



2022 | VOL. 2, Nº. 4

# ***CAPACIOUS***

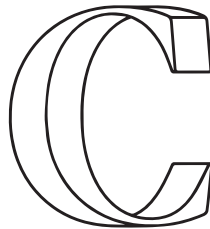
JOURNAL FOR EMERGING AFFECT INQUIRY

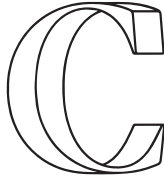


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JOURNAL FOR EMERGING AFFECT INQUIRY





*Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* Vol. 2 No. 4

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# ca·pa·cious

kə'pāSHəs/ 

*adjective*

having a lot of space inside; roomy.

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

This journal will champion work that resists:

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

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

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

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

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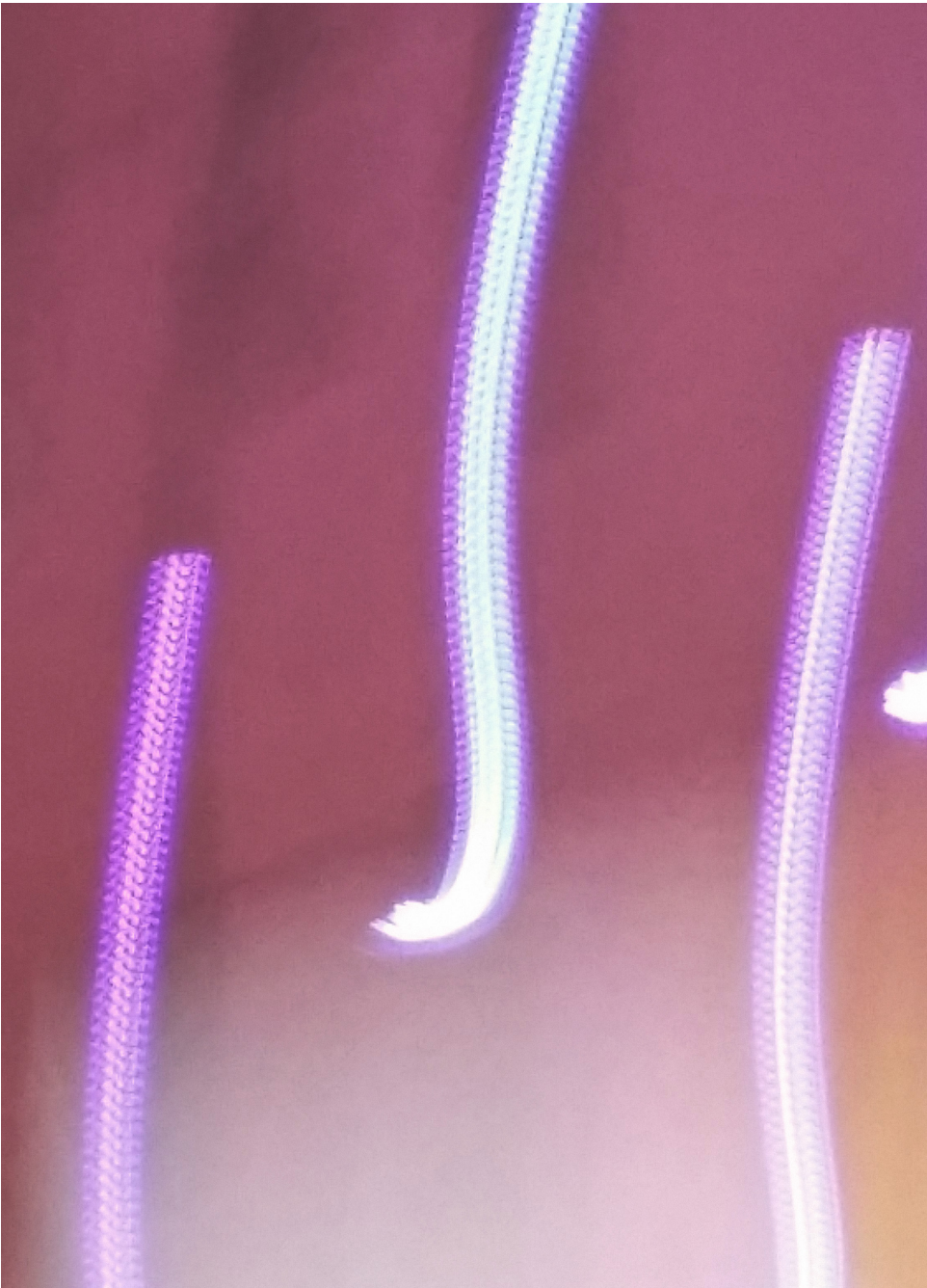
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*Making Space*, Wendy Truran, 2018  
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# AFFECT AND/AS PEDAGOGY: A 101 CONVERSATION



Jennifer Duggan

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Libe García Zarranz

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In March 2022, Greg Seigworth visited the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway. Collaborating with colleagues from Philosophy, English, and Education, Greg led a workshop on *Affect and/as Pedagogy*, engaging with a capacious range of transdisciplinary affect scholars and readings. In the following piece, written as a conversation, we reflect on some desires and tensions that emerged out of the workshop. Inspired by Lauren Berlant's and Kathleen Stewart's experimental work in *The Hundreds* (2019), we have written the piece in 101-word paragraphs without signaling who is writing to enact the exposure and discomfort discussed as joyful ethico-affective pedagogical practices.

Originally from Spain, Libe teaches and researches in Trondheim where she continues to obsess about the paradoxical world of affect while learning with the capaciousness of affect studies. This passion, which started in 2011, has turned into a sticky pedagogy, shaping her teaching practices in Canada, the UK, and Nor-

way. Jenny grew up in Canada and has lived and studied in multiple countries, including Norway. Her interests have long included difference and the unruliness of affects. She became interested in the pedagogies and ethics of discomfort when considering how Indigeneity is mis/represented and erased in Norwegian classrooms with colleague Amanda Fayant.

Writing within the textures of US classrooms, Bessie P. Dernikos (2018) advocates for a pedagogy of exposure that “seeks to not only *expose* but also *recover* traumatic wounds by reimagining an affective, albeit risky, relationship to past and present histories of violence” (3, emphasis in original). Dernikos’s notion offered us a navigational tool with which to examine pedagogy’s ethico-affective dimensions. Simultaneously, while reflecting on what a pedagogy of exposure could afford us as educators in Norway, Dernikos’s formulation led us to consider entangled concepts and practices, including pedagogies and ethics of discomfort, and the complex affects they expose us to.

What is affect to you? Or what does affect do, in your view?

Affect is a feeling, an upwelling, contextual and embodied. It is bodily, but it can hide. It is a reverberation, a resonance, a wavering voice, a posture, a gesture, a cramping of the gut, a lifting of hairs on an arm expressing values, ethics, unconscious biases. It is the way events and others can speak *through* us. It is therapeutic. It is exposing. It is un/comfortable. It makes us aware of the unruliness of our bodies and feelings, our liveliness, our imagined ‘selves’ as inextricably interwoven with others (human and nonhuman). It is easily moved, shifted, shaken. It is often involuntary.

The word affect takes me back in time. It sits in the past. I once wrote about affect being everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, of affect being unruly and disobedient, not unlike Kathryn B. Stockton’s sideways children. It is affect’s playful paradoxes that continue to fascinate me, moving me into the present. How can affect mobilize ethics and pedagogies? I think with Spinoza’s joy as a vehicle for action and with Kai Cheng Thom’s question in *I Hope We Choose Love*: “is there such a thing as a pedagogy of the joyous, and if so, where do i find it?” (2019, 19).

You mention unruliness, disobedience, and playful paradoxes, here. Could you expand a little on what you mean?

Sara Ahmed teaches us how affects like shame circulate within and across spaces, objects, and bodies; in my view, this signals affect's multidirectionality and perhaps its ungovernability. Affects are unruly in this sense. It is also a question about temporality; I am fascinated by how affects are transtemporal in that they can connect or disconnect past, present, and future frameworks. This porosity, malleability, and cross-border impetus of the affective realm can transform but can also kill us, as Teresa Brennan (2014) reminds us. This is one of affect's many paradoxes. I wonder if this resonates with your view on unruly affects?

Yes, it does. I also think of how much affects can surprise us; we can feel them suddenly, without warning, and without any expectation that we might experience such a response. Alternatively, unexpected affects can bubble up in response to events or meetings with others (human or more). For me, affects' ability to surprise is central to their unruliness. Affects highlight our vulnerability; as the inimitable Lauren Berlant puts it in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), affects are forces that move us out of ourselves "in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene" (1–2).

These reflections on the paradoxes of affect speak to the question of exposure, particularly the reference to Brennan, and in relation to the work of affect theorists such as Agnieszka Anna Wołodźko (2019–20). In her 2019–20 piece for *Capacious*, Wołodźko contends that "what we need now is to practice life not *against* but *with* contamination" (221, emphasis in original). We can expand this framework and take it into educational contexts, such as the classroom. Dernikos's work is particularly illuminating in helping us situate our teaching practices in relation to how a pedagogy of exposure can activate an ethic of care.

What do you feel are the main affordances of Dernikos's *pedagogies of exposure*?

Exposure requires us to make our wounds visible to those whom we know may not understand their origins or may call us weak for having been wounded in worlds not designed for beings like us. Exposure can be exhausting and diminishing. But it can also be a relief—getting it all out in the open. Certainly, from the queer/trans perspective from which I tend to think, exposure is concomitantly vulnerability and a reprieve from trying to *pass* as something or someone one isn't. It is an escape from one kind of discomfort (passing) into the embrace of a different discomfort (vulnerability).

When thinking about exposure, I am transported back to Edmonton's 2008 queer arts and cultures festival. I am a first-year PhD student, excited to enter the space. The fabulous Lucas Crawford, trans affect theorist, is there as well. I still feel the atmosphere and a world of possibility unfolding. Fast forward 14 years; these embodied memories are still with me as I encounter Dernikos's 2018 work on pedagogies of exposure for the first time. Reading her article in advance of Greg's workshop made me realize how many of my classroom practices revolve around exposing ourselves to current worlds and futures otherwise.

You mention *imagining our futures otherwise*. What do you feel this has to do with choosing love, or using joy as a vehicle for action?

In an almost perverse way, these are excellent times for affect studies. The COVID-19 global pandemic has only accelerated and hypervisibilized many pre-existing inequities, affecting minoritized populations the most. Anxiety, depression, and many of Sianne Ngai's other ugly feelings saturate social media worlds while stifling polarization reigns in public discourse. These are troubled times, but as Indigiqueer writer and scholar Joshua Whitehead insists, there is love after the end. Colonialism, white supremacy, misogyny, and anti-transness are ordinary atmospheres for many communities, which makes speculation and mobilization imperative to keep imagining Black futures, Indigenous futures, trans futures, queer futures, feminist futures otherwise.

Yes, I agree! I think that movements and resistances during the past two to three years have really brought home for me just how much depends on an ethic of solidarity, of standing together across difference, as bell hooks urged us to do, as well as the affects that well up when we (fail to) do so. I think here of the reemergence of #BlackLivesMatter, for example, as well as ongoing and vocal resistance to trans-exclusionary feminism. For me, much of the draw of such movements and resistances is their reliance on *love*: self-love and love of others across our differences.

Do you think such a view could lead to a flattening of differences or ignoring of oppressions and structural inequalities?

Yes, I think it could, and that is why it is vital to keep theorizing love as an ethic and a practice, detaching it from sentimentalism and reattaching it to a more capacious form of kinship and aliveness, to think with Kevin Quashie's scholarship. In this

process, ethical love can feel messy and uncomfortable, especially when it urges us to act in accountable ways towards others, including those who think or feel differently from us. For instance, radical love, as enacted in Syrus Marcus Ware's multimedia installation (2020), is deeply grounded on difference, while seeking to counter systemic oppression and discrimination.

No, I do not. Love does not mean that we ignore differences, frictions, and discomforts. As Alain Badiou (2009) has written, we love *in spite of and across* those things that discomfort us. Love is, according to Badiou, one of the most deeply transformative powers that exists. It forces us to consider the Other's perspective and change—hopefully for the better—in order to maintain mutual love and respect. Love motivates us to be better. Love is based on the past, lives in the present, and looks to the future. Love is about our mutual comfort (or, at least, minimizing *discomfort*).

You refer to *discomfort* here, which makes me think about pedagogical work you have done around the notion of a *pedagogy of discomfort*, following Megan Boler, Michalinos Zembylas, and others (Boler, 1999; Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2010; Zembylas 2015). Tell us a bit more about this line of inquiry.

Discomfort makes us aware when we don't fit in a given context. Discomfort encourages us to think outside/alongside ourselves, imagine otherwise, project ourselves outside of ourselves. Our skin doesn't quite fit, or perhaps the niche in which we sit in the world is suddenly lumpy and refuses contentment. Discomfort makes us rethink our position(s). It makes us aware of things we don't want to acknowledge, such as how our comfort depends on others' *discomforts* (Ahmed 2006), or that our wellbeing is dependent on others' lack of well-being. Discomfort is the sudden, shocking realization of our own and others' positionalities and biases.

And what are the limits and possibilities of implementing pedagogies of discomfort in the classroom?

In the classroom, discomfort is confronting. Some are confronted constantly, and others almost never. Educators have an ethical duty to ensure that (dis)comfort is shared, that everyone is confronted with their own and others' strengths, vulnerabilities, blind spots, and biases regularly in order to encourage critical reflection and empathy. How else can we grow? If we are never expected to do anything that makes us uncomfortable, are never asked to confront our perspectives, to consider how they formed, to wonder who is (dis)advantaged by the systems from which we may benefit, then how can we make the world a better place?

I agree with your remarks, particularly regarding the ethics of redistributing comfort and discomfort in the classroom in just ways. However, I wonder about granting too much authority to the teachers in this context and thus ending up reproducing uneven power relations. The reaction of a student being required to feel discomforted can result in a strong affective implosion of fear, sorrow, or even repulsion for the idea being discussed. In Spinozian fashion, these affects may lead to a refusal to act in ethical terms. I am thus cautious of embracing discomfort's full capacity as a pedagogical tool for social justice.

What might this mean in practice?

For me, this might mean something like what we have conceptualized in our conversations with Amanda Fayant—exposing painful histories, such as the treatment of Indigenous peoples around the world, and accepting the discomforts of delving into these histories and acknowledging complicity. This also means acknowledging and working with each other across differences, including inviting Indigenous thinkers, educators, artists, and activists into our classrooms if we are not ourselves Indigenous; dismissing textbooks and other materials that (often stereotypically) speak *about* rather than *with* Indigenous peoples; refusing to accept the ethical failure of privileging colonizers' comfort over truth, reconciliation, and Indigenous perspectives.

In *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), Ann Cvetkovich writes that we should not “assume that good politics can only emerge from good feelings; feeling bad might, in fact, be the ground for transformation” and argues that we might be able “to live a better life by embracing rather than glossing over bad feelings” (3). You and I have already mentioned transformation. Do you feel that transformation is central to the project of pedagogies of exposure and discomfort? If so, how?

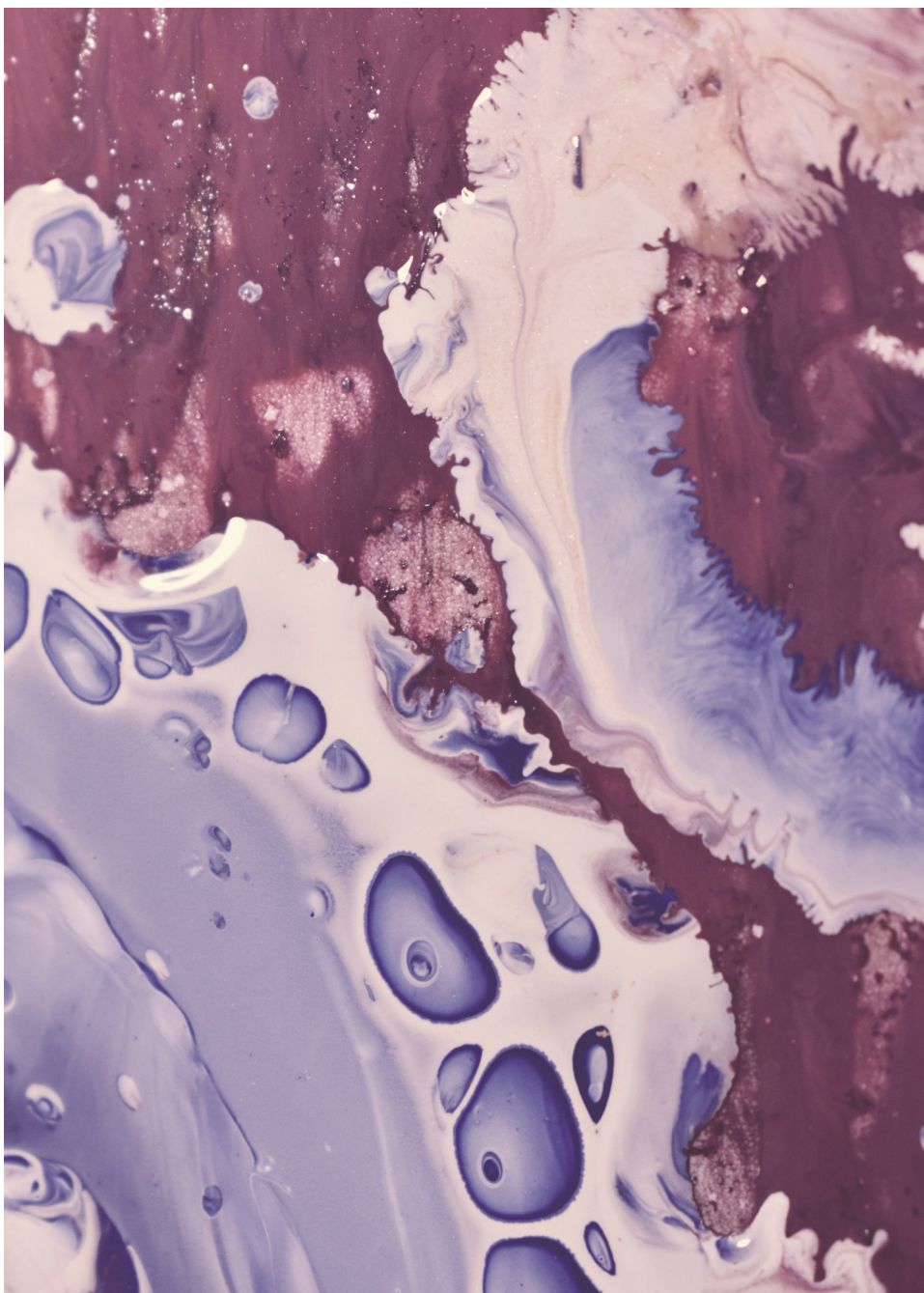
Discomfort spurs us to transform either ourselves or our contexts. Isn't transformative action what trans, queer, and other critical theoretical frameworks are all about, in the end, not sitting back and theorizing for theories' sake but thinking in ways that urge us to use discomfort as a springboard for social justice? Inevitably, my mind is also drawn to fandom studies here too, which posits that fans' desire to create transformative works is based on dis-ease with the works we love as they originally are (Walls-Thuma 2020). This is why transformative works, such as fan fiction, are so often radical or subversive.

Yes, absolutely, but there may be another side to bad feelings. Feminist, queer, and trans methodologies continue to expand the contours of exposure and discomfort in ways that invite the reconceptualization of these concepts as potentially joyous. In other words, and in closing, let us feel and imagine the potential pleasures of exposing oneself to something unknown, of discomforting oneself by acting in an unexpected way. As educators and affect lovers, let us resist the violence of the passive voice, of being exposed or being discomforted, and turn instead to active modes of joyous dissent and insurrection as vehicles for transformation.

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*Wilted Flowers*, Unknown, 2017  
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# LOVE, OR SOMETHING



Dana Luciano

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

One of the difficult parts of writing these pages was finding the right tone, understanding the relations I was trying to establish between myself and the work, and between that assemblage and you, the audience I can't see, whose motives and desires I don't yet know. To paraphrase a thing Lauren wrote in a memorial essay for a friend: "I am not ready to talk about Lauren yet—and I am not talking about them, but about some things she said that I learned. (Berlant 2014b 35). For that reason, I intended a kind of impersonality, though as it turned out, I cannot *not* be personal in this relation, in this context, at this time. It strikes me that I should have used their surname, Berlant, to discuss their writing and thinking, as per formal academic convention. But that felt false, so I stayed with their given name. I have used both the pronouns by which I knew her, she/her, and those they used professionally for the last few years, they/them.

1. In an earlier, flailing attempt to think about Lauren written in the days after her death,<sup>1</sup> I posed a question—"How do you mourn someone like Lauren?"—that I didn't come close to beginning to answer. That left me feeling kind of stupid since I once wrote a book about grief (a book Lauren was generous enough to blurb) which taught me nothing about how to cope with a loss like this. There was no reason it should have, of course—the book wasn't meant as a how-to manual. But since grief wants something to do, I let it pull me back toward some of the things I'd learned from Lauren while doing this work.

Lauren wrote beautifully, though not always explicitly, about aspects of grief and mourning. Both *Cruel Optimism* (2011b) and *The Female Complaint* (2008) are, in effect, studies of deferred mourning: refusals to lose, to detach from objects and fantasies that fail to sustain one, that actually do damage. The two books framed these refusals differently: *Cruel Optimism*, in a sense, was a book about denial—the “terror of detaching” (Berlant 2008, 31)—whereas *The Female Complaint* was about bargaining, negotiated attempts to maintain one’s optimism, one’s faith in the object. In this sense, the book generally engages grief in the scaled-down (Lauren would say dedramatized) and more iterable register of disappointment. Some of these attempts do take place in the guise of mourning, like the mass displays of mournfulness in response to the deaths of what they term “juxtapolitical” celebrities, intimate publics that enabled strangers to speak tenderly to one another about losses that stood in for the remnants of political optimism.

But they wouldn’t have called themselves a theorist of grief. She did, however, identify herself as a love theorist, at least for a time. And in this guise she illuminated for me the pairing of grief and love at the heart of liberal/sentimental culture – an entwinement that takes the form perversely both of the romantic couple, completing one another, and the mother/child dyad, one birthing and nourishing the other. There’s nothing exclusive or inevitable about this pairing: grief can arise from the shifting or sundering of many kinds of object relation, not just those we call by love’s name. Nevertheless, we maintain that the two are made for one another – that loss is the measure of love, grief the index of true and faithful feeling.

The entwinement of grief and love is the public face of a private relation said to found the liberal subject; the participation in loving community—a family, a marriage—that establishes one as the subject of feeling first and foremost. While the capacity to love is said to distinguish the feeling subject, the capacity to grieve lights up the clarity of love, making possible the sympathy that establishes the social bond and sustains life amidst loss.<sup>2</sup>

The desire for love’s clarity, though, is also the source of the damage it can do. Love, in *The Female Complaint* (2008), is “the gift that keeps on taking” (It’s the originary form of cruel optimism, 1) It threatens to be so in theory as well. Love, Lauren wrote, unsettles our lives: it is one of the only occasions when one consents to change: “one of the few places where people actually admit they want

to become different” (Davis & Page 2008, n.p.). In this sense, love can open the possibility of worlds not yet known, ones that we hope will better sustain us. But when critics try to mobilize love toward revolution, they minimize its messiness; they try to sort out good and bad love, or otherwise neglect its ambivalence and aggression (which likewise attach to the grief it can inspire). Love, Lauren reminded us, “is not entirely ethical”: it can be greedy and chaotic. Yet we misrecognize its genres as sentimental or pastoral (Berlant 2011a, 684).

When asked about love in interviews—interviewers did love to ask her about it—Lauren tended to complicate or step to one side of the term. The self-definition I spoke of above ended in bemusement: “I am a love theorist,” she observed, “how did that happen?” (Berlant 2012, n.p.). This wasn’t disavowal, but a deflection toward the necessary complexities of attachment, the affective muddle that surrounds our attempts to sustain ourselves in our objects. When critics spoke of love alone—as she noted of Derrida—they often tried to make themselves loveable. But cheery amenability to affirmative misrecognition was hardly what Lauren was about.

Lauren identified love, unsentimentally and accurately, as a willingness to bear the inconvenience of the other. This recalls us to the way love couples with grief—for what could be more painfully inconvenient than the fact of their being there no longer.

**2.** We keep wanting grief to work for us, to make it productive, redeeming its pain. In queer theory, loss often has this proclivity. Queer thinking about loss originated in external and unchosen circumstances; the AIDS crisis, as it focalized and proliferated differently, distributed histories of violence against sexual and gendered dissidents. The commonality of loss in queer communities amplifies the desire to work with grief’s unworking—to tarry with it, in Judith Butler’s phrase, and to enliven it toward other possibilities. In “Untitled, Untilted”<sup>3</sup> (2019), an essay on the work of José Muñoz, Lauren takes up his description of a scene of lively mourning, an event intended as a vigil for Matthew Shepard, a white gay man murdered by homophobes, which swelled with the weight of so many other queer losses that it spilled out into the streets, moving urgently and defiantly, if undirected, against all forms of homophobic violence even as it encountered more of it, in the form of a brutal police assault that sent several marchers to the hospital and many more to jail. The term Lauren uses to describe the way the march gathered momentum as it proliferated meaning is *with-nessing*, which they gloss as “staying alive in sync with a situation of loss.” The term is adapted from Bracha Ettinger, but Lauren is very much visible in the adaptation. A *situation*, as

they explain in *Cruel Optimism* (2011b), is a “state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life” (5). A situation of *loss*, in this sense, aligns the speculative future anteriority of its something with a something that *has* mattered, that continues mattering, an object that has been lost and found otherwise in an intensification of the present.

Situations like the impromptu march emerge as collective speculations, in which people think and move with and alongside one another in unscripted collaborations, movements where the absence of advance planning and an unclear destination result in the looseness that enables syncing-up to the situation’s vicissitudes. Recollecting the aftermath of Muñoz’s own death, Joshua Chambers-Letson (2018) describes the emergence of an ongoing gathering, a “new communist party” (small c p) that he assesses, with Fred Moten, as “an organic entity, a living, breathing being, a gathering together of the multiple in the one” (xi). Lauren might have called it “socially necessary proximity” (Berlant 2016, 412).

Like Muñoz, his friend and teacher, Chambers-Letson underscores the particular necessity of such gathering in minoritarian contexts, as a mode of resistance to the forms of violent attrition that people of color, especially queer and trans, are routinely subjected to. Loneliness, as he observes, is a common consequence of this attrition, to be addressed, though not denied, by gathering. These moments of coming-together forge other genres of relation from the unsovereign condition of loss.<sup>4</sup> They ferret out something worth connecting to in the action of staying afloat.

But there are also times, Lauren notes, when the *something* that might unfold from the situation does not. In a conversation with Lee Edelman about Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren (2013) turns first to moments in which mourners continue to be lonely, where love continues to be inaccessible—an archive gathered from texts like Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) and Tom Dumm’s *Loneliness as a Way of Life* (2008). These, Lauren writes, are not stories of success or collective struggle so much as meditations on what remains when nothing does. “Nothing” comes, via Dumm, drawing from Emerson’s well-known lament: “I grieve that grief can teach me nothing” (Emerson 1983, 29). As Lauren perceives, though, nothing is something other than an absence: it is a state of withdrawn-ness, where grief’s detachment from the world becomes a condition that allows one to contemplate whether return is actually worth it.

These writers are not looking for a way back into life, a “substitute anchor” or “transformative...event” (Berlant & Edelman, 38). Rather, they recognize that “doubts about nextness will persist...as life goes on” (Berlant & Edelman, 38).

The persistence of these doubts, of grief’s detachment, is not melancholic, at least not in the Freudian sense. Melancholia ensues, for Freud, when an unbearable ambivalence about the lost object divides the subject. In these cases, though, the ambivalence is about the world: “to what life, after all, is one recommitting, when the thing that stood in for a life worth attaching to no longer obtains?” (Berlant & Edelman, 38). Such ambivalence, Freud (1918) acknowledges, is part of normal mourning—“in mourning...the world...has become poor and empty”—but that is a temporary state: eventually, the mourner turns back to the world, her ego “free and uninhibited again,” ready to reattach (1945, 246, 245). This account of mourning is optimistic about the psyche’s ability to care for itself, to repair its wounds and get back to ordinary living. But what if the care of the self entails a refusal of the ordinary? In some situations of loss, what Freud sees as the world’s seeming impoverishment is sensed as the actual state of things, and the work of grief is to induce a desire not to work at reattaching. “*Why bother*,” Lauren notes, “is one phrase that marks a great loss” (Berlant & Edelman, 38). It takes a lot of work, as they’ve often reminded us, to continue showing up for a noisy, bothersome world that may or may not—that usually doesn’t—show up for us. Staying with the possibility of not doing so can be something other than capitulation or surrender, a flaw in the mourning subject, or the internalization of the world’s oblitative drive; it may trace a demand for “the prospect of a world worth attaching to that’s something other than an old hope’s bitter echo” (Berlant 2016, 414).

It was Lauren’s gift to walk up to such states and explore them, patiently, to track the significance of ordinary floundering, revealing its ability to pose questions worth pursuing. The loneliness that lives on, that persists past mourning’s optimism, is not subjected to a decision-making process, made to reveal either the naïve redemptiveness of *with-ness* or gathering, or the privileged nihilism driving the desire to enact such critiques. Following its movements meant surrendering the assurance of the roadmap, knowing, as she knew, that there is always more to know.

**3.** In the piece I wrote last summer, I pointed to a method that Lauren identified as theirs, one she described as reading-with. Reading-with, she explains, is a way of thinking from two positions at once: “see[ing] with the perspective of an object, while also moving through the world in your difference from it” (Berlant 2018, 161). She claims to have learned this method from Sedgwick’s “White Glasses” (1992) an essay written as a work of anticipatory mourning for her friend Michael Lynch, although as it turned out, he remained alive long enough to hear

her present it. Lauren first described reading-with at the end of the book they co-wrote with Edelman, which includes the conversation the two held in the wake of Sedgwick's own passing. It is practiced in the essay I referenced above, which they wrote six years after Muñoz's death. Reading-with would seem, then, to be particularly attractive as a mode of mourning, a way of bearing the shift in the object, manifesting the presence of the other alongside oneself. It induces, like grief and like love, an "experience of nonsovereignty," a form of collaboration without a predetermined destination (Berlant & Edelman 2013, 125).

That's a story about reading-with when it works. It doesn't always. Lauren wrote about their first attempt to read with William Pope L's *Forselen*, a work whose very title, they note, sounds like an inducement to read (Berlant 2014a). Instead, she found herself getting defensive and grumpy. The encounter provoked a reflection on method's idealism:

The wish, of course, is that reading with, like being with, is a natural process that unfolds. Over time, the bad defenses will peel away. Over time, you will lose your terrible attachments to likeness and alterity. Over time, the right things will end up on the floor while the rest is taken in. There is a reason we call that wish *fantasy* (Berlant 2014a, n.p.).

A few months after she died, I took part in a panel discussion of Lauren's pedagogy. Silence fell at the end of the presentations, a silence that refused to break. I'm certain this wasn't the fault of the panel convener, who crafted a beautiful event, or the panelists, who rose to the occasion. One audience member gamely tried to dispel it by sharing a story about Lauren, but it didn't take, and the silence sat there. There's a memorial convention, the moment of silence, a dignified pause formally marking the absence of a respected or beloved someone. This wasn't that kind of silence. It was awkward, an awkwardness multiplied by the distinctive texture of silence on Zoom, the weird absence of ambient noise, the deadening effect of dozens of mute buttons.

Lauren wrote of awkwardness as the graceless intervals in the movement from detachment to worldbuilding: the clumsy and painful work of retraining the viscera, developing a new sensorium for life lived otherwise. "There can be no change in life," She wrote, "without revisceralization. This involves all sorts of loss and transitional suspension" (Berlant 2016, 411). She takes up the awkwardness of transition as an opening to a kind of optimism, however hesitant and qualified, that unlearned defenses might gesture toward other modes of connection, other possibilities to connect to. Not always, but maybe.

We ceremonialize grief, I think, not to purge it of its pain but to paper over its awkwardness. We ritualize silence to mark the insufficiency of language, but we can't get past how badly we want it to work anyway, how desperately we lurch about, trying to regain balance, seeking in words or symbolic gesture a relief we feel horrible about wanting. The clumsy noise of absent speech, in a space meant for discussion, reflects our pained inability to find the right relation to the liveness of Lauren's thought when the conversation is tethered to the undesired necessity of commemoration. It's a kind of genre flail, another of Lauren's concepts that magnetizes optimism by locating meaning in moments in which we mostly feel stupid. But there's nothing inherently hopeful about it, beyond the gorgeous generosity of seeing the pained and stumbling ordinariness of the way we live most of the time.

Lauren would make a joke right now, I think. I haven't got one: just an idea, a feeling really, that the *nothing* that grief teaches and the *something* that we need but can't yet name, hover together in a suspension whose outcome, yet uncertain, is what we have to go on with.

## Endnotes

1. <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2021/07/21/untitled-for-lauren>

2. Or this, at least, is how the fantasy has long gone; these days, Lauren points out, this subject clashes with the security subject, for whom feeling is a liability, to be shunned or mocked, leading to a profound desire for the return of an ethics of feeling, illuminated, once again, by the clarity of love.

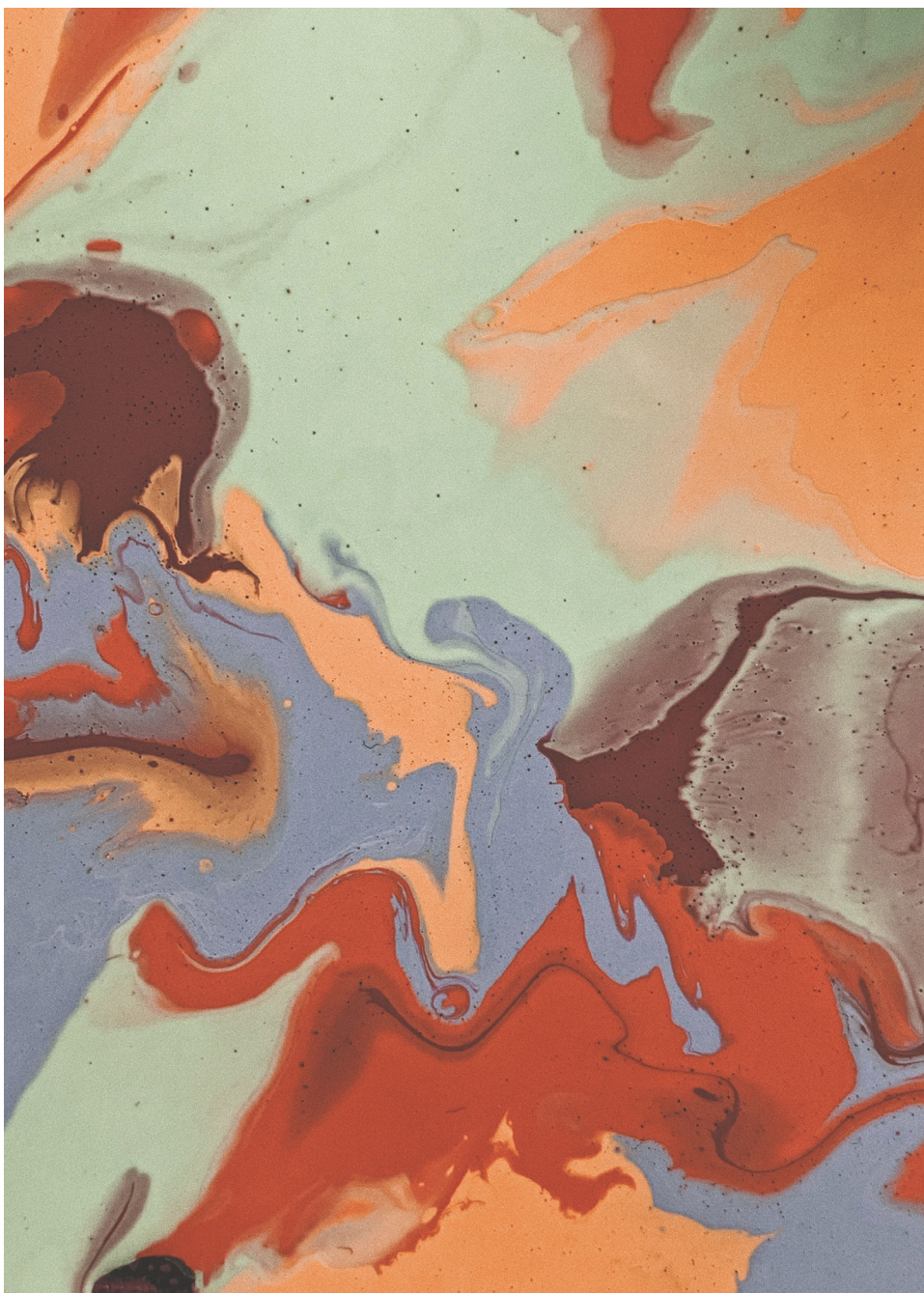
3. <https://supervalentthought.com/untitled-untitled>

4. This impulse guides Muñoz's earlier theorization of queer melancholia, a genre quite different from the unchosen and painful condition Freud describes. Queer melancholia names a deliberate refusal to lose, a "mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names." (Muñoz 1997, 74)

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*Untitled*, Dids, 2020  
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*Grab von Johann Strauss auf dem Zentralfriedhof in Wien (detail), Z. Thomas, 2020  
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# MUSICHOLIA, OR, VARIATIONS ON A MELANCHOLIC SUBJECT



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## ABSTRACT

This essay undertakes an auto-theoretical inquiry into some dimensions of a formative childhood experience and its enduring influence on the author's life over six decades. At the core of the experience is the temporal proximity of the author's birth to the unexpected death of his maternal uncle, a man who had returned to post-Holocaust Vienna to pursue his dreams as a musician/conductor. The essay draws heavily on Freud's classic "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), and some subsequent readings of that essay, to frame and inform the discussion. It then teases out the relationship between melancholia and music (Steinberg 2014) to illuminate some of the ways they have been entangled with the author's capacities for self-formation, becoming, and creative expression.

