often, those of the crying baby, the timestamp machine, the alarm clock, the stirrings of existential dread, determine our cycles of awakeness, our productivity, our presence. The *crisis ordinariness*[16] of late capitalism rhythmically inserts the financial crash into the all-too-stable myth of perpetual growth, and so too breathes that crisis into the rhythms of the everyday (Berlant 2011).

The rhythms of techno abide by an alternate set of rules than those rhythms which make sense of the body, regulate it and its place in the world. Techno takes the infinitesimally small, the synthetic drum, the drone, the distortion, and reproduces and accelerates these into largeness, presentness, overwhelm. It brings bodies into durational and repetitive moments which rehearse their very place of origin, the universal substance of which they are derived. Its speed intensifies these effects, as speed "implies that bodies, including collective bodies, are defined not as closed, determinate systems, formed, or identifiable merely by their constituent parts or organs" (Goodman 2012, 201). This in turn stresses the constructedness of the body, its uneasy formation through rhythm and affective relations, calling attention to its porosity and changeability. Techno suggests the possibility of alternate material arrangements, rhythmic constructions. It harkens back to that universal material from which all becomes individual, making the miniscule massive, then collapsing back into nonidentity. In each beat a day passes, but so too a pulse throbs, a market crashes, a birth, a death, we experience the cyclic simultaneity of these all.

As techno works to highlight that universal materiality out of which discreteness, the body, is rhythmically formed, it also serves to highlight the entanglement, the affective intensities, which relate between bodies. Affective relations highlight samenesses and differences, which in turn bring their counterparts, *joy* and *sadness*. *Action*, again, is that affective relation which is self-derived, or which results from a knowledge of the fundamental identity or sameness of all material, all bodies. What does techno do to bodies in relation—or, better, what does *action* feel like?

Sometimes it feels like the becoming-dense of the air that surrounds you, a filling-in of the spaces in between. Sound washes over you, shaking through all the solids, liquids, and empty spaces that make up a dancefloor. Sometimes it feels like a wave of change; a sound joins the mix, a little acid, a new rhythm. Or a new set of dancers move to the front of the floor, injecting a novel energy to the movements of the crowd, always pushing and pulling, aligning anew. Sometimes it is in the feeling that a sound is *very old*, that it taps into something that has been going on in and between bodies for a long time. It reaches from somewhere you cannot place and lodges itself in your inner ear, inhabits the now briefly, and disappears as quickly as it arrived. It can feel like *tapping in*, or *tapping out*. It is certainly collective, but it does not feel like an integral of distinct parts: whatever we are moving towards is something underneath or beyond the individual, the radical rather than the liberal totality.

François Gauthier (2003) describes the rave in terms of the Bataillean *fête* (71), a moment of excess during which the self transgresses into a larger body, or what for Bataille (1986) is c*ontinuity*. *Continuity* is like death, but sexier. It is the bottom of the deep gulf that separates one subjectivity from another, it is the precise moment when one cell splits into two, it is the *something* which we all came from and to which we will all one day return (Bataille, 12-15). In the *fête*, the orders determining the sacred, the productive, the reasonable are overturned. In order's place there comes profanity, consumption, the obscene. The techno rave takes what is tiny and makes it enormous, it gives access to something like God, but only in the most debauched sense, the God that lies in the disintegration of selves into the One. It takes place outside of productive time, continuing on and on into and past the break of day. It holds its excesses in the loudness, in its duration and in its repetition. It proposes alternate rhythms towards the (de)construction of the body, it proposes alternate modes of affective relation through collective

movement, outside-selfness, continuity. It reaches towards the sublime, as the beautiful is too easy, and, anyway, won't scratch the itch for destruction. 'Once the needle touches vinyl, there is no future—repetition has made it obsolete. The revolution of techno has been the creation of music that develops itself in its own interstices, the interstices of the present. The parasites of chronology narrative, beginning, middle and end are all gone. Listening is pure, pure opening' (Joos 1997, 11-12).

I draw this quote from a text included in a compilation entitled *Festive Ritual*, the release of which coincided with a photography exhibition of the same name, documenting the Montréal underground rave scene in the late 90's. The compilation and exhibition are an archive of a moment in the city's history where, thanks to the prevalence of corruption and organised crime, rents were low, storefronts were empty, and grime reigned supreme. The stakes were low and the dream of upward mobility would have been a distant fantasy. I describe this context not so as to romanticize the past, but so as to point to the similar precipice upon which the scene now finds itself. The flow of foreign capital has now swept the streets and erected those colourful modular monuments, emblematic of an age of gentrification. Condos sit empty, rents skyrocket, the few stragglers still able to live on unemployment are pushed further to the East if they are franco-anarchists, further to the North if they are queer. Like the post-referendum era of the late 90's, this moment finds itself in the 'post' of failed social movements, haunted by Occupy, the Maple Spring of 2012, the anti-austerity movement of 2014-2015. We are low on hope. This climate adds a sense of urgency to the scene, which seeks for alternate modes of community and consciousness in the momentary "interstices of the present" for which techno allows.

It's 5 am,

and the atmosphere explodes suddenly into something new. The lights shift bright and red, an LED board behind the DJ booth which had been spelling out funny little phrases ("hi mom") throughout the night switches themes, and suddenly explodes into a pulsating brightness, lighting up with the acronym PLUR. PLUR stands for Peace, Love, Unity, Respect—it is a perhaps outdated (read: cringe) carry-over from 90's rave culture which still makes its way occasionally into raver vernacular. Everyone laughs when the letters appear on the LED board up front, peace and love signs jokingly pop up across the dance floor. Some make a soundplay of PLUR and the French "pleure," feigning tears in pierrot fashion. Some overly cynical reactions betray a genuine affinity for the acronym. PLUR popped up in the early 90's, in the early days of raving on Turtle Island/in North

America, and is widely attributed to Frankie Bones, an organizer of some of the earlier large-scale raves which this side of the Atlantic had seen. Then, it was a call to stop the fighting, cliquery, and sexual violence which had spread through the early scene (Sterling 2016). Now, it is a longing cry to a world whose problems we wish were so simple as a lack of Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect.

A penchant for militantism and a love for the riot make it difficult for me to argue for the merits of Peace. Love and Unity seem a utopian project in our contemporary context. Respect seems to posit two stable subjects interacting with one another non-porously, according to a quite particular set of social rules. But maybe I've written PLUR off too soon. Didn't getting to that space of communal movement, affective attunement, perhaps *action*, require first a kind of comfort that is found in Peace and Respect? It is difficult to feel into the interstices and vibrations between bodies when mosh-happy techno bros and overly talkative partygoers are in your midst. It is difficult to propose this without writing the night into a safe sterility. Love and Unity, too, are not a far cry from the affects I have described throughout this night: a movement towards the One, whatever is shared between all material and body, a movement towards the other, despite its possibly shattering consequences.

Arun Saldanha (2007) describes the way bodies act and interact together in dance environments as a "viscosity," or "how an aggregate of bodies sticks together" (Saldanha 2007, 50). Saldanha's ethnography of the Goa trance scene uses a Deleuzian and Spinosist framework to understand how bodies, specifically white bodies in his case study, make departures out of discrete embodiment and into a sort of psychedelic collectivity. In the Goa trance scene described, whiteness is socially prerequisite for participation in these moments, and, as such, any latent political-utopic possibilities in these spaces are neutralized back into exclusion and identity. Saldanha identifies a similar movement towards unity, but diagnoses an excluded group from the universality of PLUR—locals and domestic tourists, Indians, anyone not meeting the aesthetic and racial qualifications for collective transcendence (77-78, 89). The scenes described fall short of their unificatory potential as they ultimately reproduce hierarchy and identity within the alterity of dance spaces. This perhaps cautionary tale does not preclude that other scenes, genres, styles, times, or places could produce alternate "viscosities" allowing for alternate social-material-bodily arrangements, possibly moving towards the unity to which PLUR aspires.

CAPACIOUS

Indulging in the suspension of cynicism here, I propose we view PLUR as an example of *emergence*, through adrienne marie brown's *emergent strategies* (2017). These are the small-scale creation and propagation of the kinds of solidarities and subjectivities we want on a larger scale. Actually, brown's work collapses the distinction between the small and the large scales of activist work, viewing individual action as fractally affecting all that surrounds, creating ripples of change. *Emergent strategy* nudges towards the new, it views the self as a microcosm of the world, and proposes the transformative possibilities of self-work, interpersonal work, and community work.

The collective rave subjectivity could act as a place of practice and exploration for the kinds of disidentifications, confusions, destructions, and re-starts that will be required in order for the world to radically transform from its current racial-cisheteropartiarchal-capitalist order. Those meaning-making systems that make sense of the self so too make sense of the world: borders, nations, gender, whiteness, the ownership of property, everything those systems exclude. This is what Tony Sampson (2016) describes as a "scattering," the collective movement towards an affective unruliness that disrupts neoliberal subjectification, disentangling us from the affective powers of capitalism (66, 71). The disruption of the self, following from *emergent strategies*, could double as a disruption of the world. From dancefloor ethics to dancefloor, from dancefloor to organising practice, from organising practice to ecstatic moments of revolt. PLUR makes space for swaying in the weird and the unknown, for *action*, introducing possibilities for a new-or-non-subjectivity, a rehearsal for the *something* we hope is to come.

It's 6 am,

and the night, as planned, is coming to a close. The last track plays, silence for a second, then the crowd bursts into cheers and applause. It is rare that I find myself on dancefloors so full, spatially and of energy, at the closing of a night. Thank-yous and acknowledgements from the organizers make their rounds—this is something particular to the endings of raves in the underground scene—extending to DJs, sound techs, harm reduction, lighting and decoration crews, the attendees and dancers, acknowledging the collective and participatory nature of these kinds of events. Nightlife scenes are manifold; they are collectivities, workplaces, ethical worlds, spaces of traversal and preservation, among others (Straw 2015). We have seen these facets of the event take form throughout this telling, with each actor and moving piece taking part in the emergence of the night, and this many-armed organism is recognised by organisers and attendees alike.

The lights come on, the crowd mills about for a bit. We express gratitude, we laugh together at the odd little things we have experienced. Do you remember that very short person in a gas mask, who only ever danced facing away from the front, then disappeared as quickly as they arrived? The (very) old woman? Did you have a read of the *missed connections*notebook in the hallway outside? We move outwards, finding our coats and the little objects we have spread about throughout the night. Out the front door, early dawn has begun to light up the horizon to the North, Montreal's East. Some chance encounters depart together. Others speak breathily outside, having a last smoke before heading home to sleep the morning away. My girlfriend and I ride our bikes home mostly in silence together. Both of us know that *something* has happened here tonight.[17]

Now That We're Home…

We have asked many questions in the storytelling of this night. What happens in a dark, loud, crowded room, when experience meets its fringes? Where does the self go when it joins the community? What does this mean for the world outside, so reliant on a stable and bordered self in order to uphold its teleology of progress, its processes of exclusion, its myths of (inter)subjectivity? Our goal has been to explore the possibilities for reading theory into feeling and feeling into theory. To find out a little more about what happens when the rhythms that construct the self are thrown askew, when the self joins to something beyond. To grasp the implications of this experience on the collective, the continuous, and perhaps on the political.

In the end, I hope we have learned something, at least, about how to throw a good party. Maybe, too, about the field of affects that surrounds us, generates and is generated through experience, shared or otherwise. I have written here for the project of archiving, for the pleasure of fingertip against keyboard, as a token of appreciation. To synthesize knowledge, as it takes its form in the theoretical text, with non-knowledge, as it takes its form in the shapes of bodies moving, the transgression of the self through the collective, the flow of encounter and subsequent rupture. To attempt transmitting the *something* that we feel in, around, between bodies. Maybe in telling this story I have gotten near to that *something*, or maybe I have just pushed it further out of reach. As Elizabeth Bronfen (2013)

says of the night and the stories we tell about it: Telling stories is meant to turn away the night so that forms can take shape from chaos. And yet, just as the ordinary night incessantly takes back the day, so chaos promises to recapture the forms that have emerged from it (394).

Notes

1. A flashbulb memory is a particularly vivid memory, often of an emotionally significant event. While often more detailed than most memories, flashbulb memories are particularly prone to alteration: their vividness does not correlate with higher accuracy. This is true of all memory, which is fundamentally fallible; memory is not stored but rather reconstructed with each passing recall.

2. *Fort-da* is an approximation of the German "go away" and "there," and is a phenomenon proposed in Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as an illustration of the death drive. Freud observes his grandson casting off and reeling back his toys, narrating this activity with "fort" and "da" as he absences and presences the toy from himself. It is a game of self-denial and re-unition with his desired object, a play with the pleasure of not-thereness. Time, in this night, plays this same game, jumping away from us, becoming unknowable, then flashing momentarily back into our field of vision.

3. The sinthome is a thread holding together each subject's particular arrangement of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. This is a subject's relationship to language, its history, its traumas, its incompleteness. A sinthome can be twisted and tangled, leading to a disjuncture between the self and the world around it. Part of the role of a Lananian psychoanalyst is to untangle this sinthome.