## KEYWORDS

music, melancholia, psychoanalysis, temporality, auto-theory

## Musical prelude

Opening *Sonatina* of Bach's *Cantata BWV106* [first 2:40].<sup>1</sup>

...is it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence?... I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start. (Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 67)

Melancholia, whose definition fluctuates in descriptive psychiatry, takes on various clinical forms the grouping together of which into a single unity does not seem to be established with certainty; and some of these forms suggest somatic rather than psychogenic affections...We shall, therefore, from the outset drop all claim to general validity for our conclusions. (Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 243)

## Distant and damp

This essay begins in Vienna, where I visited for the first time in 2017 to present a (different) paper at a conference on 'Music and Death'.<sup>2</sup> I spent 10 days prior to the conference seeking traces, or "invisible presences" (Woolf 1985, 80) of an uncle, my mother's brother, who studied and worked as a musician/conductor in Vienna between 1955 and 1960. The most salient features of the story relate to my uncle, a child refugee/survivor from Nazi Germany who returned to Europe (from Australia) to pursue his ambitions and career as a musician in Vienna (the city of music); that he died there suddenly, in early 1960, just 6 weeks after I was born; that his sister (my mother) experienced shattering grief around her brother's sudden death, an event that informed and infused the milieu in which I was nurtured as an infant; that the conjunction of music, death, and Vienna constituted, by virtue of these circumstances, some fundamental ground of my being; that, although we never met directly, the stories and mythology surrounding my uncle's life haunted me from a very early age; and that, working through these archives materially, psycho-emotionally, intellectually, and creatively, has been a much-needed lubricant for a sedimented loss that built up over many years. In combination, these

various features, threads, excursions, and musings comprise a form of auto-theory, an attempt to “connect affect to everyday life or to attend to the resonant landscape between the personal and the historical” (Wiegman 2020, 7).

The research I undertook in preparation for attending the ‘Music and Death’ conference in Vienna allowed me (albeit tentatively and tenuously), to align some of my movements and activities with those I imagined my uncle to have undertaken, as a musician in Vienna, in the second half of the 1950s. These movements and activities included a visit to the music academy where he studied; attending concerts in venues which he would also have frequented and performed in; meeting a few of the aging musicians with whom he played; and locating the addresses of apartments where he had resided.

Tracing the last years of my uncle’s life in Vienna also generated some very potent moments which included: unexpectedly encountering his lingering spirit in the hospital where he died; listening to a recording of him playing the French horn, while standing alongside his original place of burial; singing out the notes, and shaping the musical phrases as he produced them; phrasing the melodic line with him and thereby sharing the very breath (co-inspiring) that had once kept him alive; realizing that I could continue to breathe with him through that recording of his horn-playing, as the music was being produced by his (living) breath; registering the paradox of him being simultaneously alive (in his playing) yet otherwise dead (in his own reality); offering, in song and chant, belated and consoling prayers on behalf of his parents, his sister, his lover—none of whom were able to attend his actual funeral in the *Zentralfriedhof*, Vienna; experiencing some of my own delayed grief and belated mourning for the uncle I never knew, who died so suddenly, many years ago, just prior to his thirtieth birthday (Levy 2020).

## Mourning and melancholia

Arguably the most significant aspect of Freud’s essay on “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917/1955) is the way he couples mourning and melancholia, both rooted in either actual and/or affective experiences of loss. For Freud, pathological melancholia is characterized by “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings” (244). Freud suggests that “the same painful frame of mind” characterizes mourning, with the “absence of self-regard” being the “one exception” (244). The other key point of distinction for Freud is that

the melancholic person may know “*whom* he [sic] has lost but not *what* he has lost in him [sic]” (emphasis original, 245). This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss that is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning.

Within this schema, qualities of the lost object remain unknown to the melancholic, and the content or details pertaining to this lost object remain (in the) unconscious. Freud suggests that the ongoing unknownness (and perhaps unknowability) of certain qualities belonging to the lost object inhibits the melancholic’s capacity for knowing and/or becoming themselves (through building a strong and healthy ego). The melancholic remains predisposed to “an extraordinary diminution in self-regard,” and an “impoverishment of ...ego on a grand scale” (245–6). For Freud, the whole “complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound” (253).

Again, for Freud (1917/1955), “mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead” (257). Melancholia, however, in Butler’s reading, “refuses to make any such declaration, [and thus] denies speech” (Butler 1997, 185), perhaps thereby also throwing into doubt the truth/actuality of the object’s loss. Butler outlines the spatializing effects of Freud’s conceptualization of melancholy. She reads his conception of melancholy as “precisely what interiorizes the psyche” (170), understood through the way melancholia “initiates a variable boundary between the psychic and the social, a boundary...that distributes and regulates the psychic sphere in relation to prevailing norms of social regulation” (171). Thus, for Butler, “our ability to refer to the psyche through tropes of internality are themselves effects of a melancholic condition” (171).

In Butler’s reading of Freud, the melancholic subject incorporates, and thus becomes, some of the loss or abandonment it is unable to accept in relation to the object. Freud writes how “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego” (1917/1955, 249), and Butler notes the “biblical cadence” accompanying this reference to the “shadow of death” (1997, 187). In this reading, “melancholia operates in a direction directly counter to narcissism” (187). Whereas the narcissist is able to “control love, even when that narcissism appears to give way to object-love,” the melancholic is left “impoverished, wanting” (187), an expression or embodiment of the object loss. “In narcissistic love, the other contracts my abundance. In melancholia, I contract the other’s absence” (187).

Ruti (2006) suggests that “melancholia begins to give way to narrativization, interpretation, and application” when “the other’s limit has been firmly set—when there is no longer a convenient place for the subject’s fantasies to attach themselves to” (183). Although I did not fully comprehend it at the time, my encounters in Vienna punctured the “melancholy fit” (Keats 1917, 246) that first began to fall on me through my mother’s grief and mourning, immediately following the sudden death of her beloved brother in early February 1960. Brennan (2004) usefully identifies an “energetic dimension” (6) to the transmission of affect, and the way in which one person can carry the “affective burden of another” (6). From an early age, and consistent with Freud’s formulation, I became aware of ‘whom’ the lost object was, through his name and limited stories about him; but not ‘what’ he was, in substance, as a man, son, brother, musician, aspiring artist, friend, lover, colleague, dreamer. Nevertheless, also in keeping with Freud’s schema of the melancholic, the actual lived qualities of my dead uncle remained unknown to me, while the memories of those who knew and loved him, remained either underarticulated (too painful to endure, given his death) or buried in their unconscious.

As quoted above, Freud rounded off his initial schema by referring to the “whole complex of melancholia” as acting like an “open wound.” This wound, for Freud, manifests a variety of negative and constraining forces on a developing or healthy ego. The Freudian analysis of the relationship between mourning (the death of a love object) and melancholia (the sedimented, persistent aftermath of that loss) resonated truly for me, more than other discourses or prior modes of analysis (including various periods of psychotherapy). In a profound way, my uncle’s death became a wound that marked and weighed upon my character for many years, right up until the time I began preparing for the Vienna conference in 2017.

## Suspended survival

Ultimately, the melancholic has to work with and/or through a central dilemma, that being “whether to follow the lost object into death or to seize the opportunity to live” (Butler 1997, 192). Such challenges may require “redirecting rage against the lost other, defiling the sanctity of the dead for the purposes of life, [and/or] raging against the dead in order not to join them” (193). Survival, in this context, becomes “not precisely the opposite of melancholia, but what melancholia puts in suspension” (193). Regardless of the efforts and degrees of success in rupturing “the melancholic bind, there is no final reprieve from the ambivalence and no final separation of mourning from melancholia” (193). Butler’s reference to survival as that which melancholia puts in suspension invites further consideration and extrapolation.

Baraitser (2017) explores some of the “affectively dull or obdurate temporalities” (2) that can operate for some who encounter bereavement, dislocation, incarceration, existential negation, the rupture of historical memory, psychoanalysis, and other forms of delay and waiting. In each of her case studies, the normal flow of time has been interrupted or suspended, necessitating that time or duration be differently endured. Baraitser is interested in what a study of those living in suspended time with their “persistent attachments,” including to “those who are dead” (1), can tell us about our capacities to survive and care both in the present and into the future. Integral to this exploration is Baraitser’s recognition of the way in which Butler’s reading of Freud’s “melancholic processes” points to the force that generates, mediates, and governs interiority and sociality (42). Baraitser refers to these processes as creating “a sliver of a gap between subject and object, and in doing so internal and external worlds are instituted” (43).

## A sliver of a gap

Butler and Baraitser’s interest in the co-constitutive nature of the internal and the social both reflects and informs (but also overlaps and dovetails with) various conceptual and methodological ‘turns’ over recent decades from the post-structural and discursive, through the corporeal and affective, to the post-human, more-than, and other-than-human. The disruption and subversion of binaries, as well as the blurring of boundaries through these turns, has made possible different and differing conceptions of self, thought, knowledge, being, becoming, action and change. Blackman (2012), for example, seeks to dissolve notions of a solid and singular subject in favor of “a concern with those processes, practices, sensations and affects that move through bodies in ways that are difficult to see, understand and investigate” (ix). Within the sliver of the gap too, affect is “born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*” (emphasis original, Seigworth & Gregg 2010, 2). Whatever the slippery or elusive dimensions may be, “affect acts”, is “put to work” and “operationalized” (Seigworth 2003, 76), not being a tool for analysis or reflection.

Ngai’s analysis of “ugly feelings” (2005) provides a useful bridge. Firstly, her primary aim is to explore “situations of suspended agency” (1). This aligns with the notion of melancholia placing survival “in suspension”, as well as the nature and potentialities of suspended time, explored by Baraitser. Secondly, Ngai de-

finds tone (in literature, film, and critical theory) as “the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce... [and whose] power resides precisely in its amorphousness” (30). This reference to ‘our aesthetic encounters’ points more directly to my particular interest in music, and how music and melancholia are entangled and mutually constitutive.

Grant (2020) draws some sharp and convincing parallels between the reciprocal workings of music theory and a form of affect theory in early 18th century Europe, and ways in which contemporary theories of affect also “sound so musical” (20). He highlights key musical terms like resonance, vibration, and attunement that are also used in “paradigmatic or explanatory ways” (20) by recent and current affect theorists. Guattari (1990), for example, wrote of “discordance” and “*ritornellizations*” (emphasis original, 70), and the need for (psycho-) analysis to give the “interpretation of phantasms and “displacement of affects” a “new ‘stave’ in the musical sense of the word” (78). Drawing partly on this call from Guattari, Seigworth (2003) re-views and reframes Freud’s well-known account of his grandson’s *fort/da* game as “a kind of rhythmic movement and provisional song... for staking out momentary order in the midst of chaos” (96).

## Musical interlude

*Adagio* from the Brahms *F major Piano Quintet Op. 34* [start at around 15:50]<sup>3</sup>

## Music and melancholia

Steinberg (2014) notes that a certain “mood of melancholy” (288) appears to inhabit (haunt?) all music, regardless of when and where it was created. Steinberg also makes the bold and risky assertion that “melancholy *is* the condition of music—all music” (emphasis original, 289). He justifies this totalizing claim (‘all music’) with reference to the “heuristic precedent” (289) offered by Freud concerning all dreams functioning as wish fulfilments (even when we have nightmares, or find our wishes disguised in certain ways within the dream). Given this foundation and corollary, our interest needs to be primarily with “the music itself” (290) (as with the dream content, for Freud), rather than with the composer, or the listener. For Steinberg, “music is melancholic in relation to its own desire” (290). As an ostensible subject with its own desire, music “wants to speak and to speak importantly” yet, this is an “unfulfillable wish” which thus becomes “the

source of its melancholia” (290) just as melancholia, in Butler’s reading of Freud, “denies speech” (Butler 1997, 185). Musical melancholia, therefore, is “an epistemic predicament” given music’s inability to speak “importantly” (i.e. meaningfully or self-knowingly) or thus, to fulfill its own desire (Steinberg 2014, 290).

Music, as a non-representational mode of expression, is always confronted with, and destabilized by its inherent inability to fully articulate and communicate what it wants and means to say. Steinberg’s primary “purview” (2014, 290) is 19th century European classical music, although the line he traces is from Mozart (late 18th century) to Schoenberg (early 20th century). Steinberg proposes that some of this music developed its own “fiction of subjectivity” which enabled it to “embody melancholy, not as a descriptive or correlative of human mood, but as a function of its own inner life” (Steinberg 2014, 291; see also 2004). This claim is as provocative as it is compelling, and if we permit it (at least for the sake of the excursions here), then some of what Steinberg refers to as 19th century “modern music” also “knows its own melancholy” (291).

For Steinberg (2014), much music remains bound by its own “anxiety of articulation” (295) and this anxiety is “what makes melancholy the condition of music” (297). In response to this anxiety, Steinberg pinpoints a “fleeting melancholy moment” in Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, the moment where music (first?) manifested “the self-awareness of its own inarticulacy” (299). This self-awareness produced what can be seen (and heard) as a demand “from within itself, [for] the status of speech” (297). As the anxiety of articulation could not be resolved in purely musical terms, or tones, Beethoven introduced the voice (and words) of the singer in the final movement of the *Ninth Symphony*, declaring emphatically, ‘*O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!*’ (‘O friends, not these sounds!’).

Music’s inherent anxiety of articulation is symptomatic of “the gap between music and speech, between music and meaning, between music and the world” (Steinberg 2014, 310). For Steinberg, “this is the melancholia of music itself, the predicament that gives music so much rhetorical and emotional importance for modern listeners” (310). At the very heart of this predicament, however, Steinberg also identifies a paradox: “through its very inarticulacy,” music simultaneously has inherent within it “an unsignifying precision that speech itself may not be able to attain” (310). In ways that perhaps cannot (and need not) be fully explained or understood, but may still be heard and felt, music can sometimes express and

communicate itself with more clarity, directness, and emotional intensity than the language of speech. To cite the perfectly pithy formulation by Mendelssohn with which Steinberg also concludes his argument: “What any music I love expresses to me, is not thought too *indefinite* to be put into words, but on the contrary, too *definite*” (emphasis original, Mendelssohn 1878, 276).

Steinberg’s references to “romantic, enabling melancholy” (e.g. 2014, 304) have their own history and varieties of theorization (e.g. Del Nevo 2008). Keats’s sublime *Ode on Melancholy* (Keats 1917, 246–7) might also be the exception that proves the rule in relation to Steinberg’s aforementioned paradox. In the poem, Keats successfully conjures something of melancholy’s affective qualities through the way she manages, in her “veil’d” and “sovrän shrine,” to capture us mortals in her “Temple of Delight”. In the opening stanza of the Keats *Ode* there are multiple, emphatic refusals to succumb to any urge to remedy “the wakeful anguish of the soul” in a decisive way. Melancholy is presented as source and guide towards a more soulful embrace of Life’s beauty and goodness, despite (or even because of) Life’s transience. We experience melancholy in all her weightiness, “when the melancholy fit shall fall/Sudden from heaven.” This fall is “like a weeping cloud/ That fosters the droop-headed flowers all.” These allusions to falling, weeping, and drooping deftly capture feelings constitutive of melancholy atmospherics such as heaviness, lachrymosity, enervation.

While Ruti (2006), echoing Keats, acknowledges melancholia as a necessary condition for psychic (or soulful) health, she also argues the need for the subject to “find its way out of melancholic entombment” (158). This image owes more to Freud than it does to Keats. For Ruti, the melancholic subject works through “the sources of its despair—by digging deeply into the tender terrain of its losses” in order, ultimately, to be able to “accede to the kind of intuition that leads to self-understanding [and creative expression]” (166–7). Even when the subject manages to transcend their condition and “translate melancholia into meaning” (167), Ruti notes that such an act of transcendence “does not have to be—and rarely is—permanent” (167). Keats’s poetic insights are palpably embodied in the musical examples threaded through this essay. Each exudes melancholic tendencies, and music’s knowledge of its own melancholy, compellingly. Thus, the opening *Sonatina* of Bach’s *Cantata BWV106* placed as the musical prelude beneath the keywords at the beginning; and the *Adagio* from the Brahms *F major Piano Quintet Op. 34*, placed as the first musical interlude at the start of this section.

The Prelude to Act 3 of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*<sup>4</sup> is offered here as a third musical interlude. The more intimate we become with these musical examples, the more we might sense, feel, and perhaps even 'see' the weeping clouds, the drooping flower-heads, the weighty fall from heaven that they (and melancholia) elicit. However, it is beyond both my technical abilities and the scope of this essay, to attempt any closer analysis of the music offered in the context of this discussion. As the narrator in Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva* declares, "You don't understand music: you hear it" (Lispector 2012a, 4).

The chosen extract of Wagner (above) also features the German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, still considered to be one of the greatest exponents of the art, despite his complex maneuverings during the Nazi period in Germany and elsewhere in Europe (Cowan 2017). Furtwängler's performances became entangled in the Nazi appropriation and tainting of the German music tradition such that, when listening to his recordings, we also hear Furtwängler trying to salvage something of that lost tradition. For Žižek (2000), when we listen to Furtwängler's recordings, we long to capture "not the organic immediacy of classical music but rather the organic-immediate experience of the loss itself" (661). Thus, for Žižek, a fascination with Furtwängler is "melancholy at its purest" because of this urge to (re) connect with "the very original gesture" (661) of the loss.

## Music and death in Vienna, and elsewhere

It is necessary to underline the fortuitous coincidence and convergence of the 2017 'Music and Death' conference in Vienna. Had the conference been scheduled for any other city in the world, even the city where I reside (Melbourne, Australia) I would unlikely have had more than a fleeting interest in it. However, the personal resonances in the music/death/Vienna nexus were as profound as they were immediate and as alluring as they were frightening. In the inquiry, I cast myself as the 'posthumous nephew,' albeit born just before the death of my uncle. In this mode, my primary task was to come to know more about my uncle and gain closer proximity to the last years of his life (in Vienna), in order to (finally?) grieve his sudden and tragic departure from the world. When it came to developing a suitable form and mode for the conference presentation, the selection of musical items to accompany the text I composed, and the images I selected, were crucial

(Levy, 2020). I later came to understand the presentation as a form of belated eulogizing (Davis et al 2016), whereby the encounter with death was treated as “a subject of aesthetic design” (Hedtke & Winslade 2017, 161).

I was not aware, in those months of preparation (or even when I was in Vienna), that I was also working to discover more about, and find ways to gain some relief (and release) from my chronic melancholia. Baraitser’s (2017) work is again useful here. It can help to think through how melancholia had put my survival ‘in suspension,’ enough to keep me alive, but unable to thrive. Baraitser also conceptualizes “chronicity” as having a vital allegiance with “natality rather than mortality” (188). In this schema, “newness is neither breach, rupture or flash, but a quiet noticing that something remains, which is the permanent capacity to begin again” (188). The Vienna conference, unexpectedly, provided opportunities to (re) activate that natality, and the capacity for newness to open up in/through/around me.

## A wandering/wondering Jew

Ruti (2006) suggests that “it [sometimes] even happens that we come to view our entire life in relation to a single mythological moment—a turning point or a sea change—and the rest of our lives, what we do, experience, and dream about, comes to be interpreted in relation to this moment” (201). I cannot be certain that my uncle’s sudden death in my infancy was that ‘single mythological moment,’ but I have been wondering a lot more about such a possibility in my post-conference research, reflections, and auto-theoretical excursions. In an astute, passing comment on W.G. Sebald’s eponymous central character in *Austerlitz*, Halberstam (2011) identifies “a menacing abyss in the center of his autobiography” (85). This image and atmosphere of a ‘menacing abyss’ is an apt description of the psycho-emotional proximity I had to my uncle’s untimely death and the enduring intensity of his death in relation to my subjectivity and affective capacities.

As a non-Jewish German, born in 1944, Sebald regarded the Holocaust—including the moral universe that imploded through the years of the second world war, and the trauma and denial in German society that persisted after the end of World War II—to be the most defining event of his existence (the heart of his abyss, one could say). In different ways, and on many levels, this Holocaust event that Sebald was born into constituted the impetus, fuel, and substance of his major literary works. The senses of outrage, shame, guilt, and responsibility for the mass murders on an unprecedented scale were imperative and definitive for Sebald. Santner

(2006) suggests Sebald's "saturnine gaze" (62) generates "apocalyptic darkenings, moments where the last traces of light are, as it were, sucked back into black holes of despair and pain" (61). Sebald describes one of his characters, Ambros Adelwarth as giving the impression that he was "filled with some appalling grief... every casual utterance, every gesture, his entire deportment...was tantamount to a constant pleading for leave of absence" (Sebald 1996, 111). Adelwarth's trauma-by-association had left him "longing for an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember" (114). Santner (2006) suggests that Sebald perfected a "dark beauty" (63) in his writing that produces, paradoxically, enormous pleasure for many readers. This is the same pleasure, I would suggest, that one can hear and feel in examples of music-embodied melancholia, or the music that knows its own melancholy.

Santner (2006) is interested in the way Sebald "invokes the dimension of *un-deadness*, the space between real and symbolic death...the ultimate domain of creaturely life" (emphasis original, xx). The essential quality of the 'undead' owes a debt to (Walter) Benjamin's paradoxical notion of "petrified unrest" (Benjamin 1985, 40), with Benjamin (and his work) being "the ultimate embodiment" of melancholia (Santner 2006, 89), or the ultimate "figure of melancholia" (Lac 2019, 27). Along similar lines, Restuccia (2005) regards Sebald's use of photographs in his novels as an attempt to "effect a return of the dead" (305). This, for Restuccia, is one of the ways in which Sebald (also through certain characters and narrative voices) seeks to "bear witness to an unforgettable forgotten wound...that gaping wound in twentieth century German history" (316-317).

The image of an 'unforgettable forgotten...gaping wound' echoes Freud's (1917/1955) reference to the melancholic's 'open wound' discussed earlier in this essay. As indicated in letters remaining in the family archives (private collection), my uncle was acutely aware of how the old Nazi network and ongoing anti-Semitism in Vienna (and beyond) were continuing to limit, if not actually work against his career aspirations as an orchestral conductor. Certain (non-Jewish) teachers and colleagues confirmed this suspicion to him (off the record). A recent study by Leeb (2018) details in a bold and scholarly manner how the Austrians, *en masse*, were (and perhaps still are) unable to accept their collective guilt and responsibility for Nazi complicity, following the German invasion in 1938 (see also Steinberg 2000).

Given this ongoing reluctance and resistance to “touch their shameful past” (Leeb 2019, 80), the ‘gaping wound’ in 20th century Austrian history could be considered, arguably, even more raw and festering than the German one that Sebald tended to so unflinchingly, and delicately. This was the same wound within which my uncle had tried to forge a musical career. After nearly five years in Vienna, he had resolved to take his chances elsewhere (in the UK, or the US, or even back in Australia), exiling himself from the home and heartland of the music he adored, to pursue his professional aspirations and artistic goals without compromising his moral integrity (or jeopardizing his personal safety). His Jewishness was not the sole determining factor, but it was a significant one. As it transpired, this was also the point at which fate intervened and eliminated all future wandering, and wondering, for him.

## A melancholic musician

As a Jew and musician living in the ‘open wound’ of 1950s Vienna and central Europe, my uncle could not have avoided experiencing the complexities and contradictions, “the collision, or mutual imbroglio, of history and psyche” (Rose 2003, 12; see also Steinberg 2007). After all, he fled with his family from Germany in May 1939, none too soon. He was nine years old at that time, unavoidably aware of his circumstances. Other members of his/our family were exterminated in death camps. When or how was he able to grieve and mourn their tragic elimination? To return to Europe, just ten years after the end of WWII, was also a hugely daring and fraught act. For nearly five years, he lived and pursued his musical and artistic dreams, under no illusions about the obstacles he was facing. Yet the passion sustained him sufficiently. It is quite likely that when he was buried in the Jewish section of the *Zentralfriedhof* Vienna in February 1960, many of the Jewish graves were still showing signs of having been desecrated during the years of Nazi occupation and collaboration. It is painful to imagine his funeral taking place, without any immediate family, or music, amidst these violations.

Ruti (2006) argues that, in the context of (self) analysis, meaning-making remains “the kind of infinitely fluid process which, ideally at least, teaches the subject that the past is never irrevocably fixed or closed off, but instead remains permeable to retrospective acts of reinterpretation” (200). It is through such acts of reinterpretation that I have been able to discover how my uncle’s untimely death, coincident with my then-recent arrival in the world, produced sedimentations of grief through and within my facilitating environment (Winnicott 1965), that have had a last-

ing impact and influence on my melancholic disposition and inclinations. Freud's seminal essay (1917/1955) and certain readings of it (eg. Butler 1997; Lac 2019; Steinberg 2014) have helped to illuminate my understanding of this condition, and its lasting impact.

Santner (2006), in his reading of Freud's famous essay, insightfully suggests that the mourner "gets on with life," with new objects of love to attach to, whereas the melancholic remains "retarded" by virtue of being attached to the lost object" (89). I suspect that I fast became one of the new objects for my grieving mother to attach to, while co-incidentally losing some of her, to her lost object. Meanwhile, I remained for many, many years, unconsciously attached to the original lost object, knowing 'whom' but not 'what' I had lost; retarded in my own further/fuller becoming, gripped by the chronic melancholia that was configuring the im/possibilities for who 'I' might/could be/come.

Clemens (2010), in his reading of Agamben, suggests that the melancholic subject lives a life that is "literally disqualifying itself" (12). Any possible cure for melancholy then is "at least partially dependent on the sufferer's ability to reinvigorate both self and world by an imaginative solution" (10). Morag (2017) refers similarly to the aim of psychoanalysis as that of achieving an "imaginative self-knowledge" (84). It was only in Vienna, almost sixty years after my birth and my uncle's death, that I could begin to let go of the aforementioned attachment to the lost object. It was equally both by chance and design that this moment of unburdening took place at the original gravesite of my uncle, with the specially-chosen music streaming into my ears, pulsing through my inner networks of blood and nerve, and soothing my stunted soul. Without both the music, and my inhabiting a site so proximal to his death, I doubt the same degree of catharsis could have occurred. This event also adds weight to the claim that permits "to music itself some agency", pointing to the equal importance of "what music does with people, as what people do with music" (Dell 2017, 3).

On the day, in the cemetery, by the grave, it was Mozart's music at its most self-knowingly melancholic (the *Rondo* in A minor, K.511), coupled with some traditional Jewish prayers, that catalyzed the moment. Nor could it have been just any performance of the Mozart. Amongst the many (very good) recordings that I knew, it had to be the one by Artur Schnabel, a Jewish musician who had lived and studied in Vienna, and who was also uprooted and traumatized by the Nazi occupation of Europe. Many other pianists capture the beauty, the refinement, and

the dramatic elements in Mozart's *Rondo*, but only Schnabel seems to fully distill and reveal the depths of melancholic longing, the aching beauty, the "chiaroscuro of major and minor" (Epstein 1946, 248), the spiralling towards an "ecstasy of anguish" (Levin, in Church, 2021, 63), embodied in this miniature masterpiece.<sup>5</sup>

This was also the recording I chose to accompany the extended ode to my uncle that I wrote and then presented at the Vienna conference<sup>1</sup>. Here, the words and music intertwined, seeking to bring him briefly, back to life, through telling the story of his years in Vienna.

## A breath of life

On the opening page of Clarice Lispector's *A Breath of Life*, a narrator's voice declares: "I write as if to save somebody's life. Probably my own. Life is a kind of madness that death makes. Long live the dead because we live in them" (2012b, 3). Up until the conference in Vienna I had been inhabiting a very particular form of (melancholic) 'madness' that my uncle's death had precipitated. Over all those years I had been 'living in' my dead uncle, with the time of his death contained within my own (Riley, in Baraitser 2017, 92). To the extent that my family's mourning over his death was completed, I remained the pseudo-replacement for him as the lost love object, an object (in Freud's terms) that I could know, to a limited extent, for 'whom' he was (by name, having died suddenly and tragically), but not for 'what' he was (in substance, or what he represented through his character, aspirations, and human foibles). Until I finally, by circumstance, came to face the reality of his death when standing on, and alongside his (original) place of burial, I had been 'living in him' to a problematic (albeit largely unconscious) extent. For the first time, at the side of his original grave, I was able to simultaneously register my own grief over his loss, as well as to consciously sense my right to an independent life and existence, separate from his death. None of this was premeditated.

The potency and depth of my responses seemed to carry with them a lubricating and liberating force that I have been able to access, intermittently, since that time in the cemetery in Vienna. In keeping with Ruti's (2006) conclusion, I am working through the past to establish a more "vibrant foundation" for a "redefine[d]...future" (223-4). Integral to this 'vibrant foundation' is a substantial yet distinctive body of music that consoles, informs, instructs, and inspires my (piano) playing, (choral) singing, (extensive) listening, thinking, writing, and (still tentative) living. It is not music that allows me to completely transcend my chronic

melancholia, but if we accept the Freudian conceptualizations discussed within (e.g. Baraitser 2017; Butler 1997; Freud 1917/1955), this is not a condition that can be transcended (or even desired to be). Nor is there any music that can adequately fulfill its own desire to know itself, by which it might overcome its inherent ‘anxiety of articulation’ and/or self-knowing melancholy (Steinberg 2014). Thus, the music that affects me most substantially reinforces an inevitable melancholia, helping to make my lived experiences more bearable, and sometimes more joyful.

Becoming and remaining more conscious of these enabling constraints provides the impetus to move beyond the deepest roots of my chronic melancholia. Under these conditions of natality, I am better able to honor and integrate my uncle’s life and legacy, as well as to forge a path into a future shaped more by my own volition. Ruti’s (2006) conception of the soul as “a form of energy related to one’s capacity to keep breathing in the face of life’s challenges” (18) gains traction under these improved conditions. Each new breath provides a little more for my needs, a little less for my dead uncle. Each new breath, a breath of life, holds the potential to turn sediment into sound, and murmuring into melody, enhancing the possibility of becoming more of the music, while the music lasts.

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## Endnotes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXMUpqSyJJo> [first 2:40]
2. I have, more recently, recorded a version of this presentation which can be accessed at <https://youtu.be/HSKTImJn6wQ>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ff-LGGI4wCU&t=1504s> [start at around 15:50]
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8vjlkITcCg>
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DP665A8iA8g>

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*Untitled, Monstera, 2020*  
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# PLAYING WITH SOUND IN THERAPY



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I am sitting in the brown leatherette chair in the playroom in the rural community mental health clinic where each week I meet with children, ages 3 to 12, for play therapy. I have turned my chair away from the center of the room and am staring at a wall. I don't know how much of the 50-minute session with Lauren<sup>1</sup> I will have to sit this way in response to her demand that I not look at her, not talk to her, not do anything that calls attention to the fact that I exist or am aware of her. This is a familiar move in her dance of fending me off, of refusing of my attention or care, which feels intrusive and painful to her. Lauren, 10-years-old, has been in and out of foster care for years. Her parents are periodically incarcerated. In her first session, when I spoke to her she covered her ears, singing at the top of her lungs, making conversation impossible.

For the first several weeks of the therapy Lauren hid behind the toy kitchen set, humming and singing loudly whenever she heard a noise from me. I sat and drew pictures, which I showed to her with no expectation of response. Eventually she began throwing toys at me which I gently tossed back to her—an interaction. When she finally emerged from hiding, she made it clear that I was not allowed to speak. Eventually, she pulled out small white boards and allowed communication

through writing. When I wrote in response, she was able to look at it or not, to erase what I had written without acknowledging it, or to respond. When she did respond, it was most often pure sarcasm, telling me how stupid, ridiculous, ugly, and hated I was, again controlling distance and closeness. Over time, she did begin to allow that we might speak toward one another. With decreasing frequency, she demanded that I turn the chair around and act like I wasn't there. Sometimes I could tell what prompted this; other times I could not.

Throughout my work with this child, we rarely—and by rarely I mean perhaps a handful of times in the roughly 200 sessions we shared—directly addressed what was happening with her parents or her living situation or her foster care homes. For much of our time together, she would not and perhaps could not think about her life, a life that in many ways was so out of her control. And in fact, most of my young clients rarely talk about their lives, they rarely think about their lives, and rarely see their lives as I see them. Whether or not they live with their parents, and even when they have suffered abuse at their parents' hands, my clients inevitably love their parents, and they work to protect them and their memories or fantasies of life with their parents from any intrusion or criticism or judgment. Rather, in our sessions the children live very much in the thick now of our moment-to-moment play; talk, when it happens at all, is mostly about directing me in play or about the immediate experience of the play or of our time together.

In our play, the children and I dance and chant, sing, play catch and jump rope, and count. We have long stretches of quiet, side-by-side painting, and play rowdy, competitive board games full of cheating and laughter. We spend countless hours in the sandbox, shoveling sand from side to side, pouring in water, building, destroying, finding things we'd buried, exploring textures. I rarely address the behavioral issues that often are the identified problem that has brought the child into therapy. And yet things happen in our sessions, although it is very hard for me to say what those things are, let alone report them to my supervisor or in the computerized treatment notes required by Medicaid.

What has occupied my thinking for the past several years is how to understand what it means that the kids rarely talk about the things that caused the initiation of therapy and yet that significant things happen in our work. To me, this has considerable implications for our faith in language and symbolization as it challenges the speech-centric beliefs we have about what counts as prompting learning, or development, or change.

I undertook training as a therapist in my late forties. I was already a full professor at a major research institution. For many years I had been thinking and writing at the intersection of psychoanalysis and Deleuzo-Guattarian theory. I knew that conjunction was supposed to make me uncomfortable but, instead, I found it productive. I agreed with Deleuze and Guattari's criticisms of psychoanalysis, but I had also spent time talking with doctors and analysts and patients at the La Borde Clinic where Guattari spent his life working as a psychotherapist. I knew that bringing this work together opened it up in vital ways but, also, that the psychoanalysis that Deleuze and Guattari critiqued 50 years ago is not the psychoanalysis I have studied.

In the past forty years, some of the schools of psychoanalytic research and practice—and most notably relational psychoanalysis—have undergone a major shift away from biological narratives that offer pre-determined stories such as Oedipus, or the good and bad breasts, or the *nom du pere*, in favor of dynamic systems theory, infant research, and a post-modern take on developmental psychology that posits humans as fundamentally relational, emergent, transpersonal dynamic systems that construct and revise internal models of the interpersonal world from ongoing experiences (Mitchell, 1988; Boston Change Process Study Group, 2010). Beginning in infancy, humans are understood as engaged in learning patterns of anticipating and responding to affective energy as it flows through relationships with people, events, and things. Humans are understood as constantly affecting and being affected, most often at the level of the procedural unconscious—that part of the mind that processes mechanical, semantic, and structural information and generates, stores, and revises predictive schema – in non-symbolized form, out of the awareness of the involved parties. Philip Bromberg (2011), in describing the relationship between the mind and experience, provides a description of the flexible, context specific organization of the procedural unconscious. He describes the mind as organized by multiple, shifting self-states that are responsive to the relational demands of a given context. Speaking of human interactions, he says: “Each partner, through his or her own way of being with the other, is affectively reacting to some part of what is taking place between them that lacks symbolic representation as an interpersonal event” (Bromberg 2011, 70; see also Boldt, 2020).

As the Boston Change Study Process Group writes, therapy can thus be conceptualized as a complicated dance in which clients work to predict and direct “the nature of the engagement” through regulating and controlling physical, psychical, and emotional distance, “moving towards ... and away from one another ... or to avoid something happening, or to get something to happen, or to increase or decrease the state of arousal, or to shift the affective state, in relation to the other” (1053). At the heart of the therapy is how the therapist responds to these

relational moves, how successfully or unsuccessfully we co-create “the feeling of being ‘in sync’ with [one] another,” whether we come to feel “fitted,” or if we are “left with the feeling that the other is a million miles away” (1053). A central therapeutic concern is with relational schema that have hardened into repetitive or territorialized responses that are alert to danger but not to context, that are not flexible, that have little room for creativity, experimentation, or improvisation. Many of my clients have experienced long-term or persistent traumas that, in the service of self-defense, have prompted the development of relational schema that constantly capture and organize potentialities into knowable versions of the same. In other words, the children keep enacting the same relational schema, regardless of context. It is understandable, brilliant even, that based on their prior experiences, they enact schema which have given them some ability to predict what might happen or to have some sense of control in threatening or out-of-their-control situations (Boldt 2020). The problem is, when enacted in other contexts, their defenses not only land them in trouble, but they also rob them of sources of help, connection, and joy. The goal of therapy is to provide a relationship that, in being persistently different from the schema the children bring with them, expands their repertoire of what is possible.

I have now been staring at the wall for 15 minutes, trying to catch glimpses of what Lauren is doing when I think she isn't looking at me, getting yelled at when she catches me. She knows I am watching her as best I can and now three years into the treatment, she is no longer serious about me not looking at her, although at times she needs to assert this control. But now she has an impulse to engage me, and she blurts out a song: “You're an elephant's ass! You like to eat trash! And everybody hates, hates, hates, hates you!!!” I turn to look at her and smile. She appears to get angry at the smile. She repeats the song, putting emphasis on the “hate” part, but it feels to me more like a performance of anger than the real thing, like these days her heart just isn't in the hatred. I repeat the song to her, with the appropriate variation: “I'm an elephant's ass! I like to eat trash! And everybody hates, hates, hates, hates me!!!” She smiles in spite of herself and returns to her doll house play, but this time does not demand that I turn away. So it goes with Lauren.

I have become deeply interested in the fact that the children initiate sound games like this one all the time. We chant the alphabet while performing improvised dance moves and producing hand percussion music. The children make up lyrics and chants which they repeat over and over again, playing with changing the

tone, pitch, intensity, and speed: “Evan smashed Gail’s car and Gail yelled ‘Oh no!’ Evan smashed Gail’s car and Gail yelled ‘Oh no!’ Evan smashed Gail’s car and Gail yelled ‘Oh no!’” What is this about? Drawing from Adrienne Harris (2009), I think of these as “deeply rhythmic and resonant ways of being together.” (15). Fast and slow, near and far, loud and quiet, hard and soft, chanted, sung, and shouted; these qualities all matter, are all material (Boldt, 2020). They are physical, vibrating experiences, raw sensory elements, that work through resonance or prosody, as sounds become the material through which we explore a physically registered mutual attunement. “Eaka leeka leeka loo” chants Marly. “Oka, loka, loka, poo!” I respond.

I have come to think of this sound play, which is such a frequent part of our sessions, as the microlevel of physically registered attunement where much of the relating and possibility lie. The psychoanalyst Adam Blum (2016) describes the connections he makes with his adolescent patients through music, as “an unarticulated substrate of experience (primarily rhythm and harmony)” (174) that allow the “inchoate experience” (Green 1983, cited by Blum) of the therapy session to be shared without speech.

What happens in this non-symbolized soundscape in the clinic has to do, I believe, with what is communicated about the relational possibilities of leading and following, coming close and moving away, coming into tune and then dropping in dissonant notes. These exchanges directly address relational schema or repertoires, without ever being talked about or even necessarily consciously marked. Who can we be to one another in this mix? What can the materials and time and space we share be or do or help us to become? What things are now possible? Blum (2016) addresses the rhythmic musicality of the therapy session, the power of rhythm or predictability, and improvisation. He describes the sharing of these rhythmic exchanges as “the process by which increasingly nuanced and complex aspects of experience develop between physical bodies in relation to one another” (180).

It is essential that my clients feel an ability to regulate the emotional demands or requests I make—demands for closeness and distance, being open or closed, being alone or being with others. The client’s opening, the therapist’s response, the client’s response and so on, “creates a fundamental sense of rhythm that helps to form the sensory floor” of therapeutic interactions (175). Blum says,

I believe that the main function of this way of talking in our treatment is not to discover things about ourselves or one another, nor to communicate primitive needs and provisions, but rather to begin to feel ...the particular qualities

of what it is like for the two of us to relate to one another, a kind of experienced but not verbalized experience of melody, and rhythm ... allowing for enhanced moment-to-moment tracking of shifts in the relational field (175).

Blum goes on, reporting on an adolescent client whose sessions were almost entirely taken up with listening to music whose content Blum often found to be violent and disturbing:

The most important aspect of our work ...is not the admittedly disconcerting content of the material but rather the patient's newly apparent willingness to impact at an almost physical level the increasingly containing structure of our treatment. The durability of this sensorial container, once in place, creates a potential for still unknown, untested elements of experience to emerge (177)

For this client, who had grown up experiencing interactions with others as intruding upon and obliterating his reality, what resulted from sharing music was that the client discovered that there are other, more hopeful and experimental ways of being with the therapist and then with the world. Importantly, it wasn't simply that they shared the music, but that they entered into music together in a way that included disagreements, frustrations, and disruptions. Persisting through these disturbances that threatened to stop the rhythms they were making together, Blum writes, instead contributed to a new form of continuity that could allow for differences which ultimately contributed to more expansiveness and creativity in the relationship. In its movements among stanza and refrain, tonality and dissonance, with changes in intensity, key, pitch, and rhythm, the physical properties of music, Blum claims, "resemble the movements and dynamics of psychical life, radiating out from identity toward reciprocity, cycling back through the familiar as its orbit expands toward otherness, oscillating between home and distance, sameness and difference" (179).

When Lauren sings to me, "You're an elephant's ass! You like to eat trash! And everybody hates, hates, hates, hates you!!!," it is way of making it clear to me that I do not matter to her and that indeed, no one matters to her except her parents, who she cannot have. She has no friends at school, says she doesn't care about anyone. She drives people away. She screams at me, "You are too close! Move over there! Stand in that corner! Don't come near me!" I obey, but as the months and years pass, I begin rolling my eyes, or whistling, or humming a little tune. "We both know by now that this isn't necessary," is my implicit message. She wants to be back with her parents. Laurens' parents come out of incarceration and pretty much every time she sees them something awful happens. They hurt

her over and over—they don't show up; they pick Lauren up and drop her off at the house of someone who is a stranger to her while they go out partying; they bring Lauren a present and then with a big flourish, take it away and give it to one of her stepsiblings. I don't know this from Lauren, but hear it from the foster family. I say to Lauren, "I hear you saw your mom." She says, "Yah, it was great." We go back to our playing. We sing-count and then Luran tricks me with made-up numbers. She practices cheerleading routines she has made up and I applaud. Sometimes she smiles a little. Sometimes she catches herself smiling and tells me to shut up. She makes up more lyrics to her "Everyone hates Gail" song and I receive them with enthusiasm.

Over time, the song changes in quality. It becomes a game we share. When the lyrics get too repetitive, I say, "Oh come on. You can do better than that. You say 'stupid' too much. How about idiotic? How about, "Gail's an idiot. We know that's true. And everybody really really really hates you?" We both can laugh now, at the same time, as long as I don't comment on it. And then other things start happening. She begins to venture statements about her parents—"I hate it when they do that." I am very careful in response, "I know you do. You love them." One day she says, "When I act like that, I'm being just like my parents," and I say, "Tell me about that." And then one day, she comes into the clinic late, red-eyed and very upset. Her foster parent tells me she got into trouble at school. I ask her what happened and she says, "They gave me a detention. I told them, 'I have an appointment. I can't miss it.' They didn't care. I started crying and yelling. I was so afraid I wouldn't get to see you."

These kinds of words are few. They don't happen very often but they are significant. In other words, I'm not saying that words don't matter. In fact, I think it's important that Lauren got to a place where she understood something about why she acted as she did and that she could say it, could admit in a sideways way that our relationship matters, and could seek comfort from me. Words and the ability to think about things matter. But other things paved the road that got us to these words and, also, it is important to be clear: words don't replace the other stuff or become the things that matter the most.

For the last months we work together, most of our sessions are taken up with playing music on my phone and choreographing dances. She starts with showing me dances she has made up to particular songs. She sings along with her choreography. I admire her performance. She is genuinely good at it, self-taught, and I have the feeling of a young child who is saying, "Watch me" and who needs my admiration and positive regard, things I am happy to give her, because I genuinely

love this now-young adolescent. She then tells me to get up and dance with her, that she will teach me the moves. I am embarrassed; I am definitely no dancer. But I know it's important and I get up. She shows me moves, I do them badly. She claps and tells me, "That was really great, Gail, a 10." I know that's not true. But these are the expressions of a girl who is beginning to have friends and get invited to parties, whose teachers say she is doing well, who is recognizing that her parents' ways of being aren't what she wants for herself, and who is beginning to imagine that she can love and be loved in return.

## Endnotes

1. Lauren is not an actual client. To protect the privacy of my clients and their families, the clinical stories I tell herein are fictionalized. They do not represent any one of my clients. Name, age, and other details such as the words, activities used in the sessions, and details of my clients' lives and experiences have been altered.

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# U-HAULING: A FANTASY OF QUEER CODEPENDENCY?



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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the trope of lesbian u-hauling to understand the discursive factors underlying its historical influence and continued circulation within popular culture and on social media. The author analyses the affects and desires that stick to the figure of the U-haul as a symbol of queer attachment, and observes the affective similarities between lesbian merger, fantasy bonds and codependency that feature prominently in the story of lesbian u-hauling. Critical perspectives on the psychopathological construct of codependency are reviewed to interrogate its limitations through a trauma-informed and dialectical lens that theorizes queer codependencies in the context of systemic trauma. Using an interdisciplinary framework that draws from feminist theory, psychology and social work, the author argues that the story of lesbian u-hauling represents a fantasy of belonging that is related to desires for nationalist forms of inclusion, and that is sustained through addictive attachments at both micro and macro levels.

## KEYWORDS

addiction, codependency, fantasy, psychoanalysis, queer, lesbian

“If shame will bring us together, it is also the case that it can,  
will, and does tear us apart”

—Heather Love, *Feeling Backward* (2007, 14)

There is a rich archive of queer histories imbricating the pain and trauma of queer shame with the euphoric experience of romantic attachment and emotional connection. As a queer person with a history of codependency, I connect to this historical record and find a sense of belonging in what seems to be a queer tradition of love that is commingled with pain and hardship. A few years ago, while steeped in the mixed feelings of my own recovery from codependency, I often questioned the romanticization of painful experiences of love and attachment represented in queer love stories. One such story is that of lesbian u-hauling, which is a trope that conveys both shame and pride through self-deprecating humor. This persistent narrative circulates in the form of an archetypal joke about lesbians bringing a U-haul to the second date, which was popularized by comedian, Lea Delaria, in the 1980s. It refers to a romance that begins with rapid enmeshment, followed by an emotional whirlwind of infatuation that quickly deflates into disconnection, disappointment and separation. I recently discovered a number of queer meme accounts on Instagram that prominently feature the U-haul joke, which led me to the hashtag #UhaulLesbians, used affectionately on posts of queer people pictured with a moving truck and a partner in tow. Further down the rabbit hole, I noticed my own experience of codependent relationships was similarly characterized as a queer stereotype on social media. It became clear to me that what is called “merger” or “codependency” in psychology literature is part of a story about lesbian relationships, which is often told with an air of satirical reverence, and whose influence may be felt across a variety of subcategories of queer identities and queer relational configurations. This story invokes gender essentialist logic, as we will see, but queer people across the spectrum of gendered experiences may share its relational affects.

The experience commonly referred to as lesbian merger is informed by the history of psychopathology, which has perpetuated the idea that love between women is dysfunctional because of the tendency to merge, and that this is due to a lack of emotional boundaries between women. The construct of codependency has

also been used to pathologize and undermine the role of caregiving in family dynamics. Feminist and critical theorists have challenged the psychoanalytic constructs of both codependency and love between women by critiquing psychoanalytic theories that impose a hetero masculine ideal by positing individuation as an indicator of maturity. In spite of these efforts to intervene into the psychopathological theories that undermine queer relationships, an attachment to the U-haul stereotype and to the story of lesbian merger prevails in its influence on our intimate relationships and identity stories as queer people. Hegemonic discourses like psychoanalytic theories that are employed to uphold normativity through the pathologization of queerness invoke shame around the experience of queer desires, expressions, and modes of identification. Feelings of shame promote self-sabotaging behaviors, like those that accompany and sustain addictive attachments (Potter-Efron and Efron 2002), because these kinds of coping methods tend to offset the felt experience of the negative affect (Wiechelt 2007, 403). As such, queer codependencies may be informed by the shame that is produced by systemic forms of trauma, and that are enacted through the discursive violence of psychopathology.

A discussion about the possibility of dysfunction in lesbian relationships has mostly been avoided in the critical discourse, which is, perhaps, due to the shame that circulates around this history and debate. This paper is a response to Kadji Amin's (2017) call to confront "the rub" in writing and theorizing queer histories. In *Disturbing Attachments*, Amin underlines the importance of "finding the rub" as a researcher of queer history, pointing to sites, subjects and materials that bring us discomfort, for the purpose of de-idealizing queer narratives and heroes. He writes, "Deidealization is not the wholesale destruction of cherished ideals, but a form of the reparative that acknowledges messiness and damage, refuses the repudiating operations of idealization, and acknowledges the ways in which complicity is sometimes necessary for survival" (2017, 11). Amin revisits the history of Jean Genet, the radical French writer, to confront the problematic aspects of his character and behaviors that are sometimes omitted from historical analyses in order to position him as a revered agent of queer liberation. Amin uses this analysis to highlight methodological issues within queer theory, and suggests that queer historians and theorists should work to acknowledge and interrogate the disturbing nature of our affective attachments to stories, subjects and frameworks. Arguably, therefore, there is 'a rub' in the history of psychoanalysis, feminism, and lesbian merger: are we ashamed to admit that some queer feminists might engage in dysfunctional relationships? What attachments are de-idealized when confronting the possibility of dysfunction, and what fantasies work to maintain them? I am interested in understanding the role of fantasy as a dissociative affect related to codependency that helps to mitigate queer shame produced by systemic

trauma, and that functions as a safeguard against disconnection by securing our attachments to ideas, behaviors, people and systems. Codependency and merger are examined herein in relation to queer affects; they are characterized by what Amin calls “commingled affects” of love and shame that comprise an affective lineage within queer histories and representations wherein love is consistently experienced in tandem with the sacrifice and disavowal of key aspects of one’s social identification with homophobic discourses, systems and people.

In this essay, I identify the commingled affects that stick to the story of lesbian u-hauling, and analyse the queer desires that circulate around the figure of the U-haul. I argue that the U-haul joke functions to uphold a fantasy of belonging that is related to desires for nationalist forms of inclusion, and that is sustained through addictive attachments at both micro and macro levels. I draw connections between psychology, social work, and feminist theory to illustrate how fantasies of belonging help to secure harmful attachments to people, ideologies and systems. I am employing an interdisciplinary framework because I believe there is value in understanding interpersonal relations at the intersection of trauma and mental health, within broader frames of political meaning, for theorists, clinicians and community members alike. I refer to affect theory to understand queer connections because it emphasizes the intensity of emotion as an organizing factor of experience that is inherently political, as it impacts and informs the quality of life of queer, racialized and disabled individuals and communities. Unlike psychoanalysis, affect theory does not seek to pathologize emotion, and thereby acknowledges the potential of our feeling states and their expressions to affect political action and personal transformation. I am using a trauma-informed, dialectical lens inspired by clinical approaches to care (Dimeff and Linehan 2008; Wilson, Pence and Conradi 2013) that acknowledge the influence of trauma on our mental health, relationships and communities, while creating space for the possibility of change, growth and recovery. Following Amin, what have we neglected to confront in the critical and feminist discourse deconstructing the psychopathological categorization of queer intimacies that might invite a more nuanced perspective on harmful relationships in our partnerships and communities? I think it is important to engage in this discussion because of the implications it presents for resistance movements and the quality of connection in our personal lives as queer people. Romanticizing something that is potentially harmful because it secures a “disturbing attachment,” whether to an historical figure, identity narrative, neoliberal state or romantic partner, keeps us bound to thought and behavioral patterns that undermine our worth, well-being and access to emotional connection and political transformation.

There are a number of feminist theorists whose work deconstructs the ways in which affective attachments can fuel the violent machinations of power (Ahmed 2004, 2006, 2010; Amin 2017; Berlant 2011; Cvetkovich 2003; Gould 2009; Puar 2007; Spivak and Butler 2007). In *Moving Politics*, Deborah Gould (2009) writes,

A focus on affect retools our thinking about power. Power certainly operates through ideology and discourse, but it also operates through affect, perhaps more fundamentally so since ideologies and discourses emerge and take hold in part through the circulation of affect. Even more, affective states, unfixed in their directionality, can be molded and manipulated and then harnessed to the desired objectives of a leader, the state, capital, or a movement. (28)

Feminist theoretical formulations that address the affects of structural violence, including Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" (2011), Sara Ahmed's discussion of "national love" (2004), and Jasbir Puar's theory of "homonationalism" (2007), explain the implications of affective investments in national forms of belonging for oppressed subjects and resistance movements. It is the yearning for belonging that interests me in each of these theories, because it is the desire to be known and accepted that is undercut by traumatic experiences that produce shame, including those categorized as acute, chronic, complex and systemic. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (2021) defines trauma as, "the lasting emotional response that often results from living through a distressing event." Systemic oppression produces affects of systemic trauma, and involves the normalization and perpetuation of traumatic experiences caused by systematic marginalization, discrimination, and exploitation under neoliberal capitalism. Goldsmith, Martin and Smith (2014) define systemic trauma as, "the contextual features of environments and institutions that give rise to trauma, maintain it, and impact posttraumatic responses" (118). Systemic oppression involves the ongoing attrition of safety that is experienced through relentless and repetitive forms of state-sanctioned violence. As such, oppressed people may be particularly vulnerable to promises of belonging at both micro and macro levels. As queer people, our personal entanglements are necessarily imbricated with our trauma, and I am interested in the ways in which the story of lesbian merger may be informed by the trauma of oppression, its relationship to interpersonal and national forms of belonging, and the psychopathological discourse around addictive attachments.

## What Does a Lesbian Bring to the Second Date?

The figure of the U-haul carries affective residue as it persists in its travels through the lesbian imaginary in forms ranging from dry jest to romantic fantasy. Along the way, affective adhesions that hold a distinctly queer ambivalence stick to the story of lesbian relationships. In this story, shame and desire combine to pro-

duce affects of longing, waiting and yearning, as well as disdain, ruefulness and resentment. The symbol of the U-haul is employed toward uses both romantic and sarcastic, as it carries the ambition of homonormative romance as well as the embarrassment of those who are critical of engaging too closely with homonormativity. The U-haul inhabits liminality as it travels between spaces, exuding transience and impermanence. While the moving truck may be fuelled by visions of commitment, security and home, it also embodies the instability of transition and the insecurity of displacement.

There is an unsettling ambiguity in the symbol of the U-haul. In some ways, it stands in for a wedding ring, and yet, it does not carry the same sense of security, much like a queer commitment that does not garner the same institutional support as a heterosexual marriage. So, although some U-haul lesbians may claim this practice as an act of 'queering' monogamy, representing commitment and the intimacy of co-habitation, others will decry it as homonormative and too closely associated with straight rituals of patriarchal ownership and toxic monogamy. It is a symbol that represents the dialectic between proximity to heteronormative standards of monogamous commitment and the inevitable queer experience of falling short of them. It is possible that on some level, both sides of this ambivalence work to mask the immense grief, shame and alienation produced by experiences of institutional and familial neglect. The word *U-haul* implies a self-inflicted and arduous effort to mobilize one's own weight. It symbolizes do-it-yourself, staunch and stubborn individualism that rejects and/or lacks community, family or institutional supports, as well as access to capital that might enable hiring movers or living separately. This underlines an 'us against the world' mentality that romanticizes alienation and resists being subsumed by the oppressive systems that exclude and undermine queer identities, expressions and attachments. Moreover, this mentality reflects emotional distance as a defense mechanism against shame and neglect.

Affects of longing surround the figure of the U-haul. Desires for connection, support and belonging circulate around this symbol of togetherness and queer commitment. Desires for emancipation from past traumas, failed attachments and oppressive systems are felt in the mobility of the moving truck, representing a flight from negative experiences of loss, lack of support, and marginalization. The story of lesbian u-hauling offers an escape route from our current oppressive reality, loneliness, and material insecurity, as it invites us to ride off into the sun-

set, and into the embrace of a new lover with whom we can split the rent. This escapism harbors a denial that our painful experiences might not simply disappear when we pack up and move away. In short, the U-haul represents a fantasy of belonging that serves to disguise the personal and political baggage that a lesbian brings to the second date.

## The Emotional Baggage of Nationalism

The symbolism of a moving truck filled with housewares and personal items speaks to our domestic attachments: that which is worth holding on to, and that which informs our identity stories. The U-Haul brings with it a yearning for domestic stability, the comfort of home, and the emotional and material security that may be structurally inaccessible to marginalized queer people. It symbolizes a moment bridging past experience and future destination, in which the sense of yearning produces an attachment to the promise of a better life on the horizon that is almost there, but always just out of reach. This desire for the good life, as Berlant (2011) describes it, may be a desire for nationalist forms of belonging, which creates relations of cruel optimism within which subjects become implicated in addictive attachments to the perpetually unmet promises of capitalism. When u-hauling, the allure of the good life may prompt us to emulate heteronormative family structures in an effort to enjoy the benefits of state-sanctioned forms of intimacy. With dreams of a fresh start and idyllic visions of romance and family life, oppressed subjects may opt for forms of inclusion that masquerade as belonging, fuelling a capitalist system that benefits from our misplaced desires and missed connections, as it offers replacements for connection, love, and acceptance in the form of consumer goods and institutional inclusion. Not only are we coerced into normativity by the desire for belonging, but we are also attached to our partnerships because of the haven that they provide from the demands and violences of oppressive systems. The homonormative fantasy represented by the U-haul responds to the intersection of these attachments, as it encapsulates nationalist desires for coupledness, the autonomy of individual households, social and relational mobility, and attachments to commodities representing domesticity and family life.

## Just Joking?

Lotta Linge's (2006) study about the function of humor in relation to shame illustrates how humor balances out the negative affects associated with shame (disgust, dissmell and humiliation) as a safeguard against low self-esteem. Linge cites the research of affect theorist, Silvan Tomkins, to argue that humor functions as a

“moderator” of other affects. Tomkins (1963, 1991) has theorized that there are two clusters of negative affects, and that shame–humiliation is organized under the second cluster, which concerns object relations, and involves the regulation of intimacy and autonomy. Linge’s (2006) study illustrates that humor may be used to secure connection and combat shame, and that the intrapsychic and interpersonal functions of humor support togetherness through the exchange and attunement of inner affectual states. From this perspective, the U-haul joke can be seen to support intimacy by neutralizing queer shame and related negative affects in that it uses humor to repair the damage of disconnection that is produced by experiences of systemic trauma. In this case, humor may serve a reparative purpose, but research into the functions of humor in romantic relationships has shown that humor can also be used to withdraw from connection through the deflection of conflict (De Koning and Weiss 2002; Heavy, Christensen, and Malamuth 1995). The joke about ‘U-haul lesbians’ functions in both reparative and detrimental ways by transmuted queer shame whilst also avoiding a direct confrontation with the potentially harmful effects of merger.

## What is Codependency?

Codependency is a term employed within developmental psychology, family therapy, self-help literature, and social work clinical practice. It enjoys popular use as a colloquialism in online groups hosted by YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. Codependency is defined somewhat ambiguously in the above-mentioned arenas, sometimes in conflation with alcoholism, in particular, and addiction more broadly. Broader still, it may be used to refer to relational dynamics involving any condition requiring non-reciprocal caregiving and uneven power dynamics in interpersonal partnerships and family systems. It is used interchangeably as a didactic tool, a psychological concept, and a feature of mental illness (Morgan 1991). The term has also been contested as unscientific and as lacking in “any systematic research basis” (McGrath and Oakley 2012, 53). Jeane Harper and Connie Capdevila (1990) suggest that “[c]odependency is so conceptually complex . . . that it would require four separate DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] categories to contain it, combining characteristics found in Alcoholism, and the Dependent, Borderline, and Histrionic Personality Disorders, as well as an additional category made up of ‘associated features’” (289). Nevertheless, the working definition that I employ is akin to Michael McGrath

and Barbara Ann Oakley's (2012), who suggest that, "it might be better to conceptualize codependency as dysfunctional behaviors to identify, rather than [as] a disorder to diagnose" (54). For the purposes of this essay, I am interested in the affective factors that influence maladaptive behaviors contributing to relational dysfunction that may be categorized as codependent.

## Codependency v. Interdependence

Codependency comprises a set of relational conditions (including self-neglect, caregiving and power struggle) that produces affects of emotional disconnection, and is differentiated from interdependent relations that otherwise facilitate emotional connection. Nicole LePera's (@the.holistic.psychologist, 2020) definition of codependency points to the theme of self-neglect directly, stating that "codependency is the chronic neglect of self in order to gain approval, love, validation, or self identity through another person." LePera's position builds on an earlier body of psychology literature proposing a set of diagnostic criteria for codependency, in which self-neglect is featured as the core concept around which related characteristics are organized (Hughes-Hammer, Martsof and Zeller 1998). Unlike interdependence, codependency prevents emotional connection through mutual self-denial in a sacrifice of individual experience for an image of togetherness. The problem is not necessarily the sacrifice or the caregiving, but the chronic self-neglect with which self-sacrifice and care are performed. Maintenance of a codependent bond requires at least one party who prioritizes the needs of others over their own, which produces the affect of psychic merger wherein individual needs are misrecognized. Codependency has been described as a relation of "compulsive caring" (Weegmann 2006, 36) in reference to John Bowlby's (1980a) writing on attachment and loss, in which a relationship between compulsive care and projection is implied. Bowlby writes, "Because a compulsive caregiver seems to be attributing to the cared-for all the sadness and neediness that he is unable or unwilling to recognise in himself, the cared-for person can be regarded as standing vicariously for the one giving the care" (156). Partners in a codependent relation are co-conspirators in the construction of a façade of intimacy. In this dynamic of relating we escape together, projecting our hopes and fears on to our love object in a vain attempt at connection fuelled by fantasy. This act of projection is a boundary violation that ignores the possibility of differences of opinion, values, ideals, goals, and even personality traits between partners. Boundaries enable emotional connection, and without them, we may be dating our own fantasies. Writing on psychoanalytic views of lesbian and bisexual women, Beverly Burch (1997) writes, "[t]he theme of merger is related to the theme of attachment and intimacy but has another dimension to it, the loss

of individual boundaries. Attachment and autonomy are not mutually exclusive, but merger and autonomy sometimes are” (91). It is important to emphasize here that merger and codependency are not always characterized as synonymous in the sense that merger is sometimes understood to occur in both helpful and harmful expressions. For instance, Burch uses the term “progressive merger” to refer to interdependent relating, which ultimately highlights the ambiguity of the trope of lesbian merger. Harmful merger is, therefore, closer to the psychopathological definition of codependency in that it entails self-neglect through the failure to maintain individual boundaries.

## Codependency, Addiction and Fantasy

Codependency has long been characterized in self-help literature as a kind of love addiction or interpersonal addiction (Wright and Wright 1991). On this view, codependent relations can be understood to be in line with Robert Firestone’s (1993) formulation of addictive attachments and fantasy bonds, and particularly in relation to what he outlines as the second category of fantasy involvement, which includes individuals who

utilize real events as a means of reinforcing or ‘feeding’ their most prized fantasies, and value form over substance in interpersonal relationships. For example, in a destructive, addictive attachment, fantasy-bonded individuals place a strong emphasis on ritual or role-determined responses, such as the Saturday-night date, sleeping together, routine sex, and formalities such as remembering birthdays and anniversaries, etc. At the same time, they may treat each other indifferently or disrespectfully. Indeed, a fantasy bond is a destructive type of relationship in which elements of self-parenting are projected and reciprocated to the detriment of both participants. There is a desperate holding on to the other person, with a corresponding lack of genuine relatedness. (341-342)

Codependency is not necessarily experienced as an addiction to a person. Rather, a codependent relation hinges on addiction to affects in the service of self-neglect, as in mechanisms of fantasy, denial and projection. Likening codependency to pathological altruism, McGrath and Oakley (2012) write, “[t]he self-sacrificing individual accepts the psychological and/or physical pain he endures as a necessary part of the ‘helping- others’ equation. For the pathological altruist, perhaps the pain and suffering is the goal” (59). In my view, pain and suffering may be the unconscious goal of codependent love in the sense that codependency operates

around a belief that love requires self-neglect and the eradication of boundaries between partners. It is this commingling of love and pain that is captured in the symbol of the U-haul, reflecting a dialectical fantasy that allows the simultaneous romanticization and derision of merger. In this context, I understand fantasy to refer to a form of dissociation that protects a subject from the negative affects associated with trauma. In a fantasy bond, gestures representing intimacy function to distract from the reality of disconnection. Self-neglect works well to uphold the fantasy of intimacy because, not only is it viewed as a romantic trait, but it is also commonly thought to be a feminine virtue.

## Boundaries—Navigating Sameness and Difference

How do we talk about boundaries and queer relationships without redeploying the oppressive function of psychoanalysis? Burch (1997) speaks to the history of the pathologization of lesbian relationships when she writes,

By the 1960s psychoanalysis had firmly fixed lesbian relationships in one stage or another of dire pathology. For example, Charles Socarides (1968) wrote that lesbian relationships are characterized by “hate, destructiveness, mutual defeat, exploitation of the partner and the self, oral-sadistic incorporation, aggressive onslaughts, attempts to alleviate anxiety and a pseudo-solution to the aggressive and libidinal urges which dominate and torment the individual.” (89)

A central feature of the psychoanalytic symptomology of lesbian merger that has effectively been used to delegitimize “same-sex” love is a lack of boundaries between partners. Traditionally, psychoanalysts have suggested that the recognition of difference is a condition for “real” desire, whereas same-sex relationships are deemed narcissistic and lacking in self/other boundaries on account of gender sameness (Burch 1997; O’Connor and Ryan 1993; Warner 1990). The dialectical fantasy of u-hauling that appeals to ambitions of heteronormativity whilst also commending queer failure draws from this discursive history as it both incorporates and rejects the psychoanalytic claim that lesbian “sameness” is characteristic of the failure to achieve heterosexuality.

The psychoanalytic tendency to employ the language of sameness and difference to pathologize queer desire has been scrutinized by queer and feminist thinkers. Sara Ahmed (2006) discusses the “fantasy of lesbian merger” in *Queer Phenomenology*. She writes that “[t]he very idea of women desiring women because of ‘sameness’ relies on a fantasy that women are ‘the same.’ Such a fantasy is also played out in the psychoanalytic approaches to ‘lesbian merger’—in the idea that

women, when they tend toward each other as objects of desire, tend to lose any sense of difference” (95). Maggie Nelson (2015), in her autobiographical text, *The Argonauts*, comments in a similar vein:

One of the most annoying things about hearing the refrain “same-sex marriage” over and over again is that I don’t know many—if any—queers who think of their desire’s main feature as being “same-sex.” It’s true that a lot of lesbian sex writing from the ’70s was about being turned on, and even politically transformed, by an encounter with sameness. This encounter was, is, can be, important, as it has to do with seeing reflected that which has been reviled, with exchanging alienation or internalized revulsion for desire and care. To devote yourself to someone else’s pussy can be a means of devoting yourself to your own. But whatever sameness I’ve noted in my relationships with women is not the sameness of Woman, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy. (44–45)

The psychoanalytic rubric of desire that employs sameness and difference relies on an essentialist gender binary that falls apart when confronted with the countless possible expressions and experiences of queer identities, relations and desires. In “Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality?” Michael Warner (1990) critiques Freud’s assertion that homosexuality is a form of narcissism by interrogating the absurdity of the psychoanalytic claim that a subject has failed to distinguish self from other when they desire a member of the “same sex.” His critique identifies and problematizes Freud’s commitment to maintaining a categorical binary between identification and attachment that corresponds to subject and object, male and female. Warner’s analysis illustrates how the psychoanalytic record enforces the gender binary to pathologize queerness and uphold heterosexism. Ahmed (2006) further suggests that the psychoanalytic formulation of lesbian relationships as lacking by virtue of gender sameness serves to elevate “the concepts of separation and autonomy that secure the masculine and heteronormative subject as a social and bodily ideal” (95–96). It also secures interpersonal boundaries within the domain of normativity, which implies that functional relationships for women require a cis-masculine counterpart.

Psychoanalysis as a regulatory device might be understood as a vehicle through which autonomy, self-sovereignty (and by association, individual boundaries) are weaponized to uphold neoliberal societal values, with the effect of undercutting collectivist community building and feminist calls to widen the social safety net. Ranjana Khanna (2003) asserts the importance of understanding psycho-

analysis as a theory of nationalism rooted in colonial histories of anthropology and archaeology because this perspective “allows us to see it as an exemplary document of the modern European moment that gave rise to narratives of nationhood and selfhood that are today so much a part of internal imaginaries that colonials and postcolonials alike cannot think of selfhood entirely independently of psychoanalysis” (100). It is clear that separation and autonomy are upheld by psychoanalysis through the construction of selfhood and self-sovereignty. In this sense, boundaries are also, arguably, representative of whiteness and ability, as they are wielded against collectivism and horizontality. A firm boundary between white, heteronormative, able-bodied subjects and racialized, queer, disabled others maintains hegemonic white supremacy, individualism and heteronormativity. To divide and separate is the work of inflexible boundaries. However, a complete lack of boundaries may also present barriers to liberation for queer, disabled and racialized subjects, insofar as affects of self-neglect are produced in the absence of boundaries. We cannot be free if we are entangled in bonds requiring self-neglect disguised as love and care. Part of the problem with the psychoanalytic understanding of lesbian desire is that it genders autonomy, and, thus, boundaries as masculine and closeness, or merger, as feminine. If we are to refute the ways in which psychoanalysis maintains white, hetero masculine ideals, it is important to avoid any essentialist assumptions that conflate dysfunctional relations with the feminine. In other words, autonomy and closeness are not mutually exclusive, and boundaries can be used to disrupt connection as often as they may be tools that enhance connection. In the symbol of the U-haul, we can see the disruption of the possibility of interdependence in the implications of both rugged individualism and merger, producing affects that may cast the appearance of connection but that functionally facilitate escapism.

## Depathologizing Codependency

Some theorists writing about feminist care ethics have espoused the values of interdependence by problematizing the dichotomy of individuation v. relationality, and refuting the traditional definitions of autonomy and care as mutually exclusive or oppositional (Gilligan 1989; Keller 1997; Meyers 1987). Jean Keller (1997) has advocated for the utility of dialogical thinking around this binary, explaining that autonomy depends on the development of self-respect, which emerges from positive social connections. Other theorists have refuted the pathologization of codependency by defending emotional intimacy as a strength and an indicator of well-being (Collins 1993; Granello and Beamish 1998; Malloy and Berkery 1993; Sloven 1992). These arguments attempt to construe codependency as a relation of emotional connection that has been needlessly pathologized in an

effort to rebut the misogynous implications of literature that blames women as the enablers of addicted spouses or that pathologizes their care as symptomatic but no less essential to the nature of femininity. Gail Malloy and Ann Berkery (1993) cite a paradigm of connectedness to argue for the Growth in Connection model, which emphasizes healing relational dysfunction through relationship rather than by denouncing empathy and self-sacrifice as pathological traits of codependency. Similarly, Barbara Collins (1993) uses self-in-relation theory to critique the concept of codependency, suggesting that this construct does not provide a useful framework for intervention because it is disempowering to women. Robert Weiss (2019) offers a critique of codependency as a deficit-based model for recovery for partners of sex addicts, suggesting a strengths-based model which he calls prodependence. He writes that, “Prodependence, as a strength-based attachment-driven model, views loved ones of addicts as heroes for continuing to love and continuing to remain attached despite the debilitating presence of addiction” (179). Weiss re-frames the behavioral characteristics associated with codependency as virtues rather than deficits. The above-mentioned formulations intervene into earlier psychoanalytic theories, like Freud’s (1949) theory of sexuality, which shame women for the attributes with which they are socialized. These are important interventions, and they may also, inadvertently, contribute to denial about the possibility of dysfunction in the ways connection can sometimes be pursued. In other words, a fantasy of belonging can be seen in arguments that frame codependency as intimacy, and self-neglect as heroic or virtuous. When advocating for the value of mutuality it is important to distinguish interdependence from codependency, lest our advocacy be leveraged in the service of denial and the perpetuation of harm. Codependency may be conceptually problematic as a diagnostic category, but we are gaslighting ourselves and others when implying that relations built on shame, fantasy and martyrdom are akin to interdependence.

## Fantasy and Systemic Oppression

Relations that are upheld by escapist fantasy and self-neglect highlight a relation of what Berlant (2011) calls “cruel optimism” in the story of lesbian merger. Berlant suggests that the fantasy of ‘the good life’ perpetuates an attachment to an oppressive state by distracting subjects from the ongoing crisis of attrition produced through neoliberal policies and ideologies. There is an addictive quality in relations of cruel optimism, which can be seen in the pursuit of a harmful attachment de-

spite the ways in which it impedes our “flourishing” (Berlant 2011, 1). Following Berlant, subjects are, arguably, fantasy bonded to the state in cycles of addiction to self-neglect, bound by what Ahmed (2004) calls “national love,” an uneven power dynamic masked by the rhetoric of patriotism. Ahmed writes,

Indeed, the impossibility that love can reach its object may also be what makes love powerful as a narrative... Even though love is a demand for reciprocity, it is also an emotion that lives with the failure of that demand often through an intensification of its affect... So the failure of the nation to “give back” the subject’s love works to increase the investment in the nation. (130–131)

In the case of lesbian merger and codependency, attachment is intensified by systemic neglect, producing desires for state-sanctioned forms of intimacy. We may participate in the romance of homonormativity, as in, the act of u-hauling, while internalizing the neglect of family and institutional systems, and this produces ambivalence in our attachments at both interpersonal and systemic levels.

Jasbir Puar (2007) reflects on Ahmed’s discussion of national love to explain the concept of homonationalism, stating that

unrequited love keeps multicultural (and also homonormative) subjects in the folds of nationalism, while xenophobic and homophobic ideologies and policies fester... [w]hile the good (straight) ethnic has been... folded into life, for several decades now, the (white) homonormative is a more recent entrant of this benevolence (civil rights and market) that produces affective be/longing that never fully rewards its captives yet nonetheless fosters longing and yearning as affects of nationalism. (26–32)

Puar is describing the fantasy of a benevolent state that fuels the abuse of a neo-liberal agenda on racialized and queer others. Perhaps resistance mobilization is not unlike recovery from addiction and codependency in the sense that the ability to identify and interrogate our fantasies may have far-reaching political implications for resistance movements, as much as it may support interpersonal wellness. Moreover, the trauma of oppression produces affects proximal to self-neglect, like shame and worthlessness, in and between oppressed subjects as an affective safeguard that protects the hope for a better life.

## U-hauling as a Queer Fantasy

Sara Ahmed (2010) writes, “[t]he obstacle to desire... performs a psychic function in preserving the fantasy that getting what you want would make you happy” (32). In the case of codependency, love is misrecognized as both happiness and self-neglect. In codependent relations, we think we desire what is actually the obstacle to our desire, and a relation of cruel optimism is the result. When u-haul-

ing, we may be projecting a fantasy of belonging without the awareness that it is, in fact, a fantasy. The figure of the U-haul carries the affects of this fantasy, and operates as a thinly veiled metaphor of codependency that contributes to undermining connection and well-being, interpersonally and collectively. This fantasy of belonging has become both the obstacle to desire and the desire itself, producing an experience of love commingled with relational trauma that reinforces a familiar experience for oppressed subjects: a lived reality of, what Berlant calls “the new crisis ordinary.”

For oppressed subjects, the crisis of attrition and state-sanctioned violence is a routine occurrence from which fantasies of belonging may provide a welcome distraction. I am suggesting that this fantasy extends from the macro into the micro, resulting in affects of interpersonal codependencies that produce emotional disconnection. The ways in which oppression can impact relationships between oppressed subjects has serious and far-reaching implications for collective struggles for liberation. Interrogating our personal and collective fantasies of belonging is necessary for both personal recovery and collective resistance. Fantasy can be adaptive, supportive and creative, but it can also be a dissociative mechanism that keeps us attached to dysfunctional systems and relationships that perpetuate disempowerment and compromise our well-being.

## Conclusion

The stories of u-hauling, codependency, and lesbian merger continue to affect our relationships, communities and resistance struggles. In some ways, these stories affirm experiences of love at intersections of trauma, addiction, and oppression. In other ways, they may undermine these very experiences. In my view, the story of lesbian u-hauling represents a queer fantasy of belonging that encourages affects of self-neglect and contributes to experiences of codependency. Codependency produces affects related to fantasy, like projection and denial, as defenses against negative affects, like shame and worthlessness, with potentially detrimental outcomes. The affective complexity produced by systemic trauma that is woven into our queer love stories works to normalize the romanticization of painful attachments. Lesbian relationality should be theorized in a manner that attends to a dialectic between emotional attachments born out of resilience and the residual trauma these kinds of attachments may affect.

The psychoanalytic fantasy of lesbian merger and the psychopathology of codependency has been resisted by queer, feminist, and critical theorists. Critical approaches that interrogate the oppressive function of psychoanalysis often fail to adequately validate the potential detriments of fantasy bonds and addictive relationships, circumventing an important conversation about the impacts of systemic trauma on the quality of connection between oppressed people. A critique of psychoanalysis should acknowledge its contributions to queer trauma, whilst not discounting the effects of trauma on relational dysfunction and mental health outcomes. Those working to improve the lives of queer and marginalized communities in resistance, including theorists, clinicians and community workers, must resist the violence of hegemonic oppression that is realized through psychopathology, *and* work to address the affective reverberations of this oppression within our interpersonal relationships and communities. Wherever possible, we need to emotionally divest from that which impedes our flourishing as individuals and communities, and recognize that emotional awareness can function as a foundation from which to organize, mobilize and resist oppressive systems.

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REVIEW:

*ART IMMERSIF, AFFECT ET  
ÉMOTION AND ÉMERSIVITÉ  
DU CORPS EN ALERTE*



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Boisclair, L. (2019). *Art immersif affect et émotion (L'expérientiel 1)*. Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 240pp., \$27.00 (paperback).

Boisclair, L. (2020). *Émersivité du corps en alerte (L'expérientiel 2)*. Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 192pp., \$22.00 (paperback).