4. The line of *action* and its relation to *something* re-appears throughout this night, and will be explored here variously and towards its possibly radical political potential. I hope to get somewhere near to the *something* we are all trying to describe, always maintaining the impossibility of *grasping it*.

5. The lighting and deco on this night were created by the Tiohtià:ke (Montreal)-based artist Space Graft.

6. Apocalypse tunes like this: https://soundcloud.com/chilldous/yey3ee5acg23.

7. In absence of the exact remix played that night, imagine this but much faster than its original speed with a high-paced beat overlaid: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aG5C32aATKc.

8. Neurotransmitters are the brain's 'chemical messengers': they flow from neuron to neuron, activating and deactivating pathways and regions responsible for all the brain's activities. Excitatory neurotransmitters like glutamate and dopamine increase activation, while inhibitory neurotransmitters such as GABA and serotonin decrease activation.

9. See Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, in the chapter "Capitalism and the Real," where capitalism's Real is described as "a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality" (18). Capitalist realism produces a "pervasive atmosphere" which upholds capitalism's order and makes it feel natural and inescapable. This serves to suppress the Real, upholding the myths of perpetual growth, production, and perfection.

10. For a more in-depth and accessible explanation of these experiments, see https://www.quantamagazine.org/physicists-are-closing-the-bell-test-loophole-20170207/.

11. Like this: https://soundcloud.com/axelcrow91/octave-one-feat-ann-saunderson

12. Like this: https://soundcloud.com/index-marcel-fengler/thomas-hessler-push-imf08?in=index-marcel-fengler/sets/imf08-thomas-hessler-push-ep-1

13. This set was mixed by Tiohtià:ke (Montreal)-based DJ Zi!, one of the two members of the Missed Collections collective, along with Turtle Nex. They provided me with the tracklist for their set and described their mixing practice on this night.

14. The Spinoza of this reading is perhaps an altogether too Deleuze-coded one—as my MA thesis reader Nathan Brown has said… "Poor Spinoza!" While 'knowledge' for Spinoza may have more to do with the cultivation of reason rather than, say, dancing to techno into the wee hours, I maintain an interest in the mystic Spinoza to whom Deleuze, but also perhaps Freud through French mystic Romain Rolland, owe some of their weirdness.

15. See Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Georges Bataille's *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, and Sigmund Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*. I place these together here not to posit a total sameness between these concepts, but rather to explore the similarities between what they are moving towards in terms of experiential or even ontological ground.

16. See Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, where "crisis ordinariness" explains how crisis is built into the everyday. Trauma forms the subject, and is uptaken into its ways of navigating the world. The impossibility of achieving the American Dream is built into its promise of perfection. The financial crash is built into the market which grows uncontrollably in a world with finite resources.

17. Acknowledgement: It is only with the help of my girlfriend at the time of this writing, Desirée Nore Duchesne, that this story could meet keyboard. Our conversations and re-hashings, theoretical and otherwise, formed the night in our collective memory, which I have attempted to transmit here.

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Mitten, Carl Keksi, 1936

SHE WANTED:

A Hearth Rug, to Hold Space for and Spread Softness, a Practice Which Was Not (Wholly) Tied up in Relations of Production, and to Elaborate and Extend the Political and Varied Ongoing Ways of Being in the World Which Already Exist in Working-Class Doing

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> The idea was Carmen Callil's, who saw from the Introduction to Kathleen Woodward's *Jipping Street* that there was much more to say. Ursula Owen waited a long time to work out what that was (Steedman 1986, xiii).
>
> [T]he very devices that are intended to give expression to [lives] like mine and my mother's actually deny their expression. (Steedman 1986, 9).
>
> The ideology of desire Steedman chronicles casts history as a weight on the capacity to live now as if in an ongoing future shaped by fantasy, not by forces or relations of production' (Berlant 2008, 236).

This paper responds to Carolyn Steedman's (1986) book *Landscape for a Good Woman* with my 'idea' that there is much more to do almost forty years later in addressing the working-class real as a writing problem. In this paper, I follow Steedman in fashioning a switched-up register of 'wanting' through intergenerational knitting practice by way of affect-attuned experimental writing. Working against the grain of social realism and the depiction of the psychological simplicity of working-class subjects across academia, I respond to, extend, and elaborate the 'wants' and desires of *Landscape.* I think through the active doing/process of knitting—and, like Steedman, with members of my family—in order to provide a more capacious, complex approach to working-class life. It is not that knitting, the object of this paper, is necessarily only a working-class activity, but rather the approach of this work, as well as the qualities of knitting as a process, enable a set of alternative devices for writing working-class life.

In order to actively avoid the problems of writing working-class reals I begin with two formal interventions which approach the personal and the subjective differently. Firstly, I deviate from the confessional approach through detaching from narrative accounts. Here, inspired by Stephen Muecke (2019), I follow out the "subjective affordances" of fragments, the "half seen" glimpses and flashes of "emergent concept[s] or feeling[s]" that have value in their "evanescence" (Muecke qtd. in Berlant and Stewart 2019, 154). The qualities of the writing come to mirror knitting as process: the fragmentary, the loopy texture, the bouncy slip. Secondly, inspired by Kathleen Stewart's work, the subject is referred to as 'she' rather than the naming of individuals or distancing myself as author from others. 'She' may be me, my mum, my grandma, my great grandma, or a constellation of other women (related to me or not) who *do* through knitting. As it happens, 'she' is suitable in this instance gender-wise but would be perhaps different in another piece. This is my attempt to overspill "the individual, tying its capacities to its relational entanglement with others and the outside" (Massumi 2021, 315).

The focus of this experimenting with wanting and knitting, as suggested by my title, is complex. It ranges far beyond the straightforwardly materialistic (she wanted: a hearth rug) into the active practices situated within (and which sometimes overspill) it in its processual quality (she wanted: to hold space and spread softness); it speaks to tangles of relation, world-building (or worlding) and a doing which is, likewise, in excess of its initial appearances (she wanted: a practice which was not (wholly) tied up in relations of production). In addition to this, by improvising with knitting in this way, I work towards my wanting of writing which is also in excess of conventional working-class reals and whose political imperatives go beyond what might now be imaginable.[1] I want to achieve a form that allows for greater complexity without making huge representational leaps about the whole of working-class experience (she wanted: to elaborate and extend the political and varied ongoing ways of being in the world which already exist in working-class doing).

I.

Working the chart, the abbreviations almost come to be second nature, a new bodily capacity. Cryptic instructions to "2/1 LCP," to work "wyib" or "wyif" eventually came to feel less mathematical (Nordlund 2019, 8). Casting the stiff peach and blacky-brown, sheepy smelling, worsted wool from the back of the work to

the front, she slips neat stitches onto the cheap pink plastic cable needle. Sliding stitches, 1, 2, 3 from metal surgical steel tips to pink plastic and back feels springy under her fingers.

Getting towards the stitches in the middle becomes a safe haven—a journey across moss stitch island which feels easy and reliable. A quick sprint with no need to check instructions. Its uniform texture is intuitive and in dialogue only with itself (two rows of knit followed by two rows of purl). Reaching the end of the row, she turns the project and her right-hand grasps for a pencil, clipboard, and ruler combination—neatly scoring a mark on the chart before beginning the next row. Zoomed out, holding the knitting at arm's length she sees the cable pieces working up and down the sleeve every inch or so with a bobble that makes her smile. The knotty, tight work that seemed bizarre at first comes together to form neat bobbles only really seen at the point of beginning to make the next bobble several rows away. Again, she holds up the piece, seeing the color work, the pattern of intersecting smiley faces come to fruition, and smiles herself. Made up of soft acrylic blue and green wool, the front, smiling and stripey, is neat and smooth, while the back is a purposeful tangle, the loops of blue and green thread betraying what on the "right side" looks simple. Here on the "wrong side," "floats" carry the non-dominant color along each row as she stops every three or four stitches to catch the thread in the working stitch.

Crossing and looping in constant movement, this work is invisible to the "right side" and results in a helter-skelter of blue and green with the working balls of wool tangled and looped around each other. Once it becomes too messy, too difficult to part these strands in order to make fresh stitches she swingballs the bobbins away from each other in order to proceed. They spin round and round before coming back to a neater starting position—whoosh! Leaving neat and separate strands of blue and green to begin the next row. All together with a "squirrel" colored border, this will come together as a machine-washable "mood blanket" (Spektakelstrik and Mødrehjælpen 2020, 1). She anticipates all this as she scours the market, looking over the care labels. She thinks distantly about the daily patterns of newborn babies and beyond. She thinks: milk-sick, leaking nappies, pulverized fruits and vegetables.

The power *to affect* is in whatever way she works as she turns long lengths of cotton, bamboo, wool into solid pieces. Woven and manipulated around long circular needles, short double pointed needles, classic metal or wooden straights with stoppers at the end. Stitch methodically follows stitch now that she is comfortable/well-practiced, where before they sometimes stuttered as she began knitting, pushing chunky wooden or plastic needles squeakily through stitches. Row sometimes follows row (follows row follows row), depending on what time she has available. Each stitch

holds a unit of time and requires an active doing and some form of attention, a present-centered form of tending which has different dynamics. Sometimes she forms stitches in a half day-dreamlike state, other times hovered over—her attention hawklike. When she was young with her tongue stuck out, or now with her brow furrowed, lamp on, radio switched off. Later she smirks as she sees Etsy shops or knitting conventions stocking mugs and hats which read "don't talk to me, I'm counting" (Eclipse Mugs 2024, np). Her fingers move in patterns dictated by who taught her, or where in the world she sits. Continental, English, or Portuguese, the styles dictate her bodily approach, slung over her neck or fixed to her clothing by a pin. She feeds the wool wrapping it just-so around fingers or holds it tightly, pinned between thumb and forefinger mechanically wrapping it around the needle. She evens out tension with a flick of her fingers and wrists, by keeping the thread across her neck loose and easy, or by mechanically unravelling the ball with a pull that starts in the shoulder.

II.

In the fabric of the cardigan lies whole worlds; the worlds center around Portuguese sheep, specifically the Churra Badana breed and the people who live with them (Retrosaria 2022, np). The people who work with them on the land, with their wool, the historic breeding, sheering, scouring, teasing, carding, spinning and dyeing of the fleece, the manufacture of typically north-eastern Portuguese clothing and objects all of which that are now on the wane due to a lack of demand for these items, the non-practice of that skill and, just now, the revival of interest in keeping those practices. Those skills, those sheep, all those worlds which touch on an international market in selling small batch, hand-dyed wool from Rosa Pomar, that shop in Lisbon which comes to her via an online seller five miles from where she sits. Knitting it up, she sniffs its sheepy smell, picks out the larger pieces of grass, washes, shapes and wears the finished garment—carrying it with her next to her skin.

Like that peach-colored cable cardy, finished pieces are intimate. They lie against arms, heads, knees, paws and furry bums of those we knit for as they pull a cardigan around their waist, brace against the cold, slip on a hat while going out of the front door, as blankets are draped over knees in a pushchair or provide a cozy backdrop for a catnap. Sometimes they're too much: the natural wool too rough against her bare arms, the window-washing clown reads more as scary than fun. Knitted

pieces punctuate houses and wardrobes and turn up all over. An ancient-looking rug sits by the fire. Its colors are a vivid mix of oranges, greens and pinks made up of squares, circles and triangles. At the vintage event in the market in Stockport town center she wades through pin badges, old postcards with neat handwriting, tea dresses and peacoats and at the bottom of one of the racks lies a folded-up cream Aran jumper for £15. As she unfurls the jumper, slight details make it apparent that it is hand-knitted—the lack of a label, the slightly loose texture, a couple of wonky stitches. Across these items you can imagine the trace of hands. With an expert eye you can guess at the construction method, the stitches involved as well as the time and energy that went into it. In the corner of the room she can read cycles of energy, optimism generated and then waning, shifting to different projects leaving others lingering. Optimistic experiments linger in the form of a featureless brown potato-shaped body of an owl, a deep green crocheted oak leaf, and a large bubble-gum-pink cardigan, the wool already partially reclaimed for another jumper. A textile artist on her Instagram allows themselves as many projects as they like on the go at one time but they reclaim the wool from the ones left to linger more than a month or so (Morrow 2021, np). Their enthusiasm and optimism for new projects is unbounded and the wool gets frogged.

Frogging is dry. It's not the wet, bouncy sensorium that the word throws up but the sound of fibre on fibre, friction and pop, friction and pop. Rows and rows of uniform stitches, oval rabbit ear loops, bend and disappear while lower ones pop up like cartoon daisies. Its sound is regular and rhythmic, a recursive movement and sound, like this pencil on this paper, like a stick drawn across railings, like a train over sleepers. Frogging is the taking back of rows of knitting or whole pieces. It's not the kind of taking back of a piece which resembles careful reverse knitting the way she works back to pick up dropped stitches or irregularities in tension affecting the texture. Frogging is way more dramatic; it implies a bigger issue, a mistake realized much later or a total change of heart. It requires taking the piece off the needles entirely, a process of pulling and winding, pulling and winding. Sometimes she knits with the expectation of frogging in her future. Not wanting a sloppy cardigan, she picks up fewer stitches than the pattern dictated. Part not wanting to finish the project, part wanting to get to the finished product at the end, she knew, there would likely be too few stitches at the end. She knew that there was a danger of curly edges, the bottoms of the front of the cardigan swinging and flexing upwards. Overriding this, she had a hint of optimism that it might all be perfectly fine, sometimes you just can't tell until right at the end.