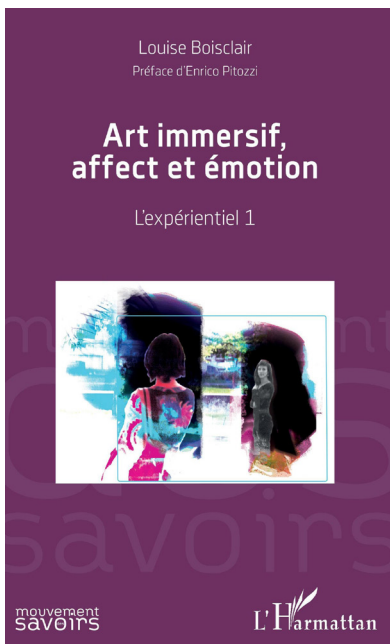
2019 and 2020 have been productive years for Montreal-based art critic Louise Boisclair: She has published twin book projects, respectively titled *Art immersif, affect et émotion (L'expérientiel 1)* and *Émersivité du corps en alerte (L'expérientiel 2)*. Both books are devoted to unpacking what takes place during an event of experience, with the former focusing on immersive art installations, and the latter on limit situations where the human body finds itself in a state of emergency. The degree of coherence across the two books is high, with them sharing in

philosophical references and conceptual concerns. Readers of process philosophy and affect theory will find themselves at home amongst the references; thinkers such as Spinoza, William James, Daniel Stern, and A.N. Whitehead provide the groundwork for Boisclair's project.

These two books are published in the French language with Éditions L'Harmattan. The English title of *L'expérientiel 1*, should it ever be translated, would be *Immersive Art, Affect and Emotion*. The book provides first-person accounts of the author's embodied experience of seven different immersive art installations. Boisclair's text intentionally sidesteps questions of national culture and art history to enter the phenomenological fray where these artworks make meaning through their affecting of participatory bodies. *L'expérientiel 1* features eloquent first-person descriptions of works such as Erin Manning and Nathaniel Stern's cinnamon-based gallery experiment, *Weather Patterns: The Smell of Red*; Julius Horsthuis' *Illusions & Cryogenian* and Dustyn Lucas' *Pluroma*, which were projected in the Société des arts technologiques' 360° video-projection dome called the Satsosphere; Kitsou Dubois' gravity-defying *Vols paraboliques*; and the Sense-Lab's recreation of Lygia Clark's balloon environment, amongst others. Boisclair's vision of immersive arts is one where the body, in particular, is immersed. To advance this vision, the use of selected immersive art installations graph a taxonomy of bodies, which includes the exploratory body, the elongated body, the

suspended body, and the struggling body in her book. By drawing analogies to her training in Tai Chi, Boisclair posits these immersive installations' reconfiguration of the body as harboring the transformational potential for people to leave them with a different feeling than they entered.

The centrality of the body across *L'expérientiel 1 & 2* provides a locus point around which discussions of affect and emotion circulate. One of the strengths of Boisclair's mode of exposition is the close attention that she pays to competing theories of affect and emotion. Her work is sensitive to the differences between these terms and *L'expérientiel 1* goes to significant lengths to maintain their unique denotations. In arguably

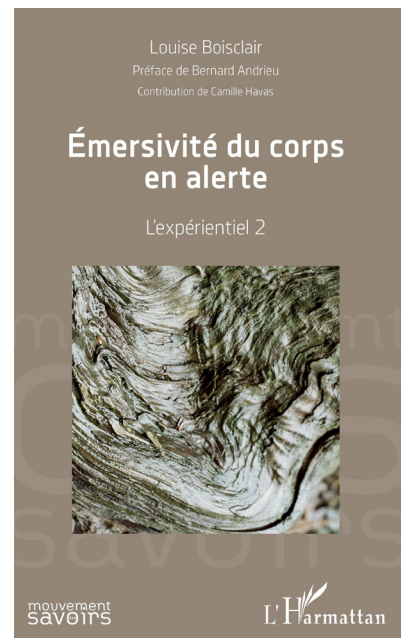


the book's most remarkable moment, Boisclair stages interviews with a number of theorists-artists such as Andrew Goodman, Jonas Fritsch, and Lorella Abenavoli on this distinction between the terms. In brief, these interviews bring to the fore the notion that affect is a prepersonal intensity, whereas emotions are personal, subjectively qualified feelings.

This distinction is important to maintain since the terms are regularly used interchangeably (in some occasions due to an absence of technical precision, but other times deliberately, as in the psychological models of Silvan Tomkins), even though it is what cleaves much of the humanities scholarship on the topic. One lineage, coming through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and leading back to Freud, is concerned with gendered emotions and finds its present-day articulations in the work of women's studies scholars such as Lauren Berlant and Ann Cvetkovich, amongst many others. The other tradition of affect theory circles around the work of Brian Massumi and leads back to Spinoza, primarily through Deleuze.

*L'expérientiel 1* and *2*'s chosen reference points make clear that Boisclair is working in the lineage of Brian Massumi's approach to affect theory, and Massumi's 2011 *Semblance and Event* appears here as the fountain from which the project's line of development springs. Nevertheless, she opts to place affect and emotion on an experiential continuum. Her writing is keen to valorize what internalized emotions stirred up by immersive artworks may contribute to the eventful ecologies in which they take place. One of the book's strong suits is its willingness to keep an eye on both the affective and emotional poles of immersive art. Boisclair's stylistic choice to detail her experiences interacting with each of the works in a story-retelling format gives insight into the emotional states produced, all the while remaining cognizant not to reduce the impersonality of an event to its personal effects. *L'expérientiel 1* is indeed written "between" affect and emotion.

Water metaphors abound in this liminal zone, tying the book together, with kinetic chapter titles such as "On the dock" and "To Navigate and Dive" that evoke of the author's practice of



moving with the affective currents put into play by the immersive arts. Through this aquatic subtext, the two books find their through-line, where the human body takes part in an oceanic body of vitality affects between infant and caregiver. Such is the principal image of *L'expérientiel 2. Emersivity of the body on alert*, the second of the two books maintains a dual concern with affect and emotion, but this time in situations where the human body is in danger. The title is a play on words between emergence and immersion, and it provides phenomenological analyses of bodies in states of emergence/emergency. The image which stands out the most is Boisclair's intimate description of her close family member's severely premature newborn's struggle to survive in prenatal care over the span of twelve tedious weeks. Through close attention to the vitality affects present in this clinical scene, Boisclair uses C.S. Peirce's theory of first, second, and thirdness to account for how the extreme limits of embodiment can come to signification.

*L'expérientiel 2* is the more intimate of the two books, and the case studies share a close affinity to the author's life. Boisclair devotes considerable space to discussing a terrible fall that she took one icy winter in Montreal, in addition to her long history of practicing Tai-Chi. Each of these scenes of the body in a state of emergency provide fertile ground for Boisclair to deploy her semiotic and affective analyses. If there is a shortcoming to her method, it is that by focusing so intently on the body, the psyche – and all of the unconscious questions it raises – disappears. And yet perhaps this is one of the project's aims: to discover such 'mindful' conditions of corporeal movement whereby the mind is no longer noticeable, and it quietly dissolves, as if in the midst of an advanced Tai-Chi exercise.

Readers who are new to affect theory will find the glossaries at the end of each book to be helpful resources. I could see a number of these glossary entries being useful for pedagogical purposes, especially in a French-language undergraduate classroom.

REVIEW:

*EMBODIED COMPUTING:  
WEARABLES, IMPLANTABLES,  
EMBEDDABLES, INGESTIBLES*



Johnny Gainer

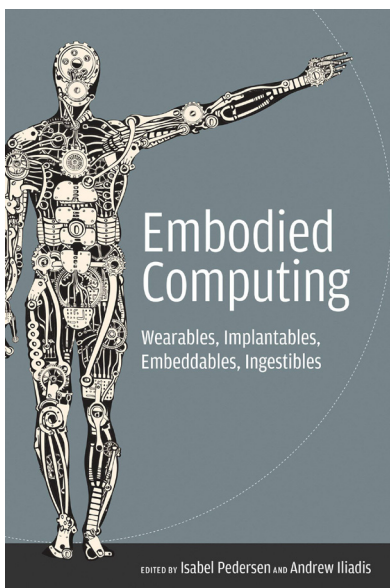
Pedersen, I. & Iliadis, A. eds. (2020). *Embodied Computing: Wearables, Implantables, Embeddables, Ingestibles*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 288pp., \$35.00 (paperback).

During my communications course for undergraduate mechanical engineers, students must consider the diverse engineering realities that guide the material and technological worlds where their material creations will dwell. The assignments primarily focus on rhetoric imbued within the machines they create, but also the interrelationships between machine/body and the forces/networks that exist largely outside of their control. As the students develop prototypical nanotechnology, 3D printed prosthetics, or proposals for smart monitoring systems, discussions arise over how their designs shape how we as humans with technology move, communicate, and think.

Isabel Pederson and Andrew Iliadis' book *Embodied Computing Wearables, Implantables, Embeddables, Ingestibles* is a timely collection of essays that expands upon many of the issues my students are working through, specifically in relation to what it means to blend the self with digital technologies. Questions related to

my class arise in the book, such as: What is the relationship between what is worn, implanted, embedded, or ingested and the human body? How does a person opt, bodily, into networks of digital platforms? What affordances are created for the individual from extracted user data? The ten chapters of Pederson and Illiadis' book can be read as a collective approach to uncovering what bodily impacts and capacities may arise in the encounter with the ever-evolving ambient, seamless, and unnoticeable devices surrounding us, upon us, or inside us. The potential the book holds for critical and creative intervention surrounding the creation, implementation, and use of these devices is essential for those working in the field of affect studies, STS, design studies, and communication.

Whether it is the early, tactile use of wearables between footwear and toes (Genosko's chapter "The Big Toe's Resistance to Smart Rehabilitations") or contemporary data extraction from electively implanted technology (Warwick's chapter "Cyborg Experiments and Hybrid Beings"), the chapters in the book focus on wearable design that removes the distinction between that which separates human from machine. The design of engineered wearable, pervasive, and sensitive devices have elements of naturalization so that the user may forget the device all together. Through time spent using, the felt presence of the device disappears; it is simply a part of the wearer, increasingly enmeshed with human bodies under the guise that the device will lead to better health and more economic efficiency.



While many have addressed the increasing presence of these wearable devices, few have attempted to go further in extracting the individuating nature that the data from these human-machine assemblages can create. This book is useful for how it revitalizes the critical conceptualizations that surround the subject of wearable technology and for how it turns toward different ways of embracing *embodiment*. As a view from within the human-machine assemblage, the book guides the reader to how we got here, "how the body is imposed upon to become a platform across a series of technologies that are increasingly interdependent" (46). This underly-

ing theme of codependence in the book turns its focus to the networked nature of these devices – the intensities and connections lying below the individual, including precognitive functions.

The editors' individual chapters pair nicely to develop a conceptual framework for *embodiment* that weaves ostensibly frictionless information with material conditions. Iliadis' chapter "Computer Guts and Swallowed Sensors: Ingestibles Made Palatable in an Era of Embodied Computing" lays the groundwork for how to critically approach phenomenological experience with devices that are "at once embodied through computational materiality and, more importantly, passively embodied in the user's enhanced body" (34). The data extracted from the smart pills that you swallow to measure blood levels or from a camera used in surgery to introduce literal gut reactions produces "visceral data" that is collected (34). This visceral data, in turn, governs the self externally through "biomedia," processing information that would attune to and create metrics rooted in everyday experience.

What becomes of this body-as-media? What happens when the supposed inside can be manipulated from the apparent outside? What happens to the relation of inside/outside itself? While a pill, or any embedded device, inside/on/near you is often packaged as a "neutral" entity, they in fact work in relation to biopolitical hierarchies that create limits and potentials within the mix of human and non-human networks. Pederson's chapter identifies these connected "nodes" of power as platforms or "subjects as mechanisms in larger dataspheres" (49). Whether it is the active choice to use devices and apps that help with monitoring substance abuse, implants that make everything from buying products quicker/easier or the conscious choice to decrease the use of a particular technology, this all implies a desire to be a "blended body": an extended mediated realm of data and flesh.

As the chapters cover a range of devices through ethnographic and historic methods, they take seriously the messy notion of mixing data and flesh, through embodied or "body-affixed" (12) and body-centered technologies by "identifying and tracing the agential capacities, affects, and vitalities that give meaning and power to them at the level of everyday mundane practices" (67). Lupton's chapter "Wearable Devices: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Agential Capacities" considers how this increasingly familiar moment of human/machine becoming is attributed to a device's "thing-power" (76). When the numbers on our smartwatches look good, we tend to respond by feeling good. Wearing the device feels right, powerful. At the same time there is increased anxiety and concern over the "ha-

bitual” and “ritualistic” nature of using and sharing too much, so much so that “non-use wearables” have been developed by activists in order to pre-empt ‘using’ as a form of active resistance (142). The focus here is that embodied computing exists through new forms of individual value: a value that places the quantified self within an embedded matrix of other connected nodes for purposes of data collection, whether you are a user or not.

The book effectively recognizes that these lively forces, these human-machine assemblages of sensors and flesh, require a continuously emerging labor of making-sense of the data by recognizing the relational power extends beyond our control. Users in this sense must take on the load of “sensing, computing, energizing, storing (data), transmitting, and hosting a network, with a seemingly infinite capacity for expansion” (47). The affordances that are seemingly given to a user need to be paired with what is hidden or taken away from the human-machine relationship. The book’s chapters remind us that the body is an interface, and so our embodied lives, our digital footprint, take on new meaning as they “extend beyond the fleshly envelope into the environment, and the environment likewise colonizes their bodies” (67).

As humans, our immersion within sensing, prodding, poking, and glitchy environments imposes on us as we impose upon them. For me, one of the critical arguments of the book is that it doesn’t matter whether you are a user or a non-user, you cannot fully opt-out of the affordances that digital environments allow. As Jethani’s chapter “Doing Time in the Home-Space: Ankle Monitors, Script Analysis, and Anticipatory Methodology” illustrates, the embodied experience of house arrest through tamper-proof electronic monitoring can drastically alter a “users” concept of personal space and time (157). In this case, as a user, your ability to familiarize yourself with your material surroundings are conditioned by where bodies are permitted to go. Whether it is bodily comportment or data extraction, the embodied assemblages of human-machine technology fundamentally shape the political potential of what it means to be an active agent in the world.

These assemblages offered in the book of messy and clean, dirty and smooth, reveal the ways that the many desires of techno futures have come together to build the drive for increasingly seamless, constant connection. In the chapters, a recurring question is: what do people make of their blended and alive data sets? Critical scholarship such as this must recognize the internal and external, the

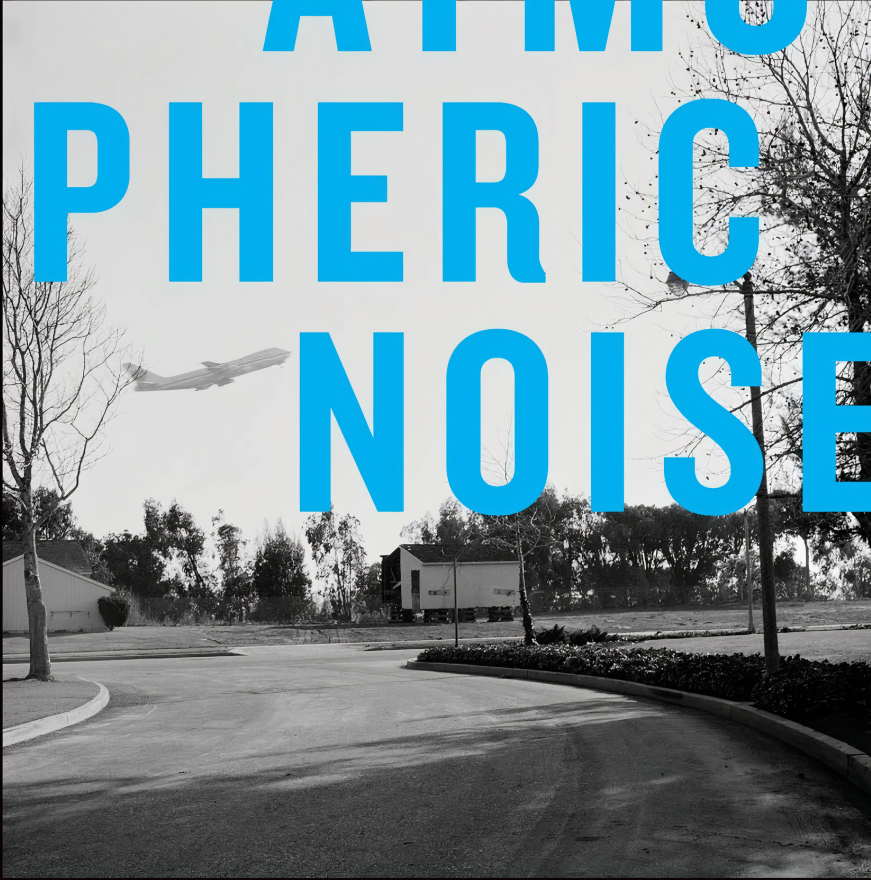
social and material conditions that guide our understandings of technological innovation and implementation. What lessons can be tangibly drawn to address the emerging ontologies of our present and future?

With this in mind, the book refuses to entertain any sort of luddite approach that would imagine we can somehow avoid these human-machine relationships. Instead, the chapters offer a critical understanding of embodied computing as always present, an always-already blended body. Ultimately, we are all cyborgs (Warwick's chapter "Cyborg Experiments and Hybrid Beings" is especially useful for considering the limits of individuality and varying degrees of becoming *cyborg*); from using a pencil to hearing aids, to non-medical body-modifications using RFID chips, the linking of human and embodied machine has always been the case. Ultimately, because this collection never swerves from an engagement with the potentiality that exists within these embodied forms of being, the reader is given a sense of hope, hope for more feeling, more capacities, more affordances for blending thought and bodily experiences with other humans/animalia/things.

Overall, I found reading the book prompted me to engage more fully with my students by highlighting the sites of power that arise over the course of our own labors. I found myself pushing them about *how* they wanted to encourage embodied design. As critically engaged designers of things in the world, there is a realization of power implicitly granted to the student engineer as designer. When an individual meets with their device, how will the code influence actions? How will the algorithms perform? How will the design comport them digitally? With the diverse author backgrounds, varying methodologies, and the critical return to body-centered computing, this collection lays the groundwork for what will inevitably be even more questions surrounding these devices and policies of implementation, questions that will impact us in reconfigured and deeply connected environments.

THE  
INDEFINITE  
URBANISM  
OF  
LOS ANGELES

ATMO-  
SPHERIC  
NOISE



MARINA  
PETERSON

REVIEW:

*ATMOSPHERIC NOISE:  
THE INDEFINITE URBANISM  
OF LOS ANGELES*



Alican Koc

Peterson M. (2021). *Atmospheric Noise: The Indefinite Urbanism of Los Angeles*. Durham: Duke University Press, 256pp., \$26.00.

As I sit in my living room writing this review, I try to listen attentively to the noises of the busy Montréal intersection that I live by. Aside from the usual traffic, there's the buzz of construction sounds—an omnipresent local soundtrack in which infrastructure resonates with municipal corruption and serves as a cacophonous sonic background to the city's lurid history of organized crime. There's the muted whine of the man on the corner across the street who shouts quick, indecipherable bursts at passersby on days when the weather isn't too cold. The bars and clubs on our block have been shut down following the latest wave of COVID, hushing the usual sounds of partying undergrads with a haunting and sterile silence. This silence is only broken by a car on our street whose alarm seems to have recently broken, causing it to set off at random intervals throughout the day, and also at unholy hours of the morning—which incites a variety of unspoken destructive fantasies involving bricks and sledgehammers. Noise most certainly annoys, as they say, but it also creates atmospheres that lend an affective texture to life as lived, and imbue spaces with a rich sense of local identity.

The concept of atmosphere has become something of a hot topic in a great deal of affect studies related scholarship of late. This work is typically characterized by a general sense that atmospheres have developed a particular salience in social life over the past few decades. Yet the scholarship encompasses a vast array of different fields, methodologies, theories, and timelines seeking to explain exactly how and why this happened. From the perspective of aesthetics, for example, atmospheres can be understood as a symptom of the conditions of late consumer capitalism and its advanced marketing techniques, or they can serve as a useful tool to understand how aesthetic experience is curated into ontological categories in the hyperaccelerated cultural production of digital media. In cultural geography on the other hand, atmospheres may be used to highlight collective affects emanating from specific sites, instilling them with an immaterial sense of coherence. Situated at the crossroads of sound studies, anthropology, and urban studies, Marina Peterson's new book *Atmospheric Noise: The Indefinite Urbanism of Los Angeles* (2021), explores the atmospheric liminal spaces between sonic ecologies, infrastructure, technology, and urban development. Approaching the study of atmospheres from a more ecological perspective, influenced by the work of Peter Sloterdijk, Peterson focuses on the issue of airplane noise in Los Angeles. She situates the growing concern around noise pollution in the 1960s and 1970s within the broader context of atmospheric discourses pertaining to phenomena as wide-ranging as nuclear threat, environmentalism, smog, postmodernism, "the dematerialization of the art object," and "systems thinking...anchored in cybernetics or 'ecology'" (6).

What is particularly interesting about Peterson's approach to atmosphere is the way in which the concept serves as more of a method than an object of theoretical concern. Explicitly eschewing formal definitions of her terms, Peterson instead uses concepts such as atmosphere, noise, and annoyance "as a means of attending to materiality in motion" (9). The result is a glitchy and improvisational work that formally reproduces the diffuseness, indeterminacy, and slipperiness of her object of study. With a musician's ear and an ethnographer's attention to detail, Peterson's acoustic ethnography drifts freely across sandy beaches, abandoned neighbourhoods, and roach-infested municipal archives, occasionally pausing to record the sound of the wind, to Google the sounds of frightened chickens, and to watch the El Segundo blue butterflies "flittin' around" (179). Admittedly, the book's organization can feel a little bit chaotic at times. Most of the chapters read like a conventional ethnography, while chapter 5 takes on a more exper-

imental form with a series of Stewart-esque vignettes which Peterson refers to as “glitches,” and other chapters still “sometimes end up in a place seemingly far from where they began” (15). While these movements might otherwise give the book a somewhat disjointed feel, Peterson’s self-aware pairing of content with form, complimented by her beautifully evocative writing hold the book together with the same sense of loose materiality with which she describes the concepts of atmosphere and noise. One might thus liken *Atmospheric Noise* to the music of a band like Sonic Youth, whose inventive noise rock breezes through the avant-garde/pop divide by bringing together experimental improvisation and conventional composition.

While provocative in its form, it sometimes feels like Peterson misses the opportunity to fully engage with the some of the incredibly generative theoretical work around atmospheres—a concept which seems to slip away as quickly as it appears in the book. The figure who seems most conspicuously absent here is Gernot Böhme, the German phenomenologist who has emerged as one of the central figures in what we might refer to as the “atmospheric turn.” This seems like a deliberate choice on Peterson’s part, as Böhme’s Marxist critique of aesthetic atmospheres might seem like a far cry from the indeterminate ecological atmospheres she describes. What is particularly useful in Böhme’s thinking from the perspective of Peterson’s project however, is his theorization of the in-betweenness of atmospheres—between subject and object, absence and presence, virtual and actual, formed and forming.

Not only is Böhme’s description of the in-betweenness of atmospheres pertinent to how Peterson characterizes concepts such as atmosphere and noise, but it resonates with her notion of *indefinite urbanism*. True to Peterson’s style, the latter term loosely holds together the themes of *Atmospheric Noise*, yet is only vaguely defined in the book’s last chapter where she writes:

I use the term *indefinite urbanism* to attend to porous boundaries between that which is hard and which is airy, to edge spaces of infrastructure as effects of the interplay between sounds from the sky and sensation, considering spaced shaped by atmospheric conditions and now invisible histories as a dimension of lived urbanism. Indefinite urbanism encompasses ‘blank space...ellipsis spaces, free space, liminal spaces, spaces of indeterminacy, spaces of uncertainty, vacant lands, voids’ and ‘Dead Zones’ (Doron 2007, 10). These are areas of loss and potentiality, of desire and play, of exploration and pleasure, of control and its limits, where things that may or may not be intentional happen. They do not dissipate or smooth over but remain, complicated and ambivalent, audible yet invisible, apparent yet seemingly void, formless or unformed. At

the same time, indefinite urbanism extends beyond a particularity of edge spaces, affording the conceptualization of *a city*, an urbanism in which the openness of the indefinite does not prescribe, proscribe, or determine. Open ended, vague, undefined, or contradictory, it avoids the definitive, the definite *the*; *the* city that is modern, progressive, and growth oriented. It is the city as process, in flux: emergent, ambivalent, inconclusive, vague, a 'volumetric' 'moving' city (156-157).

Peterson never really discusses exactly what drew her to Los Angeles as an ethnographic site, aside from some mentions of the city's quality of light, pleasant climate, sprawling expanse, and relative quietness in the book's introduction. Yet, one can distinctly *feel* Los Angeles in her writing. Peterson's concept of indefinite urbanism aptly captures a vibe I caught on my first visit to L.A., of constantly feeling as if I was on the peripheries of the city, wondering to myself exactly where the city would actually begin. This is the atmosphere of *Atmospheric Noise*—a book which is every bit as sprawling, decentered, and inconclusive as the city which it describes, yet has so much to offer within its vast confines.



*Untitled*, Dids, 2020  
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"Still not as Gay as Twilight" meme, 2011  
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# “STILL NOT AS GAY AS TWILIGHT”: Postmodern Affect, Nostalgia, and Queer *Twilight* Renaissance during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

Stephenie Meyer's (2005) *Twilight* is a paranormal, young adult series chronicling the love story between 17-year-old high schooler, Bella Swan, and 104-year-old vampire, Edward Cullen. Despite *Twilight's* blatant heterosexual canon, the franchise was met with widespread homophobic backlash and was seen as girly, uncool and, hence, 'gay'. Over ten years have passed since its release, yet thousands of former and new fans are unashamedly reclaiming the saga online. Widely known as "The *Twilight* Renaissance", this unapologetic comeback (with a particular surge in popularity during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) is particularly prominent in online queer communities. Intertwining Raymond Williams' (1977) structure of feelings and Frederic Jameson's (1991) cognitive mapping, this article argues that this collective queer affect is inseparable from the neoliberal and advanced capitalist pandemic context in which it inhabits. The *Twilight* Renaissance is conceptualized as an exemplar of Butt and Millner-Larsen's (2018) queer commons, wherein queer Twihards construct a space or, in this case, fandom, in attempts to revive and repair a historically homophobic narrative. This queer comeback directly responds to the stress and uncertainties that accompany the COVID-19 pandemic.

## KEYWORDS

Affect, queer, *Twilight*, pandemic, postmodernism

Stephenie Meyer's (2005) *Twilight* is a young adult gothic romance series chronicling the love story between a cis-gendered, heterosexual adolescent female, Bella Swan, and a cis-gendered, heterosexual vampire, Edward Cullen. The saga garnered an immense fanbase, particularly because the readership was primarily teenage girls. As the *Twilight* novels and respective film adaptations were released from 2005 to 2012, however, the public reception of the saga faced a homophobic backlash. Although blatant heterosexuality is canon in *Twilight*, meaning that heterosexual relations are the official narrative in the story, the saga generated a colossal moral panic and homophobic rhetoric. Die-hard fans of *Twilight*—or, Twihards—were met with an extreme degree of unpopularity that was inherently characterized by homophobic undertones (Bernard 2017; McFarland 2013a). This anti-*Twilight* backlash transpired across social discourse, especially online meme culture. According to “Know Your Meme,” a website that catalogues viral internet memes, one of the most prominent anti-*Twilight* memes was the “Still Not as Gay as *Twilight*” meme (2011). This popularized understanding of gayness echoed homophobic connotations of “gay” being cringey, shameful and, hence, uncool (McFarland 2013a). *Twilight* was publicly branded as gay and Twihards were shamed by association.

You cannot, however, kill the undead. Against the backdrop of this mass homophobic shaming in the early 2000s, there has been a resurgence of the *Twilight* fandom across social media spaces, including Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook. Former and new fans have belatedly and unapologetically reclaimed the saga over a decade later on countless online platforms. It is widely known as the *Twilight* Renaissance (Dishmon 2018; Peterson 2019; Silva 2019). Interestingly, despite years of homophobic vilification, the *Twilight* Renaissance has been particularly prominent in online queer communities. Not only do a significant portion of these *Twilight* Renaissance fans identify as a part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and others (LGBTQ+) community, but many of the original characters in the series have been coded as queer by mass *Twilight* Renaissance members (Dishmon 2018; Silva 2019). Despite Meyer's (2005) aggressive heteronormativity, there has been a resurgent interest in ‘gayifying’ *Twilight* as a core pillar of the online *Twilight* Renaissance phenomenon. This queer comeback largely emerged in 2018 and is still prominent over a decade later in the early 2020s—with a remarkable surge at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

How, then, did *Twilight* become the queer comfort food of the COVID-19 pandemic? This paper explores the manifestations of queer collective affect during the pandemic through the *Twilight* Renaissance. This paper traces queer affective

representations by situating the *Twilight* Renaissance in the COVID-19 pandemic state. Intertwining Raymond Williams' (1977) "structure of feelings" and Frederic Jameson's (1991) "cognitive mapping," I argue that this collective queer affect is inseparable from the advanced capitalist pandemic context that it inhabits. I then conceptualize the *Twilight* Renaissance as an exemplar of Butt and Millner-Larsen's (2018) "queer commons," wherein queer Twihards construct a space or in this case, fandom, in an attempt to revive and repair a historically homophobic narrative. Finally, I explore the ways in which this queer comeback is uniquely representative of a queer coping mechanism that directly responds to the stress and uncertainties that accompany the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The Girls who Love Boys that Sparkle

From 2005 to 2008, Stephenie Meyer released the best-selling *Twilight* saga. Consisting of four novels—*Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*—the saga follows Bella Swan, an awkward and plain high schooler living in the gloomy town of Forks. Bella falls in love with and eventually marries Edward Cullen, an old school chivalrous vampire who is part of the Cullen vampire clan. Following the vast success of the novels, this gothic romance series was released in five film installments from 2008 to 2012, starring Bella (played by Kristen Stewart) and Edward (played by Robert Pattinson).

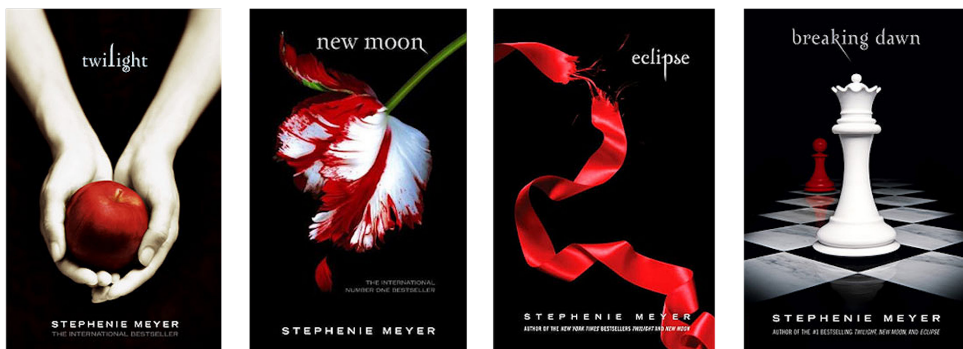


Figure 1. *Twilight* novels (Pinterest, n.d.)

Much has been written about the saga's implied metanarratives, such as Christian ideals, heteronormativity, chastity, eternal matrimony, patriarchal safety, nuclear family values, and so forth. Blatant mentions of conservative Christianity are peppered throughout the series, including the forbidden fruit imagery on the *Twilight* book cover, as well as the metaphorical representation of the impossible lovers as a lion and a lamb: "And so the lion fell in love with the lamb" (Meyer



Figure 2. Bella and Edward in the first *Twilight* film (Hardwick 2008)

2005, 274). Meyer’s focus on religious purity and virtue can be traced throughout the series and is most evident in Edward’s refusal to sleep with Bella prior to marriage, despite temptation. Flegg (2020) highlights that “Meyer’s use of Christian language (the language of white, Anglo-Saxon capitalism) reflects the way Edward and Bella view each other as holy” (19). The vampires in Meyer’s *Twilight* universe embody Christ-like qualities, such as Edward’s sparkling skin when exposed to the sun. These religious metanarratives largely draw from Meyer’s Mormon faith, which transform into values that the saga puts forth (NíFhlainn 2019; Wisker 2013). Against this backdrop of the saga’s heteronormative, Christian metanarratives, queer readers might find themselves in a space that does not represent or resonate with their experiences.

Edward’s biblical pose (Weitz, 2009)



## Faggpires, Wimps, and Vampires, Oh My! The *Twilight* Moral Panic

The ‘feminization’ of vampirism and, in particular, Meyer’s portrayal of vampires as sparkly, non-violent vegetarians who politely feed on animal blood rather than human blood sparked the *Twilight* hatred flame (Bernard 2017; Sarah Z 2021; Thomas, 2017). Edward Cullen was ridiculed for ‘feminizing’ conventional characterizations of vampirism such as the violent, monstrous traits that vampires have historically upheld. Edward Cullen and, by association Robert Pattinson, disrupted and feminized the traditional vampire figure and was hence publicly seen as wimpy and gay. Edward Cullen, with his romantic gestures, sensitive charm and coiffed hair, was branded as a *faggpire*—a f\*ggot and a vampire (Urban Dictionary 2010; Slang Define, n.d.). This homophobic anti-*Twilight* hatred flooded internet culture and was predominantly disseminated through memes. Despite Meyer’s strict heterosexual canon and Robert Pattinson’s cis-gender heterosexual identity, these memes proffered the implication that Edward Cullen and Robert Pattinson were closeted queer individuals. For instance, one meme depicts Edward Cullen perched in a tree and reads: “Edward Cullen is pale because there's no light in the closet” (Tanpuk 2010). One of the most memorable anti-*Twilight* memes is the “Still Not as Gay as *Twilight*” (2011) meme series, which dismissed homoerotic imagery and same-sex activity as incapable of ever being as gay as *Twilight*.



Figure 4. Collection of "Still not as Gay as Twilight" memes (2011)

The fact that the majority of *Twilight* fans were overwhelmingly adolescent women (Bode 2010) cannot be ignored. The invalidation and shaming of things that teenage girls enjoy is not a unique social phenomenon. As McFarland (2013a) notes, the aforesaid meme was “likely an expression of a largely male, adolescent population attempting to distance themselves from a text principally associated with femininity [and] has...more to do with a socialized contempt for all things feminine in nature” (24–25). One fan who read the books as a preteen girl recounts how her unapologetic love for the series rapidly faded into a secretive adoration due to her fear of public shaming: “Then 2010 hit and it was suddenly uncool to like *Twilight*. I think the series deserves to be critiqued but without making female fans feel guilty for enjoying it, which seems to have happened frequently when the movies came out” (Andrea as cited in Singer 2020, para. 5). Another fan similarly recounts her experience with the anti-*Twilight* backlash:

I was one of those girls who, when *Twilight* and its movies were all the rage, was in the target demographic for those things. I read the books, saw the movies with my friends, and yet to daringly say that I liked *Twilight* was something I would have never done. I was terrified of feeling judged, when as an adolescent girl I was already worried about 24/7, so to add in being publicly open about liking something that I knew would lead to hate and criticism, I kept my mouth shut. I’ve grown up now, and I know better than to care what people think of me, but when you’re a 12-year-old girl it’s harder to know that. (Martinez 2020, para. 5)

While the dismissal of fandoms is certainly not a new phenomenon, it is worth highlighting the gendered nature of this dismissal. Unlike their male counterparts, young female fans are habitually pathologized for their displays of hysteric adoration towards particular fandoms (Anderson 2012; Šesek & Pušnik 2014). According to Dare-Edwards (2018), “[n]ot only are fangirls considered to be controlled by their emotions, but their emotions are consistently devalued as trivial” (118).

Due to Edward Cullen’s perfect and chivalrous nature along with his exclusively fixated attention towards Bella, Flegg (2020) pinpoints that the *Twilight* saga represents “a fantasy of the women’s intimate public” (19) because it taps into young women’s desire. Recounting her teenage love for *Twilight*, Singer (2020) describes her specific attachment to this fantasy-formation: “Was it simply that the books captured my greatest sexual fantasy at the time, which was lying fully dressed next to a man—also fully dressed—and receiving compliments? (This fantasy holds up.)” (para. 7). In a similar fashion, another former fan asks, “What young woman doesn’t want some hot, eternally young man to be devoted to her

like no one else?” (Kristina as cited in Singer, 2020, para. 20). The dismissal of female fandoms, then, is implicitly married to a widespread discomfort with female expression of desire. With a refreshing twist, however, *Twilight* refuses to be staked despite years of homophobic anti-*Twilight* shaming during the early 2000s.

## Fandom Resuscitation: The *Twilight* Renaissance is Here and Queer

Over ten years have passed since the release of *Twilight* and yet thousands of new *Twilight* memes, blogs and posts amass on social media websites. Former and new fans are unashamedly reclaiming the *Twilight* saga online. This revival began trending on various social media websites in 2018 and has continued through the early 2020s, with a particular surge in popularity during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Widely known as the *Twilight* Renaissance, fans are resurfacing to unapologetically celebrate their love for the saga in ways that they may have previously been shamed or unable to (Dishmon 2018; Krishna 2018; Peterson 2019; Radulovic 2018). A focal pillar of this comeback is queer. Many queer fans within the *Twilight* Renaissance are ‘gayifying’ *Twilight*. In the early 2020s, *Twilight* is gay—but this time, in a good way.

One factor that may have kindled the onset of the *Twilight* Renaissance is when Kristen Stewart, the actress who played Bella in the *Twilight* film adaptations, publicly came out as bisexual in 2017 (Michelson 2017). The *Twilight* Renaissance could also be sustained by former fans resisting years of anti-*Twilight* shame with the realization that the mass anti-*Twilight* rhetoric was merely misplaced misogyny that essentially vilified the interests and desires of young women (Donaldson 2018; Peterson 2019). Another variable that might explain the fandom’s heightened activity during the pandemic is Stephenie Meyer’s release of a fifth installment to the novels. As the pandemic was burgeoning, Meyer released *Midnight Sun* (2020) in August 2020, which narrates the entirety of the original *Twilight* novel—but this time, from Edward’s point of view.

Many others argue that fans have returned to *Twilight* because of the unintentional humour, campy aesthetics and theatricality (Freedman 2020; McFarland 2013b). What was formerly vilified and shamed is now being embraced for its humorous elements. In other words, it’s so bad, it’s good. Despite the potential appeal of cringe culture, this reasoning does not definitively explain the distinct queer component that is inherent to the *Twilight* Renaissance.

What was once shamed for being too soft and gay is now being celebrated by countless queer Twilight fans. Largely on social media websites such as Tumblr, many queer Twihards have established their reclaimed presence through countless memes, posts, and blogs. Many of these posts ‘queerify’ Twilight by coding heterosexual characters as queer and by ‘shipping’ them—that is, romantically pairing—in queer ways with other characters.

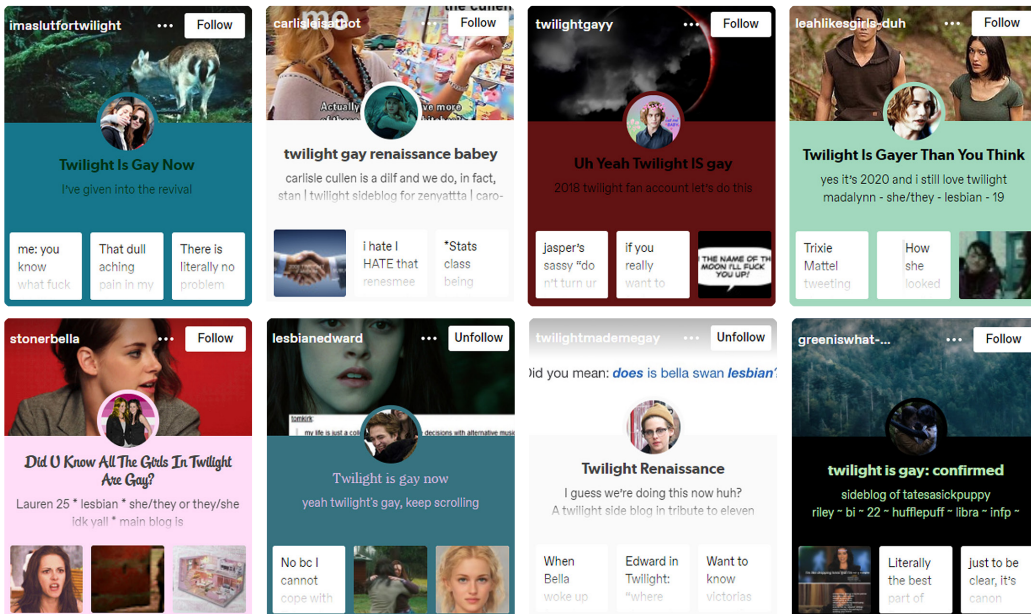


Figure 6. An assortment of queer *Twilight* renaissance blogs on Tumblr (carlisleisathot; greeniswhatgoodletsgo; imaslutfortwilight; leahlikesgirls-duh; lesbianedward; stonerbella; twilightgagy; twilightmademegay)

As many have noted, the vampire figure has traditionally been associated with queerness, particularly due to its associations with deviant sexualities, forbidden or unnatural desire, existing on the fringes of society, ‘passing’ as a human, and so forth (Auerbach 1995; Dyer 2002; Vincent 2015). *Twilight* has similarly been linked to queerness. For instance, McFarland (2013a, 2013b, 2016) highlights the ways in which *Twilight* vampires—particularly Edward Cullen—disrupt heteronormative gender roles by rejecting conventional understandings of vampiric masculinity. By injecting chivalry, safety, and softness into Edward Cullen’s character, Meyer unintentionally carves space for the vampiric queer in *Twilight*.

As Silva (2019) masterfully summarizes:

Historically, vampires have been meant to represent people within the queer community as a way to demonize and discourage any sort of “deviant” sexual activity, so it’s no wonder a large part of the members within the Twilight Renaissance identify as part of the LGBTQ community. Similar to the fact that many people were shamed for liking Twilight, many people at the same time felt ashamed of their sexuality and were forced into keeping it repressed. In this new era, however, people are able to express their love for Twilight AND their sexuality freely and without guilt. (para. 2)

Queer readings of heterosexual literature are not a recent phenomenon. In her book *NASA/Trek*, Constance Penley (1997) emphasizes the longer tradition of queer fanfiction in popular culture fandoms and the ways in which fandoms persistently invent new ways of injecting queerness into their consumption of non-queer literature and film. Queer *Twilight* fanfiction is similarly not a recent phenomenon that suddenly arose as a result of the *Twilight* Renaissance. Reading, writing, and engaging with *Twilight* slash fiction was an incredibly commonplace practice in the early 2000s. Slash fiction, which refers to a subgenre of fanfiction involving the romantic or sexual relationship of same-sex characters, has been described as a safe, affirming, and low-risk space that has particular utility for young queer individuals who wish to 'try on' various identities, sexualities, and scenarios through their favourite characters (Floegel 2020). At the time, queer pairings on websites such as [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net) and [www.twilighted.net](http://www.twilighted.net) were extremely prevalent in online fanfiction communities. By creating virtual spaces for themselves in *Twilight* fanfiction, queer fans were able to resist heteronormative metanarratives through their construction and consumption of queer *Twilight* fanfiction (McFarland 2013a). As Dreisinger (2019) notes, “[t]hrough their slash pairings, fans are free to explore the emotional and sexual possibilities of their favourite characters, constructing and developing their identity alongside their queerships” (100). Nevertheless, against the backdrop of homophobic anti-*Twilight* shaming during the early 2000s, openly engaging in these queer readings of *Twilight* outside of the fanbase was quite embarrassing. Juxtaposing queer readings within the fandom during the early 2000s versus the *Twilight* Renaissance unveils vastly differing experiences. Queer readings of *Twilight* in the early 2000s were certainly nothing to brag about, whereas queer readings of *Twilight* during the ongoing Renaissance is unapologetic and celebrated. In both instances, “both fans and ‘haters’ alike, straight and non-straight, participate in queer readings of the *Twilight* text” (McFarland 2013b, 70).

## Looking Forward, Looking Back: The *Twilight* Renaissance as Postmodern Affect

Much has been written on postmodern vampirism as an echo of the socio-political and material context that it is situated in. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson (1991) describes postmodernism as a movement that takes place after the 1970s and is heavily driven by late capitalist mass consumption. Within the circumstance of our current late capitalist context, Meyer’s conception of vampires can be classified as a postmodern pastiche of traditional vampirism. Jameson (1988) defines *pastiche* as something that imitates (but differs from) traditional representation for the sole purpose of deflated mimicry devoid of socio-historical or political commentary—comparable to a ‘blank’ or ‘empty’ parody lacking any further meaning. In contrast to conventional vampires that were seen as a monstrous and dangerous Other, Meyer shifts from typical portrayals of demonic and threatening vampirism and opts for a tamer and more modern portrayal of vampires (Hughes 2011; Karanović 2012; Sanna 2013). On a superficial level, the *Twilight* vampires are non-threatening vegetarians, they blend into humanity as friendly beings, they drive cars, they attend high school, and they contribute to society. In essence, Meyer ‘re-mixes’ (Jameson, 1988) traditional vampirism with popular culture, forming an entirely new pastiche that may seem more appealing and more relatable to contemporary mass culture.

As a subversion of traditional vampirism, Meyer’s vampires embody compelling qualities reflective of a neoliberal ideology largely associated with free-market capitalism and self-interested economic growth. Kathryn Kane (2010) emphasizes that the Cullen vampires are the embodiment of the American late-stage capitalist dream. Rather than transgressing boundaries, the Cullen vampire clan represents the ideal neoliberal collective because they assimilate into wider society, contribute to the gears of capitalism, and are materially successful. The Cullen clan is compliant and proper. It does not disrupt the very foundation upon which conventional normality is fabricated. As such, *Twilight* is well-aligned with capitalist prescriptions of consumption and personal gain. Flegg (2020) pinpoints *Twilight* as the “great late-capitalism vampire novel” (17)—and not without reason. In *Twilight*, the heroine pursues Edward until she becomes a vampire herself, hereby mirroring capitalist portrayals of romance as a consumptive process for the purpose of profitable gain. To add, Bella’s process of consumption is highly individualized. Meyer puts forth an implied message to readers: Bella must accept

the mundanity and ordinariness of her human world or independently alleviate her anxieties by risking her life in pursuit of being a vampire like the Cullen family (Thury 2021). Bella's journey of attaining vampiric transformation draws from a particular set of responsabilizing neoliberal ideals. In fact, Celia Jameson and Julia Dane (2014) identify the *Twilight* series as representative of the "contemporary pressure in neoliberal societies to work toward self-transformation for the purpose of self-actualization" (247).

This analysis becomes clearer when we contrast the social positionality between Bella and the Cullen vampires. Bella is not particularly wealthy, nor is she conventionally attractive. While Bella presents as quite shy and mundane, the Cullen vampires personify wealth, beauty, and privilege. As modern vampires, they are highly educated, white, and affluent. They inhabit a large and stylish home and are surrounded by vast material comfort. They own multiple luxury cars, they have countless university degrees due to their immortality, and they have unlimited heaps of money. Bella not only wants to be *with them* as Edward Cullen's romantic interest, but she also wants to be *like them* as a vampire herself. One can certainly begin to draw links between her desires to become a vampire and class-based desires for material comfort. As the neoliberal subject, Bella represents collective anxieties and precarities that are, through her persistent self-actualization, eventually transformed into privilege. Finally becoming a vampire and a part of the Cullen family, Bella unlocks her passage toward capitalist achievement, material comfort, and eternal perfection. At the end of the *Twilight* series, she finally secures successful absorption within the dominant class positionality by becoming a vampire.

Bella's eventual vampirism can be interpreted as a site of salvation from advanced capitalist undoing. As Sorcha Ní Fhlainn (2019) writes, Bella becoming a vampire suggests an "escape from the mundane, away from increased impossibilities placed on the young who dream to experience the opportunities to which only the older generation have access" (228). It is no accident that Erika James' erotic romance novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), which was initially developed as a *Twilight* erotic fanfiction series, characterizes Edward as a billionaire CEO and turns Bella into an ordinary university student merely trying to get by. The parallels of desiring material comfort, as personified by the heroine's central love interest, are discernible in both *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* and speaks to the larger yearning for security within late-capitalism. I maintain that this affective desire to reap the security that the Cullen clan possesses speaks to Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism," wherein neoliberal subjects develop an attachment or hope towards something largely unattainable, ultimately rendering their desire as problematic. According to Berlant (2011), these attachments to "a cluster of

promises” (23) include the false fantasies of success, happiness, and profit that are entrenched in the scarcity-driven crisis of late capitalist sensibility. In this sense, subjects attach significance to a particular “object of desire” (23) under the false assumption that the object will lead to fulfillment. This affective relationship is eminently present in Bella’s attachment to vampirism and, by extension, the neoliberal benefits that accompany vampirism including material comfort, vast wealth, endless consumption without risk, physical advantage and beauty, and so forth. In a cruelly optimistic way and much to Bella’s dissatisfaction, Edward denies Bella access to what she believes will be the embodiment of her happiness: vampirism. It is not until the end of the saga when Bella nearly dies that Edward finally transforms Bella into a vampire, giving her access to her vampiric object of desire (Meyer 2008). The *Twilight* saga is hence dually prescriptive of irresistible and largely impossible capitalist gains (Flegg 2020).

As a representation of contemporary times, what does the emergence of the *Twilight* Renaissance tell us about the fandom’s shared affect? Williams (1977) coined the notion “structure of feelings” to depict the ways in which affective elements—which often transpire across conventions of art, literary texts, and film—are directly informed by the particular set of societal conditions within that specific time and place. In other words, Williams’ (1977) structure of feeling concept marries the affective landscape of our lived conditions with art, literature, and popular culture. For Williams (1977), the shifting moods and tones available through art and literature can pinpoint the broader, shared feelings that encapsulate the socio-historical context that they inhabit: “forms and conventions in art and literature [can be seen] as inalienable elements of a social material process” (133). For Williams (1977), transitional affective states within society can be understood through three registers in structures of feelings: *dominant* which are largely hegemonic and mainstream, *residual* which predate and somewhat influence dominant cultures, and *emergent* which constitute new cultural practices that materialize in society. Williams (1977) was most interested in how structure of feelings could map out emergent cultures. In extrapolating Williams’ (1977) conception, the *Twilight* Renaissance can be read as a symptom of an emergent counterculture that disrupts the previously-dominant misogynistic and homophobic structure of feeling, of which the anti-*Twilight* hatred of the early 2000s is a symptom. As an emergent disruption, this digital *Twilight* revival resists that hegemonic narrative by queerifying a residual artifact: the *Twilight* saga. This

emergent community, then, represents collective feelings of discontentment with and resistance of the dominant shaming that initially defined the *Twilight* hatred. I argue that this emerging queer resistance mirrors the collective desire to persevere against *Twilight's* heteronormativity. For queer fans, queerifying the *Twilight* universe is arguably much more satisfying than submitting to the implied traditionalist and heteronormative values manifest in the dominant structure of feeling that can be read off the saga's surface.

Jameson's (1991) concept of *cognitive mapping* similarly functions as a way for postmodern subjects to represent their experiences within late capitalism. For Jameson (1991), the heart of cognitive mapping is "nothing but a code word for 'class consciousness'" (418). As Koc (2017) argues, "cognitive mapping can also be understood as the mapping of an affective space produced by late capitalist culture" (57). Jonathan Flatley (2009) expands Jameson's cognitive mapping beyond cognition to account for the emotional experiences one may have with modernity. Flatley (2009) conceptualizes these experiences as "affective mapping" and locates affect as a site of shared political experiences within certain spatial environments.

If, as Deleuze and Guattari (1994) state, "art is the language of sensations" (176), then we must account for the socio-political and economic contexts that these sensations inhabit. Here, I employ an expansive definition of art to contain fandoms, including the *Twilight* Renaissance. In this way, mapping the *Twilight* Renaissance simultaneously illuminates collective anxieties towards the precarious nature of our current late capitalist state, as well as a shared need to grapple with ongoing neoliberal despair that is heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a cruelly optimistic way, the *Twilight* Renaissance unearths a shared desire for escapism from the mundanity of capitalist life. The attainment of social and material wealth, as defined by transforming into a vampire, becomes rather significant when we account for the precarity of today's generation which is chiefly defined by financial instability, increasingly exploitative and uncertain employment, and widening gaps between the wealthy and the unwealthy (Neilson 2015; Twenge 2017).

Put simply, art—and I argue, fandoms—exists within the tensions between affect and socio-political context. The *Twilight* Renaissance both affectively claps back at capitalist precarity while highlighting the collective need to cope with the salient consequences of late-stage capitalism. Finally, in its conception, the *Twilight* Renaissance rewrites formerly alienating narratives that vilified the fandom in order to create a sense of unashamed queer belonging.

## Longing for Belonging: The *Twilight* Renaissance as Queer Commons

Since a significant portion of *Twilight* Renaissance fans identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, it is no surprise that queerness is a central pillar of the *Twilight* Renaissance. As lesbian YouTuber STRANGE ÆONS notes, “if you’ve been having fun with the *Twilight* Renaissance lately, you’re probably a gay twenty-something” (2021, 30:40 minutes). Upon closer examination of queer *Twilight* Renaissance content, particularly blogs on Tumblr, one will notice that there is a theme of queer ownership that goes beyond coding characters as queer or ‘shipping’ them in queer ways with other characters (i.e., romantically pairing them). There is an apparent queer occupancy of the saga within the *Twilight* Renaissance wherein queer fans brand *Twilight* as ‘a gays only event’, ‘gay property’, and ‘for the gays now’.

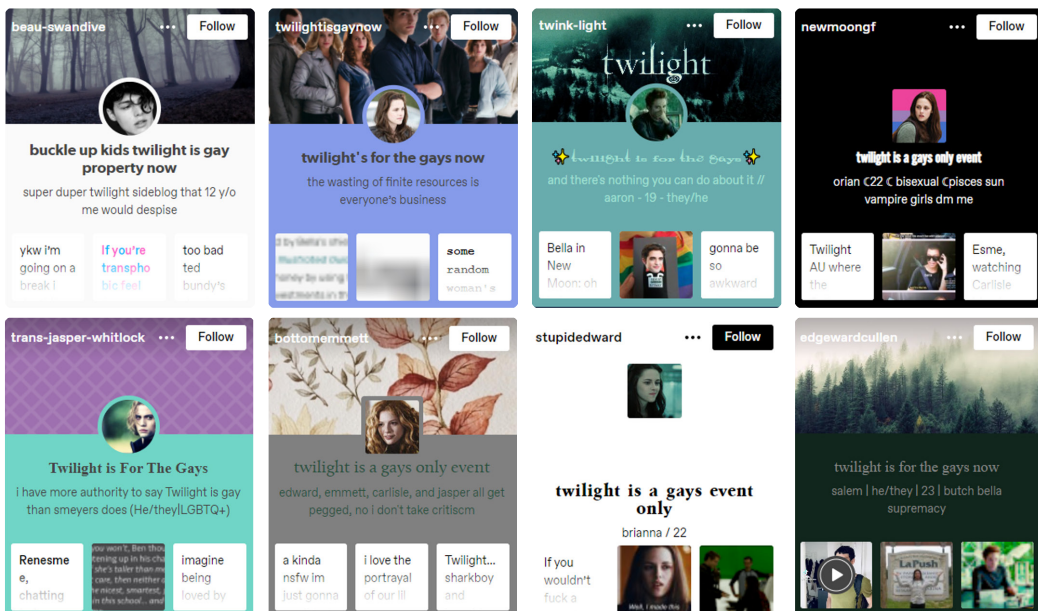


Figure 7. A display of queer ownership is seen among various *Twilight* renaissance blogs on Tumblr (beau-swandive; bottomemmett; edgewardcullen; newmoongf; stupideward; trans-jasper-whitlock; twilightisgaynow; twink-light)

According to Millner-Larsen and Butt (2018), “queer commons” can be defined as queer efforts to form queer spaces that protect and sustain queer ways of existing which may otherwise face heteronormative marginalization by mainstream society. The authors pinpoint these practices of ‘queer commoning’ as “ameliorative responses not only to the failures of mainstream LGBT politics but also to twenty-first-century austerity and gentrification” (401). The precarities and anxieties of late-stage capitalism provoke reactionary responses of queer commoning because they offer a sense of belonging that queer individuals may otherwise be denied. However, queer commoning is not only about “envisioning new models of public, collective, or common ownership. It is also, importantly, about transforming the modes of social reproduction on which such mechanisms depend” (Millner-Larsen & Butt 2018, 409). The queer commons are not merely contemporary spaces for queer existence and queer regeneration, but they are also forward-looking and eager to construct more sustainable, caring and dependable queer futures.

Bearing this in mind, I argue that the rise of the *Twilight* Renaissance is a form of queer commoning. Recalling Williams’ (1977) notion of dominant structures of feeling, queer fans of the *Twilight* Renaissance are carving their own space within the fandom as a form of counterpublic—or, as Williams (1977) would call it, a symptom of an emergent culture—against the normative anti-*Twilight* hatred of the early 2000s.

How, then, can we understand collective affect within this queer commoning of the *Twilight* Renaissance? Eric Stanley (2018) marries queer commons-forming initiatives and collective public feelings to inform his concept of “affective commons.” Stanley’s (2018) conceptualization of affective commons draws from Marx’s notion of communes or common spaces, which are primarily identified as a process of coming together. Jean-Luc Nancy (2010) expands on this distinction of communes: “the affective commons, as commune, is the coming together of singularities and exceptions, toward a queer future, and against what disciplines us to love our oppressors while awaiting a freedom that never comes” (Stanley 2018, 503). Here, Stanley (2018) is interested in how collective affect informs queer spaces and, conversely, how collective affect reflects queer collective life and queer structures of feelings.

The *Twilight* Renaissance also speaks to the collective desire to create a sense of belonging. In a 2016 interview, Fredric Jameson stated that postmodern art—and I would argue fandoms—is subject to a specific brand of nostalgia that does not simply romanticize the past, but yearns for a past that is “constructed in the image

we require” (Cevasco 2016). Perhaps this notion of nostalgia—quasi-romanticized and vital—speaks to how members of the *Twilight* Renaissance have constructed a community based on their desire for queer belonging within the saga.

Figure 8. (twilightbutwithlesbians 2020)



The *Twilight* Renaissance as queer affective commons can signify the collective need for reclamation and reparation against the backdrop of exclusion and anti-*Twilight* shaming. Eve Sedgwick (2003) maintains that practicing reparative reading allows the reader to extract “sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150–151). In spite of Meyer’s intentional heteronormative writing, reading

queerness into literary content such as *Twilight* can not only construct a space where queer fans can unapologetically be queer, but also act as a reparative survival tactic. This is especially relevant for queer *Twi*hards that may not have had access to representative content that was explicitly queer in the early 2000s. As per Sedgwick’s (2003) tradition of reparative reading, the *Twilight* Renaissance offers a more hopeful, fun, and representative interpretation of *Twilight*. Former queer fans that were previously shamed are now engaging in a reparative reading of the series through their queerification of the *Twilight* Renaissance. As Claire Francis (2019) puts it:

Anyone between the ages of 18 and 35 is so hyperaware of all things *Twilight* that it’s a universal inside joke, and that level of familiarity with a text lets us reinvent it, reimagine it, reinvigorate it, on a monumental scale. The *Twilight* Renaissance, as the *Twilight* meme frenzy on the Internet has been named, has us reinterpreting the text we’ve already read, making Edward as virgin-y or snail-obsessed, and Bella as bookish or as butch as we want, reveling in *Twilight*’s ludicrousness rather than ridiculing it. We’re rewriting “problematic” relationships; we’re making Bella in love with Rosalie or Alice and making Jacob and Edward bros rather than antagonists. We’re representing ourselves, making Leah a lesbian or treating Bella’s trauma seriously. (para. 17)

It is readily apparent that the fandom has the productive potential to create a more hopeful and inclusive reading for queer fans to finally consume *Twilight* without shame.

## The *Twilight* Renaissance as the Queer Comfort Food of the COVID-19 pandemic

For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a threat not just to physical and mental health, but also to livelihoods and financial stability. The fact that the *Twilight* Renaissance surged during COVID-19 reveals a collective need to cope with these pandemic-triggered anxieties and uncertainties. Some fans returned to the original *Twilight* series as a balm during a time of global health emergency. Tumblr user a-holy-trinity (2020) states, “And yes I’m currently using *Twilight* to cope with a pandemic.” Many fans acknowledge using the *Twilight* Renaissance as a coping mechanism, especially with Stephenie Meyer’s release of the next installment of the series, *Midnight Sun*, in August 2020. Another user, lina.230125 (2020), notes, “I also jumped head first back into the *Twilight* Renaissance by reading *Midnight Sun*” in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 9. (Orb1ting-1 2020)

For YouTuber Ashley Faith (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic generated a need for escape to a time when things were simpler. For her, engaging in *Twilight* served that exact purpose. Upon the release of *Midnight Sun* in 2020, thousands of fans stood in line at their local bookstores to purchase a copy for themselves—mask on and sanitizer ready. Had this novel been released over a decade ago during the *Twilight* moral panic, standing in line to purchase a book from the *Twilight* saga would have been embarrassing. However, for many fans, purchasing *Midnight Sun* and escaping into its 600+ pages during the pandemic was shamelessly comforting. One fan highlights the feelings of nostalgia that the new release has generated, noting that “*Midnight Sun* is my most anticipated book of the year—I’m looking forward to a very nostalgic trip back to

Forks” (Milka as cited in Singer, 2020, para. 31). Another fan depicts the importance of the saga during the COVID-19 pandemic: “[*Twilight*] is a secure place to be, even for only a few hours. Maybe that’s why reading *Midnight Sun* has become more and more appealing. In a world where so much is uncertain, it

feels safe to fall back into the well-known universe of vampires and werewolves” (Marisa as cited in Singer, 2020, para. 37). An anonymous user on [www.reddit.com](http://www.reddit.com) expresses the comforting role that *Twilight* is playing in their life during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Now I'm 26 and have all the time in the world in this quarantine, so I watched the movies again and fell in love with it again. I finished *Breaking Dawn Pt. 2* today and cried haha. I honestly don't care if it's trendy to hate it. I know people pick it apart and say it's not written well, and the movies are cheesy, and they nit-pick every little thing, but eh... it's nostalgic to me. It kind of took me to a "happy place" with all the sadness going on in the world and in my personal life. (Anonymous user, 2020, para. 2–3)

Another fan responds, “Same. It's getting me through COVID” (Anonymous user, 2020, para. 11). Familiarity, safety, nostalgia. These are all sought-after feelings amidst endless waves of pandemic uncertainty.

Nostalgia is an important element of postmodernism, particularly the affective thirst for escapism and a general longing for the past (Denzin 1991; Hutcheon 2003). Recalling Jameson (1988), his concept of pastiche is an example of this postmodern nostalgia because it serves to reinvent or imitate a traditional representation, which then “seeks to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects” (19). Extrapolating this analysis, the *Twilight* Renaissance serves as a form of pastiche and, hence, an object of nostalgia as well. Various authors have noted the therapeutic efficacy of nostalgia as a primary tool for coping during isolation, fearful as well as stressful, threatening, and uncertain times (Fiorito & Routledge 2020; Gammon & Ramshaw 2020; Sedikides & Wildschut 2018). Yeung (2020) found that stressors and anxieties related to COVID-19 did, in fact, trigger collective nostalgia. Many people turned to nostalgic outlets as a way to cope with the pandemic, whether it was by revisiting familiar movies, returning to a well-loved song or album, re-reading old novels, or otherwise (Johnson 2020; MRC Data 2020; Yohannes 2020). During times of great stress, nostalgia offers routine and predictability.

While trauma and overwhelming stress can blur one's sense of futurity, nostalgia can act as a transitional object or, rather, an emotional pacifier that reminds us of a previous time that we successfully lived through. It helps us recall a clear ‘before and after’ in order to sustain us as we face feelings of pandemic uncertainty. As Susan Whitbourne (2012) points out, “[e]motionally connecting with your

younger self helps you maintain a sense of continuity over time” (para. 6). For many members of the *Twilight* Renaissance, engaging in the fandom may serve as a nostalgic continuity tool that facilitates coping through pandemic-triggered stress and anxiety. As Evan Mantler (2021) puts it, “[i]n 2020, you’ll discover that leaning into your interests is not only a coping mechanism, but a long-term happiness strategy. You’re going to be really excited about the *Twilight* Renaissance and laugh at so many memes” (para. 23).

Coping with COVID-19 through the *Twilight* Renaissance is also a form of care—whether that be self care, emotional care, mental health care, or otherwise. As one *Twilight* Renaissance member puts it, “reclaiming *Twilight* is mental health care” (reclaimingt看light, n.d.). Not only is coping through the *Twilight* Renaissance a form of care, but it is also collective care. Collectivity and community undoubtedly become critical during times of social limitation such as the COVID-19 pandemic’s social distancing and isolation protocols. Where the pandemic’s social distancing restrictions enforced a sense of asociality upon our collective experiences, the *Twilight* Renaissance helped fill that social gap. All one requires is a steady internet connection.

## You are now Leaving the *Twilight* Renaissance

My interest in this essay stems from a desire to better understand the affective nature of the *Twilight* Renaissance at this specific point in time, with a particular focus on reparative readings and queer coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. The affective theorization of the *Twilight* Renaissance is worthy of several books, so by no means is this conceptualization of the fandom satiating or exhaustive.

I close this essay with some final ruminative thoughts. Earlier, I discussed the ways in which both fans and haters alike were engaging in queer readings of *Twilight*—whether that be as a homophobic public backlash against the series in the early 2000s or as the fandom’s queerification of the saga through the *Twilight* Renaissance of the early 2020s. While the former queer reading expresses repressive and shaming qualities, the latter queer reading acts as a reparative coping strategy. Further research may wish to explore the interplay between nostalgic coping and cruel optimism. Because *Twilight* echoes tenets of late capitalist advancement, consumption, and material comfort, romanticizing these promises of capitalist comfort through the process of nostalgic coping—particularly during an uncertain and precarious pandemic context—is not at all unproblematic.

Ultimately, as Nina Auerbach (1995) poignantly puts it, “every generation creates and embraces its own [vampire]” (vii). Unveiling the socio-historical significance of each generation’s vampire and locating it as reflective of a particular collective affect, then, becomes an interesting task. Throughout this essay, I have argued that the *Twilight* Renaissance is animated by a collective effort towards a queer reparative reading of the series. *Twilight* was and still is gay.

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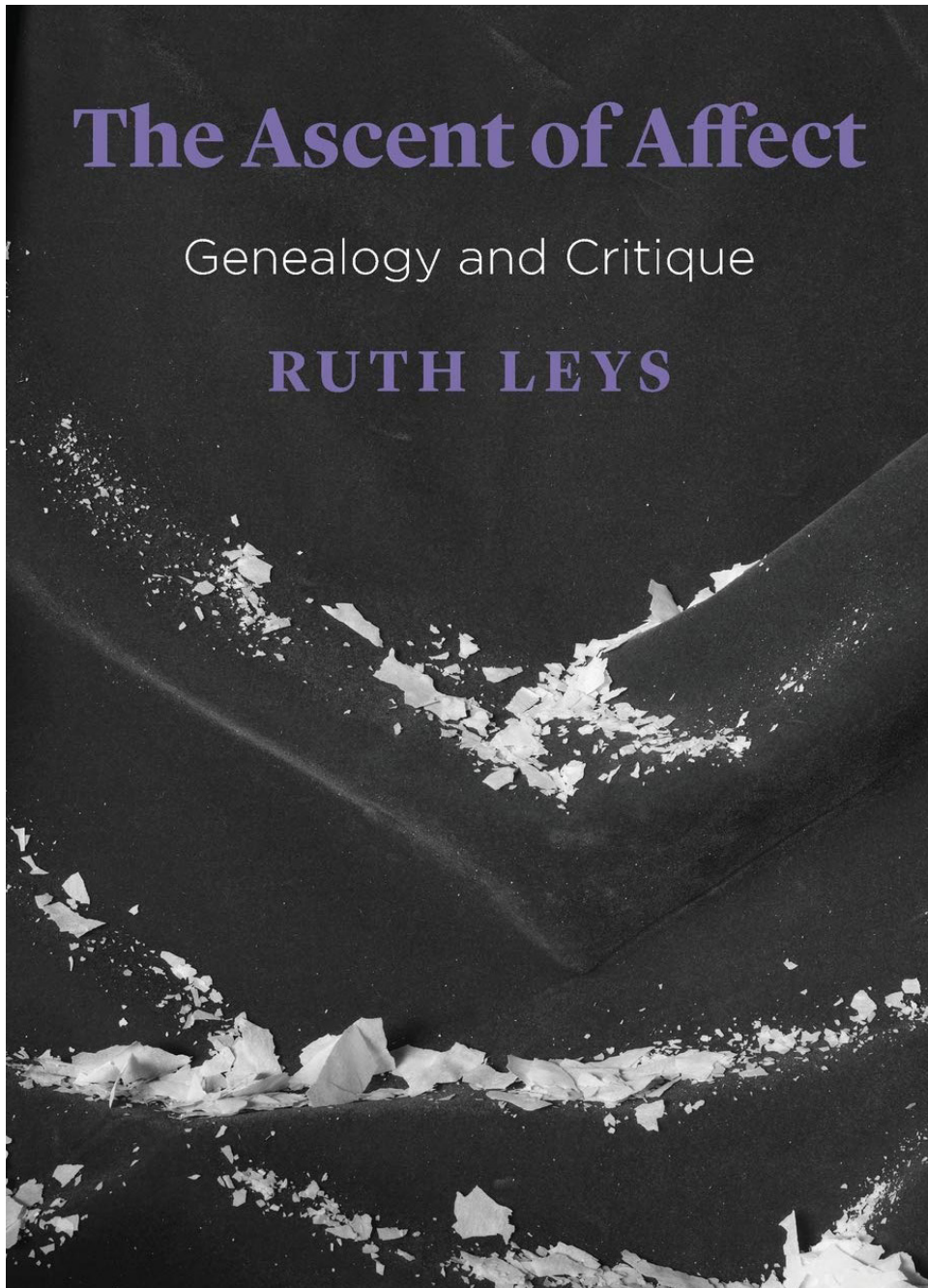
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Leys, R. (2017), *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique*, University of Chicago Press

# RATIONALIST NOSTALGIA: A Critical Response to Ruth Leys' *The Ascent of Affect*



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## Introduction

Every academic field benefits from a healthy debate about its presuppositions, key terms, and lines of argument. Affect theory is no different. It needs critique—both from within and without, both friendly and hostile—to sift through working ideas and figure out how to progress by moving on, how to build by clearing away. The writings of Ruth Leys—especially her widely cited article “The Turn to Affect: A Critique” (2011) and its book-length elaboration *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (2017)—have emerged as the focal point for much academic criticism of affect theory. Citing these pieces has become standard procedure by those who want to reject or diminish the value of the study of affect for the humanities.

But the details of Leys' arguments are seldom actually brought into the conversation. Many of Leys' advocates seem to believe that she is holding the line against the unlawful incursion of the sciences into the humanities. Yet Leys' own line of analysis rests heavily on her own interpretation of relevant scientific findings in order to swat down humanistic theories of affect. Leys' work, I argue here, offers a distorted representation of the state of the scientific conversation in psychology of emotion, then awkwardly transposes that ruptured image onto contemporary affect theory in the humanities. In the process, Leys weaves the story of a sector of science that I suspect is almost entirely unknown to most humanities scholars. This has led to near-zero scrutiny, on the part of those citing her, of her tendentious and, in my assessment, conceptually flawed rendition of how emotion science has played out over the past half century.

This essay considers four aspects of Leys' project that reflect mischaracterizations or idiosyncratic interpretations of her scientific sources. First, I consider Leys' commitment not to "genealogy" per se, as her title announces, but to an attempt to adjudicate debates in emotion psychology by referring all of them back to a single book from 1994—Alan Fridlund's *Human Facial Expressions: An Evolutionary View*. The entire field of emotion psychology, in Leys' telling, has mysteriously overlooked this vital contribution in the generation since its publication. (She dedicates the entirety of Chapter 6 of her book to blasting emotion psychology for its neglect of Fridlund's work.) Rather than offering a genealogy, Leys is holding something more like a scientific kangaroo court.

Second, I look at Leys' imprecise engagement with the philosophical debates around "intentionality," which she understands as being broadly about rationality and consciousness, rather than a narrower, technical discussion about the nature of mental processes and their relation to objects. Not only this, Leys has actually mischaracterized Fridlund's position on "intentionality" and overstated the consonance of Fridlund's ideas with her project. Unlike Leys, Fridlund is not interested in "intentional" actions that are accessible to individual consciousness. Third, I consider how Leys' elevation of Fridlund's affinity with Richard Dawkins' gene-level adaptationist view of evolutionary biology further undermines her efforts to carve out a space for human "meaning." All of this is driven, I conclude, by a thoroughgoing nostalgia for an unchallenged liberal rationalism. Leys' project, in this view, is congruent with reactionary formations against other critical perspectives (undying boogeymen like "postmodernism" and "cultural Marxism") that have challenged the mythology of the sovereign, reasoning Subject as the only possible tentpole of a functioning public sphere.

## Whig Genealogy

In a 2010 interview, Leys characterizes her approach to the history of science as shaped by Michel Foucault's essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1984) which calls for an approach to "history" that is no longer history, but "genealogy." For Foucault, the error of history—as method—is to compose the past as a linear narrative leading to the present. The genealogist, by contrast, sees time as a sedimentation of accidents (Foucault 1984, 78). This innovation, which allowed her to move past a "linear, teleological approach to history," inspired Leys' early work on trauma (Leys & Goldman 2010, 657). She identifies Thomas Kuhn as another methodological influence (Leys & Goldman 2010, 656). Kuhn parallels Foucault in his argument against what he calls "Whig history" of science: history told only from the perspective of the winners, the past reconstructed as the long coronation of the present. In the context of the history of science, this leads to Kuhn's gleefully skeptical conclusion that "we may... have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth" (Kuhn 1996, 170).

But Leys' approach in *Ascent of Affect* has an unmistakably Whiggish cast. The combination announced in her book's subtitle—"genealogy and critique"—provides the platform for a hybrid genre in which Leys authorizes herself to write not just a narrative account of the history of emotion psychology, but a running commentary on what she takes to be the conceptual flaws of the field as a whole. Although she presents herself as doing a fashionable "genealogy," the book is really more like hot-wired science, an intellectual incursion that aims to resolve a complicated debate from a perch outside the field. She doesn't just tell the story of emotion science. Leys decides exactly how that story ends.

Or rather, how it should have ended, because the story Leys tells is one of discipline-wide mistakes and missed opportunities. A significant amount of *Ascent* is dedicated to castigating the psychology of emotion for getting everything wrong up to 1994, and then failing to recognize the genius of her champion, Alan Fridlund, who ostensibly solved the problems at the heart of the field with his book *Human Facial Expressions*. "My argument in this book," she concludes in *Ascent's* final sentence, "is that in the field of emotion research there is no intellectually viable alternative to Fridlund's position, whatever the cost may turn out to be to many of the existing 'scientific' studies of emotion" (Leys 2017, 368). Rather than a genealogist, Leys in this book acts as a referee of scientific debates, jumping into the ring to raise Fridlund's glove.

Writing of the psychologist Richard Lazarus, for instance, Leys announces that his “entire picture of appraisal as involving inner cognitions intervening causally between the person and the world... was a mistake, one that led to several dead ends” (Leys 2017, 132). Leys continues in this adjudicatory role in her assessment of mid-twentieth-century psychologist Magda Arnold. “What is important to grasp about [mid-century psychologist Magda] Arnold’s influence,” she contends, “is what she got right about appraisal—and what she got wrong” (Leys 2017, 145). When Fridlund steps on the stage, she praises him as the “one person... who at this juncture made a decisive break with [Paul] Ekman”—her story’s supervillain (230). And yet she has to devote an entire chapter to explaining why Fridlund’s book has *not* had the transformative effect on the field she thinks it should have had in the quarter century since its publication<sup>1</sup>: “it has been all too easy for scientists, even those generally supportive of Fridlund’s work,” she laments, “to repeat the very conceptual mistakes that, as he had tried to show, have been inherent in Ekman’s picture of the emotions from the first” (270).

This pattern of not just describing the history of a field, but preferring one tendentious interpretation among others, persists throughout the book. An easy way to trace this plotline is to follow the way Leys chooses the winners and losers of science with adjectives. Fridlund writes a “deeply researched and brilliantly argued book” which is also a “brilliant dissection” of Ekman’s work (230). James Russell, Robin to Fridlund’s Batman, writes a “brilliant critique” (61), which has the added advantage of being “superb”<sup>2</sup> (16; 264). Meanwhile, those who get the science wrong—like Ekman, Silvan Tomkins, or Antonio Damasio—have views that are “theoretically confused and empirically problematic,” sometimes “cunning” but fundamentally “weak” (378; 263).

I don’t want to suggest that historians of science have to remain agnostic about their subject matter. And I’m not at all ready to commit science history to full-blown Kuhnianism. But this narrativizing is nonetheless emblematic of how vast the distance is between Leys’ method and Kuhn’s call for attention to mutations of thought (rather than a positivist victory parade)—what Foucault would call *genealogy*. It’s not wrong to agree with some scholars more than others, but it’s disingenuous to attempt to resolve a live controversy in a scientific field, then cloak that effort under the sleek mantle of “genealogy.” It disguises the adjudicatory operation at the heart of Leys’ book.