The practice of knitting is inherently optimistic. In the production of that baby blanket for a friend, the (slightly scary) window-washing clown her mum's workmate made for her as a child, or a bubble-gum pink cardigan. Optimism spreads in

the planning, the knitting itself, and the gifting. In order to follow out that process you have to believe that object will be met with enthusiasm or be considered beautiful, or at the very least useful by the recipient. In continuing in this way knitting is full of pure potential, in some ways the optimism might be slightly presumptuous or over-eager but the continued practice of knitting for and with others is part of a worlding practice. Soft things can make worlds habitable for yourself and others. Making the hearth rug, the window-washing clown, the smiley baby blanket, using each other's needles and tools, asking the other to troubleshoot, to unpick the last line of dropped stitches, we knit together.

III.

When she knits it's more-than about the end product, more-than making winter clothes at a price far cheaper than in the shops. It's more-than making people and places comfortable, more-than spreading softness. It is more-than "a tendency," a textured and habitual practice (Berlant and Stewart 2019, 10). When she knits she "subtends and exceeds" all of these potentials and opens up more (Seigworth et al 2020, 89-90). After seeing those lines on the pregnancy tests, she knits for the baby. She knits despite the fact she can barely believe she is pregnant. Optimistically, she "extends herself into that world," that version of events in which everything pans out and the baby arrives safely (Stewart and Carlson 2014, 128). Again, through knitting she exceeds the idea of "that world"—more than the world where the baby arrives safe and well. Carlson and Stewart (2014) write of how the activity of opening a window bends "the space-time of historical narrative into pockets of engagement" (Carlson and Stewart, 128). In their work this includes the histories and production of rubber, glass, steel, while in ours of wool, cotton, bamboo—of the Churra Badana sheep as well as the wood, plastic and steel of the knitting needles. They write that the activity results in the unfolding of "mood works" which are "always immanent to those who experience them" (Carlson and Stewart 2014, 128). As minor as it seems, in the active doing of knitting, as with opening a window, people are affecting and affected by those movements. The live quality of making worlds always requires "improvisation, transformed in the process of translation" (Carlson and Stewart 2014, 128). Knitting as worlding form, then, is not only in *response* to activity, need, new worlds, but actively makes them through sharing and reverberating practices.

This improvisatory and speculative practice in itself exceeds what is commonly bound up with knitting. Knitting conceived in this way exceeds its representation as a fixed, old-fashioned temporality through its practice as an ongoing active process. Similarly, once conceived of as a 'doing' knitting exceeds a cozy maternal frame—moving to an active, intentional and political "power-to" rather than "power-over" (Massumi 2015, 69). As a similarly speculative practice, writing in this way becomes excessive. Elaborating and extending the various dimensions of knitting enables an elaboration and extension of what writing working-class doing can be, in turn. By subtending and exceeding through "relaying the affective resonances of worldly textures" of knitting, writing feels "plump" with potential for elaborating political and varied ongoing ways of being in the world (Stewart 2021, 51:49–51:59).

The excess provided in the practice of knitting and elaborating and extending through affective sensing and experimental writing provides one way of opening up working-class reals. Led by a wanting of "a structure of political thought" adequate to the complexity of working-class life and experience in the same way that motivated Steedman, this process agrees with the dropping of inadequate forms for exploring working-class reals. In particular, the dropping of forms which revolve around the tragedy imbued in the working-class social realist autobiography which Steedman (1986) wishes to "consign […] to the dark" through the "so what?" question of *Landscape's* final paragraph (144). Instead of leaving a gap or a gulf where that popular form occupied, I ask what could be invented through a wanting of multiple forms, excessive modes which propel us towards "new horizon(s) of possibility" (Berlant 2008, 236). What if past activity (maybe phrased as the historical) acted as "a weight on the capacity to live now" (Berlant 2008, 236) as in Steedman's (1986) reading in a way that aids us in following out snowballed affects and collective doings that spill over into a place where new "structure(s) of political thought" might be possible (Steedman, 144). What if that was what we wanted or where wanting could take us?

Notes

1. I use 'reals' here with the intention of my writing to be generative rather than fixing, to explore multiplicity rather than foreclose scenes, qualities and atmospheres into fixed, flat 'realities.' My use of the term 'reals' is inspired by Kathleen Stewart's usage of the term which she describes as being in contrast to "modernist anthropology's mantra of a literally 'grounded' writing anchored in the deadened realism of finished forms and social facts" (Stewart 2016, 35).

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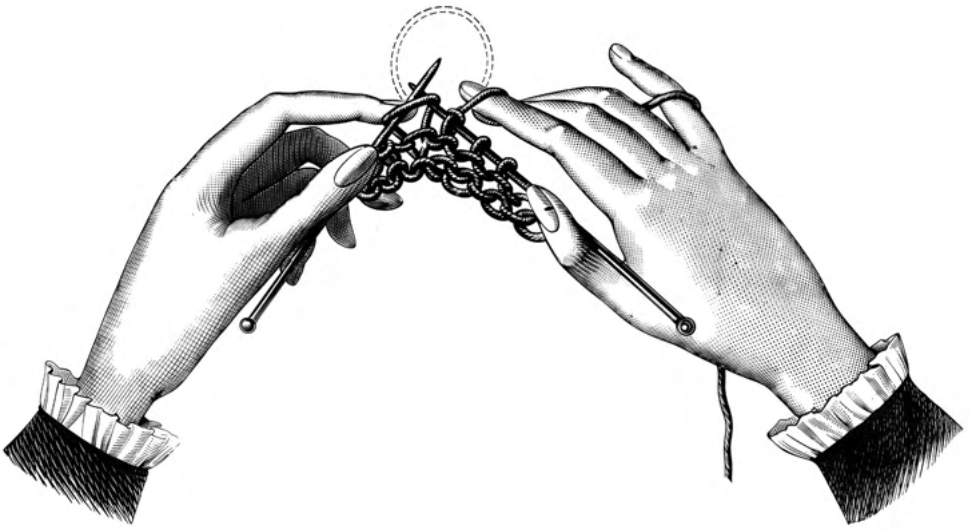

Position of the Hands in Knitting,
Thérèse de Dillmont, 1886, Public Domain

Connie Converse
Schenectady, New York, 1955
(The Musick Group, Heroic Cities LLC)

TRANS-TEMPORAL INTIMACY, OR, NEGATING TIME AS WE KNOW IT

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ABSTRACT

This article is an exploration of "trans-temporal intimacy" as a methodology, a sensibility, and a desire. Trans-temporal intimacy could be understood as a closeness, a proximity, an intimate engagement, a generative connection across time, and enacting this through epistemologies of sensuality, sexuality, affect and touch. Drawing on critical theorizations of time alongside queer, feminist understandings of affect, intimacy, and touch, I seek to uncover the radical potential of being intimate across temporal distinction. How might forming such relationships, in our research and beyond, encourage us to remain antagonistic towards hegemonic temporal regimes? If we treated temporality as another categorization that benefits the regimes of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism which control us, then how might we go about dismantling its dividing character? Inspired by my relationship with the sonic archive of disappeared singer-songwriter Connie Converse, I aim to achieve this trans-temporal intimacy through the act of listening and being with sound. By responding to feminist articulations of embodiment and the erotic, I argue that the practice of listening offers a more radical sensory basis for critical archival engagement. Ultimately, this allows greater access to the radical forms of sociality and kinship made available through sound, including those which dissolve the notion of the individual self.

KEYWORDS

trans, temporality, intimacy, listening, affect, touch, relationality

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> Each time, I want to sing to that unbearable past, which also turns out to be the soundtrack to an open and more beautiful future (Singh 2019, 66).

Closeness

At the end and the start of it all is a dream of connecting with something, or someone. An affective pull towards some form of being with another, and the hope to do so despite occlusion. Some things feel impossible, too incommensurable to reckon with. But we are always looking beyond, towards new ways of being and doing through which we feel truly free and alive, even when all of us are not. So, I start with this impulse, to cross some kind of threshold. I sit with bodies (physical, theoretical, imaginary) and orient myself with and towards them (Ahmed 2006).

In this article, my problem is with time, or to be precise, straight/white/colonial/capitalist time: the temporal regime of racial capitalist modernity. As a researcher, but also as a person contending with my existence within this regime, I'm looking for ways out, methods for researching and living which allow us to be antagonistic towards the world that has been imposed upon us. I wonder: if we treat temporality, or rather normative temporal distinction, as another categorization that benefits the regimes of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism which bind us, then how might we go about dismantling its divisions in our daily lives? In looking to futures beyond mere survival and towards genuine liberation, I posit that becoming close across the divisions of time, with those that live lives in excess of their present, brings us closer to radical futures.

This article is an exploration of 'trans-temporal intimacy' as a methodology, a sensibility, and a desire. Trans-temporal intimacy could be understood as a closeness, a proximity, an intimate engagement, a generative connection across time, and enacting this through epistemologies of sensuality, sexuality, affect and touch. To adopt a trans-temporally intimate approach is to use affect to search for such connections, to disregard temporal convention, and seek new coalitions which undermine the forces that divide you. Trans-temporal intimacy, as a queer methodology, *desires* these connections, desires their ability to insistently and imaginatively remember subjugated lives, and desires the alternative possibilities they lead us towards. Trans-temporal intimacy, then, is methodologically antagonistic towards time as we know it. It also functions as a loving gathering of ideas.

What I am calling "trans-temporal intimacy" is an orientation that is present across various disciplines: affect studies, queer theory, critical archival theory, sound studies, but exceeds them all in various ways. At its core, this might be said to be a feminist project of the imagination. We have many vernaculars, methods, memories, and affective processes to speak with the past. We speak with ghosts (Gordon 2011). We inhale dust and become feverish (Steedman 2019). We speak and we listen (Campt 2017). We touch across time (Dinshaw 1999). We situate ourselves "in the wake" (Sharpe 2016) and look for potential "in the break" (Moten 2003). We scavenge for scraps (Halberstam 2019) and ask what use they might have (Ahmed 2019).

Specifically, I'm thinking through the radical potentials of being intimate across temporality, of being intimate with people and things separated from us by temporal distinctions. What might it mean to actually form intimate relationships across time? Which alternative forms of kinship and relationality might these connections inspire? How do these intimate formations enlighten us about the small corners of experimentation found in non-normative life? And subsequently, what possible methods, frameworks and mediums might allow us to access these spaces more easily? What does it mean to look back to look forwards, in the here and now?

This project starts with the dream of genuine connection and ends with a conviction that connection creates space for liberation. I will begin with a discussion of temporality and its discontents, followed by interrogating the role of affect and sensation in temporal disruption. By highlighting listening as a particularly disruptive and antagonistic method for negating temporal division, I consider the radical potentials made available through affective methods which undermine the bounded, individual subject.

Connie

For the sake of honesty, and of citation, I want to say here that this whole concept started because I developed a relationship with Connie. Connie Converse was an enigmatic white woman born in 1924 in New Hampshire in a settler colony known as the United States. She liked to travel around and write songs. She was rumored, among other things, to be a member of the Communist Party, and a lesbian. Her music was not heard in a conventional sense. She rarely performed publicly, and the recordings we have of her music were not made for public hearing. What we have are relics recorded by her friend Gene Deitch onto a reel-to-reel tape recorder. One day in 1974, Connie placed her belongings into her Volkswagen Beetle and drove away. She was never heard from again.

After Deitch was invited onto a WNYC radio show in 2004 and played some of her songs, Connie's music began to reach a larger audience than it ever had previous to her disappearance. A compilation of these recordings, *How Sad, How Lovely,* was released in 2009. I can't recall how I first heard her, but she found her way into my waking dreams. I found moments of utopia in her strange sounds. In their beautiful, eerie descriptions of running away, of making home with the mountains and birds and flowers. In their bizarre fables and failed romances. In their longing for a kind of freedom, of forms of love which are unencumbered.

These recordings inadvertently create an affective archive. One which hints at the radical scraps of social life found through sound and music, in the ways her songs blend with the relational noise which surround them. Falling in love with this archive, with Connie, is why I am here writing about intimacy. I firmly believe that there is something here, in these relationships we are always making as researchers, and as queer people, that might guide us towards something genuinely radical.

My falling-for and desiring-of her sounds, and the aliveness they contain, guide my entire understanding of trans-temporal intimacy. Through this relationship I was encouraged to think intently about listening and its ability to traverse temporal distinctions and the separations between life and death, but also to deconstruct the temporal regimes and broader structures they constitute. What follows is an attempt to imagine beyond such regimes, and an encouragement for everyone to do the same.

Temporal Antagonism

> What is the "tense" of a black feminist future? (Campt 2017, 17).
>
> And how does one tell impossible stories? (Hartman 2008, 10).