This is even more risky in the case of a field like the psychology of emotion, arguably the most unsettled subfield in psychology, one in which powerful, broad-based schools of thought are locked in ongoing struggles and debates. (See Plamper 2015, 11–12, for discussion.) Perhaps due to the elusive nature of its subject matter, emotion psychology remains a field in flux. James Nikopoulos articulates exactly this concern, pointing out that Leys’ stance is “either Team Ekman or Team Fridlund.” Emotion science must choose. But why, he continues, “does a complex research agenda involving many investigators working in many fields have to choose between only two options?” (Nikopoulos 2019, 58)

Leys’ “genealogy,” then, is nothing of the sort. As Elizabeth Wilson notes in a review symposium on *Ascent of Affect*, her book “is much more interested in correction and veracity than it is in the vicissitudes of interpretation” (Wilson 2020, 5). Leys sets herself the task of rigging up a particular stance within the psychology of emotion, then uses this stance to adjudicate the rest of the field. This means Leys is not only doing a Whig history, she’s doing a Whig history that papers over a volatile, ongoing debate, offering an abrupt and underdeveloped solution and packaging this solution to her primary audience—humanities scholars—as an inevitability. It’s a partisan move, invoking the authority of science to shut down a discussion in the humanistic camp.

## Blurred Intentions

Although Leys’ 2011 article was laser-focused on affect theory in the humanities (particularly the version of affect theory most clearly indebted to Deleuze, as in the work of Brian Massumi, Nigel Thrift, and William Connolly—but with sidetracks to bash Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick), *Ascent of Affect* is predominantly about post-World-War-II emotion psychology. The first chapter of the book is devoted to Silvan Tomkins, the American psychologist whose *Affect Imagery Consciousness* tomes were creatively anthologized by Sedgwick and Adam Frank in 1995 as *Shame and Its Sisters*.<sup>3</sup>

The second is on Paul Ekman, a former student of Tomkins and one of the most famous psychologists alive, best-known for his work on facial expressions. The third and fourth are on Lazarus, another psychologist of Ekman’s generation, and his well-known early-1980s debate with Robert Zajonc about the relationship between cognition and emotion.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the story's hero, Alan Fridlund, a former protégé of Ekman's who went rogue and published his 1994 book to challenge the regnant interpretation of Ekman's experiments. Chapter 6 is about the discipline of emotion psychology since Fridlund's book was published. This is where Leys excoriates an entire field for its ongoing failure to recognize Fridlund's achievement. Chapter 7, finally, is the 2011 article, reworked, which returns to the colorful clubhouse that is affect theory in the humanities—Deleuzians, psychoanalysts, queer theorists, media scholars, and other tavern rabble all rubbing elbows, though Leys' focus remains on the Deleuzians plus Sedgwick. The book's epilogue serves as another apologia for Fridlund, followed by two abrupt appendixes for some final score-settling.

The first thing a humanities scholar with some familiarity with affect theory might notice about this book is that it mainly probes the periphery of what we think of as affect theory in the humanities today. As Carolyn Pedwell points out, the bulk of the book is about scholars that most self-identified affect theorists have never even heard of, let alone cited—Ekman, Fridlund, and Lazarus, certainly, but for many, likely Tomkins, as well (Pedwell 2020). Leys justifies spending the bulk of the book on these figures, though, by linking them all to a single, continuous mistake, a mistake that she sees infecting Tomkins' work, seeping into the thought of Ekman and Lazarus, then rearing up in contemporary affect theory in the humanities. For Leys, this mistake is so all-consuming that it organizes entire fields in both the humanities and the sciences. This is the error of “anti-intentionalism.”

In Leys' telling, intentionalism refers to the “idea that emotions are directed at cognitively apprehended objects and are sensitive to ‘reasons’” (Leys 2017, 4). Elsewhere, she further associates intentionality with “meaning” (130) and “motive” (233). For her, “meaning or belief or intention or interpretation” are all synonyms (345). What she calls “anti-intentionalism” is opposed to all these things. It is, for Leys, a shorthand that conveniently indicts all the anti-humanist and non-liberal thought of recent scholarship, work in which the “intact person with his or her intentions and meanings” is disrupted (16).

I'm not convinced by the claim that affect theory is of necessity anti-intentional, and the deliberate blurring of different strands of affect theory is a big part of why *The Ascent of Affect* fails in its stated aims.<sup>4</sup> Sedgwick, for instance, clearly thinks that, for Tomkins, the cognitive and the affective, far from being radi-

cally disjunct, “involve many kinds of interdependent transformations” (Sedgwick 2003, 115). So, too, Adam Frank and Elizabeth Wilson—arguably the most prominent contemporary experts in Tomkins’ thought, certainly in the humanities—adamantly reject Leys’ position as neglectful of “Tomkins’s insistence on the intimate relation between affect and purpose, meaning, and value as such” (Frank & Wilson 2020, 5). Even more explicitly, Sara Ahmed explicitly identifies her approach to affects as intentionalist (Ahmed 2004b, 7). And Jan Slaby insists that “all affective states in humans are (or essentially involve) intentional feelings” (Slaby 2008, 430).

Rather than getting pulled into a citational food fight, though, I want to dedicate this section to a closer inspection of how Leys understands “intentionality” in the first place.<sup>5</sup> The debate about “intentionality,” in many ways, *is* Leys’ project in this book. But there’s something seriously askew about the way Leys defines this crucial term. She sees intentionalism as the view that emotions are “sensitive to reasons” or related to “meaning or belief or intention or interpretation.” This picture contains the philosophical definition of intentionalism, but also expands it so far beyond its original domain that it has morphed into an entirely new construct.

Here’s the opening paragraph of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on “Intentionality”:

In philosophy, intentionality is the power of minds and mental states to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs. To say of an individual’s mental states that they have intentionality is to say that they are mental representations or that they have contents. Furthermore, to the extent that a speaker utters words from some natural language or draws pictures or symbols from a formal language for the purpose of conveying to others the contents of her mental states, these artifacts used by a speaker too have contents or intentionality. ‘Intentionality’ is a philosopher’s word: ever since it was introduced into philosophy by Franz Brentano in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it has been used to refer to the puzzles of representation, all of which lie at the interface between the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language (Jacob 2019).

I am quoting this passage in full to show what is *not* in the technical definition of intentionality. *Intentionalism* is an approach that emerged within philosophical and psychological debates about emotion. It names a specific response to a question: *Do feelings necessarily associate with a specific object, or can they be ambient—like moods—arriving without a concrete referent?* Intentionalists adopt the first approach: they think every emotion comes with an object. “Intentional” literally means “object-directed.”

Philosophers see this as a lively but narrow debate around the nature of mental representation. The SEP entry's author warns us that "in its philosophical usage, the meaning of the word 'intentionality' should not be confused with the ordinary meaning of the word 'intention'" (Jacob 2019). Leys stumbles into exactly this error, chunking the concept of intentionality together with a range of other derivations that bear little relationship to its carefully circumscribed philosophical domain. Her definition of intentionality as the "idea that emotions are directed at cognitively apprehended objects *and* are sensitive to 'reasons'" uses the conjunction *and* to attach the technical definition of the term to a far broader set of questions (Leys 2017, 4, emphasis added). The additional registers created by Leys' expanded sense of the word—"meaning or belief or intention or interpretation"—are not part of the intentionality debates in philosophy of emotion (345).

This is broadly destabilizing for Leys' argument. To take just one example, let's look at the vexed concept of "consciousness." Leys takes it as given that intentionalism (taking the pro-intentional side in the intentionality debate) is also about *conscious* "meaning"—subjects being able to reflect on the objects of their feelings and subject them to rational scrutiny. But for philosophers, intentionalism is a broad church stance encompassing a range of positions on the relationship between intentionality and consciousness. The SEP dedicates an entire freestanding article to exploring the many philosophical contenders in this debate (Siewert 2016). Intentionalism is entirely compatible with a philosophical stance that locates some feelings in a *non-conscious* domain—beyond the pale of interpretation or waking access. Intentionalism just means that those feelings, though invisible to consciousness, are still *attached to an object*, rather than being objectless. Similarly, anti-intentionalists might well take the view that all of our feelings are accessible to conscious awareness, only those feelings need not have objects. There's no contradiction in either stance. Failure to acknowledge this diversity is an error on Leys' part, sourced in a misunderstanding of how philosophers have defined this term.

## Motivation and Expression

This is Leys' most basic mistake. But the most significant consequences of this error come later. Her ship really runs aground when she affixes intentionality to "motive" (Leys 2017, 238). In essence, Leys grafts our everyday definition of "intention" as "something someone wants to do" onto the technical definition.

To better understand the impact of this on Leys' argument, we need to look more closely at the moment in the 1990s that Leys sees as pivotal for emotion psychology, when an entire field ostensibly failed to see a solution staring it in the face. In Leys' telling, key debates in emotion psychology were decisively resolved with the publication of a single book in 1994, Fridlund's *Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View*.<sup>6</sup>

One might think, from reading Leys, that Fridlund is a deep thinker of intentionality, a white knight jousting over philosophical turf on every page. But what becomes apparent on reading Fridlund's book is that it is scarcely about intentionality at all, certainly not as philosophers understand it—the question of whether mental phenomena must come along with objects. The word “intentionality” doesn't appear in the index as a standalone entry. There is a single reference corresponding to “Intentionality, displays and,” and “Intention movements” (discussed below) has five entries. That's the extent of Fridlund's attention to any variation of “intention.” This is because Fridlund's real focus is not on accessible mental objects, but on placing emotional expression within a frame of evolutionary fitness. He thinks of “intentionality” as “something done with purpose.” But crucially, as we'll see, he disavows any sense that these purposes need to be conscious.

The backdrop: for Ekman, Fridlund's former mentor, our facial expressions are either sincere or deceitful. Sometimes we smile because we're happy. Sometimes we smile because we want people to think we're happy. But deceiving others with our face doesn't always succeed. We can be caught in a lie because our false face cannot fully contain our emotions, revealing a smile or a grimace that contradicts the emotional content of our deception. This is the source of Ekman's famous concept of “microexpressions”—brief flickers on the face that seep out from under our mask and betray our real feelings. A network television show, *Lie to Me*, was based on Ekman's research (and featured an Ekman-like character played by Tim Roth). The careful observation of microexpressions to detect lies was a recurring theme of the show.

Fridlund's break with Ekman's stance leads him to a radically different model of facial expressions. He insists that faces have *evolved to communicate effectively* in all situations. And they do so strategically. Every expression is motivated and does what it intends to do. All of them. No cracks, no mistakes. He writes:

All parts of our brains are equally evolved and act in coordinated fashion to promote our survival amid the social matrix into which we are born. Facial displays have meanings in the social context of their issuance, and they reflect not any 'true' self or hermetic emotions [slipping out involuntarily] but one's motives within a specific context of interaction (Fridlund 1994, 294).

Leys summarizes the contours of Fridlund's position like this: "humans and non-human animals produce facial behaviors or displays when it is strategically advantageous for them to do so and not at other times" (Leys 2017, 128). Our faces, for Fridlund (and Leys?), can never give us away. What looks like a mistake is actually there for a reason. There are no microexpressions, no Freudian slips, no tells. In other words, all facial expressions are "intentional" in the sense that they transparently express a "motive."

For the moment, let's step back from the psychological debate about whether facial expressions can ever reveal an emotional truth we are trying to conceal. What is immediately apparent is that this use of intention is not the same as "intentionality" in the technical, philosophical sense. It's true that Fridlund is interested in the study of "intention movements"—a phenomenon observed by psychologists and zoologists defined as "incipient acts we emit just before we act in earnest announc[ing] our intentions," like a clenched fist raised before a punch (Fridlund 1994, 64). And he argues that intention movements are adaptive responses rather than unintended cracks in an attempted deception. We might signal an aggressive intention in advance of an attack to try to, in Fridlund's account, "establish mating priority without a costly fight" (Fridlund 1994, 73f). (I discuss why he does this, and why I think he's wrong, below.)

But in doing this, Fridlund unambiguously differentiates his discussion of intention as "a promise or stated purpose" from the philosophical sense of intention as "the function or 'aboutness' of an act" (61, fn. 1). Most importantly, in his use of this vocabulary, "neither humans nor nonhumans have to *know* what they intend" (ibid., emphasis original).<sup>7</sup> So the level of "intentionality" is not pinned to a conscious "intact person," but to an organism, assembled from evolutionary imperatives. "Again," he reiterates later, as part of an argument that infants use communicative signals with their caregivers in motivated ways, "my use of 'motive' and 'intention' implies no necessary awareness or volition" (134, fn. 6).

This undercuts Leys' entire argument that Fridlund is arguing for "intentions" qua human meanings that are "sensitive to reasons." "Fridlund's fundamental insight," she presses, "was precisely that, in light of the new ethology, facial displays must be understood as intentional-communicative signals," or "intentional movements serving various social motives" (Leys 2017, 233). But Leys has conflated the philosophical sense of intentionality (*whether a mental event has an associated*

*object*) and the conventional sense of intentionality (*what we do on purpose because we want something*). Her insistence that Fridlund leads us out of the darkness of “anti-intentionalism” by making the objects of our feelings accessible to “intact persons” is wildly off the mark. Fridlund expressly denies that the “intentions” he’s talking about are, of necessity, in our field of awareness. On the occasion of an accident of vocabulary, Leys combines two scientific/philosophical conversations that are talking past each other. This leads her to misrepresent the way her keystone scientific informant is actually framing his project.

## The Adaptationist Fallacy

The flaws in the conceptual foundation of Leys’ project run even deeper, though. This is because the innovation that leads to Fridlund’s breakthrough—which alone, according to Leys, can rescue the psychology of emotion—is set in motion by none other than the evolutionary psychologist Richard Dawkins. Leys breaks with decades of humanistic pushback on sociobiology and blithely accepts Fridlund’s assumption that everything we do must be for the goal of reproductive “fitness” (and hence there can be no accidents of expression) unchanged and unchallenged.

Leys sees Dawkins as making Fridlund’s “intentionalist” revolution possible. As we’ve seen, Fridlund is not actually interested in the question of whether emotions have objects. He’s interested in how organisms do things “on purpose” rather than by mistake. Dawkins is the same. To get here, Leys misrepresents a key feature of Dawkins’ thought, making it seem like he is interested in “intact persons” as the locus of motivation. Leys summarizes Dawkins’ argument in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* as follows: “in order to attain reproductive success, individuals do not act for the good of the group but in their own interests” (Leys 2017, 226). But that’s not what Dawkins says. It’s right there in the title of his book: Dawkins’ argument is that *genes operating beneath the level of the interests of the individual* are selfish.

This is why the first chapter of *The Selfish Gene* is dedicated to accounting for altruism—a treacherous problem for Dawkins’ theory—in terms of gene selfishness. Why do mothers across the animal kingdom sacrifice themselves for their young? Why do monkeys emit alarm sounds in the presence of a predator that risks drawing attention to the vocalizer? Because, Dawkins tells us, “both individual selfishness and individual altruism are explained by the fundamental law [of] *gene selfishness*” (Dawkins 2016, 8). Genes operate for their own good or for the good of their identical copies—which means they will protect conspecifics

or kin to save copies of themselves. Individual organisms are the useful idiots of genes seeking to replicate themselves by any means necessary. If genes think they can make or save more copies of themselves in *other hosts* by sacrificing their *current host*, they'll do so in a heartbeat. Individuals are actually subordinate to the dictatorship of selfish genes, which bring their own agenda to the table.

Claiming Dawkins as a figure who authorizes the intentionality of “intact persons,” as Leys understands it, is fox-in-the-henhouse reasoning. With a straight face, Leys invokes Dawkins, who repeatedly refers to humans as “survival machines” for genes, to rescue the realm of human “meanings.” Fridlund is cozy with Dawkins’ approach precisely because Fridlund is interested in the ways the “intentions” he’s identifying in facial displays *don’t* have to be “known” to the individuals expressing them. They’re evolutionary mechanisms that are driven by *sub-personal* imperatives. “All parts of our brains are equally evolved,” he writes, “and act in coordinated fashion to promote our survival amid the social matrix into which we are born.” (Fridlund 1994, 294) Notice that it is “parts of brains” in this scenario that are exhibiting intentionality, not the “intact person with his or her intentions and meanings” (Leys 2017, 16).

But isn’t Leys half-right in her summary of the Dawkins–Fridlund position? Surely genes direct individuals to behave selfishly often enough? Maybe, but it’s important to underline that gene-selfishness, too, is a contested concept. This opens onto another area where Leys mischaracterizes the complexity of a live scientific debate. Both gene-level selection and individual-level selection stumble into a wider conceptual problem: rigid *adaptationism*.

Leys claims that, on arrival in the mid-1970s, “Dawkins’s selfish gene approach to natural selection immediately transformed the classical view of animal signaling” (Leys 2017, 226). This is a baffling misrepresentation, and I doubt even Dawkins himself would claim such a sweeping victory. Dawkins’ work landed in the midst of an ongoing *debate* within the field of zoology—and evolutionary biology more generally—about the extent to which different features of organisms could be explained with reference to their improvement of an organism’s overall fitness.<sup>8</sup> But the insistence of Dawkins and his allies on making selfishness the overriding priority of genes was itself a sort of scientific construct. As feminist philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller points out, the selfish gene model presupposes a subject that is “simultaneously autonomous and oppositional” (Keller 1991, 87). The

gene in Dawkins' tableau bears a suspicious resemblance to the selfish, acquisitive, ruthlessly efficient capital-S Subject at the center of the capitalist imagination.

This helps us identify a distinct problem with Dawkins' theory. Organic evolution is not nearly as economical, streamlined, or efficient as Dawkins would have it. As Keller points out, selection operates on *multiple* levels at all times (the gene, yes, but *also* the individual and the group)—not to mention in multiple timescales and on fluctuating ecological landscapes. For this reason, organisms produced by evolution aren't the hyper-efficient specimens adaptationists imagine us to be. In 1978, a few years after *The Selfish Gene* was published, the biologists Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin skewered adaptationism as what they called the "Panglossian paradigm"—the evolutionary equivalent of Voltaire's character of Dr. Pangloss, able to interpret any feature of the world, no matter how unsavory (venereal disease, for instance), as somehow necessary for this, the best of all possible worlds (Gould & Lewontin 1979, 583).

Gould and Lewontin called instead for attention to the strangeness of evolution, to the way organisms emerge as convergences of accidents rather than perfectly sculpted artifacts of natural selection. Take their famous concept of "spandrels," for instance. These are all the evolutionary oddities we observe in organisms that don't seem to fit the picture of ruthlessly efficient natural selection. (Male nipples, tailbones, and appendixes, to give a few common examples.) Maybe these spandrels were once useful, but no longer, or maybe they've been repurposed from some older, now obsolete function. Or perhaps they're side effects of the structural limitations of an organism's body plan. The point is that not every feature of every organism has been sharpened to a fine point. Gould and Lewontin label their approach "pluralism"—open to adaptationist explanations of phenomena, but keeping the possibility of non-adaptationist interpretations live. It's evolution as genealogy—an accumulation of accidents—rather than as Whig history—a machine for producing perfection.

This brings us back to the facial expression debate. Dawkins' controversial adaptationist perspective—interpreting all the different features of an organism as in alignment with a functional *need* exhibited at the level of gene propagation—becomes the core of Fridlund's approach. For Fridlund, organisms *don't make mistakes*. The "selfish gene approach to ethology," Leys explains, "stressed the idea that from the point of view of the individual or gene it would not be beneficial for the signaler to signal his or her intentions at all times" (Leys 2017, 227). This is why Fridlund is interested in "intention movements." Even these involuntary (and, contra Leys, totally unconscious) signals are *beneficial* for the organism (or its genes). As Fridlund writes, involuntary indicators of our inner states that

undermine our survival purposes “would be extinguished early in phylogeny in the service of deception, economy, and privacy.” (Fridlund 1994, 132) No micro-expressions. No cracks in the mask. Organisms are just too good at what they do.

As another adaptationist philosopher has argued, we must treat every feature of a living organism as “a product of a process of *reasoned* design development, a series of *choices* among alternatives, in which the *decisions* reached were those *deemed best* by the designers” (Dennett 1995, 230, emphasis original).<sup>9</sup> Finely wrought pieces of evolutionary machinery that we are, we couldn’t possibly undermine our own flawlessly calibrated goals. The little premonitions of our desires that we’re unaware of—“intention movements”—are part of a fundamentally adaptive communicative system. Fridlund even goes so far as to suggest that people who have “tells” that make them bad liars are actually helping themselves by allowing possible trading partners to trust them more in the long run (Fridlund 1994, 138). This is the kind of extremist interpretation a strong adaptationist posture inevitably leads to—taking obviously nonbeneficial behaviors and reinterpreting them as adaptive.

These are all hallmarks of adaptationist hypotheses. They’re not *necessarily* wrong, but they are, at best, only one angle of interpretation among many. A pluralist approach would keep open the possibility that an organism may well *unintentionally* send signals in a way that is evolutionarily maladaptive. Unlike rigid adaptationism, it countenances the conclusion that not every feature of an organism can be subsumed into an adaptationist explanatory frame. And that’s the crux of the dispute between Ekman and Fridlund. Are facial expressions perfectly sculpted mechanisms and therefore incapable of self-betrayal (Fridlund), or do they sometimes falter, despite our best efforts to deceive those around us (Ekman)? For all Leys’ bafflement as to why 21st-century psychologists have overlooked Fridlund’s brilliance, she doesn’t seem to consider the possibility that his fundamental framework relies on questionable scientific assumptions.

## Rationalist Nostalgia

Whether we’re talking about the debates around intentionalism, emotion, or evolution, the bottom line is that these scientific conversations are complicated. Leys’ method of taking a spread of rambunctious debates and melding them into a single conversation—then self-assuredly insisting that there’s a single solution

to fix them all in one fell swoop—leads to a conceptual train wreck. Any one of these topics opens onto a landscape of serious debate among many viable scientific positions. Leys' insistence that adopting something called "intentionalism" solves every one of these disparate problems gets us nowhere. Neither genealogy nor critique is satisfied.

Leys' focus on emotion psychology, though, hides her fundamental political interest. Beyond referring all challengers to her science back to Fridlund as the final word on emotional display, she's ultimately *not* all that interested in the conceptual intelligibility of these concepts. Her real concern is about the nature of political reason. What keeps Leys up at night is the collapse of a public sphere governed by rational argument.

"[E]nthusiasm for affect theory," she writes at the book's outset, "tends to blind people to the political stakes involved" (Leys 2017, 2). She rejects "Ekman's affect program theory and related ideas" because it "marginalizes the intact person with his or her intentions and meanings" (16). She endorses the literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels's ongoing pushback on "postmodernism" and its "replacement of ideological disagreements, or conflicts over belief and meaning, with differences in our feelings or bodies produces an indifference to political or ethical dispute" (345). Affect theory is just another version, for her, of the great postmodern sabotage of our once-glorious public conversation.

This is why she accuses Jane Bennett of presenting a picture of affect that "makes it hard to imagine what parliamentary debate would look like," since "for Bennett, debate over ideology is irrelevant" (349). Responding to Elizabeth Wilson in the early-2010s *Critical Inquiry* symposium on her original essay, Leys blasts Wilson's book *Affect and Artificial Intelligence*, in which "readers are encouraged... to undertake a mode of affective criticism in which 'caring' and 'empathetic' attachment to the objects of inquiry take the place of judgment and critique" (Leys 2012, 889). Making affect central obscures what we should *really* be talking about, for Leys, namely, "whether or not particular beliefs or opinions are true, or even worth taking seriously" (Leys 2017, 346).

So this is what it all boils down to: Leys' criticism of affect theory is, at heart, nothing more than another version of the boilerplate reactionary bristling at "postmodernism" as an affront to capital-R Reason, the dissolution of the "intact person" as the key element of liberal society. Her line of thinking is perfectly in sync with all the swaggering "rationalists" of the public sphere, the Jordan Petersons, Stephen Pinkers, and Richard Dawkinses of the world, who want to stiffen our spines for reasoned debate, which they claim once ruled us (when

was that, exactly?) but which has fallen away. What this company—including Leys—misses is that “rationality” always comes along with its *own* genealogy. We think a certain way because of the weaving lines of history that converge on our moment, our place, our bodies. They refuse the possibility that what seems like neutral reason *to them* is, in fact, a dynamic sedimentation of priorities and valences—including affective valences. It’s the oldest trick in the book: what seems obvious from your perspective ascends to the pantheon as Reason itself; anyone who thinks otherwise is just, well, irrational.

This is why Leys is so eager for “intentionality”—in the psychological sense—to slip over into the completely unrelated question of *rationality*. “[A]dopting Tomkins’s separation of the affects from our cognitions and... treating the affects as nonintentional states,” she writes, “implicitly deflates or eliminates disagreements over ideas in favor of an emphasis on what we feel or who we are, a position that allows concern with affect and identity to trump debates over the rightness or wrongness of what we believe” (Leys 2017, 49). Affect’s “anti-intentionalism,” she thinks, directly ramifies into a faulty public sphere that obliterates any platform for dialogue.

On some level, this is just knee-jerk liberalism, clinging to the fiction of the self-transparent, autonomous, rational subject—the subject adumbrated by Leys’ idiosyncratic definition of “intentionality”—even after this picture of the subject has been challenged by scholars in the humanities (and the sciences) for centuries. But what Leys fundamentally fails to understand is that affect theory, to the extent that the term names a unity, doesn’t *call for* a public sphere oblivious to reason. It is not, by and large, normative. Affect theory diagnoses, names, and studies the public sphere *that we already have*—that we have *always* had, and always will have—because whatever rationality is, it is only one dimension of our embodied life, and so too is the multifarious public sphere unfurling between our bodies. As Pedwell writes, “critical affect scholars have sought to rethink the meaning of key concepts such as ‘feeling’, ‘thought’, and ‘agency’, and to challenge critical theory to think in more relational, processual, and speculative ways” (Pedwell 2020, 5). This doesn’t mean abandoning conversation, argument, and debate. But it does mean recognizing that the pushes and pulls of feeling are always with us, even and especially when what we’re thinking and saying *feels* totally neutral.

## Conclusion

My argument here is that Leys' analysis takes a volatile scientific debate and attempts to resolve it from the outside, then repackages that resolution for outsiders to the field as if the debate had already stilled. To appoint oneself as the apostle of the emotion sciences to the humanities and then use that position to hawk an idiosyncratic interpretation of that science isn't just a Whig history; it's a polemic that tries to disguise that it *is* a polemic, a move that is regrettably typical of so many adoptions of the sciences into humanistic conversations.

There are plenty of viable and interesting critiques of affect theory—many created by affect theorists themselves. As far back as 1995, Sedgwick and Frank expressed skepticism that Deleuzian approaches to affect could fully capture the richness of human experience (Sedgwick 2003, 113). Sara Ahmed articulated her own concerns, along similar lines, a few years later. (Ahmed 2004a, 39, en. 4) Lauren Berlant sidesteps Sedgwick's interest in anti-constructionist approaches to affect by emphasizing that, for her, "the evidence suggests a distinction between a structure of affect and what we call that affect when we encounter it" (Berlant 2011, 158). In my own work I have made a point that I think resonates with Leys' concerns, namely, that affect theory needs a better account of how knowledge is clinched by feeling (Schaefer 2017; 2022). There's a whole range of positions in the literature on the relationship between affect and thought, much as there is across the psychology of emotion. I can imagine Leys being sympathetic to many of these viewpoints, yet she cites none of them, preferring to paint a monolithic version of affect theory united by the grand vice of "anti-intentionalism."

Leys needs the intentional approach—intentional in the sense of "on purpose," not in the technical, philosophical sense—because she needs individuals. She sees it as a moral imperative that we have "intact persons"—liberal subjects, autonomous agents, which she presumes are the only viable foundations of a functioning public sphere. This is why she ends up on the same frequency as Dawkins and Fridlund (while still misreading them overall). The supremely selfish Subject with its militarized borders and acquisitive expertise—the scientific construct feminist critics have excavated from the foundations of adaptationist sociobiology, what Sylvia Wynter has astutely identified as the figure of capital-M "Man"—is really the *individual* par excellence. (Wynter 2003) That's the Subject built by Dawkins' selfish genes, at least in the popular misrepresentation of his work that Leys trots out. It is this fortified Subject that Leys wants us to return to, and it is, I have argued, the threat to the ironclad integrity of this Subject presented by affect theory that has prompted her attack.

I know I have been sharply critical of Leys' analysis here. But I want to end on a note of appreciation. Leys' core concern, I believe, must be taken seriously. Affect theory really *does* need to talk about what it means to move beyond the liberal subject. Affect theory, because it pays attention to factors that are only partially present to consciousness, often takes as its form of analysis "*You say that your actions and beliefs are motivated by x, but really they are about y.*" This genre didn't emerge with affect theory. It has been the orientation of critique for 200 years—dialectics (material and otherwise), psychoanalysis, genealogy, post-structuralism, and even (especially) evolutionary psychology, to name a few, have all trafficked in the same analytic maneuver. One of affect theory's innovations is to elevate the semi-opaque dynamic between awareness, motivation, and self to the level of a major motif. Leys has raised an important concern about what happens when we walk away from the sovereign liberal subject in a social, political, and cultural framework in which liberal common sense is a given. Pressing against this fiction has consequences, and scholars working on affect can benefit from Leys' call for a self-reflexive conversation about the politics and ethics of affect as method.

## Endnotes

1. A review of the Fourth Edition of the Guilford Handbook of Emotions from 2016 shows that Fridlund is cited frequently, though primarily with reference to his broader theory of how expressions are modulated for strategic purposes, not with reference to the question of intentionality. This is consistent with the interpretation that Fridlund is using the word "intentionality" very differently from the way Leys is, as discussed below.
2. To Leys' credit, she also acknowledges Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a "brilliant literary critic" even as she sets up her disagreements with her.
3. *Ascent of Affect* is, in many ways, an extension and elaboration of earlier criticisms Leys had leveled against Sedgwick on the topic of shame in the form of a sustained attack on Tomkins, who inspired much of Sedgwick's work (Leys 2007).
4. Summarizing Tomkins, Leys writes that in his model "the nervous system is understood to be 'wired directly to the onset of the danger'" (Leys 2017, 83). Note the embedded quotation in that passage. One might assume this quotation is from Tomkins, perhaps offering a statement of his own position. But it's actually a passage from an article by Massumi—an article that does not cite Tomkins, written by an author who has never made use of Tomkins. This is characteristic of how Leys recklessly conflates widely divergent strands of the literature.
5. See Frank & Wilson 2020, Ch. 3, esp. 35-39, for a more detailed rebuttal of Leys' characterization of Tomkins' thought. See also Schaefer 2019.
6. Leys seems to have not only read Fridlund's book, but interviewed him (and only him) in the process of writing *The Ascent of Affect*. Personal communication with him is cited about ten times throughout the book.

7. Leys has noticed this footnote and cites it, but declines to quote Fridlund's explicit assertion that we don't need to "know" what we intend (Leys 2017, 271).

8. See Sterelny 2001 or Schaefer 2015, Ch. 5 for an overview.

9. Dennett calls this position the "intentional stance," but note that his use of this word differs again from both Leys' and Fridlund's respective senses.

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*Untitled*, Dids, 2020  
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# PURIFICATION MEDIA: SELF-BRANDING, GENTRIFICATION, SMOOTHNESS



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Self-branding, entrepreneurship, and gentrification form a constellation of practices foundational to neoliberal capitalism. What is the aesthetic and affective logic of this set of related practices? What spaces for resistant critique can be found in this logic? Through its multi-media method of painting and writing, this article attempts to both answer this question and experiment with a resistant aesthetic practice. Beginning with the case study of the contradictory Vancouver billionaire Chip Wilson, this article argues that self-branding functions by treating the body as an abjection that must be disciplined or erased. Parts of the body that do not meet the brand must be affectively “unstuck,” to use the language of Sara Ahmed. Following Katherine Hayles, this positions self-branding in a lineage of technologies that seek to transcend the body. The branding of gentrification follows the same logic. Ultimately, self-branding, entrepreneurship, and gentrification all participate in the logic of what Byung-Chul Han calls “smoothness”: a repressive affective and aesthetic practice that seeks to deny everything except for an effusive positivity. However, the smooth is also vulnerable: the affective logic of neoliberalism requires its repressed other for its identity, even as it attempts to erase it. As a potentially resistant practice, this paper experiments with bringing forth the abjection that self-branding and gentrification can never entirely do away with.

## KEYWORDS

self-branding, entrepreneurship, gentrification, smoothness, neoliberalism

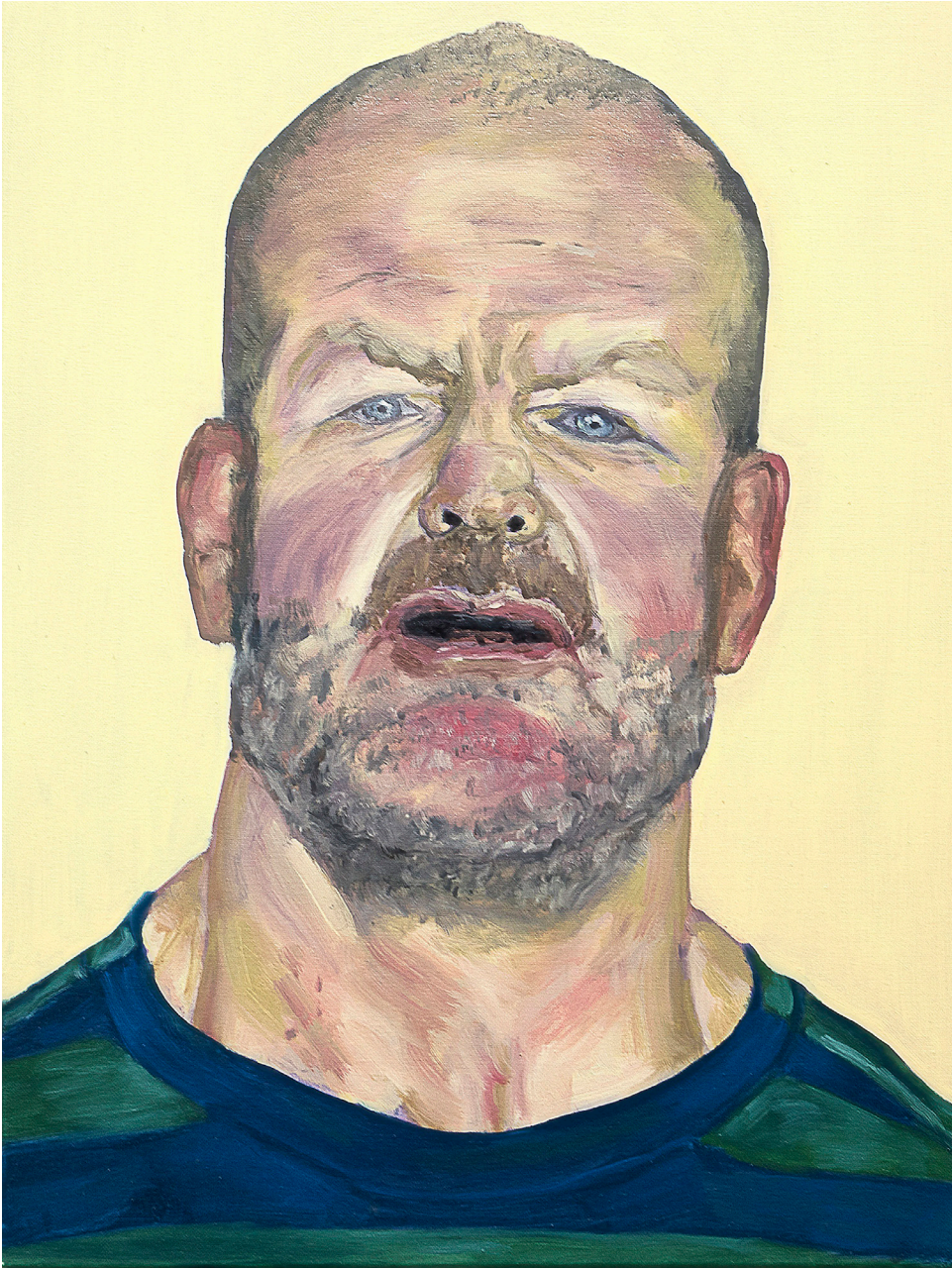


Figure 1. Chip Wilson (Lululemon, Low Tide Properties, Hold It All)

## Introduction

Contemporary spaces of gentrification, in cities across the global north, share a strangely homogenous aesthetic. I step into the same, minimal, off-white coffee shop with its re-finished wrap-around counter in my neighborhood in Vancouver, in Leipzig, San Francisco ... even in some forgotten ex-steel town, like Cambridge, Ontario. The new condo buildings are smooth with minimal colours and lots of glass, perhaps an angular “landscaped” space with sparse plants, all encapsulated by a clean one-word moniker like “Pinnacle” or “Habitat.” (There is even a condo development in Berlin with the emblematic name of “Pure.”) It’s no surprise that most theorists of gentrification now follow Neil Smith’s (2002) argument that neoliberal gentrification has become a “generalized” “global urban strategy” (430, 437). Some even point out its “increasing urban homogeneity of services and ‘feel’” (Atkinson and Bridge 2005, 8), albeit with important local variations.

This “feel” of neoliberal spaces is the focus of this paper. However, the affects attached to neoliberal minimalism are not just limited to architecture and design. They seem to creep through neoliberal society as a general principle: from the tasteful self-branding of the Instagram Influencer to the glassy technologies that enable it, to the dominant idea of the contemporary entrepreneur as a sleek, un-attached individual freed from the complexities of an entangled, social existence. This affective modality adds something to Wendy Brown’s (2015) definition of neoliberalism as an economized “form of reason” (17). Here, I want to explore neoliberalism as an affective structure, an almost inescapable set of beliefs and feelings stuck to a certain aesthetic. This essay attempts to name and connect the shared affects and aesthetics attached to the neoliberal values of entrepreneurship, self-branding, and gentrification, with the goal of mounting an aesthetic critique of neoliberalism.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s theorization of affect being “sticky” (2010), I argue that each of these aspects of neoliberalism is made possible by a shared technique of what I call “brand-affect,” or the intentional gluing of various affect to bodies, selves, and neighborhoods towards profitable ends. This form of financialized self-creation functions by ensuring that only the most unobjectionable affects circulate between branded bodies. Ultimately, I argue that these neoliberal aesthetics are what Byung-Chul Han calls “smoothness” in his book *Saving Beauty* (2018). For Han (2018), smoothness is, of course, a tactile quality, but it also extends ideologically as “a general social imperative” to affordances of easy consumption,

frictionless communication, etc. (1). Examples include things like smart phones and Brazilian waxing, but also the forced positivity of the Facebook “Like,” or the contemporary obsession with absolute health. The smooth is “an *optimized* surface *without* negativity” (Han 2018, 16, emphasis in original), “a world of pure positivity” (Han 2018, 5). To me, this concept of smoothness as a broader ideological category helps to explain the shared “feel” of self-branding, entrepreneurship, and gentrification. However, in my view, neoliberalism’s insistence on smoothness renders its aesthetics unstable. Leaks, aberrations, and disturbances can never be fully scrubbed out; they always threaten to return and fragment the coherency of the brand.