It is my hope that trans-temporal intimacy might function as part of a multitude of practices which form what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013) describe as "the general and generative antagonism" (17); a commitment to fugitive practices which refuse the world as it is. I highlight temporality as one of the key sites of violence restricting our lived possibilities not in isolation but as part of a long history of temporal resistance. The "white temporal regime" (Mills 2014, 31) of

modernity restricts imaginative possibilities, it disciplines and temporally compartmentalizes, becoming its own form of capitalist currency (Thompson 1967). Achille Mbembe (2015) describes colonization as a "fundamental negation of time" (n.p.), viewing this negation as threefold: that in colonization, colonized people were/are viewed as "radically located outside of time; or whose time was radically out of joint;" that any notion of the 'future' became "the monopoly of Europe and had to be brought to the natives from outside, as a magnanimous gift of civilization;" and that in the colonial mind, the colonized person "was ontologically incapable of change and therefore of creation" (n.p.). The temporal regime of colonial modernity is one which shapes understanding, valuing and disenfranchisement of "underdeveloped" peoples and geographies (Rodney 2018) by rendering colonized subjects as inherently "of the past" (Mignolo 2011).

Colonial time then presents an impossible bind, one which precludes any notion of otherwise, in the past or the future, than that imposed by colonization. It follows that any anticolonial project must encompass an antagonistic relationship towards time as we know it if we are to be able to truly imagine and conceive of an 'otherwise.' Denise Ferreira da Silva (2014) describes her 'black Feminist Poethics' as "an ethics, which, instead of the betterment of the World as we know it aims at its end" (82), one which requires "nothing less than decolonization" (85). In understanding that liberation can only be achieved by the end of the world, she highlights colonial temporality as something which must necessarily be destroyed to achieve this end. For Ferreira da Silva, "the World of Categories... is always already in Time, of Time" (87). 'Time' functions as another regime of colonial epistemology (90); a force which governs the imagination, and thus our potential for conceiving otherwise. Categories are understood as eternal, timeless, rather than specific historical constitutions. I follow Ferreira da Silva in seeking to imagine new possibilities for future existence by better understanding the excessive, antagonistic lives of the present by negating their categorization. Trans-temporal intimacy is an approach which refuses the categories of past, present and future in the same way it refuses other categories of existence which seek to restrict our methods of communication, knowing, and loving. By adopting or seeking a trans-temporal intimacy, we not only undermine the temporal divisions presented to us but allow ourselves to become closer to those lives which themselves have exceeded and continue to exceed normative temporal understandings.

If "white time becomes not merely a Euro-centered periodization, but a demarcator of the appropriate use of time, conceptions of daily rhythms of work and leisure, as opposed to the general misuse of time Europeans found elsewhere" (Mills 2014, 31), then how might fugitive temporal practices embrace this 'general

misuse,' treating it instead as something to seek out? Indeed, certain forms of existence necessarily entail a rejection of hegemonic temporal desires, and I identity trans-temporal intimacy as a specifically queer rejection of temporality. As José Esteban Muñoz (2019) notes, "queerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time. Straight time is a self-naturalizing temporality. Straight time's 'presentness' needs to be phenomenologically questioned" (1). Following Muñoz, I want to think further about the queer potentials for temporal transgression; in moments of sexual and performative excess where time dissolves, but also in the queer lives which themselves reject "chrononormative" (Freeman 2010) understandings of progress and capitalist determination (Halberstam 2005). Here I want to dwell on where the "trans" fits into this "trans-temporal intimacy."

As well as its mere signification, or use as a prefix, it always hints at something more radical and dangerous. Trans life is conceived of and yet always exceeds normative temporal frameworks. In *The Terrible We*, Cameron Awkward-Rich (2022) draws our attention to the distorted temporality of trans experience: "despite the literal and metaphorical association of transition and transness itself with travel, mobility, and movement, trans life under racial capitalism is at least as much about stuckness, waiting, 'lag time,' and recurrence" (8). Trans lives throw into question aspirations for linear progress, known endpoints and completeness. Hil Malatino (2019) asks us "when is one "post" transition?" (640) arguing that "'trans' names not a specific entity, but a process; it is not a noun, but an adjective" (644). Subsequently, Malatino calls to "focus on trans lives in interregnum, in the crucial and transformative moments between past and future, between the regime of what was and the promise of what might be" (644). Transness, then, denotes a space or moment radically open to change, one which contains ambivalence and is continually shaped by alternative possibility.

I'm particularly inspired by Awkward-Rich's attempt to realign struggles for trans and crip justice. In response to the pathologization and medical subjugation of trans experience, rather than distancing transness from disability by claiming that 'we are not sick,' movements for trans liberation should align themselves with crip struggles against the pathologizing model of wellness, and acknowledge the ways in which racial capitalism (Robinson 2021; Johnson and Lubin 2017) continues to deny possibility to those unable to 'perform well' in society.

Alison Kafer (2013) writes about the impossibility of futurity for disabled people in the eyes of the medical establishment. In the medical model, disability is constructed as something which denies the possibility of a 'good' life, where such a future can only be achieved through 'curing' which Kafer defines as "curative time." Kafer offers the alternative formation of "crip time:" "crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded… rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds" (27). Trans and disabled lives continuously throw into question our assumed desires for progress and development, precisely by behaving so badly within the logics of colonial, straight temporality. Fatigue prevents acceptable levels of productivity, life has to be taken each day at a time, predictability and replicability are unavailable. Bodies are misunderstood, read wrong in the street or in the doctor's office. They produce a double take. Time is sometimes painfully felt rather than imagined, measured in terms of access to medication.

The shared temporal antagonism of these writers shows to me that liberatory possibilities require a form of collapse. We want, and need, to destroy the world. This much is clear, even if it is slightly beyond the scope of this article. What I might ask, then, is how this ethos of antagonism and refusal of temporality might act as a way of beginning to negate the hold of the structures which rely upon it. And notably, how does a focus on temporality offer particular possibilities for coalition building? Without eliding specificities of struggle, what if we were to re-orient our focus around the particular forms of subjugation which normative time creates, noticing the multitudinous ways in which time categorizes and limits possibility? In doing so we might begin to negate this temporal regime, render it more and more obsolete.

In his conclusion to *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz (2019) writes: "we must vacate the here and now for a then and there. Individual transports are insufficient. We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion" (185). I'm asking us to take this demand seriously. By collectively distorting temporality, we are led leads to new forms of relationality and coalition building. We are encouraged to fuck with time, in better and more pleasurable ways. Indeed, there is much to be said about the affective aspect of looking back and looking forward. What are the affective, sensory, and emotional qualities of traversing and refusing temporal distinctions? To adopt a queer temporal or "archival sensibility" (Tamboukou 2019) asks what engaging with 'archives' (histories, lives…) might lead towards. Which new formations of queer life, queer love, and queer affective kinship might developing such temporal relationships bring about?

Thinking further about this 'pull' to escape the confines of temporality might allow us to access more expansive methods and potentials for accessing the revolutionary moments of mundanity. I hope to home in on the corporeal moments of desire and touch which lead us across temporal distinctions, what Tina Campt (2017) would refer to as "hapticality" (8). Thinking more about the embodied tug to move beyond the past, present and future becomes a question of desire. This is where trans-temporal intimacy comes into play.

Sensation

> Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition (Gordon 2011, 8).

In any relationship there is a first meeting. Sometimes these are unmemorable, you only realize your pull to them later on. But sometimes you are drawn against your will to someone or something. It enters into your life unexpectedly but stays with you, its meaning only becoming clear later on. Your body is overtaken by this affective response, with a need to somehow contextualize, comprehend or rationalize its feeling.

In *No Archive Will Restore You*, Julietta Singh (2019) deftly reconfigures archival theory by taking the body itself as a starting point, as the archive itself. This body-as-archive is a space of relationality, it becomes "a way of thinking-feeling the body's unbounded relation to other bodies" (29). In conceptualizing the archive as embodied, Singh hints towards understanding the body as itself something only understood in its connection to other things, in the dissolution of its individualized boundaries. The archive, then, is always a thing of affective interaction, of what Singh calls "transformative touch" (105). I am less concerned with the 'archive' itself than how archival theory articulates the experience of being with the past, of remembering and recollecting, of research itself, of treating objects as catalysts for memories, for world-making, for insisting on having been there. It is in these spaces which breach the gap between selves that I find the most generative potential for the trans temporal intimacy I seek.

Much like Avery Gordon (2011), "my concern is unequivocally with social life" (27). But specifically, I want to collapse Singh and Gordon in upon each other. If it is the case that "if we want to study social life well... we must learn how to identify hauntings and reckon with ghosts" (Gordon 2011, 23), then I want to extend this notion of relationality across time (and across states of aliveness) into the realm of intimacy. This is where I look for trans-temporal intimacy. I'm wondering how this trans-temporal intimacy might be not just something to notice, but to actively seek out.

What exactly is it about being so proximate, and so affectively intertwined, that is really transformative? It is the potential for affective space to question that which is considered eternal or unchangeable in the world as we know it. Intimacy is literally space making, it opens up other possibilities and temporalities in the material and felt moments it creates. Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) writes that "all intimacies stretch between the actual and the possible, the long duration and the punctual, the singular and the general" (Povinelli 195). The late Lauren Berlant (1998) noted that intimacy "poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective" (283). What is captured by both of these observations is intimacy's ability to destabilize, in particular, any sense of a thing in isolation. Not only does an individualized political project give way to a collective one, but the notion of an individual itself gives way to interaction and relationality. So, intimacy is what allows us to traverse and collapse disparate temporalities.

I'm thinking again of Connie Converse's archive, her recordings. Maybe part of why they jumped out to me is their richness in ephemera, their overabundance of the body. The coughs and the stutters. The fragments of conversation before some of the songs. The background noise, the hums and crackles. The times when she plays the wrong note or sings the wrong verse. We have no idealized, individualized creative artefact, but rather sketches and assemblages of the various noises which surrounded her. In such small scraps I hear and feel so much, there is a palpable physicality to it all. They feature a completely different form of evidence, one which "evaporat[es] at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility" (Muñoz 1996, 6). It is precisely through attuning ourselves to these forgotten, marginal things where I believe trans-temporal intimacy can be accessed.

What might be tentatively called a 'turn to the sensory' (Ahmed 2019; Campt 2017; Cvetkovich 2019; Dinshaw 1999; Freeman 2010; Gordon 2011; Muñoz 1996; 2019; Singh 2019; Tamboukou 2019) in archival thought has a great deal of potential not just in changing the way we think about archives, but the way we engage with things, people, history, temporality, and the world more broadly, as queers and feminists. This is where I believe trans-temporal intimacy can be accessed. These

sensory interventions allow for methods to remain antagonistic: towards the colonial imaginations of the archive (Stoler 2009) and of temporality, towards what is considered significant, important and worthwhile to remember. The sensory occupies a different epistemological space to the rationally understood.

All bodily potentials—the sensory, the intuitive, the responsive—hearken back to Audre Lorde's (2019) "Uses of the Erotic" and queer, black feminist theory more broadly: "Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, 'It feels right to me,' acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. [...] The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge" (46). Lorde's conception of the erotic taps into everything I also want to uncover in these affective moments of engagement across time: the radical potential of sensuality; the making of new forms of knowledge in moments of touch; the generative moments of intuition where we are overtaken by our bodily desires. The sensory interventions I've already discussed operate at these overlapping moments of sensuality and sexuality, unrestricted to either, articulating a more expansive model of sexuality than that provided by cis-hetero-patriarchy. I see engagements with the archive, with figures and things from the past (our transgressive coalition), as always-already within this world, in the space of touch, of pleasure, of desire, of falling in love. As well as acts, feelings, or things that happen to us, these are all frameworks to think through. Here we access new relationships and imaginations. What I am interested in are the methods and vehicles through which we find the spaces where we lose ourselves to affect. Where knowledge moves beyond the rational to the embodied.

Listening

> Pondering the idea of the body archive, I cannot resist thinking toward those palpable bodily openings: the orifices. Those holes in our bodies where other bodies have unabashedly entered and left their deposits. Among other things, the body's archive might be framed as an archive of penetration (Singh 2019, 32).

I want to consider listening as a form of archival engagement which might better allow us to access a trans-temporal intimacy. In my own research, I use listening as a way of accessing trans-temporal intimacy when engaging with sound archives of the disappeared or misremembered, which require unique method-

ological considerations. After all, listening is a practice which questions where bodies begin and end. It is always concerned with the openings and closings of bodies, where you engage actively with pleasure whilst choosing to let things happen to you. Regardless of its source of output, or the person experiencing it, sound is always experienced through the body as vibration, sensation and feeling. Listening is a sensory, affective and oftentimes sexual practice.

In *Listening to Images*, Campt (2017) treats listening not simply as a physical process but as a sensory modality. Campt finds the "quiet" or "unheard" to be the places filled with the most revolutionary potential, here specifically in the practices of black social life. In addition, Campt (2017) finds in listening an immense potential for engaging with the "haptic" aspects of archival engagement. Listening and sound are frameworks for getting to what is not immediately obvious: "the lower frequencies... register as what I describe as 'felt sound'—sound that, like a hum, resonates in and as vibration... Yet all sound consists of more than what we hear. It is an inherently embodied modality constituted by vibration and contact" (7). So, in fact, listening for Campt is really a form of touch, potentially the "transformative touch" mentioned earlier.

I think through Campt's work alongside one of the most radical articulations of a queer musicality—which I extend here to 'being with sound' more generally—Suzanne Cusick's (2006) "On A Lesbian Relationship with Music". In the text, Cusick radically conceives of a lesbian (sexual) orientation towards listening, playing and being with music. She defines sexuality as "a way of expressing and/or enacting relationships of intimacy through physical pleasure shared, accepted, or given" (70), subsequently questioning whether the boundaries between musicality and sexuality are really that concrete. For Cusick, both musicality and sexuality are concerned with power, giving, and receiving, and function as concurrent and mutually influencing practices. Among the richness of potential, I am thinking concurrently with Cusick's belief in a queer musical and sonic orientation to access these spaces of transgression. I think there is a very palpable erotic and sexual possibility in the act of listening that might be able to access these radical moments of being. I return to Lorde (2019) on the erotic:

> Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience... That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling (46–47).

What Lorde taps into here, and what I am trying to use listening as a means of describing, are the spaces where we lose ourselves to affect. Where knowledge moves beyond the rational to the embodied. In the moment, this knowledge comes through the vibrational experience of listening and dancing to music. This is what Cusick (2006) looks towards also—the potential for embodied musical experiences where the self-disintegrates into the other, be it another person, a sound, an instrument, an experience. I want to set listening as part of a wider lineage of affective experiences that move beyond the contained individual self into the realm of multiplicity.

What listening might offer, alongside other forms of intimate and sexual touch, is moments of dislocation from the world as it is. Listening at its core is the process of mediating vibrations between bodies. It is the affective in between that comes into existence precisely through relation. Listening is also paying attention to, caring for, and wanting to exist pleasurably with, other selves. If "we can conceptualize the researcher and the archive as an assemblage rather than as separate and independent entities" (Tamboukou 2019, n.p.) listening might function as the force pulling its things and selves into such an arrangement, that orients them in a certain way.

Elizabeth Freeman (2007) notes that "social change itself enables, and perhaps even requires, that incommensurate temporalities... rub up against one another, compete, overlap, cross reference" (499). Listening has the particular ability to place sounds from another historical moment, along with all their affective excess (the tape hiss, the movement of bodies) immediately into the ears of the present. For Brandon LaBelle (2021), "listening, as part of the work of attention, educates how the present is deeply effected and touched by its own limits, by what exceeds or has gone missing from the arena of the sensible" (7). Listening allows us to access the spaces 'in between' or 'outside' in our search for a radical trans-temporal intimacy. Listening as a methodology nurtures a trans-temporal intimacy by furthering this relationship between person and 'affective thing' through transduction, closeness and possibility. Which moments of queer potential might be made possible in these spaces in between? In this sense, we might conceive of an antagonistic archival listening practice that embraces the radical erotic potential it denotes.

Transformative Touch

> I become ever more preoccupied with this notion of transformative touch between friends. With contact that cannot be reduced to the normative cultural paradigms – sexual and parental – of intimate touch. What kinds of touch live beyond these paradigms, making up dissenting communities (Singh 2019, 105).

To return to Connie, in listening to and developing a relationship with her archive, I don't feel as if I'm interacting with some nullified object. There is so much aliveness here. There is an unbridled agency which speaks to and moves me. And with this is a challenge to what it means to be dead and gone. For all we know, Connie is still alive, somewhere in the mountains making friends with the trees and the squirrels. Maybe she achieved what her songs lead us to believe was her dream: To escape. But even if not, she is still alive in the way her sounds find new ways to reach new ears every day. And by listening to her sonic descriptions and dreams of a different life, elsewhere, I am moved to imagine the same, for myself and for all. The act of listening, of developing such a relationship, is foundational in moving me to action.

I am concerned with these minute forms of revolution, or moments of world-making (Berlant and Warner 1995; 1998) which emerge briefly and almost incidentally within the lives of non-normative subjects simply trying to survive. Moments of unfolding where we become through our proximity to other people. Transformatively imagining. It is less about assessing whether they have changed the world, and more about finding hope in their promise. Trans-temporal intimacy, then, is a methodology for engagement which captures, lends itself towards and develops a relationship with these minute revolutions. Trans-temporal intimacy asks not simply what happened, but which forms of knowledge, loving and changing the world have been allowed to disappear, and how might we fall in love with them, for the first time or again and again?

We must find ways of being with each other that are better than what we have now. Beyond the categories that capitalism, white supremacy, and cis-hetero patriarchy impose upon our existence. Where are just free, to move and to love. It is my conviction that we find moments that do just this, in the world as it is, in the affective interactions between non-normative bodies which challenge the integrity of these bodies as isolated subjects. In the affective moments which galvanize us, allow us to question further, become more antagonistic, understand our

collective rather than individual power. A trans-temporal intimacy, then, is one which enacts this disintegration with a broader temporal scope, asking questions like, if we can abolish the individual, categorization, time as we know it, which other distinctions and regimes can we abolish?

Relationality

> I am in love with the idea of partnering as a means of survival. (Abdurraqib 2022, 22).

What forging a trans-temporal intimacy might actually lead to, is a way of accessing a more radical and expansive form of kinship, a solidarity even, with those not deemed fully alive (Benjamin 2018). This kinship stems from a collective antagonism, and a commitment to always imagine otherwise (Olufemi 2021). Maybe this kinship provides a unique coalition which refuses the categories of existence rendered by racial capitalist modernity, instead becoming unified by our collective rejection of its temporal regime. This might take the form of intimate listening. It might take the form of organizing, of singing together, of falling in love. But what it understands is the categories we have to describe ourselves, and the ways in which we can touch and relate to each other in the world as it is, are not enough. Regardless of what we might call them, they are moments where the parties involved realize that their proximity is more powerful than their distance. It is clear that time as we know it has no place for us, and trans-temporal intimacy looks towards its abolition.

And so, I call upon you to listen carefully, next time that you do. When you are touched by something, follow that sensation. Dwell upon the feeling it contains. Let it bury itself deep within your body and escape again through your porous surfaces. And above all, recognize that in isolation we are nothing. That we are made by, with, and through, each other.

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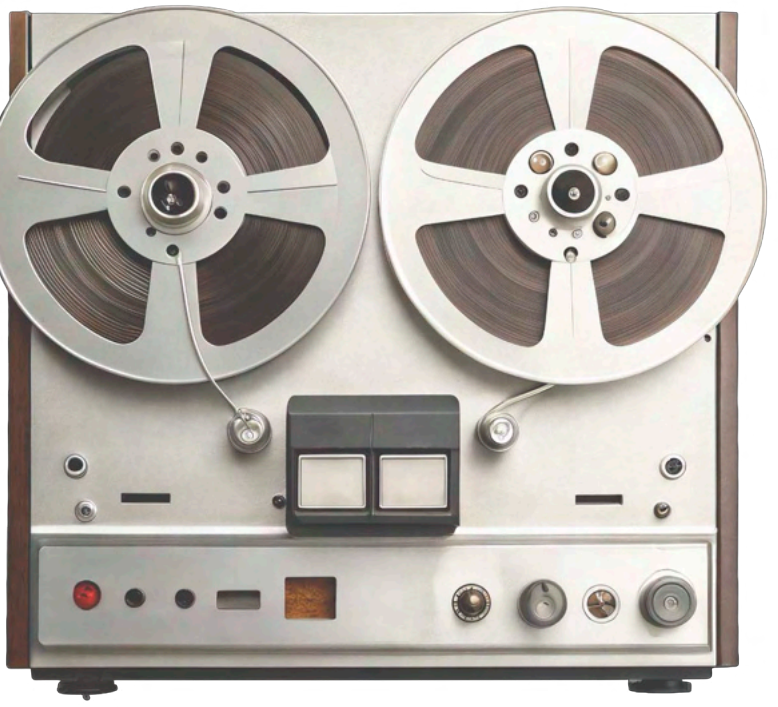
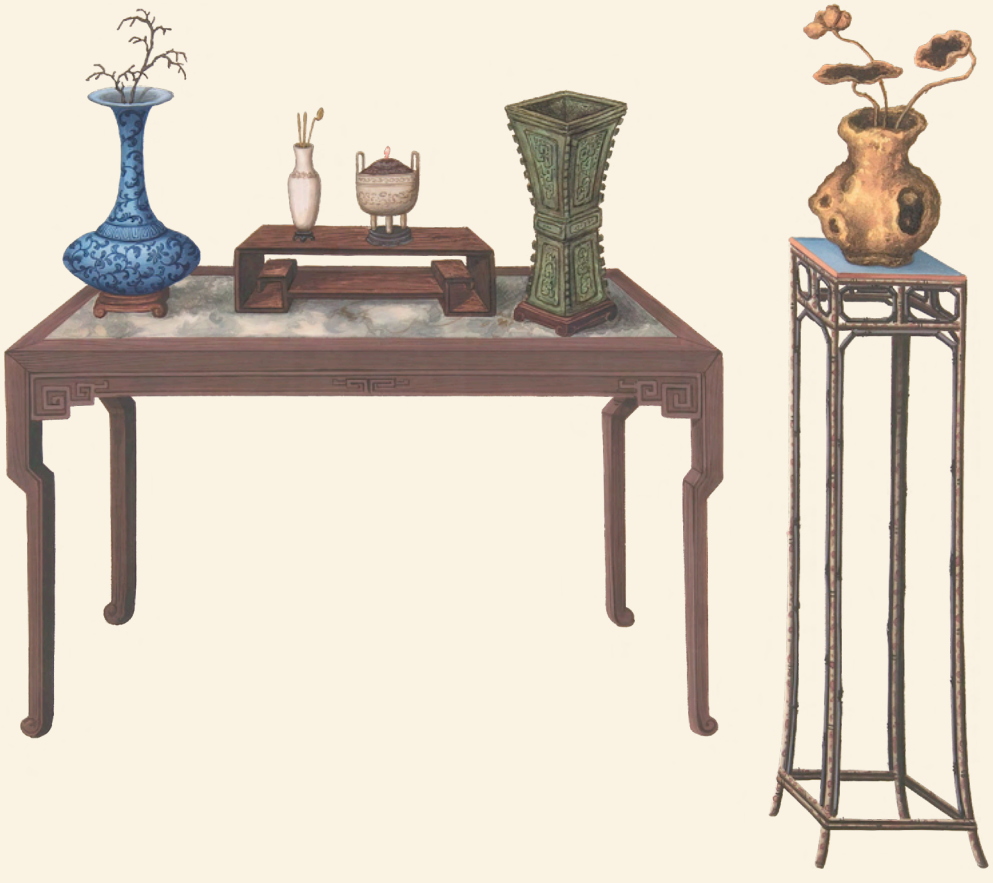


Low Table with Vases,
Anonymous, 19th century, Public Domain

Large Table and Two Small Higher Ones with Vases (detail),
Anonymous, 19th century, Public Domain



Book Review:

THE POLITICS OF LOVE: SEX REFORMERS AND THE NONHUMAN

Emily Martin
THE NEW SCHOOL

Hustak, Carla Christina. (2024). *The Politics of Love: Sex Reformers and the Nonhuman*. Oakland: University of California Press, 237 pages, $37.95 (paperback)

Nonhuman Intimacies and the Question of Love

Today, love seems to unfold in increasingly nonhuman forms. Affective and bodily intimacies are mediated through technological interfaces—both with and without a human beloved. From algorithmic matchmaking on dating apps to simulated flirtations with large language models (LLM), we are urged to renegotiate how love persists impersonally, as virtual, or even as prosthetic. Simultaneously, there is a growing awareness of the porous boundaries between humans and other organic entities. Movements like sexecology present the planet itself as a lover, inviting erotic encounters with nature. Animal behavioral science and sex research are increasingly acknowledging the prevalence of same-sex relations in nonhuman animals. Indeed, the intimacies between technology and ecology are increasingly entangled, as seen in the developments of artificial wombs where lambs have been brought to term afloat in synthetic amniotic fluid—raising the possibility of reproduction without sex altogether.

A defining feature of today's lovers' discourse is, therefore, a growing awareness of the permeability and impermanence of boundaries that enable or inhibit love as an affective and intimate exchange. This shift alters how we negotiate *nonhuman love*. It raises crucial questions: what are the parameters of love? Who—*what*—do we believe to have the capacity to love? What are the implications of acknowledging and embracing these interpenetrative intimacies and fluid boundaries? To ask these questions at all suggests an ontologically nonhuman transformation is occurring, or has already occurred, altering today's experience of love as amorphous and affectively contagious. But how can we begin to understand this shift if this is the case? If we are compelled to ask, "*How* did love become nonhuman?" then we must also ask, "*When* was love defined as human?" Indeed, this growing interrogation of love's boundaries and transformative potential calls into question what Carla Christina Hustak (2024), in *The Politics of Love: Sex Reformers and the Nonhuman*, terms "the politics of love," an "ontological politics" that positions love as a crucial marker of humanity, granting those deemed capable of love a higher status as "more human than others" (20).