Bringing out such leaks, discharges, blemishes, and cracks in the smooth aesthetics of neoliberalism is my mode of critique. In such cracks, I undertake an exploration of neoliberal affective logic; in widening them, I hope to offer practices of resistance. Part of my argument, as I elaborate below, is that brand-affect inaugurates a new layer onto Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject. Whereas Kristeva (1982) argues that the concept of the body relies on demarcating as abject that which threatens its coherency, I argue that the brand functions similarly, and must repress or excise any qualities intolerable to neoliberalism. Ultimately, the body itself is an impossible problem that neoliberalism is constantly trying to repress: whether this is the body that cannot help but differ from the idealized self-brand or the bodies that go un-sheltered in the gentrifying neighborhood. In drawing out this uncanniness that is always already lurking in the apparent smoothness of gentrifying aesthetics and entrepreneurial selves, I hope to turn this neoliberal aesthetics against itself.

The form of this critique is multi-medial. This text is interspersed with portraits of entrepreneurs involved in gentrification in Vancouver, British Columbia, that I painted from promotional photographs as part of an exhibition series.<sup>1</sup> Some of these entrepreneurs are directly involved in property development, others in lifestyle creation, others in the art world, many in a mix of these things. This text, however, is not about interpreting my paintings. Instead, I include them as an experiment in an un-smooth media format. Neoliberal smoothness is about seamless media transitions: one might think of “scrolling” on Instagram, swiping on Tinder, or “contactless payment.” In contrast, I’m attempting a different aesthetic logic by creating edges between media that might require creative

reading to connect. My intention is that this multi-media, multi-sensorial format will allow an unfolding of ideas and connections in a lateral rather than linear way, that the painting and writing will provide mutual context for critical ideas around neoliberal affect and aesthetics to emerge. I am experimenting here with creating a space of sensory in-betweenness as a hopeful site of resistance to the smooth monadism of contemporary branding.

Part of my original intention, but beyond the scope here, was a kind of sensory ethnography of these movements between media. Drawing on thinkers such as David Howes (2003), who argues that sensory experience is contingent and historical, and Sarah Pink (2007), who advocates for multi-sensorial research formats, I am interested in techniques for producing varied sensory experiences of neoliberal aesthetics, and media that can provide critical distance. I find painting to be one such method. I hope to further develop this idea of media translation and in-betweenness as a critical sensory method in a future paper. For now, I can only gesture to these ideas in the form of this project.

Through the critical method of aesthetic experience I employ here, I am experimenting with destabilizing what Imre Szeman (2015) calls “the unquestioned social value and legitimacy of entrepreneurship” in his essay “Entrepreneurship as the New Common Sense” (472). To me, this “common sense” is another word for the broader affective structure of neoliberalism that draws together gentrification, branding, and business-as-ethos. Why is such social value ascribed to entrepreneurs, imagined as disembodied superheroes “innovating” a utopian future, when we know this isn’t really true? What is this affective structure that tediously glosses their business practices, even when these actively displace more and more people? This project is trying to crack whatever brand-patina covers these entrepreneurs, which acts as a kind of life-support system for their moribund ideas of business. It builds on a plethora of critiques of entrepreneurship that tend to focus on situating the rising cult(ure) of entrepreneurship in a changing political economy (Dardot and Laval 2014; Karim 2008; Szeman 2015; Flisfeder 2015), as well as work in gentrification scholarship that has just recently started investigating it aesthetically (Lindner and Sandoval 2021). My work tries to dispel the purifying work of branding selves and places by offering sensory experiences that may be able to move beyond these slick surfaces and smooth affects.



Figure 2. Miriam Alden (Brunette the Label)

## Rupturing the Smooth: Chip Wilson, Abject Gentrifier

Vancouver billionaire Chip Wilson offers a telling window into the world of entrepreneurship, branding, and gentrification. Though most famous for founding the athleisure company Lululemon Athletica Inc., his current business activities are entrenched in real estate. With this double envelopment, Chip Wilson appears as the gentrifying entrepreneur *par excellence*, involved both in producing a gentrifying culture of middle-class wellness and in developing properties. His work as CEO of Lululemon from 1998–2005 and subsequent involvement in the company until 2019 (Coudriet 2019), created a lifestyle whose aesthetic code helped to re-signify neighborhoods as open and safe for the upwardly mobile. In the words of his personal website, “the little yoga company founded in Vancouver would go on to redefine how generations of people dressed and lived” (Wilson 2021). His current work in property development is less well-known, but equally influential in shaping Vancouver. Wilson is the founder of Low Tide Properties, a Vancouver development company that has been criticized for buying and shutting down artist and music spaces across the city for redevelopment as condominiums, particularly in the new frontier of gentrification, East Vancouver (Klassen 2019). Meanwhile, the company aims to hold \$1.5 billion in Vancouver real estate by 2025 (Korstrom 2016). Chip Wilson seems to have perfected a business model of gentrification: one branch of business injects value into neighborhoods through cultural disruption, while the other harvests this value through property acquisition and sale. This financial encirclement lends an aptness to the name of his personal investment company, Hold It All Inc.

Yet, in many ways, Chip Wilson fails to live up to the cultural promise of wellness and tasteful self-betterment that he helped create, to embody the unblemished smoothness promised by his form-fitting yoga pants. His business is sound, but *he* is leaky; Wilson has a long and continuing history of spasmodically disrupting what could be a smooth Vancouverite persona of success and wellness with objectionable comments, screeds, and appearances. His most famous blunder came when he mansplained to interviewer Trish Regan on Bloomberg TV, that “frankly, some women’s bodies just don’t actually work [for Lululemon pants]” (CBC News 2013), and there is a well-documented list of his racist, misogynistic, exploitative, and conspiratorial discharges over many years (Peterson 2013; Deveau 2005). These ultimately seem to have played a role in his ejection from the board of Lululemon (Peterson 2013; Coudriet 2019), following which he has

kept a lower profile, with his appearances in the news largely limited to curated puff-pieces (Woodin 2020; BC Business 2020). Perhaps the name of his personal investment company was a reminder for Wilson to just ‘Hold It All In.’

Chip Wilson’s strangest outburst was an essay he published on his blog in 2019, titled “Are Erections Important?” The post was taken down almost immediately, but captured and preserved on other websites. To summarize: the essay essentially argues that male arousal depends on rigid, traditional gender roles and, as such, the spread of feminism is preventing men from getting erections. Therefore, there is grave cause for fear of “the end of humanity.” This Spenglerian call to arms against cultural decline suggests military warfare as a solution to male “feminization” and threatens extinction if we do not take “the world of erections” seriously (Wilson 2019). My fascination with this essay is its meta-ejaculatory axis: its immediate deletion reveals the essay itself as an uncontrolled emission of misogyny. Meanwhile, the author argues that his physiological emissions depend precisely on his right to such misogynistic discharges. This is out of step with Vancouver’s other entrepreneurial superstars. Contrast it to someone like Westbank CEO Ian Gillespie, whose bad-boy image is properly curated, helping him rebrand massive condo developments as bohemian art projects. His Fight for Beauty campaign in 2017 presented his development company as a high art outfit, rescuing Vancouver from aesthetic backwardness. Or consider someone like Brunette the Label CEO Miriam Alden, who became one of the faces of the Assembly condo development in Vancouver, just before it broke ground and bulldozed one of the last artist-run spaces in the neighborhood, Liquidation World. Her seamless brand of girl boss feminism and business slogan of “babes uplifting babes” are just the kinds of positive messages that help us imagine that these condos are “uplifting,” rather than displacing the community (Assembly Strathcona 2021). These are “smooth” entrepreneurial agents of gentrification, with a brand coherency unruptured by off-colour outbursts.

In contrast to these figures, Chip Wilson lacks smoothness and coherency. His athleisure company lends him the appearance of merging with the smooth well-being of West Coast capitalism, but he cannot restrain his distasteful ejaculations that break with this brand. Indeed, he threatens perilous consequences if he is forced to. Chip Wilson offers a crack in the branded surfaces that neoliberalism relies on. By peering into this chasm as a method, I hope to offer a glimpse into this neoliberal affective structure.



Figure 3. Ian Gillespie (Westbank)

## Bathing in Vancouver-Affect: Sticky Promises Articulated Nowhere

One way to conceive of Chip Wilson's outbursts is as a rupturing of the self-brand by the self, or as a lack of coherency between the two. Chip Wilson's comments that feminism will lead to human extinction, and that women's bodies are the problem (not his yoga pants), fall far from the brand-slogan of his personal "Code" on his website that "gender means nothing, love means everything" (Wilson 2021). Likewise his enthusiastic promotion of 'third-world' child labour (Deveau 2005) renders article 51 of "the Code" somewhat perverse: "feeling uninspired? Surround yourself with children" (Wilson 2021). Based on Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2012) discussion of self-branding and authenticity in *AuthenticTM*, such honest disclosures of inner sentiment are the stuff self-branding is made of. Yet, Chip Wilson's eruptions of "authenticity" have not actually served to enhance his brand. Instead, they ended his career at Lululemon. Answering what is going on here clearly requires exploring Chip Wilson's self-brand more deeply. What is it exactly, and what is a self-brand more generally?

Alison Hearn's (2008) ground-breaking essay on the topic of self-branding, "Meat, Mask, Burden," shows how self-branding goes beyond the direct semiotics of logo advertising (i.e.—the Nike swoosh). Instead, it becomes a total crafting of the self that both commodifies and actualizes the individual. The injunction to brand oneself is not cynical, rather it "celebrates the freedom and radical individual empowerment involved in creating the personal brand" (Hearn 2008, 206). Within neoliberal logics, valorizing the self into a commodity also reconstitutes the self as agential and liberated. This is not just image-crafting, but a kind of self-actualization, a sentiment echoed by Imre Szeman (2015), who writes that "for the entrepreneur...creating an enterprise and creating a self is the same activity" (482). Self-branding is the response to a world in which a subject must increasingly be an "entrepreneur of himself" (Foucault 2018, 226). This means going beyond the external logo and embodying the brand. Banet-Weiser (2012) describes the era of self-branding as defined by "the replacement of things with affective practices" (71). It is not the body itself that matters, but rather the affective aura generated around it or the ideas that can be linked to it. As a form of self-actualization, self-branding allows these externalized affects to be appropriated back into the self, to become identity.

Perhaps this means that contemporary branding has taken seriously Sara Ahmed's (2010) idea of affect being "sticky" (29). Ahmed (2010) argues that objects become charged with affect in our relation to them, defining affect as "what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (29). This is not to say that an affect exists as part of the object in the material world; it remains social and relational. This affective glue pulling objects and values together forms social bonds which makes it bigger than an atomized, subjective experience. As a social process, this sticking has real power to shape identity: "feelings can get stuck to certain bodies...and bodies can get stuck depending on what feelings they get associated with" (Ahmed 2010, 39). In Ahmed's view, affective glue is often a tool for disciplining bodies through social pressure, a way of dismissing the political critiques of (queer, racialized) people by casting them as angry or against joy. Ahmed sees this as a site for resistance, a place to re-think these affects. Perversely, self-branding has a similar ethos sans political critique. It tries to recalibrate the attachment of certain ideas, values, and identities to certain bodies towards profitable, rather than (collectively) liberatory ends. I'd like to call this profitable marshaling of social affects around products and selves (and ultimately around lifestyles, neighborhoods, and cities) "brand-affect."

What kind of brand-affect does Chip Wilson have? This gets tricky. Ahmed points out how affect is always operating somewhere between the individual and the social, and is always somewhat shifty, depending on the time, the angle, the perspective. Sticking is relational, not absolute. However, these relations are real and recognizable. What kind of affect sticks to Chip Wilson when he describes himself on his personal website as being "recognized as a global thought leader" (Wilson 2021); when his investment profile features a picture of him doing some kind of snow sport and begins with the nonchalant, chill line "This is Chip" (Our Team 2021); and when he writes "on the West Coast, close bonds with nature, a spirit of experimentation and deep human connection have translated to a distinctly west coast way of living, thinking and doing business" to introduce his investment company (Hold It All 2021)? To me, he is calling on a familiar affective assemblage that seems to drench Vancouver: it includes the Lululemon lifestyle "Chip" participates in, as well as the broader culture of the post-hippie West Coast. I would describe key features of this assemblage as the life of fitness, health, and wellness; connection with nature; a promise of perfect love and success; muted colours; hot bodies; coffee; the legacy of hippie free-thinking translated into business innovation; juiced vegetables; frictionless (consumable) multiculturalism; fitness merging with spirituality on the mountain or in the yoga studio. This might best be described as a West Coast brand-affect of "wellness." It was perfectly illustrated by Genicca Whitney's now defunct company

Manifest Like a Boss, which made an entire business of coaching entrepreneurs on merging spiritual, physical, and financial health. Living in Vancouver, I feel as if I'm constantly wading through this sticky assemblage; I readily participate in it, without thinking. I am not able to point to it, or locate its source, yet it is an integral part of the weave of social relations and understandings in this place.

Chip Wilson's self-branding signifies him as being a part of and a producer of this affect that glues so much of Vancouver together. And, because it is a kind of social glue, because it is so familiar, it is a jarring break with this brand-affect when he hopes a war will cure erectile dysfunction or when he laughs at how Japanese people pronounce "Lululemon" (Deveau 2005). Perhaps what people find so horrifying about Chip Wilson's outbursts is that they fly so in the face of this wider Vancouver brand-affect, which is stuck to Lululemon and stuck to him, too. Though Vancouver, of course, is no stranger to racism, misogyny, and classism, its brand as a city relies on these distasteful qualities remaining plugged up beneath its smooth surface. It is this surface that Wilson ruptures, threatening to stick the wrong affects to the Westcoast brand of wellness. Despite these leakages, Vancouver's brand-affect remains strong; Chip Wilson (and other Vancouver entrepreneurs) continue to both tap into and create it, which in turn charges their own self-brands with vitality.

Another reading of Chip Wilson is possible here however, as embodying the contemporary entrepreneurial value of "disruption." Disruption is a major buzzword in the business world, having become a fundamental value of entrepreneurship, with investors more likely to give money to a "disruptive vision" (van Balen et al. 2019, 303, 328), and business scholars describing entrepreneurship as "a process of generative disruption" (Vedres and Stark 2010, 1150). Chip Wilson does tap into this value. He is an avid Ayn Randian individualist (Wilson 2020a), an ethos that articulates a fantasy of self-fashioned business people doing what herd-like masses don't dare to. And he deploys the language of the disruptive creative class in his essay on local politics "MEC or NDP: Is There a Difference?" (2020b). Here, he argues that lefty political parties and co-op stores are mutual failures because of their wimpy social justice politics, which prevents them from taking the creative risks necessary for greatness (perhaps things like child labor?). He contrasts this position with that of "creative entrepreneurs who enjoy working 24/7" (Wilson 2020b). Chip Wilson clearly *sees himself* as a kind of Randian, creative disruptor.



Figure 4. Genicca Whitney (Manifest Like a Boss)

Yet, I would argue that Chip Wilson also fails to properly embody this subject position. His disruptions are too real; they don't congeal into a successful image of creative disruption. Soaring to the heights of Trump-level derangement, Chip Wilson is dragged down by the Vancouver wellness brand-affect that he relies on. He is fundamentally an in-between character, whose Vancouver wellness affect is dissolved by his libertarian outbursts, but whose disruptions cannot quite be re-mediated by self-identifying as a creative entrepreneur. Chip Wilson's clumsy (non-) apologies, retracted statements, and erased blog posts gesture to this failure, as does his ejection from Lululemon. He wants to self-identify as the disruptive entrepreneur, but can't quite smooth out the edges. In the end, we are just left horrified that the founder of Lululemon hates women, and unimpressed by his effort to break the mold.

In this way, even entrepreneurial disruption depends on a kind of coherence: tensions that reduce value must be repressed, disruptions cannot be too real. Chip Wilson's failure to successfully embody the self-brand of the gentrifying entrepreneur throws this ideal figure into clearer relief. This subject position relies on an interplay between disruption and being self-identical; but this interplay cannot itself be disrupted, it must flow smoothly. As in Banet-Weiser's (2012) analysis, "authenticity *itself* is a brand" (11, emphasis in original), meaning that the disclosure of inner-truth must itself be branded to be successful. The creative entrepreneur must cultivate a self-brand of disruption, not a disruption of self-brand.

## Transcendent Entrepreneurial Brand-Bodies: Self-Branding as Purification

If a self-brand is ruptured by the intrusion of certain affects, as my reading of Chip Wilson suggests, then branding is not just about sticking. It is also about un-sticking. Whatever ruptures it must have been affectively unstuck from the self-brand or barred from entry by the act of branding. Alice Marwick (2013) explores the importance of this kind of entrepreneurial self-editing in her book *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. Marwick (2013) defines self-branding as "the strategic creation of an identity to be promoted and sold to others" (166) and highlights how it has become "firmly instilled in modern business culture" (164). This rise is partly technological as,



Figure 5. Lisa Chan (Lanaca Properties, Suite Living, TrufElle)

in the age of social media and Web 2.0, there is an increased need for people to “keep their brand image ‘pure’” (192). The disciplinary mechanism for this purity, in Marwick’s account, is neoliberalism. People can lose their jobs if their actions do not fit a “‘businesslike’ image” (199). Examples of such reprobate behaviour from her ethnographic work are “drinking alcohol, doing drugs, talking about politics, or having sex” (199). Rosalind Gill (2014) identifies similar phenomena in her essay “Unspeakable Inequalities,” which focuses more on how the political enters the logic of branding. Businesses, in her argument, want to go through the motions of performing their egalitarianism and then move on: raising politics as an ongoing structural issue is a no-no. As such, someone’s “intelligibility as an entrepreneurial subject/cultural worker” depends on “the unspeakability of sexism (and of racism and perhaps other structural patterns of discrimination too)” (523). Any invested, political discussion of inequality must not enter the brand. Marwick (2013) refers to the erasure of such behaviors and traits as the “edited self” (195), which ostracizes activities that are not “business-friendly” (195). In Gill’s language, the not-business-friendly becomes literally “unspeakable” and is excluded from the self-brand.

The affective un-sticking of these qualities is a form of smoothing. Following Han’s (2018) concept, this smoothing removes any contradictions that could trouble the positive coherency of its brand. Han writes that “the smooth is something one just likes. It lacks the negativity of opposition” (10). Likewise, brand-affect demands that it be smoothed of any contradictions that could make one dislike it, even if one wanted to. Eve Sedgwick’s (2003) reading of smoothness, in her book *Touching Feeling*, helps show the relation between smoothing and un-sticking. Drawing on the work of Renu Bora, Sedgwick explores how highly textured items reveal a history, written into the object, which invites an orientation towards it. Coarse surfaces invite the questions “How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?” (Sedgwick 2003, 13). In contrast, she argues that a smooth texture is one that “defiantly or even invisibly blocks or refuses such information...that insists instead on the polarity between substance and surface, texture that signifies the willed erasure of its history” (14–15). It is no wonder, then, that brand-affect must be smooth. Following Sedgwick, un-smooth objects are affectively unpredictable. Texture invites a questioning. It calls out for a subjective orientation towards itself (“what could I do with it?”), as well as an interpretation of its history (“how did it get that way?”). Since these readings necessarily vary between people and across time, so do the affects that get stuck to such objects. When only “business-friendly” affects are welcome, texture becomes a threat that must be smoothed over.

This means that the body itself becomes a problem for the self-brand, given its potential for textured betrayal. Indeed, Marwick's (2013) and Gill's (2014) examples of self-brand-failure are all embodied, impassioned experiences of desire, whether political or sensual, in which the body and feeling are out of rational (patriarchal) control. They constitute ruptures because they reveal the situated presence of the physical body and its desires not properly mediated through the symbolic order of self-branding. The body is denied in favor of the brand. Indeed, Marwick speaks of mental health struggles in the self-branding subjects of her ethnography, "including anxiety, information overload, lack of time, and hurt feelings" (197). These struggles must of course also be smoothed out or rendered positive. In this way, self-branding can be seen as a kind of purification of the physical body, a rejection of parts of its embodiment and a mediation of its functions into a clean, "neatly packaged" self (Marwick 2013, 195).

Vancouver property developer Lisa Chan offers an interesting iteration of this problem, given that one of her businesses sells a kind of embodiment. While one branch of her business empire involves the eviction of long-term tenants for profitable redevelopment (Vancouver Tenants Union 2019), her other business, TrufElle, markets aphrodisiac cannabis chocolates to bored, upwardly-mobile, heterosexual wives. The TrufElle website offers a testimonial about Chan turning to weed chocolates "to find ways to keep the passion exciting in her marriage" (TrufElle 2021). At first glance, the presence of sex and intoxication in the self-branding work of this testimonial seems to contradict Marwick's findings about what is tolerable to neoliberalism. Yet, this (quintessentially Vancouver) product is less a re-assertion of the body than a re-mediation of it into an acceptable form. What is intolerable to neoliberalism here is not sex per se, but the idea that the entrepreneur might actually lead a life of tedium that her body has rebelled against. Desire must be smoothly mediated to be in line with the image-concept: either too much or too little betrays the body's revolt against the idealism of the self-brand. With TrufElle, the textured signs of embodied desire (or lack of it) can be easily smoothed over into a positive, affectively-predictable surface. It prevents the body from interrupting the self-brand. TrufElle acts as a chemical supplement to aid in maintaining the "edited self" (Marwick 195). It helps fulfill the mandates of what parts of the body can be included in the self-brand and what must be excised.

This reading of self-branding comes close to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. For Kristeva (1982), the abject is what "lies outside" (2), "a border" (9) that delimits what must be excluded from the body; it also requires a ritualistic purification. In

this reading, self-branding can be seen as a way of “*purifying* the abject” (Kristeva 1982, 17), the abject in this case being those qualities which are of “intolerable significance” (11) to neoliberalism, what the [neoliberal] “superego...has flatly driven away” (2). The abject, for Kristeva, is focused not just on body horror (rotting corpses, shit, vomit), but also on “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). In this way, it is a response to a profound break-down in meaning and identity. What could be more destructive to a brand than being un-self-identical, in-between? Deviation from the brand is a kind of deviancy; and deviancy is an admission of what is intolerable to neoliberalism. Rosalind Gill’s language is very telling here: such deviations literally become “unspeakable,” what Kristeva might refer to as “a ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing” (2). They are unspeakable literally because the language is not legible, the thing referred to cannot be recognized: admitting it would be too destructive. Gill (2014) argues that certain admissions about neoliberalism become unspeakable, specifically its evident discrimination, even as these become increasingly obvious. It is the bad smell no one will voice, the rotting flesh that collective fantasies must deny: a kind of abjection.

There are also apparent differences here. For Kristeva, the abject causes a visceral horror, a bodily rejection; it is “intrinsically corporeal” (11). Self-branding, I would argue, needs to repress the body as such: it is, in a way, intrinsically *anti*-corporeal, yet is still an identity structured against abjection. The abject delimits identity, but the coherent identity of the self-brand is outsourced to a virtual body. What happens when the meaning of this branded image-body is threatened? Where does the uncontrollable convulsion take place? In a way, the very existence of the fleshy body becomes a kind of abjection for the self-brand: self-branding sets up an identity that is not firmly situated in a single corpus, but is rather “in-between” two (Kristeva 1982, 4). In the context of abjection, this is a fundamentally unstable situation where meaning is constantly under threat; the abject as identity-breakdown is always looming. In order to preserve self-identity, the undisciplined parts of the flesh body that are not identical with the brand must be constantly articulated as outside, as not-belonging to identity. The self-brand is the site of the exclusionary ‘spasm.’

In other words, there is always the threat of a textured seam arising between the body and the self-brand, betraying how these two entities are stitched together as well as the very history of that stitching. This would present a dangerous



Figure 6. Michael Audain (Polygon Homes)

in-betweenness. To smooth over such a seam, the brand-affects must appear as qualities of the entrepreneur rather than things that have been stuck on. There can be no residues of glue. Chris Ingraham (2020) suggests how this erasure of sticking takes place in his book *Gestures of Concern*. In his interpretation of Sara Ahmed's concept of stickiness, he writes that "once we adapt an orientation toward objects and people that presumes certain 'affects' reside in them, we lose sight of the history by which that orientation came to the fore" (76). In other words, the essentializing of affects is also a process of smoothing, of erasing the texture that, following Sedgwick, betrays a history. Smoothing obscures the stickiness of affects. Affect here takes on an ideological valence: as history is smoothed out, what is actually transient and relational comes to appear as essential. In other words, brand-affect is an essentializing work. As Alison Hearn (2008) argues, it is treated as a form of self-actualization, the empowered creation of an actual identity. The smoothed body has to give way to a new essence: the essence of the brand.

In this way, I would argue that self-branding participates in a broader set of post-human technologies for purifying the body. In her essay "Flesh and Metal," Katherine Hayles (2002) critiques precisely such narratives of technological transcendence, which see the body as clearly bounded, controllable, and editable. Drawing on Donna Haraway, Hayles (2002) sees such narratives as participating in a "masculinist fantasy of second birthing, transcendent union of the human with the technological that will enable us to download our consciousness into computers and live as disembodied information patterns, thereby escaping the frailties of the human body, especially mortality" (299). Technology promises to purify the abject, once and for all. This process relies, in Hayles' critique, on a view of the body that stops at the flesh, that is not involved in the environment, in-between: it cannot be leaking out into the environment interpenetrating and co-creating itself with others. The self-brand is clearly on a different level than downloading consciousness, but it is structured on the same fantasy of body purification. Aspiring to this ideal, self-branding emerges as a strange and ritualistic practice, marked by a fundamental uncanniness; since the body can never really be scrubbed clean, it is a constant, uncanny "return of what has been repressed" that threatens the coherency of the self-brand (Freud 2003, 155).

Hayles seeks to counter this practice with the alternate narrative of the "mind-body," an entity that tries to overcome the traditional Western dualism and its destructive fantasies of body transcendence. Where is the mind, though, when

there is more than one body attached to it? The self-brand functions as a bizarre, self-fashioned Doppelgänger that actually seems to have more claim to the mind than the flesh-body does. This Doppelgänger is prioritized and acts to discipline the now secondary flesh-(mind)body into a profitable self-identity. Reconstituted as the abject in relation to the self-brand, the flesh-body becomes strange to itself in its eruptions of unbranded abjection. From the perspective of the self-brand, the flesh-body is a “massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome” (Kristeva 1982, 2). In this way, the self-brand renders the flesh-body uncanny, *unheimlich*, no longer at home in itself.

As a project of self-actualization that transcends the limitations of the body, the self-brand relocates the “home” of the mindbody into the brand, and leaves the flesh-body homeless. The self-brand renders the flesh aberrant, in need of discipline. Capitalism comes full circle here. As Marx points out, “branding” was an important technique of subjectivization for workers in the earliest stages of capital: he cites early English laws that state (to use just one example) “if it happens that a vagabond has been idling about for three days he is to be taken to his birthplace, branded [*gebrandmarkt*] with a red hot iron with the letter V on the breast, and set to work” (*Capital* 1990, 897). What could be more uncanny than this violent history returning in the form of self-branding? Any admission of uncanniness, though, is itself intolerable to the self-brand: its evictionary operations must be secretive in order to preserve the neat package Marwick describes. Self-branding masquerades as a Foucauldian technology of the self, of autonomy and fulfillment, but remains a disciplinary technology. Whatever un-homeliness occurs, the self-brand must remain at home, editing out the aberrations of the flesh, leaving them outside the door, on the other side of the threshold, in the cold. To reveal the uncanniness of self-branding, then, means voicing the eviction of the flesh-body.

## Blemishless Spaces of Pure Positivity(!): Smoothness and the Aesthetics of Gentrification

The television series *Black Mirror* draws a direct connection between self-branding and gentrification in the episode “Nosedive” (2016). The main character, Lacie Pound, attempts to buy a home in an upscale neighborhood, in which an aesthetic of smooth surfaces in various shades of off-white reigns un-blemished. The ability to buy into the neighborhood is premised on one’s “rating,” a dystopian validation system by which everyone is constantly ranked out of 5 stars by their peers. Lacie needs to increase her 4.2 rating to a 4.5 in order to receive the



Figure 7. Bob Rennie (Rennie Marketing Systems)

elite discount on the apartment. Things that rank well are participation in other minimalist, off-white spaces, taking perfect bites out of perfect cookies, and being effusively positive. “Nosedive” illustrates how self-branding and gentrification merge under a common aesthetic. Self-branding is the promise of embodying this aesthetic; gentrification is the promise of dwelling in it. In order to keep its brand-affect coherent, the new neighborhood must excise those who do not embody this aesthetic. You can’t be in the gentrified neighborhood without branding yourself as a purified body. In this way, the branded self becomes a gentrifying self. The spread of this disciplinary mechanism across space aesthetically reinforces how “the entrepreneur is abstracted and universalized into a model for all citizens” (Szeman 2015, 474).

This *Black Mirror* episode expresses how neoliberal aesthetics interpenetrates neighborhood and self and becomes a general affective structure. Though this aesthetics of gentrification is recognizable enough to be the basis of a popular TV show, it has only recently received scholarly attention. In their edited volume *Aesthetics of Gentrification*, Cristoph Lindner and Gerard Sandoval (2021) attempt to bring aesthetics into the study of gentrification which, as they point out, has primarily been confined to the social sciences (14). There is some earlier work on how conspicuous consumption aesthetically anchors class identity in the gentrifying neighborhood (Jager 2007), as well as an extensive literature on how the art world supports gentrification, which is later nuanced with appropriate ambiguity (Matthews 2010). In contrast, the works in Lindner and Sandoval’s volume contextualize the aesthetics of gentrification as a transformation of space to serve the needs of neoliberal capital. Following this perspective, and the connections made by *Black Mirror*, I want to describe gentrification in the larger neoliberal aesthetic constellation of smoothness. In this way, I entangle gentrification with self-branding and entrepreneurship, and explore the ideological implications of the affects that come to stick to this broader aesthetics.

Though I frame my reading of gentrification through Han’s theory of smoothness, I also want to contest some of his analysis. In particular, my desire to foster a resistant practice of de-smoothing makes me want to formulate a more open theory. The smooth in his work appears as a *fait accompli*, a complete dominance of the status quo. As such, the only way forward for Han is back—back to Hegel, Heidegger, Adorno, and friends, who he hopes can help re-instate a self-shattering experience of the beautiful. There is a kind of sweetness to this as the book becomes more of a lament for lost ways of thinking; it is melancholy, depressed. However, from this melancholic position, Han doesn’t really see the potential for an immanent critique of the smooth.



Figure 8. Conceptual Site Rendering of Mariachi Square in Boyle Heights, LA  
(Source: Baginski and Malcolm)

To me, smoothness actually contains its own conditions of failure within it, in the same way that the fleshy body continually haunts the self-brand. Friction, texture, and history cannot be totally excised. Take, for instance, the smartphone Han identifies as a paragon of smoothness. In many ways, it is the most un-smooth of objects: we constantly rub it all over our bodies—hands, faces—spit on it with our mouths as we speak at it, paw at it with our dirty fingers, cover it in viruses; it accumulates skin, dust, oils and other filth. My swiping becomes hampered by the greasy surface these very swipes create. Perhaps others remember, in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, frantically disinfecting its surface, which seemed to loom as an impossible to contain vector of disease, a site of negativity that threatened seamless use. The smooth is a fantasy, a media for purifying abjection, but always insufficiently. De-smoothing as a practice could be understood as drawing out the abjection that the smooth can never quite cover over, whether through research, art, or political action. From here, an analysis of gentrification's smoothness also opens up an immanent critique.

Anastasia Baginski and Chris Malcolm's (2019) essay "Gentrification and the Aesthetics of Displacement" describes gentrification as embodying a neoliberal aesthetics of smoothed down violence. In their reading, this aesthetics acts as a means to purify class/racial tensions and control admission to the neighborhood.



Figure 9. Conceptual Site Rendering of “Passages” at Whalley Boulevard in Surrey, Vancouver (Source: Chan)

Using the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles as a case study, they argue that gentrification operates through an aesthetic rhetoric of “improvement,” often utilizing the language of environmental sustainability. As Baginski and Malcolm (2019) point out, this implies that the original community is/was unsustainable, “defined by an underlying failure or absence that the development process can supplement, remedy or improve in a benign manner” (para. 10). Their reading of “Conceptual Site Renderings,” which are the digitally-generated images that depict the future “developed” neighborhood, are especially revealing: these show an environment in which “the resolution of all social and political tensions is imagined to be a *fait accompli*” (para. 14). Multi-racial families happily consume in a space of muted colours and clean lines, devoid of tension. These images are not confined to L.A. As Baginski and Malcolm argue, they participate in a broader gentrifying aesthetic that is also highly recognizable in Vancouver.

The aesthetic rhetoric of benign improvement promises only changes that “everyone can get behind” (Baginski and Malcolm 2019, para. 14), smoothing out the displacing violence of gentrification. Changes get re-branded as merely purifying the neighborhood of what has to go rather than motivated by profit or affecting long-term residents. As Baginski and Malcolm write, “gentrification succeeds not simply when a neighborhood is changed, but when existing spaces and infrastruc-

ture can be seen *only* as having been underutilized or inappropriate and, in that case, on their way to improvement” (para. 12, emphasis in original). Recall, for example, Westbank CEO Ian Gillespie recasting condos as avant-garde art projects in Vancouver. Daan Wesselman’s case study of gentrification of Amsterdam reveals how this brand-affect of sustainable improvement is also weaponized in the early stages of gentrification. He describes how the founding of a “creative incubator” in the Bos en Lommer neighborhood imported an aesthetics, globally coded as ‘good,’ thereby establishing a contrast with the original look of the racialized neighborhood. This “aesthetic spearhead,” without anyone saying anything, re-signifies the older aesthetics as ‘bad’ (Wesselman 2021, 193). From there, dispossession is easily smoothed into progress.

This massaging of displacement into improvement also sticks itself to certain subjectivities: “while universal access is promised to all future consumers, existing residents are not visually and rhetorically represented as proper users/beneficiaries of gentrification’s modified and standardized urban space” (Baginski and Malcolm 2019, para. 13). Existing residents are literally taken out of the picture, disappeared, and replaced by those who will use the neighborhood in appropriate ways—“the good subject[s] of gentrification” (para. 24) who provide the correct brand-affect. Jonathan Jae-an Crisman (2021), also writing about Boyle Heights, describes this process as it takes place on the ground using the term “cultural gentrification.” He defines this as “changes to a place’s aesthetics which threaten existing inhabitants’ sense of belonging” (141-142). In this account, the new aesthetics renders the long-time home of residents foreign to them. This is quite literally *unheimlich*: their home turns against them. Aesthetic changes have the aura of being insignificant or benign, yet they not only mask, but also perform a displacing violence. To me, these various recent studies on the aesthetics of gentrification all suggest that gentrification is a form of rendering a neighborhood smooth. In this aesthetic form, even displacement becomes smoothed over.

Indeed, Baginski and Malcolm (2019) illustrate how a gentrifying neighborhood must practice exclusion, but cannot let the violence of this exclusion become overt. Such violence, of course, could not be aestheticized as smooth, sustainable, an improvement. Instead, the locals must be re-mediated as they are smoothed out of the neighborhood. This takes place by making them consumable: “while many new housing development projects in and around Boyle Heights have failed to meet the needs of low-income community members, they have at the same



Figure 10. Beth Boyle (Reside Community Relations, TalkShop Media, LongGame Holdings)



Figure 11. John Ng (Jovi Realty)

time appeared to offer a kind of ‘cultural adjacency,’ a feeling of being ‘linked to the spirit of a place without having to actually rub elbows with the locals’” (para. 2). The rendering of a consumable racial identity—in this case Latinx and Chicanx—allows a smooth displacement of that racial identity, a kind of contradictory inclusion. As the self-brand had to smooth over the seam connecting it to the body, so too does gentrification smooth over the bodies it displaces from its branded vision. People are not displaced in this aesthetic fantasy; they merely step into the role that was always waiting for them, of smooth, self-branded subjects in the frictionless, sustainable neighborhood.

## Conclusion: Re-Mediating the Smooth

The aesthetic these scholars of gentrification illustrate is one of “pure positivity” (Han 2018, 5), in which any kind of negativity or friction has been excised. Everyone wants this! It is a resounding “yes!” that drowns out any notion of a “no,” what Guy Debord (1977) would call “the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made” (sect. 6). Participating in it requires a kind of self-branding, in which the subject itself becomes legible as sustainable in the rhetoric of gentrification. Much of the “common sense” Imre Szeman (2015) refers to in his essay “Entrepreneurship as the New Common Sense” is precisely this unquestionable injunction to believe in this self-branded subject. It becomes just a fact that “*everyone will have to become an entrepreneur*” (474, emphasis in original). Even this sentiment itself inhabits the ideology of the smooth; it is frictionless, unquestionable, pure positivity. The injunction to smoothness is itself smooth.

In my view, the abjection of the smooth is where resistance can take place. In Baginski and Malcolm’s, as well as in Wesselman’s, analysis gentrification requires and produces its own abject, ‘unsustainable’ other. It requires the abject for its own fantasy that it can purify, render it sustainable; it demarcates itself against the unsustainable exterior without ever really acknowledging its existence. And, in a much more material sense, gentrification produces its own abjection in the form of marginalized bodies, figures that appear as uncanny to the neoliberal order, who are literally alienated from their homes, *unheimlich*, increasing in number in the face of gentrification even as it tries to smooth them out of the picture. As self-branding displaces the flesh body from its home, gentrification displaces a multitude of bodies from theirs. Despite fantasies of neoliberal transcendence, these bodies cannot be done away with or fully smoothed out. Smoothness produces the abjection that it promises to purify. This gives abject eruption a kind of political power, and sharpens affective practice as a weapon against neoliberalism.

This project has tried to articulate an affective and aesthetic reading of neoliberalism, as it operates through branded subjects and spaces. In my view, the neoliberal aesthetic of smoothness is also its principle of interpellating subjects into entrepreneurial necessity. It is through this aesthetics that this subject position is normalized and taken on. Out of this analysis, I would promote an (experimental) technique of resistance, a re-mediating of the smooth that brings the abject (of neoliberalism) back into the picture. Art is one way this can occur. Another way is the “wrong” bodies entering the smooth scene, particularly *en masse*. A recent example of this from Vancouver is the Namegan Tent City, an encampment of hundreds of un-housed people, which moved from the impoverished Downtown Eastside Neighborhood into the much smoother Strathcona Neighborhood in July 2020. Suddenly, the city began scrambling to house them, despite the encampment having existed for years in other locations (Woo and Bula 2020).