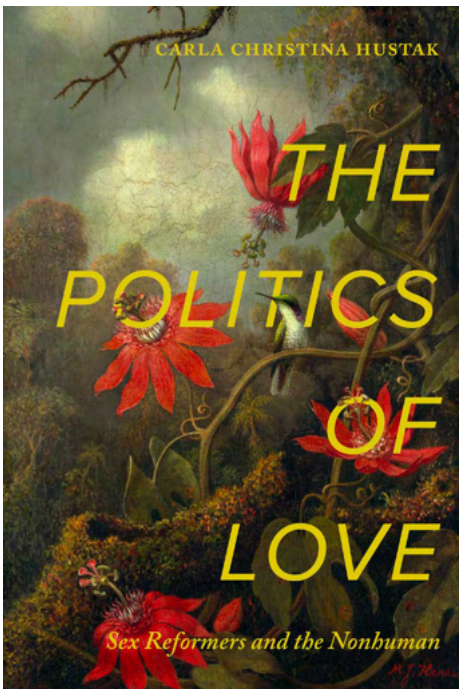
The text traces a *genealogy* of love in Western social and political discourses of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Hustak focuses on the stories of sex reformers who, in their ambition to transform existing institutions' limited concepts of sexual morality, turned to advances in evolutionary science, emergent technologies, and novel theories of sex and reproduction. According to Hustak, this shift marked the reformers' "turn to the nonhuman" for matters of love. Rather than offering a mere historical analysis of this movement, Hustak incorporates affect theory, emphasizing the role of bodily encounters, intimate exchanges, and emotional intensities in dissolving the boundaries between human and nonhuman and between love and sex. Indeed, Hustak's work illuminates how the entwined nonhuman intimacies of love today are not unique to the present—amplified and accelerated, perhaps, but rooted in historical precedents.

The Politics of Love is a timely exploration of how, historically, human and nonhuman encounters have gestured toward such critical negotiations around love, sex, and intensities of affect, with comparable consequences: the exploitation of those deemed less capable of love, and therefore less human, reducing their bodily and emotional capacity for love to a mere resource. Ultimately, Hustak holds up a historical mirror to what we often consider novel challenges: the human's position in relation to an ever-apparent nonhuman world and the notion of love as a personal, *human* emotion.

CAPACIOUS

Redefining Love: Encounters Along an Evolutionary Continuum

The Politics of Love astutely identifies a *punctum* in the genealogy of the lover's discourse. The intentional narrative shift sex reformers crafted deepened intimate bodily-affective encounters among humans and nonhuman actors—from mammalian and botanical life to the machinic and planetary. This shift opened a space of potentiality to not only historically redefine the role of love scientifically in social and political contexts but to reconfigure love itself as an affective connective force that cuts across species, organisms, and temporalities. As a historical and genealogical approach to the sex reformers, Hustak's text is ambitious and thorough. Her work demonstrates how love—traditionally seen as an intimately personal experience—was historically redefined as an impersonal, scientifically controlled practice.



Thus, this text is, first and foremost, a historical account of the sex reform movement concerned with how love was transformed within the political and social context of the late 19th century and early 20th century. Hustak argues that the historical nature of love is rooted in its affective encounters: to transform across different times and places—whether through the evolutionary continuum envisioned by sex reformers or broader shifts in the scale and deep time within ecological and planetary contexts. According to Hustak, love is "genealogical, connective, fluctuating, and recurring, rather than linear" (17). Rather than being fixed to a specific moment, love moves fluidly through history, influenced by the past and future, much like how "feeling, memory, and bodily experience do not abide by neat periodization" (17). Such sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the role of affect in the politics of love.

This conception of love cutting across traditional notions of history, time, and bodies is at the crux of Hustak's examination: the notion that sex reformers redefined love by situating it on an *evolutionary continuum*, scientifically linking human sexuality with nonhuman practices. This reconfiguration positioned sex—

as a scientific act of love or encounter between bodies—as something that extended from nonhuman sexual behaviors to the human capacity for an elevated form of *love*. Through this scientific lens, the plasticity of love as a practice that urges bodies to commingle and reconfigure toward affective intensity becomes evident.

Nevertheless, Hustak contends that dubious consequences emerge, particularly when love is oriented toward anthropocentric or human exceptionalist ideals that prevent love's plasticity from reaching its full potential beyond distinctions of human and nonhuman—a cosmic orientation. While sex reformers' reinvention of love was a means of legitimizing sexual pleasure within a bourgeois anthropocentric moral framework shaped by Victorian respectability and liberal humanism, centering the nonhuman in discourses of love posed an ontological and existential threat. To remedy this 'threat,' love had to be oriented as something distinctly human.

In Hustak's view, the sex reformers elevated love as the spiritual equivalent of a reproductive and emotionally intense *sexual drive*—privileged, in fact, by being tied to a white, middle-class, educated ideal. Sex reformers linked love to those "evolved" beings thought to bear the burden of "human progress" (25). This, however, raises the question: does this framing contradict the notion of love as something that transcends linear time and specific beings? How can we reconcile Hustak's conception of a more transcendent or cosmic love with the sex reformers' enactment of an 'evolutionary' love without falling into such incongruency?

Indeed, Hustak presents the sex reform movement as both incongruent and paradoxical: a cautionary tale of human exceptionalism. She argues that in their efforts to legitimize sexual pleasure within dominant biopolitical regimes—where sexual ethics were entangled with bourgeois respectability, evolutionary hierarchy, and anthropocentric morality—sex reformers often instrumentalized nonhuman beings. In placing the human above all others, their efforts to integrate the nonhuman into human narratives of love often led to marginalization, particularly that of *who* achieves a level of evolution high enough to be considered 'human.' Despite its well-intentioned efforts, this movement was ultimately undermined by its adherence to human exceptionalism, exposing the contradictions and dissonances within their redefinition of love. *The Politics of Love,* in turn, asks, how might the very same porous and uncertain boundaries of bodily and intimate encounters explored by the sex reformers reveal that we are not the only species with this capacity for love?

Affective Slippages: The Porousness of Intimate Encounters

The text's historical approach thus draws on affect theory to explore this pivotal moment in the redefinition of love through nonhuman intimacies. Hustak gestures toward the typical repertoire, ranging from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) "becoming-animal" to explain the ways sex reformers "forged new human/animal materialities" and its ontological implications (23) to Patricia Clough's (2010) "*affective turn*" to address the enmeshment of affect and bio-politics (75). Affect is oriented as a dynamic ontological process—a range of non-hierarchical intensities and forces that continually reconfigure our relationships with the self, the world, and between human and nonhuman entities—and therefore reinforces the notion of *love* as something recursive, connective, and dynamic.

This affective orientation is central to the text's historical disruption. Still, love's exact nature within the sex reform movement can seem elusive. Hustak acknowledges love as an emotional and human experience, a political construct, a scientific phenomenon, and an affective potential but, in doing so, struggles to reconcile these dimensions fully—to distinguish love itself from *sex.* What are the parameters of love—if any—in relation to sex? Here, 'love' and its connection to, or permeability with, sex takes on ontological concerns, particularly that of the potentiality of love to be an attribute, affect, and state that all beings can have, experience, and give to others. In attempting to make love more human, sex reformers paradoxically redefined it as something beyond a concrete, personal experience tied to specific emotions or human relationships. Instead, love extended through nonhuman bodies and potentialities; it became more of a *gradation* of intensities: an affect, abstracted.

Perhaps it is this gradation that unfolds within the text itself, even as Hustak attempts to move from sex to love, the human to nonhuman. Treatments of love very quickly slide into questions of sex, but discussions of sex practices do not inevitably lead back to questions of love. Hustak cites several avenues the sex reformers took in reinventing a practice of love grounded in scientific certainty: psychology, gynecology, sexology, botany, and even divine and planetary registers. But these practices remain grounded in sexual reproduction, sexual organs, latent sexual desires, the libido, and instinct.

We learn, for instance, that the gynecologist Norman Haire turned to the physical blending of nonhuman organs and excretions with human bodies as a resource for enhancing human arousal and attaining a "higher experience of love" (46) and the

absence of thought toward the animals and bodies that aided in this "new register of sexual feeling" (64). This is Hustak's point: engineering love as a science of sex, as positioned on an evolutionary continuum, resulted in the exploitation of the nonhuman actors who served as bodily and metaphorical resources for love but were denied the capacity to love. Still, it remains unclear how this amounted to a practice of love rather than sex, with its focus on corporeal and affective intimacies. At what point in the sex reformers' experiments did sex—a reproductive drive and bodily intermingling—become love, whether as heightened emotions or a connective force transcending species boundaries? What moves their conception of love beyond anthropocentric orientations?

The sex reformers' work reinforced an evolutionary paradigm where love arising from sexual intercourse was seen as a distinctly human capacity, restricting nonhumans and 'less evolved' humans from experiencing sex as love. Yet, Hustak argues that this moment marked a turn toward the nonhuman, opening the potential for cross-species intimacies. If so, where can we locate the nonhuman reciprocation in these examples?

To illustrate these affective slippages, in the third chapter, "Planetary Intimacies: Physics, Occultism, and Nonhumans in Love," Hustak claims that sex reformers reconfigured sex to involve not just the connection of two human bodies but the participation of nonhuman forces (96). She grounds this argument in examples such as Edward Carpenter's turn toward mathematics and religion to position "the human sexual body at the crossroads of cosmic and organic forces" (98). Carpenter, for instance, attributes other-worldly and celestial—nonhuman—characteristics to semen, elevating orgasm to a spiritual act and the body as a site for sexual and divine impulses. But this spiritualization of sex still focuses on the human experience. Attributing celestial or mystical qualities to the human body does not necessarily engage with nonhuman forces; instead, it may project human-centered spiritual ideas onto nonhuman elements. Does this genuinely constitute a radical rethinking of intimacy and love centering on the nonhuman, or does it reinforce anthropocentric views of the human body and sexual experience?

These questions point to ways Hustak's analyses might have been enriched by more explicit engagement with the frameworks she invokes. The work of Deleuze and Guattari, Clough, Latour's actor-network theory, and Massumi's notion of affective intensity are highly relevant to Hustak's discussion and could have pro-

vided an ongoing dialogic means of navigating her historical critique of anthropocentric love, especially in distinguishing between sex and love across a gradated evolutionary continuum. For instance, Hustak briefly mentions Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, but bypasses how his concepts of "duration" and "élan vital"—emphasizing evolution as a creative, life-affirming process—would resonate with the idea of love as a cosmic and organic force (10). This theoretical depth could clarify how nonhuman forces like the 'celestial' characteristic attributed to bodily fluids move beyond metaphor to material participation in an organic, transformative, and durational conception of love.

Love's Failures and Nonhuman Potentials: Toward Impersonal Reciprocity

Within the practices outlined in *The Politics of Love*, sex reformers encountered intimately and closely-forged bonds with nonhuman actors that made porous the boundaries between human and nonhuman bodies. Hustak defines this process as "eco/ontologies," or "a new becoming that involved transformations of the self and the world through their specific modes of encounter with one another…sex reformers turned attention to love as the mode of encounter, fostering mutually beneficial relationships for humans and nonhumans" (58). At the same time, however, Hustak demonstrates that these encounters led to an unequal exchange, where humans experienced an elevated capacity for pleasure and intimacy while nonhumans were exploited for their affective and bodily resources. Highlighting how these nonhuman 'resources' are at stake is a compelling claim, but affective consequences remain underexplored.

At the level of affect as gradations of intensities and sticky, transmutative in-betweenness, Hustak's conception of love as a connective force and open potentiality for porous bodily encounters can emerge only when human and nonhuman actors encounter, recognize, and reciprocally open themselves to this shared intimacy, this intermingling. But in this affective space, the politics of love can no longer hold because love was never something humans possess or perform. Instead, it is a potentiality that happens to us, connects us to others, and catalyzes reorientation and transformation. But, in this sense, *The Politics of Love* reveals the critical failure of the sex reformers: without nonhuman reciprocation, the possibility of a truly mutually beneficial relationship remains unrealized. If at any point in the fluid, dynamic 'history' of love, humans indeed intervened, these moments reveal our failure and limitations rather than our exceptionalism, our exploitation of resources over mutual exchanges.

Ultimately, *The Politics of Love* urges a reconsideration of how love has historically been constructed toward human exceptionalism and calls for exploring the broader implications for those exploited. The parallels between contemporary experiments in love—through technology, ecology, and nonhuman intimacies—and the efforts of sex reformers reveal a recurring tension: love is continually redefined to reinforce human superiority at the expense of nonhuman actors often relegated to resources or instruments to enhance human desire. Hustak's work encourages us to question these boundaries and consider what might be gained by embracing an understanding of love that centers the nonhuman, considering desires, capacities, and intimacies beyond an anthropocentric perspective and beyond an evolutionary hierarchy that posits humans at the top.

In this way, Hustak's work reflects what Dominic Pettman (2020) has called a "libidinal ecology," which emphasizes the continuities and exchanges between organisms, their environments, and the organic and technological realms from a more-than-human or non-anthropocentric perspective. *The Politics of Love* may prompt further exploration into shifting focus toward these intimate proximities with nonhumans and their potentialities throughout history and in speculative futures. When considering Hustak's genealogy of love in tandem with a concept like libidinal ecology, we might imagine the significant potential for scholars interested in posthumanist expressions of desire, nonhuman queer ecologies, and more critical engagements with technologies of love and reproduction that involve intimacies with nonhumans. Future scholarship might uncover other pivotal moments in the genealogy of love where human and nonhuman bodies exchanged intimacies or where attempts to redefine love otherwise emerged. Indeed, inspired by Hustak's text, we might turn toward the current moment and its affective potentialities to rediscover—this time through our nonhuman lovers and with an openness to their reciprocity.

Perhaps then, love may be redefined once more through a history of generative, fluid transformations across an expansive, impersonal universe. By focusing on the relational *in-betweenness*, we could see love as a spatio-temporality that shapes existence itself; the resulting ontological transformations might function quite differently—more inclusively, intimately, and expansively, on a cosmic scale. In this reimagined orientation, humans are invited to reconsider their place within an infinite ecology of lovers—an assemblage of beings and potentialities, each capable of reciprocal love.

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Table with Ornamental Objects,
Anonymous, 19th century, Public Domain

Book Review:

DIS/CORD: THINKING SOUND THROUGH AGENTIAL REALISM

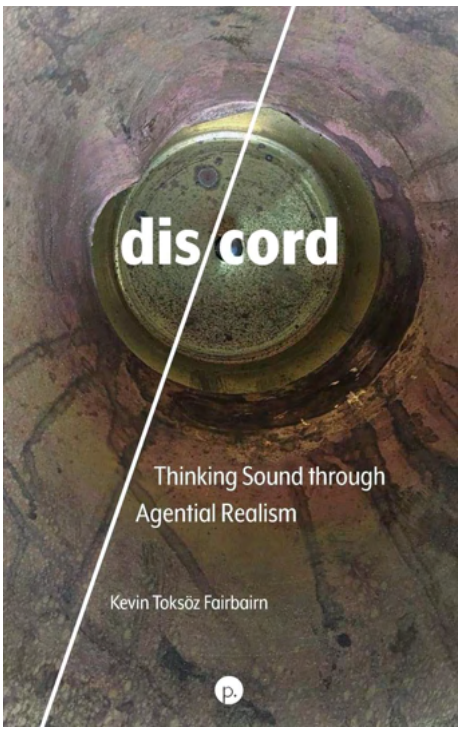
Mathew Klotz
GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY

Fairbairn, Kevin Toksöz. (2022). *dis/cord: Thinking Sound Through Agential Realism*. Goleta: Punctum Books, 146 pages, $22.00 (paperback)

In *dis/cord*, Kevin Toksöz Fairbairn's project (2022) involves asking a short question, yet one that is no stranger to complexity. What is sound? Unsurprisingly, given the subtitle of the book, he seeks to reach an answer by taking on the laudable task of bringing the profundity of Karen Barad's writing into conversation with sound and music research. His overall conceit is twofold: the titular concept of 'dis/cord'—which, curiously, remains somewhat elusive throughout, but which he first describes as "an account of the disjointed commingling of bodies in space as they affect each other sonically" (Toksöz Fairbairn 2022, 23)—and, not unrelated, the framing of sound as non-corporeal. Indeed, Toksöz Fairbairn's (2022) most persistent remark and unanimous sentiment is that "[sound] has no body of its own, and yet is embodied by everything in its environment" (19). Affect-wise, then, his project positions sound, though not in these words, as an affective relation that occurs between bodies and, in doing so, stands in fruitful tension with other accounts. I will come back to this tension below.

Toksöz Fairbairn's (2022) itinerary incorporates two major threads. On the one hand is a broad, albeit inexhaustive, survey of Barad's early theoretical commitments (2007, 2010, 2012), which Toksöz Fairbairn subsequently weaves through a generalist view of sound that is largely physics-oriented. Throughout, he maintains a staunch adherence to the linguistic minutiae of Barad's work, at times

building wordy conglomerates that are possibly more ailing than beneficial. Also brought into these diffractive readings are writings from Julietta Singh (2018), Erin Manning (2016), and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015), among others. For instance, Toksöz Fairbairn deploys the notion of "the anarchive," developed by Manning and colleagues at SenseLab (now 3ecologies), as a way to theorize what happens during and after the act of listening. If the anarchive forms a "*repertory of traces*" that "are not inert, but are carriers of potential" (SenseLab n.d., emphasis in original), then listening in an anarchival sense amounts to "a body slipping into an already moving stream" (83) in which each sound "excites other reverberations, other resoundings" (84). This formulation resonates with my own account of sounds as, all at once, bearing the residue of their performative origins, coming to be shaped by different listening perspectives and histories, and adding to those histories, only to be re-animated over and over (Klotz 2023).



On the other hand, Toksöz Fairbairn (2022) undertakes what can be described as artistic research, tracking what he candidly admits is "the indelible effect that these works [by Barad] had on [his] relationship to working with musicians, with compositions, with instruments, and with sound itself" (26). Five new compositions emerged from this artistic pursuit. Exemplary in demonstrating the entwinement of the book's theoretical and artistic threads is *jetsam*, and I find particularly striking Toksöz Fairbairn's (2022) catalyst for the piece: first "mak[ing] an acquaintanceship with the [performance] space while it is still just a room" (77) by simply breathing into one's musical instrument (something that I regularly do with my saxophone). Not only is this a case of re-configuring the sonic valences of the instrument (and simultaneously having one's own valences changed), but also of "leaving space for the ambient sound of the room' and remaining 'a listener, implicated but peripheral" (Toksöz Fairbairn 2022, 78). Like others (e.g. Östersjö 2008), Toksöz Fairbairn takes seriously here the agency of musical instruments

and, rather importantly, contributes an extension of that conceptual shift to include physical spaces. This is a theme that is present across the book, with Toksöz Fairbairn also taking into account the agency of musical notations, playback devices, and the new compositions themselves. While each of the compositions and Toksöz Fairbairn's discussion of them certainly deserve critical attention, in this short review, I would like to zoom out and highlight three valuable conceptual correctives to both the theoretical and artistic threads. These amendments ought to also serve as germs for future scholarly endeavours.

First of all, the fundamental aspect of Barad's overall conceptual gambit—namely the material-discursive conjunction—receives a tardy introduction. Not until page 91 (over halfway through the book) are we acquainted with the term, though its implications for much of Toksöz Fairbairn's analysis prior to this moment are palpable. Early on, he takes issue with the extant influence of traditional overly-hermeneutic formulations within largely Western classical contexts. However, his suggested alternative—"scaling out from textual hermeneutics to corporeality" in an effort to refocus on "the physical (and emotional) expenditures of music-making" (30)—falls too far the opposite way (and is perhaps symptomatic of the book's ubiquitous physics-oriented bent). After all, in an agential realist sense, the discursive questions of *who* gets to make music (in terms of gender, race, sexuality, disability, class, and so on) and *how* others might or might not understand these sounds, according to certain hermeneutic frameworks, are equally important as and, indeed, entangled with the material questions of *what* they are doing and what physical conditions afford such actions. (These questions are later glossed when Toksöz Fairbairn (2022) touches on "an aesthetic of exclusion" [89], which asks who or what is not included in a musical context.) Perhaps unwittingly, Toksöz Fairbairn acknowledges such a material-discursive state of affairs in regard to his collaboration with composer Santiago Díez-Fischer (2015) on *sensitive switch*. Díez-Fischer purchased a cheap second-hand trombone in order to experiment with its sonorous capabilities, and because he had never engaged with a trombone before, he stumbled upon "a large palette of noisy, grainy, spittly sounds lurking on the periphery of normal pitches" (33–35). This catalogue of sounds not only became the foundation for *sensitive switch*, thereby evoking certain non-conventional playing set-ups from Toksöz Fairbairn, but also suggests, in its very production, a specific hermeneutic that the listener might adopt and one that is very likely related to experimental music. In a word, the corporeal element is neither distanced from nor in excess of the hermeneutic.

Second, agential realism is in no way a phenomenological matter. Bodies of any sort cannot wilfully perform or shape any component of agential realism, especially intra-action—or mutual articulation—because agency, in Barad's sense,

emerges with bodies as an affective relation. What Barad (2007) carefully presents is, on the contrary, an ontological framework (or, better still, an onto-epistemological one), which, as they write, avoids "falling into the analytical stalemate that simply calls for recognition of our mediated access to the world and then rests its case" (152). (Note that Barad (2007) expressly eschews any semblance of phenomenology in their thinking, going so far as to point out the "unwanted phenomenological connotations with which the term "phenomena" is burdened [412].) Toksöz Fairbairn's (2022) theoretical thread remains true to Barad's sentiment; as he remarks, "[t]he intra-active nature of reality does not depend on our conscious experience of it" (128). Yet the staging of agential realism in his artistic thread begins to creep into phenomenological grounds. Two telling moments are his suggestions of "listening through agential realism" (87) and "cultivating relational intra-action" (126), each of which derives from the understanding of mediated access that Barad is cautioning against and thus risks reinstating the supposed centrality of the human. So too does the introduction of metabolism in Chapter 3 as a non-metaphoric description for the receipt of sounds (and for which Toksöz Fairbairn takes inspiration from Singh [2018]) work to privilege specific human and organism-based temporalities, imposing these on more-than-organic bodies and processes. Toksöz Fairbairn (2022) imagines this metabolism rather evocatively as "a form of nourishment, gestation, and circulation" (83); gestation also suggests a repro-centric streak to this formulation. How else, though, might sound pass through and its traces linger in the wall of a dive bar, for example, or Toksöz Fairbairn's trombone, or my saxophone, without succumbing to this semantic baggage?

Lastly, sustained diffractive reading between music/sound scholarship and Barad's theoretical corpus is frustratingly absent as Toksöz Fairbairn begins to thoroughly develop his arguments in the later chapters. This absence truncates some of the project's diverse potentialities. To elaborate this point, I'll discuss two such diffractive encounters that I would love to see explored. First is the missed opportunity to revisit the extensive theoretical and practical contributions of experimental composer and improviser Pauline Oliveros. Toksöz Fairbairn's (2022) notion of enacting "intentional listening, while remaining firmly entangled in the intra-active fabric of the dynamic environment" (87) reads similarly to the dynamism that Oliveros (2005) outlines between focal listening, which affords "clear detail limited to the object of attention" (15), and global listening, which involves "tak[ing] in the whole of the space/time continuum of sound" (15).

Moreover, Toksöz Fairbairn's (2022) teasing of 'soundfeel'—a convergence of the haptic and aural qualities of sound that ushers in "a whole new order of embodied knowledge" (124)—has conspicuous resonance with Oliveros's (2010) concept of quantum listening: 'listening to more than one reality simultaneously' (74), which we can read as no doubt inclusive of the perception of multiple sensorial realities. Second, although Toksöz Fairbairn aims to establish that sound is not bodily in nature, there nonetheless exist a number of useful corporeal conceptualisations of sound. These include, but are definitely not limited to, Suzanne Cusick's (2006) provocative account of topping and bottoming with music; Elisabeth Le Guin's (2006) understanding of compositions as carnal mediums for communicating with others; and, perhaps most explicit, Chris Stover's (2016) formulation, following Baruch Spinoza, of "musical bodies," which he later amends to "sonorous bodies."

As I mentioned at the beginning, for Toksöz Fairbairn (2022), sound is akin to an affective relation (and thus a form of agency) and emerges, in affect terms, as so many *modes* of different bodies: these bodies "are what vibrates, what transmits, what diffracts" (83), he writes, in "a resounding of interference" that constitutes dis/cord (134). Perhaps reading this formulation through those of Cusick, Le Guin, and Stover is an initial avenue for further exploring what Toksöz Fairbairn has generously offered us.

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Two Low Tables with Ornamental Objects,
Anonymous, 19th century, Public Domain

OJALÁ

Michele Santamaría
MILLERSVILLE UNIVERSITY

I am so tired of waiting.
Aren't you,
For the world to become good
And beautiful and kind?
Let us take a knife
And cut the world in two—
And see what worms are eating
At the rind.
—Langston Hughes, "Tired"

Let's cut the world in two,
And sift through its innards,
Find those who stuff
children down their maws,
Deploying secret islands, bombs,
Detention centers—yet, once
We find them will these villains
Be like hydra, always ready
To grow back the heads
We cut?

Forgive me—like many poets
I am full of allusions, ilusiones.
Perhaps this has conveyed
Something; perhaps I should
Try my hand at the quotidian,
Our daily bread and life.

So, let's consider a local playground
Filled with children yelling "mom!"
Consider how I turn around
& catch my son mid-run, breath
Visible against the cold,
Not having called for me,
& yet my heart belongs to him
& to all those kids who orbit
As if happiness were the locus—
How could my heart not answer
Each one of them?

Will you watch again,
As I have watched
while ICE grabs another child
In a rabbit hat, Spiderman backpack,
Will you not discern his father's face
as Ecuadorian and Indian,
Centuries worth of endangerment
In his mouth, nose, eyes.

Will you not face the history,
That ICE are not Gestapo
are homegrown slave catchers
Looking to grab those who cannot pass
As white=right=American,
That safe passage is now mine &
Provisional until I'm asked for proof,
Though the proof is also treated
As lies.

Aren't you tired, as I'm tired
Of being told that the sky
Is neon pink, that civilians
Shot by ICE were asking for it,
That "no" means "yes,"
And that this is all
We deserve from existence?

What I wish for us is to rise
And to rise, and to rise
As one giant wave, a tsunami
Of rage and hope.
Let's make the world beautiful,
Kind and good
As brother Langston hoped that we would.
Ay, ojalá! Ojalá.
Repeat with me: Ojalá, ojalá.

Connemara, Christophe Meneboeuf, 2007

BOG WOMAN

Anna Hickey-Moody
MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY

(i)

Eora Nation/New South Wales

The cool morning air is quiet. I inhale the still before the cicadas create their hot wall of hot noise. They begin as the sun comes up and increase in volume when the heat of the day builds. By 11am the occasional car or echo of traffic is lost under the orchestra of strange hums. It is 3pm and the air is thick, hot, and loud. My body is dripping with humidity. Eeep eep eeep eep eep eep. Can I write a cicada's sound? How to express layer upon layer of noise that comes from the sky, the ground, the overgrowth, the mountains? The air vibrates. I turn my noise cancelling headphones on and off and on again, exploring the possibilities of protecting my ears from the layers of 'eeeps' floating through the air.

*

Finally, I leave. Before he gets home from work. I cram what I need into a backpack and scribble a note. Approximately 1 in 6 women (17% or 1.7 million) aged 18 years and over have experienced violence by a cohabiting partner since the age of 15. Such escapes are happening all the time. Ten years later, I still want my cat back.

*

Low set in aqua blue, Curranulla comes in, heavy with school children and

swimmers. Mynahs and cockatoos light the airways. Warbles, craws, cries, carry on the eucalyptus air. Ceiling fans hum. Sand underfoot. The salt blue buoys my white blubber stomach. Quieting the noise. Insects and birds continue the debate.

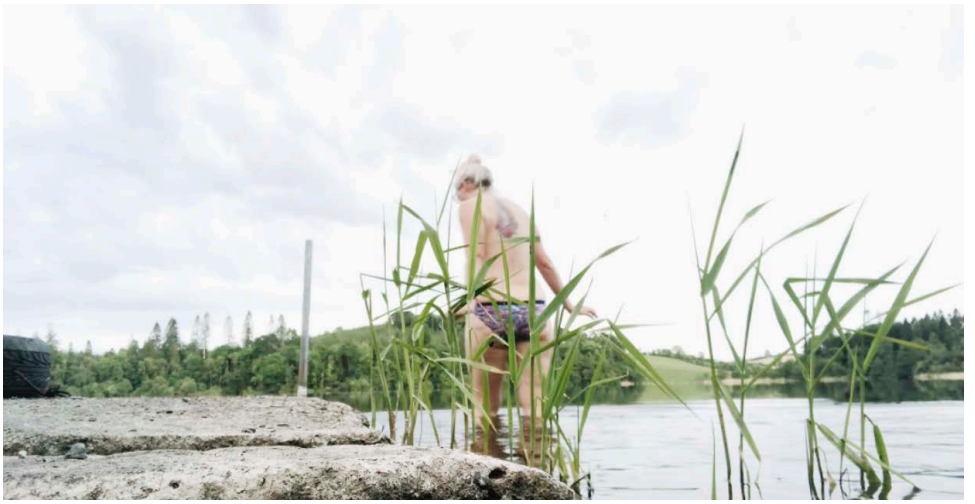

Photo: Anna Hickey-Moody

(ii)

Tarntanya/Adelaide

Christmas eve. A warm summer wind blows down Hindley Street, it's coming up off the sea. Soothingly, it brushes the soft skin of my face, my fine blonde hairs stand on end. Hello night. Brightly coloured neon globes welcome us in. Being poor presents barriers that come up in different ways, especially at Christmas. At the insistence of our exhausted mother, Dad has taken us to look at the rides at Downtown, our small city's answer to an amusement park. It is an indoor arcade—bumper cars, go karts, shooting ranges, ghost trains. Lights flash in multicolours, machine noises trill and bing. Kids with money roam around, laugh, and pose. The warm breeze, coloured lights and machine noises are cut through with screams of excitement, music and the 'chi-ching' of machines winning prizes for teenagers drinking sugar out of oversized paper cups. We can look, but not play. There is something inexpressibly sad about walking around the sideshow games with my father and brothers, watching other people having fun. *The spectacle of a happy life.* Free viewing for those with nothing better to do. There is something

inexpressibly sad about our life. Dad is so angry all the time. Mostly, his unfettered rage and violence chase me down the very back of the garden where I play with my imaginary friends.

While we are out, watching people with money have fun, Mum is at home, whipping up our Christmas presents in her carefully kept kitchen. The kitchen is her space, not solely because the "woman's work " of cooking is always delegated to her, but because my father won't eat with his children. We are too loud. He takes his meal into the lounge and enjoys it alone, in front of the television.

The early Kooka stove is a source of magic in Mum's kitchen. After school she stokes a wood fire under the hotplates and makes pikelets, on weekends she makes pancakes, and stews on the black rangehood. The oven, protected by the enamel image of the Kookaburra, produces her delicious soda breads, casseroles, and roast chicken for a treat.

One of my favorite things is Sunday night boiled puddings. Often there is not enough food to fill us up, so Mum makes a big boiled treacle or golden syrup pudding for dessert. While we eat our meat and vegetables, the lid of the saucepan holding the pud jiggles along, saying "not long now"… soft, sweet, hot, pudding is on the way. Fluffy warm clouds of wheat with runny golden syrup rivers. Steam and sugar rise up the nostrils and the kitchen windows, now covered with condensation. Sugar droplets run down the edges of my chin.

In between feeding and clothing three children and working part time, Mum sews us all special bed linen sets to match our rooms. The pillowcases Mum makes me have pink ribbon and white lace trimmings. The starched cotton is cool and soft on my skin, the lace trimmings tickle my nose, a smooth capital A in shiny, hot pink ribbon stands proudly in the right hand corner of the case.

*

My 16 year old skin pulls tight across my stomach as I lie flat on the bottom bunk, holding the slats of the bed above me to focus my thoughts. The seemingly giant 'piercing needle' is supposed to seamlessly pull the stainless steel jewellery through my soft skin, though as he pulls harder and harder to get the end of metal to come out to other side, it isn't working. It takes two attempts, and finally the fat round end of the large stud is attached to the bar stuck through the weeping wound of two experimental holes.

(iii)

Naarm / Melbourne

The air is thick with smoke all the time. As the fires to the north burn down the coast, grey smog and soot washes over our atmosphere as the horizon blurs into a misty haze. My lungs wheeze. We buy an air purifier and watch the red icons representing the blaze move along the digital maps that light up our phones. My mother spends five nights on the Bega oval, along with the members of her shire who hadn't, with their children and pets, managed to escape the region. Budgerigars, horses, dogs, cats, seas of people and smoke so thick that no one can see the sky. We come to hate the smell of smoke and the ever increasing kinds of loss it brings with it.

As a child, I loved the fact that my job was to light the fire. The sulfuric smell of the matches striking on the side of the box. Sharp and itchy in the nostril. The blue flames as the edge of the paper take off, the advertising pages going up in color before the feature articles burn orange and yellow. The smoky little twigs crackling under the briquettes, each different kind of flammable matter generating a new color in the flame: green-blue, light yellow, orange. Snap, crackle, smoke, the scene draws me in through smell, sound, color, and I blow under the little sparky flames with the biggest breaths I can hold in my lungs, blowing until I have run out of air, and watching the little flames grow, as if to say 'thank you' for giving them life.

No one ever found out how the Black Summer megablaze began. Between 2019–2020, the fires burned about 5.5 million hectares of land, destroyed 2,476 homes, and resulted in the loss of 26 lives. Over 800 million animals died, with some species pushed to the brink of extinction. The fires destroyed critical habitats, leading to long-term ecological consequences. These fires smell completely different from the loungeroom fires I was tasked to light as a child.

*

I can feel some movement in my stomach. I can't feel its shape as it grows, but the skin is pulled tight across my abdomen which is slightly popped out. My breasts are so sore I can't bear to touch them. That was how I realised I am pregnant. "I will kill myself if you have that baby." What a cruel thing for someone to say. I still wish I had been brave enough to test out his resolve. He paid for the abortion out of guilt. I adopted a kitten from the animal hospital.

*

The end of my cigarette crackles momentarily as the butane flame and white paper light a thin trail of smoke. My lungs choke, thick with the smoke sticking to the pink capillaries and turning them black with stinky tar. The white thread rising from the little cigarette connects me to my English grandmother who, before she became unwell, lived on a diet of Kent cigarettes and tea, cooking three course meals and preparing constant snacks for her husband and family, and watching us consume the food she worked so hard to bring into the world. It was only once Nan was really quite unwell, and clearly not going to recover, that she finally came to embody her appetite. Her little bird-like form loved desserts. At her last Christmas celebration she enjoyed trifle, pudding, and cake: why choose one when you can have all three? I wished my Nanna had eaten more fluffy sweet sugary things and lived less on grey Smokey tendrils and English tea.

*

I can hardly walk. I can't find a way to explain the pain that makes sense. It is in my lower right side, in my womb, but it is hard to press it and catch exactly the sore spot. It moves around. That sounds mad. How can pain move around your abdomen? The nurse at the hospital check in counter hands me two Panadol and a small cup of Gaviscon. "Try this" she says. I don't say "it's not indigestion." But I know it's not. (What if it is? What if I am actually hysterical?). The doctor at the hospital injects me with something that makes my body hot and tingly and they run me through a CT scan. I am in perfect health. There are no problems with my stomach. The pain isn't really in my stomach, I try to explain. It is in my womb. I google 'expert gynaecologists' in Melbourne and book in to see the man with the most stars in his reviews. In a disparaging tone, his secretary informs me he only sees private patients and I have to pay upfront. I don't care if they need me to pledge my organs, I just need help.

The expensive gynaecologist has his son's artwork framed on the walls and a view of the city that you can only afford if you are earning a six figure salary. I explain the pain in my right side. It's not my gallbladder, appendix, or kidney. It's down lower. Sometimes it moves around, and I can't seem to touch it. It gets so bad that I go grey, can't stand up. I lie in bed and cry. These are not feeling like very clear symptoms. It is extremely bad pain, I explain. He books me in for surgery.

The surgery is three and a half hours long. The expensive gynaecologist removes stage four endometriosis from my womb and my right ovary, which had been strangled to death by a 'chocolate cyst' which is the proper noun given to dark brown cysts that grow with endometriosis. The cyst was wrapped around the right ovary 'flapping back and forth', the doctor explains, which is why the pain became extreme with no apparent cause. The Flapping. The cyst was flapping, he says. It is not a word I use very often. There are answers. There are even photographs like science fiction landscapes that the gynaecologist has taken to prove his diagnosis. I don't want to see them. I am not supposed to be like that inside.

(iv)

Cill Dara/Kildare

Living amongst the bog that traps cars and invites all surfaces to be covered in protective concrete, *I am a bog woman*. Be careful, I might pull you down with me into the black sticky soil from which there is no escape. Bog bodies in Ireland are famous, preserved by the oxygen-poor conditions of peat.

Dating to the Iron Age (500 BCE to 500 CE), bog bodies keep skin, hair, and clothing intact for thousands of years. Some show evidence of violent deaths. Broken bones, stab wounds, signs of strangulation suggest these bodies have been deliberately placed in bogs as offerings to gods, as a part of societal rituals, or as a way of hiding a terrible wrongdoing.

The Ballynahatty Woman is the name given to the famous archaeological find of a bog woman, a prehistoric female whose remains were discovered in 1855. She is estimated to have lived 5,200 years ago. Geneticists from Trinity and archaeol-

ogists from Queen's sequenced her genome, marking the first time ancient Irish human DNA had been analyzed. This revealed that the famous bog woman had black hair and brown eyes, traits typical of southern European populations. Her genetic makeup indicated ancestry originating from the Middle East. Like her, I am of here, but I am read as not belonging here. I bring this fact up repeatedly in public when faced with arguments about immigration in Ireland and even more consistently in my own mind, when a particular strain of self-righteous Irish woman implicitly questions my right to exist on the island. If I sounded Irish would they be different? I wonder. They are all 'weapons'. I tell myself. I make lists of safe people to talk to. I am up to 10.

The fog that rises off the canal is thick, like bushfire smoke. Inside the grey white cloud I can't see what's in front of me, bodies appear and fall behind me like ghosts. Unlike the fires, the fog brings no smell. It is just as thick and disorientating, but no odor. It sticks to the body and my glasses in a wet film. Like the smoke, this grey white mist chokes me. I can't breathe in and out. My lungs are not working. I am trapped.

Alone in the mists that cover the bog, I am relatively safe from the women who are like weapons. Not entirely, but fairly removed. *Barren woman in mist.* Is this it? My hip hurts as I cycle through the grey cloud. I ache to be in the ground, but also to be lifted out of this life, into the worlds I make with words—like the worlds I made at the bottom of the garden. My barren belly presses against the clasp of suit pants, without pain inside it, or reason to fear it, other than its gentle expansion. I ride on, through the mist.

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COVER IMAGE

Front: *Table with Ornamental Objects* (detail), Anonymous, 19th century

Front: *Low Table with Vases* (detail), Anonymous, 19th century

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