Such a critique is strongest when it can counter the aesthetics against neoliberalism more generally. With this in mind, this project also seeks to dispel the delusions of transcendence that seem to inherent to neoliberalism. This is the promise of the self-brand to reach a higher level of self, to “promote both ‘authenticity’ and business-targeted self-presentation” (Marwick 2013, 166), the promise of entrepreneurship as a liberatory Romantic subject position that can be “simultaneously careerist and heroic” (Szeman 2015, 474), and the promise of gentrification to render space totally smooth, sustainable, and safe. These aesthetic fantasies ultimately rely on a massive denial of the uncanniness they produce, and function more as ideological justification for various mechanisms of discipline and displacement. Perhaps we can begin to see these aesthetic fantasies as themselves abject and uncanny, and confronting our Doppelgänger as disturbing others rather than ideal selves. We might begin to confront the smooth.

Unfortunately, the far-right currently owns the critique of smoothness in its politics of offense. Chip Wilson could be seen as adjacent to this political trend. A counter-politics that challenges both neoliberalism and the far-right needs to articulate its own critique of the smooth and unleash its own repressed abjection rather than doubling down on this aesthetics.

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## Endnotes

1. These paintings, along with others, make up a series exhibited at CSA Space in Vancouver from November 5, 2021 to January 3, 2022 under the title "Boss Bodies."

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# VIRAL VIDEOS



Parvinder Mehta

When viral videos of violence appear  
views increase gradually in fear  
as flies getting drawn to rottenness  
we recognize the vile rancidness.  
Some spectate, some emote  
some withdraw to thoughts remote.  
Some feel anguished by evil horrors  
some cheer furtively at heinous terrors.  
Some ignore the suffering with dismay  
some activate their antennae—  
to measure with yardsticks of agendas  
to weigh the words and build propagandas  
to regulate language and pick a stance  
that can't bother their privileged nuance.  
Some rage like mad bulls falling in vacuous sand  
some discipline and cancel provocative strands.  
Some explain and analyze the causes and effects  
some embrace apathy with politics to reject.  
Some ask evasive questions of whataboutery  
some justify reasons for traumatic trickery.  
Yet we carry the Sisyphean burden again  
with shock and tears filling our emotional drain.  
Till more viral videos of violence appear  
views again increase with dismal fear  
as flies getting drawn to rottenness  
we again recognize the vile rancidness.

# DIGITOPIA



Parvinder Mehta

Someone told me to join the popular  
threshold of liminal portals called digitopia,  
to make my words more visible.  
Curiously, I entered this new wonderland,  
with keys for tiny doors taking me to  
different narrative and spaces –  
glass houses of magic and realism,  
enigmas of masks and disguise,  
traps of seductions and trickery,  
images of narcissism oblivious to others,  
wizardries of anthropomorphism  
rabbit holes of mindless arguments  
and so much more. The glassy façades  
with different worlds and strokes  
showed human affects like confetti of  
mixed emotions flying everywhere.  
Some bickering, some echoing half-truths.  
Some blatantly canceling, some calling out.  
Some mongering fear, then lying and denying  
some trafficking, scamming, and smearing.  
So many, so many, so many sellers.  
Voice peddlers hawking righteous sermons  
Poets hoping people believe them.

DIGITOPIA

Pied pipers bragging their blue-ticked following  
Lazy ones listening to borrow ideas like plagiarists.  
Learners listening to learn and grow in humility,  
getting blown by new vistas of thought.  
Influencers showboating like peacocks with  
patterned plumage drawing new batches of sheeple.  
Deniers pulling down like crabs lest they  
escaped this liminality and gain freedom  
from blind thought. I tread cautiously amidst  
the landmines of arguments and opinions  
about us and them, about our wounds and  
their tears, about our sufferings and their rage.  
I try to isolate sounds and melodies  
winnowing from the cacophony of blaring  
arguments. Leaving off, I feel guilty of time's  
needles pricking me to pick up my thoughts  
back to write more new words mapping the  
fault lines and tracing a new poem on digitopia.



*Untitled, Ahmose Athena, 2022*  
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# NECESSARY FICTIONS: Haunt(ed) Archives in Caitlín R. Kiernan's *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl*



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## ABSTRACT

Caitlín R. Kiernan's *The Red Tree* (2010) and *The Drowning Girl* (2012) are disquieting queer ghost stories about feeling bad and bad feelings—metafictional novels masquerading as journals or memoirs that present their “hauntings” as the afterlife of pain that echoes, repeats, and distorts space/time. This article argues, drawing from the work of Ann Cvetkovich, that Kiernan's novels self-consciously produce and serve as provocative archives of queer trauma. Through a shared emphasis on the concept of “necessary fictions” and the gathering-together of promiscuous or nontraditional archival materials, each novel centers feelings-oriented approaches to processing grief and isolation that are less readily addressed through normative therapeutic means. Processing traumatic experiences through the frame of affective truth—as opposed to testimonial or objective fact—is already an interpretive act. As such, novels like Kiernan's offer a uniquely experiential method for understanding the archive of feelings as at once a creation of knowledge and a practice of knowing, one that makes space for alternatives to the difficulties presented by accounting for a traumatic event.

## KEYWORDS

Caitlín R. Kiernan, fiction, affect, queer trauma, archive of feelings

Queer ghost stories haunted by bad feelings and feeling bad, Caitlín R. Kiernan's *The Red Tree* (2010) and *The Drowning Girl* (2012) are novels masquerading as journals or memoirs, presenting narratives about the afterlife of pain that echoes, repeats, and distorts space/time. On the surface, *The Red Tree* is traditional New England horror about a woman writer going mad in an isolated haunted house, while *The Drowning Girl* is "a ghost story with a mermaid and a wolf" (Kiernan 2012: 1) about a mad girl's amorous liaisons with monsters. In terms of their similarities, both protagonists are queer women writers whose relations to debility<sup>1</sup>, whose capacities in the social and physical worlds, are complicated by often-unmet needs for domestic or emotional care. Both women have lost a previous lover to suicide and have begun fresh relationships but remain emotionally distant and resentful of their new girlfriends. The novels' framing as journal/memoir allows these protagonists to skim past the traumatic event of loss proper, to approach then avoid it—but glancing contacts aren't sufficient to process the bodily *feelings* of that trauma. The novels, therefore, stand as a conceptual duet married through a shared conceit: what the respective protagonists each refer to as "necessary fictions" (Kiernan 2010, 57, 315; 2012, 63). This term is used to describe the disturbing and disruptive short stories nested *within* the journals, which allow the protagonists to examine their traumatic experiences—experiences nonfiction journaling couldn't grasp, at least not in a manner supporting their survival. Necessary fictions, as fantasies resistant to "formulaic accounts of recapacitation" (Crosby and Jakobsen 2020, 77), ultimately come to serve as alternative means of knowing *through* negative affects<sup>2</sup> such as grief, pain, and isolation. These stories argue for the vital potentiality of acts of artistic creation, as opposed to or in conversation with traditional therapeutic interventions (Cvetkovich 2012).

Parsing (bad) feelings and their functions in *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl* requires engaging the novels' own theoretical approaches to trauma. The novels propose nuanced understandings of the relationships formed between the experience of a traumatic event, the communication or integration of that event, and the broader socio-textual worlds that *create* an individual's sense of self. These relations are multidirectional; the weight of bad feelings is laid against ethical questions about externalizing them, passing them on, and consuming or being consumed by others' negative affects. As metafiction concerned with crafting internal theories of queer survival, the novels explicitly define trauma as a simultaneous noun and verb, then critique their attempts to contain or encom-

pass that trauma within archives. The core term Kiernan uses to fold together fraught questions of what the unstable archive contains as well as the ethics of its creation—a word that flickers spectrally throughout the novels—is *haunting*. To be haunted is to engage the echo of a past; the ghost within popular fiction is commonly a repetition or memorialization of a traumatic event, an intrusion of a bad affect into the present it no longer occupies. However, Kiernan scrambles the orientation of haunting: troubling the linearity of past to present to future with a sort of queer permeability, arguing that texts themselves are haunts—and that people, such as the reader themselves, are no more or less than a collection of haunt(ed) texts gathered within a body-archive.

Centering affect as a method for *knowing* self and world within these novels' promiscuous materials, searching for what is "emotionally meaningful about the story as opposed to what is factually true" (Cvetkovich 2003, 275), this article first approaches the texts' construction of an archive as an interpretive practice. While a significant amount of scholarship in affect studies deals with negative feelings<sup>3</sup>, this article draws primarily from Ann Cvetkovich's "archive of feelings" and Sara Ahmed's phenomenological writings on orientation and disorientation as a means to understand the concept of 'necessary fictions.' The archive of feelings broadly explores "cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions," while archives of trauma serve as a "point of entry into [...the] many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more" (2003, 7) central to contemporary queer life. Characters Sarah Crowe in *The Red Tree* and India Morgan Phelps in *The Drowning Girl*, as writer-protagonists, construct textual archives of feeling within their journals—often through circular and self-conscious narration demonstrating the "unspeakable and unrepresentable" nature of their trauma, which is "marked by forgetting and disassociation" and strains against "conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration" (7). Due to fracturing by loss and trauma, as well as their experiencing of the world as "differently cognating beings" (Chen 2014, 172) occupying differential class positions, Sarah and Imp are only able to develop a sense of self-knowledge—or a sense of emotional cohesion—in nonlinear fashion through their strange archives (Cvetkovich 2003, 7-14). Furthermore, the unresolvable conflicts arising between affective truths and objective facts regarding recollections of trauma are made explicit within the intertexts and the protagonists' narration—modeling, in an almost methodological form, Kiernan's overarching thematic project as represented *by* the novels. The textual structure, the archive itself, is key to these interpretations.

The article next engages with the multiple representations of queer trauma—as toxin, as text, as haunting—these novels explore, as well as their ethical and recuperative approaches to those very same traumas. To locate *The Red Tree* and

*The Drowning Girl* within a queer public culture orienting around trauma is to simultaneously locate Kiernan's career-spanning artistic embrace of bad feelings there as well; these literary interventions participate in a larger counterpublic engagement with difficult or upsetting materials that contravene a wholesome or assimilationist understanding of queer feelings (Doyle 2013; Berlant and Warner 2013). Cvetkovich's suggestion that these forms of artistic production serve to "juxtapose cultural production and therapy [...] to expand the category of the therapeutic beyond the confines of the narrowly medicalized or privatized encounter between clinical professional and client" (Cvetkovich 2003, 10) are also of use as broader contexts. Finally, when considered through the lens of public cultures, the author of a text lingers within their own archives as a sort of holy ghost. Kiernan, in particular, remains with the frame of their "necessary fictions," through extensive<sup>4</sup> blogs exploring the relations between their artistic labors and their experiences of medication, psychiatry, trans lesbian *being*, suicide, poverty, and the labor of making art as a neuroatypical person.

After all, an identical loss rests at the center of both novels and also within Kiernan's own dedications: a lover's death by suicide. The materiality of suicide—and the ways the women left behind process (or fail to process) the concomitant loss—is a lingering textual specter. Drawing from the disability studies works of Mel Y. Chen and Margaret Price, the article lastly reframes the implicitly negative connotations of the trauma archive: interrogating the haunting as a process that does permeate and poison, but *queerly*, as it produces alternate forms of knowing the self, or self-histories. The protagonists' methods of knowing are influenced by prescription medication (or lack thereof), alcohol, post-traumatic stress, depression, and schizophrenia, alongside the everyday wearing-out of queer bodies. The concept of cripistemologies<sup>5</sup> offers a vital connection between the trauma archive and the implicit goal of "necessary fictions": a way of getting through, living on after, the disorientation of trauma by coming to terms with how it *felt*—if not in the end, what really *happened*. However, the novels' oppositional endings complicate a direct correlation between the creation of trauma archives and therapeutic or rehabilitative outcomes. *The Red Tree* opens with an editor's preface informing the reader of Sarah's suicide at the farmhouse, rendering the protagonist a living ghost drifting through the text. Conversely, at the close of *The Drowning Girl*, a relieved Imp informs the reader that "we weave necessary fictions, and sometimes they save us" (2012, 319). These conclusions, one catastrophic and one hopeful, engage "different ways of thinking about trauma and [...] a sense of trauma as connected to the textures of everyday experience" (Cvetkovich 2003, 3).

## Confounding Orientations: Constructing the Archive

The first encounter with these texts throws distinctions between authorship, textuality, and audience immediately into uncertainty through a fascinating muddle of paratextual attributions. Each novel contains two separate, differing title pages; sandwiched between those pages are separate dedications—as well as epigraphs, in the case of *The Drowning Girl*. The initial page of *The Red Tree* presents the novel's title in cursive script, followed by Caitlin R. Kiernan's name; following that page, a pair of dedications appears, one devoted to a woman significant to Kiernan who committed suicide<sup>6</sup>. A second title page comes after, attributing the text that follows in faux-typewritten script as "The Red Tree by Sarah Crowe and Dr. Charles L. Harvey." Two epigraphs then appear, one from Thoreau's *Walden* and the other from Seneca the Elder. *The Drowning Girl* tweaks the multiple-attribution formula, opening with a title page reading "*The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* by Caitlin R. Kiernan" and two dedications (one for Elizabeth Tillman Aldridge), then a short introductory lyric by Kiernan<sup>7</sup> as well as three short epigraphs. Only *following* the substantial front-matter attributed to Kiernan does the second title page appear, unattributed but repeating "The Drowning Girl: A Memoir" in a roughly identical font.<sup>8</sup> A 'reproduction' of a painting appears between this second title page and the manuscript's first page—however, it is a *fictional* painting existing exclusively within the novel.

These paratexts complicate the origin of the novel as well as the role of the writer or archivist. Their layering implies that the actual author of the interior textual material is *not* Kiernan, but the characters/protagonists Sarah or Imp. However, Kiernan isn't entirely effaced as she is the implied sender of the epigraphs and dedications preceding her protagonists' own directional gestures. Basic separations between author and text are complicated over and over. For example, though protagonist Sarah at first appears to be the chooser of the epigraphs in *The Red Tree*, even that is later confounded when the reader learns these are *also* the epigraphs of the manuscript Sarah finds in the farmhouse basement at the start of the novel. The manuscript—a research document on the haunting of the property that begins, in turn, to haunt *her*—belonged to Dr. Charles L. Harvey, a prior guest of the farmhouse who also committed suicide, and is similarly titled "The Red Tree" (2010, 75). The shift to fictional authorship purposefully changes the genre from a novel penned by Kiernan to a journal or memoir penned by Sarah or Imp. Outright generic manipulation invites the reader into a recursive relationship to the text's fluid fictionality. The initial collapse of novel within memoir within novel sets forward an unsettled orientation toward truth in the texts, signaling that *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl* are undertaking a peculiar theoretical project—one fruitfully understood as an archive of trauma.

Genre is a gesture of orientation; narrators within a fictional text also offer orientation toward a certain time and space for the reader. By manipulating these gestures through the placement of the protagonists as their own writers, Kiernan complicates the reader's orientation to the text and the text's orientation to the world. Memoirs and journals perform a certain relationship to truth—a presumption of reportage from life experiences—which orients audiences affectively, despite the fact that these are *fictional* journals. Further proliferating para- and intertextuality creates a queer confusion that complicates attempts to parse real-world references from novelistic inventions, in addition to the already-disorienting conflicts between factual event and emotional truth within the novels' narratives. Sara Ahmed has argued that "queer does not have a relation of exteriority to that with which it comes into contact" (2006: 4) and that bodies "may become orientated in this responsiveness to the world around them, given this capacity to be affected" (9)—while *dis*-orientation serves as "a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are" (20). Kiernan loses their sense of authorial self within the protagonists' authorial selves; Sarah and Imp lose their sense of being due to traumatic experiences neither has fully processed. The reader enters a state of disorientation as well, as the mimetic slides into the speculative, echoing with *bad feelings* embodied as ghosts, hauntings, and dreams or visions of violation. As the novels grapple thematically with affect archives and the ways feeling haunts their protagonists, so to do they enact these sensations and affects on their readers. For the audience as well as the characters, the experience becomes difficult.

And then so, too, does the audience grasp for reorientation alongside the protagonists after supernatural or psychic intrusions—a reorientation that is located through the process of creating archives of feeling through story-telling. These doubly-fictional archives orbit the affective truths of unknowable but "shattering" experiences which have persisted and become a crisis (Ahmed 2006, 157). Troubling distinctions between affective truths and objective facts are central to the novels' *feeling* of disorientation, as well as to becoming-orientated in the aftermath of trauma. However, on the audience and authorial tiers, the paratextual slippages of attribution imply these troubled distinctions are *also* central to the novels as material artifacts crafting arguments about the uses of fiction within the public cultural sphere. In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovich argues that the "notion of creativity as movement can also benefit from [...] thinking about temporalities that move backward and sideways rather than just forward" (2012, 21). She then

poses a question that resonates alongside Sarah and Imp's struggles to orient themselves through their prose: "What is going on when you can't write?" (19). As expanded upon below, the stuck-ness of failing to write, of being *unable* to process through creation, echoes the stuck-ness of traumas that cannot be simply gotten past, lived on through... while the later crafting of necessary fictions offers vital alternatives for survival.

Before those stories come, though, there is a blockage of stories. The fictional editor's note which opens *The Red Tree* describes protagonist Sarah Crowe's arrival, struggles, and ultimate death at Wight farm as a "self-imposed exile" peppered with outgoing requests "for more time on a long overdue and never complete novel," during which she became "like the heroines of her novels, a haunted woman" wrapped up in "the shrouds of delusion and depression" (Kiernan 2010: 13). Sarah herself later echoes Cvetkovich's "fear that you have nothing to say, or that you can't say what you want to say, or that you have something to say but it's not important enough or smart enough" (2012, 18)—recording in her first journal entry that she has "written nothing, nothing at all, since leaving Atlanta" and taking herself to task for journaling about the pond rather than her nightmare the night before, "some alternate version of the night Amanda finally walked out on me" but in which "she doesn't die" (Kiernan 2010, 18–20). The traumatic event appears, front and center, as a disorientation.

The opening chapters of *The Drowning Girl* also foreground trauma, *stuckness*, and disorientation as central to the novel's feelings archive. After Imp informs the reader of her personal and familial history of madness and explains that she intends to write an intimate ghost story, she says:

Before I wrote that and decided it was true, I would come into this room (which isn't the room where I paint, but the room with too many bookshelves) and sit down in front of the manual typewriter that used to be Grandmother Caroline's [...] I would sit here in this chair for hours, and never write a single word. But now I've made my beginning, arbitrary though it may be [...] (Kiernan 2012, 6).

Imp's initial grouping of objects and recollections are anchored through prose to orient her story, ranging from old paintings to the asylum her grandmother was hospitalized in. Once so-grounded, she writes that her project aim is to "go back to that night in July" when she "met the mermaid named Eva Canning," while simultaneously returning "to that other night, the snowy night in November" when she "came across the girl who was actually a wolf, and who may have been the same ghost as Eva Canning" (14). *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* serves as an archival container for the disorientation produced by conflicting memories of the same woman; the central conflict arises from Imp's knowledge that only one of

those sets of memories could be factually true, though she remembers both as real. Within both novels, Kiernan molds the performatively truthful form of journal or memoir around the fictional distance of speculative literature—aiming for a truth of affect (what depression, or schizophrenia, or suicidality, or queer trauma *feel* like) within promiscuous textual archives combining the mimetic, the *actual*, and the invented. Kiernan's public persona as a genre writer and horror critic informs her protagonists' prose-craft as well. The use of supernatural or fantastic materials within the queer trauma archive affords flexible, disruptive critical interventions on temporality and memory. Seeking alternatives to mainstream representations of trauma, Cvetkovich argues that she'd "like those forms of testimony to offer some clues about how to survive those conditions and even to change them"—but would "settle for a compelling description" of the feelings under consideration, "a task that calls for performative writing" (2012, 15). Using the example of Octavia Butler's speculative fiction, Cvetkovich argues that "imaginative fiction [makes] the complex choices of the oppressed more affectively intelligible" (124); the same orientation toward affectively intelligible truth is present within Kiernan's paired ghost stories as well. On another tier of genre, however, Kiernan's novels masquerade as nonfiction—memoirs able to "produce what Audre Lorde describes as forms of truth that are felt rather than proven by evidence" (Cvetkovich 77). Combinations of "memoir and critical analysis [...] offer open-ended conclusions" and "experiment with prose styles that may not be user-friendly"; memoir can function as a "research report, speculative fiction, and creative articulation of public feelings" (141). *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* are, in this sense, generic meldings that double the forms Cvetkovich argues are well-suited to articulate public feelings through cultural materials—simultaneously creating *and* arguing for the utilities of these boundary-crossing archives of lesbian trauma: feeling-archives which can be truthful without needing, necessarily, to be factual.

These archival intentions are made explicit through metafiction, as each novel collects materials and objects as referents to project affects to the audience. However, a productive complication arises even amongst those allusions, references, and intertexts. As with the fictional painting 'reproduction' preceding Imp's memoirs, a significant number of the materials referenced within these novels are *themselves* invented by Kiernan—but others *do* exist outside the text, and neither is differentiated from the other. The Phillip Saltonstall painting, also titled *The Drowning Girl*, which Imp says has haunted her from childhood does not properly *exist*, but at the same time, its fictional reproduction does. The work of artist Albert

Perrault is referenced in both novels and serves a central plot function within *The Drowning Girl*; the artist and his art are fictional. Short fiction written 'by' the protagonists appears set within the novels, doubling fictionality in a strange loop, and those pieces of short fiction provide an affective center for the characters' self-construction. However, the novels also contain extensive quotations from Lewis Carroll, often from the "Lobster Quadrille" (Kiernan 2010, 257, 343, 346, 361; Kiernan 2012, 113, 166, 177-182), as well as materials from multiple iterations of "Little Red Riding Hood." Poe, Thoreau, and Joseph Campbell appear frequently in *The Red Tree* alongside the fictional manuscript by Dr. Charles Harvey, who within *that* manuscript quotes from the actual publication *Fortean Times*. The reader's orientation is as uncertain as the narrators'; neither is allowed the confidence of sorting fact from fiction, allusion from invention. These challenges to the audience's grasp of the real versus the unreal point toward the ways in which archives of trauma produce knowledge of the world, or of 'the truth,' gained first and foremost *through feeling*.

Said plainly, does it matter which intertextual materials originate in the "real" world of the human audience and which are an invention of the novel, or the protagonist... when the *function* of the materials is identical? Refusing to privilege objective, factual certainty over affective, experiential truth gives weight to alternate methods of knowing based within the protagonists' bodyminds<sup>9</sup>, to borrow from the terminology of Margaret Price (2015). Narrating her first sighting of the Saltonstall painting, Imp writes, "a lot of my memories are false memories, so I can't ever be certain, one way or the other. A lot of my most interesting memories seem never to have taken place" (Kiernan 2012, 11). Journaling is a method for sorting her memories from the things that happened to her, though both are real within her mind. Despite Imp's otherwise laissez-faire approach, though, being unable to recall or parse the truth(s) of Eva Canning disturbs her. As she writes of her own memoir, "there's no point in doing this thing if all I can manage is a lie. Which is not to say every word will be factual. Only that every word will be true. Or as true as I can manage" (6). In contrast, Sarah is a far more caustic narrator whose journal is full of gaps and misattributed memories, including the central short story ("Pony") she has no recollection of drafting. Near the conclusion she writes of her missing time and confusion, "if my narrative is to be trusted—if my goddamn *memories* are something upon which I can continue to *rely*—then I must find some way to account for and reconcile this redundancy" (Kiernan 2010, 309). Sarah's tendencies toward drinking on top of her depression and seizure medication, as well as her continual suicidal ideation, render her cognitive world disruptive for the reader to immerse within. Given these difficulties of knowing, what function does the *dis*-orienting archive of feelings serve—and how might it offer a generative potential to these (fictional, real) women?

## Haunt/ed/ing: Trauma as Permeation

The novels' trauma archives are both haunted *by* the materials they contain and vectors *of* further hauntings for those who consume them. However, haunts are less individualized than that infectious trajectory might imply: the world that spawns the trauma archive is a haunted world containing the material traces of homophobia, racism, and sexism, among other structures of oppression. Cvetkovich argues that the archive of feelings integrates affects containing the sociopolitical dimensions of trauma, those that sprawl past the limits of a neoliberal therapeutic focus on personal 'self-work' (2003, 33); she gathers materials that "don't look to either identity or the state as a means for the resolution of trauma" (16) and represent "trauma [as] affectively negotiated in culturally specific ways" (26). Kiernan's novels similarly tread the fine line between social and personal hurts in their archives of lesbian trauma as vexed sites, full of "ephemeral and unusual traces" (8) and artifacts embedded with pain. As with Cvetkovich's materials, *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* serve "as much to produce an archive as to analyze one" (8). The boundaries between the individual, the archive, and the social world are unstable; that instability creates a similarly unstable, unsettling archive.

Furthermore, the novels also propose ethical arguments about trauma archives and their effects on public culture, using the frame of *haunting* as a queer permeability that renders the self as much an archive as the texts. The belief in a coherent self with a normative cognitive grasp of the world, an observing subject that consumes or controls outside objects, collapses into a queer proliferation of knowledge(s) that continually contradict, superimpose, and reconstruct the self. The clearest intra-textual definition of *haunting* appears in a discussion of Imp's fixation on Saltonstall's "The Drowning Girl" as she writes,

Ghosts are the memories that are too strong to be forgotten for good, echoing across the years and refusing to be obliterated by time. I don't imagine that when Saltonstall painted *The Drowning Girl*, almost a hundred years before I saw it for the first time, he paused to consider all the people it might haunt. That's another thing about ghosts, a very important thing—you have to be careful, because hauntings are contagious. Hauntings are memes, especially pernicious thought contagions, social contagions that need no viral or bacterial host and are transmitted in a thousand different ways. A book, a poem, a song, a bedtime story, a grandmother's suicide, the choreography of a dance, a few frames of film, a diagnosis of schizophrenia, a deadly tumble from a horse, a faded photograph, or a story you tell your daughter. [...] Too often, people make the mistake of trying to use their art to capture a ghost, but only end up spreading their haunting. (2012, 12-13)

Imp also fears her own haunting manuscript propagating itself with the same irrepressible power. Another example she gives is the Suicide Forest. She argues "that all this trouble in the Sea of Trees didn't begin until Seicho Matsumoto, a Japanese detective and mystery writer, published a novel, *Kuroi Jukai* (The Black Forest, 1960). In Matsumoto's book, two lovers choose Aokigahara as the most appropriate place to commit suicide. And people read the book. And people began going to the forest to kill themselves" (88–90). While archival materials are often considered inert objects, *haunting* presents the archive as a creature of virality—a fitting association in a queer novel that deals deeply with mortality.

Creating an archive externalizes the ghosts of traumatic events; however, in Kiernan's frame of contagious permeability, that act of creation might also result in the haunting of the person who later consumes it. These haunted/haunting materials are queerly toxic, in terms of Chen, and are perhaps best understood as "interspersals, intrinsic mixings, alterations, [that favor] interabsorption over corporeal exceptionalism" (2011, 272). Queer toxicities flourish with ethical complexity; rather than pure destructive threat, the permeable body communing with a toxic world reveals sociality and interdependence—without abandoning the realities of pain or damage that simultaneously arise from exposures (Chen 2012). Sarah writes near the end of her journal, after reproducing long sections of Harvey's once-dead, now-revenant research manuscript on the property's own haunting, "Jesus, it's got to be some kind of neurotic me sitting here transcribing this outlandish manuscript, a suicide's obsession. Has it become my own obsession? In touching and reading these pages, in my trip to the tree and my exploration of the vast basement below the house, have I become infected by this same *idée fixe*?" (Kiernan 2010, 255). Her transcription has also passed on the infectious manuscript to the reader. Though these archival materials all translate traumatic experiences through affect for reorientation toward the world, they simultaneously *infect* others through their (re)production of sensations and feelings that linger.

While textual materials are one haunt contained within the novels, there are other ghostly presences—such as the actual traumatic events, unspeakable but irrepressible, at the core of each protagonists' conflict. For example, Sarah consistently references the suicide of her lover, named Amanda, in the journal entries while skirting the subject of her death via sardonic misdirections ("Are we back to writing as an act of exorcism? Wait, don't answer that question" [144]). When Constance, the woman renting the top room of the farmhouse, asks Sarah about Amanda she replies, "Amanda is my own private haunting. She's nothing I want to share. And she's nothing you need to hear about" (297). Along the same lines, in *The Drowning Girl* Imp says the stories of her institutionalized mother and grandmother haunt her—but so does her erstwhile lover, Eva. Past occurrences

permeate the present; events that produce strong affective responses surge forward and backward through time. Cvetkovich suggests the past upwelling into the present or future is central to the trauma archive, drawing on "postmemory as it applies to the children of survivors [of the Holocaust], who have an uncanny relation to their parents' experience, which continues to mark subsequent generations" (2003, 29). The work of Avery Gordon also echoes through this ghostly temporality as a project that, rather than offering "generalizations about capitalism, racism, or globalization [...] conjures ghosts who demand not just that something be known but that something be felt and done, [...] because ghosts are both visible and invisible, the local evidence [they] provide is not just empirical" (44). Focusing on *haunting* as a productive concept isn't unique to Kiernan, but does provide linkages between her protagonist's sense of their archives, their trauma, and their methods of *coming to know* their ghost stories (or trauma stories).

Being able to know themselves, after their experiences of disorientation and shattering, means being able to live on *as* themselves—or, as another version of the self, one capable of survival. Their intimate senses of self have been scattered, well beyond their previously practiced capacities for processing cognitive disruption—capacities that arose, already, from lived experience as disabled women. Their constructed archives then accrete as each attempt to unearth different capacities, searching for affective truths that "couldn't be articulated in a single coherent narrative" and are "much more complicated than the events of what happened, connected to other histories that were not [their] own" (Cvetkovich 2003: 2). The farmhouse Sarah ultimately dies in is warped around the titular red tree and its brutal histories—local ghosts that haunt her alongside her personal specter of a girlfriend lost to suicide, echoing across time in the form of the hallucinatory experiences she records in her journal. Similarly, Imp is driven to despair and psychic dissolution by the conflicting memories she carries of the doubled Eva Canning creatures—memories she processes through artistic creations that approach the reality of the matter: Eva was neither a literal mermaid nor a literal wolf but a lover who walked into the sea to her death as Imp watched. Furthermore, the novels *themselves* function as archives of feeling crafted by Kiernan—sensational stories that work "as an alternative form of knowledge to the abstractions of systemic analysis" (44)—with their own loss of a lover to suicide framed through the dedications to Elizabeth Tillman Aldridge.

How do we understand these archives of trauma as methods for surviving or flourishing rather than performing repetitions of the initial wound? The permeable boundaries between materials, events, archivists, and audiences tangle around one

another in a constant loop; separation is impossible, as each creates and is created by their respective haunts. That permeability gestures not toward dissolution, but toward a relational and proliferating form of orientation. As Margaret Price argues, "[N]euroatypicality is often marked not by limitations but by excesses: of fantasy, speech, awareness, sense, or sensitivity. What if we took our cure from bodymind theory to suggest disability as proliferation instead of limitation?" (McRuer et al. 2014: 153). The archives gathered by the protagonists of these novels are not *limited* by their proliferating, unstable materials; rather, the narratives, metaphors, songs, images, trees, ghosts, monsters, and deaths juxtaposed offer knowledge through accretion as opposed to delineation—a mess of affects springing *from* and speaking *to* Imp's false memories and Sarah's lost time. If the monadic, bounded self is dispensed with in favor of a haunted/ing being—if self-concept is constructed through circulating, permeating affective truths—then the collection of strange materials functions as *orientation* rather than pathological repetition. Haunting floats "between inside and outside" as "a mood, an atmosphere, or a sensibility"—serving the dispersed and particulate function of toxin, building-block, or art. If traumatic events travel unmoored through experiential time, and if the archive of feelings contains its own animacy, then the trauma archive possesses a haunt's potential to *change* creators and their publics in the process.

## Integration and Dis-integration: Archives of Survival

Difficulties arising from their attempts to gather up their ghosts in affect archives lead the protagonists, finally, to the thematic center of the novels: the creation of "necessary fictions." The novels simultaneously *are* and *contain* these fictions, enacting the same project of survival their internal thematic arguments propose. Journals are already limited constructs, being textual representations of inherently fallible memories; as Sarah says, "Nevermind if I don't genuinely recollect even half the shit I've written down here, if I've just made stuff up to fill in the gaping mnemonic crevices. [...] A necessary fiction, and if the facts are compromised by my lousy memory, I don't think the *truth* is any worse for it" (57). Kiernan's protagonists consistently refer to the conflict between memoir presented as fact and the reality that *all* memories are fluctuating, fictionalized, and intended to provoke or manipulate certain affects. As a result, the challenge of narrating events 'factually' to exorcize their lingering miasma proves unresolvable—due to the nature of traumatic memories and the limitations of the prose form. For example, while Imp's multiple memories are factual, she knows it's *technically* impossible for both sets of recollections with the mermaid and the werewolf to be real. Sarah's missing time, too, is inaccessible within her journal. Lost memories are absent both from her mind and her archive—an absence which, as Cvetkovich

argues regarding historical archives lost to social trauma (such as the gay and lesbian archive, or the archive of chattel slavery), might be best imagined through the "reconstruction of ghost stories and other fictions" (2012, 129).

Where testimonial fact fails, the fantasies of fiction aim for the *felt* truth of the matter—a strategy Cvetkovich forwards within her depression archive, as well as her archive of lesbian trauma. Kiernan's novels offer a similar conceptual approach, condensed within the phrase linking *The Red Tree* to *The Drowning Girl*: "necessary fictions" crafted to address painful archival gaps. "Necessary fictions" evolve from the journals as archival processes but refer to the short stories the protagonists each write and place *within* those journals. These fictions-within-fictions ultimately locate affective truths of traumatic experiences that raw reportage couldn't approach or render meaningful—archiving the *feeling* of those events as occurrences placed outside of (though drawn from within) the creator through the distance of narrative fiction. However, the novels' endings maintain an uncertainty regarding the possible *outcomes* of using the archive of necessary fictions for re-orientation and self-construction. While the potential for adaptation to trauma through coming to *know* it with fictional creation is significant, that potential remains fraught; placing haunted affects onto the page, after all, does not always serve to drain their lethal toxicity from the host.

The phrase "necessary fiction" appears for the first time in *The Drowning Girl* as Imp recalls meeting Eva Canning on the side of the road. As a preface, she says, "I think maybe now I'm ready to try to write it out in some semblance of a story [...] A story is, by necessity, a sort of necessary fiction, right? If it's meant to be a true story, then it becomes a synoptic history" (Kiernan 2012, 63). Later on, once she has parsed the doubled fictions of werewolf and mermaid Eva Canning into one human, the Eva Canning who died by suicide, she writes, "We weave necessary fictions, and sometimes they save us. Our minds, our bodies" (319). Sarah also uses the phrase "a necessary fiction" (Kiernan 2010, 57) in *The Red Tree* to refer to the practice of telling stories, given that even retellings aiming for factuality are necessarily fictional due to perception and transmission. Sarah then repeats the phrase again near the close of the novel, observing, "I am once more forced to admit that much of these recollections are approximations. Necessary fictions" (315). The contrasting tones of the protagonists recall Cvetkovich's discussion of Dorothy Allison's writing, shifting as Allison does between fiction and nonfiction writings on incest and lesbian existence—a maneuver Kiernan also

employs through her narrators and their representation of the work as *truthful*, if not factual. As Cvetkovich argues, "Allison's commitment to storytelling as emotional rather than literal truth applies to both, thereby undoing conventional distinctions between fiction and nonfiction," wherein "the story becomes the thing needed" (2003, 109). The story is needed; the fiction is necessary.

Central to the material-affect archives in *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl* are short stories 'written' by the protagonists and containing oblique though powerful relations to the novels' permeating traumatic events. While Sarah and Imp fail to parse their experiences through testimony, either for themselves or the audience, the internal short stories strike the heart of the matter. The story at the center of *The Red Tree* is "Pony" (Kiernan 2010, 200), whereas there are two (reflecting the doubled Eva) in *The Drowning Girl*; the first is called "The Mermaid of the Concrete Ocean" (2012, 127) and the second is "Werewolf Smile" (239). These stories are set in different fonts from the main text and, in the case of *The Drowning Girl*, are sectioned without chapter headings. The short fictions themselves enter into the novels' game of disorienting attributions: a fictional narrator creating a secondary piece of fiction within their journal, which is in actuality a novel, archiving otherwise unrepresentable traumatic experiences... experiences ultimately archived by Kiernan, obscured through the orientations of genre and narrator but nonetheless participant in public culture as unsettling stories of lesbian relationality.

Kiernan's novels fit within "lesbian subcultures that cut through narratives of innocent victims and therapeutic healing to present something that was raw, confrontational, and even sexy" (Cvetkovich 2003, 4)—frequently melding the violent, monstrous, and erotic. After Constance informs Sarah that she crossed an unspoken boundary by reading the short story Sarah is "supposed to have written" (Kiernan 2010, 191) though, she does not remember doing so, the pair have sex; following the awkward and disconnected encounter of bodies Sarah reads her own work for the first time. The piece "Pony" features a pair of women who are lovers; the women are exploring a field when they see a startling horse-woman creature in the distance. However, following this disorienting unreal event, the protagonist denies ever having seen the creature. Later, as their relationship fizzles due to her dishonesty, the protagonist comes home to find her lover engaging in pony-play with another woman. The lover, in turn, discovers the protagonist's paintings of the horse-woman, revealing her deception. The piece's affective resonance contains the truth Sarah cannot otherwise approach or accept: a shattering experience of betrayal compounded by *further* betrayal, leading to the loss of a loved one. Amanda's suicide echoes as the unrepresentable trauma at the core of Sarah's psychic deterioration alongside her faltering career and

the wearing-out of her body as a poor, unwell queer woman. The erotic need, emotional abuse, and relational damage that haunt "Pony," ghosting through its sensual attachments and connotations, reveal a truth to Sarah—but she refuses the "transparently autobiographical" (216) story after reading it, recoiling from its affects and implications. Rather than embracing the "necessary fiction" contained within the piece, she becomes obsessed with the idea that perhaps Constance is purposefully tormenting her by creating the illusion of haunting in the house; as a result, Constance leaves her alone at the house, where she later dies.

Conversely, Imp approaches the paired short stories in *The Drowning Girl* as purposeful projects of affective truth-telling. "The Mermaid of the Concrete Ocean" appears in the first half of the book as one of Imp's published pieces; she shows it to her new girlfriend, Abalyn, as a performative explanation of her felt relationship to debility and art. However, the story's central image of a half-eaten corpse washed ashore on a beach becomes significant to the reader at the end of the novel, when Imp reveals that Eva's remains were similarly recovered after her walk into the sea—as a dismembered corpse that Imp also paints for herself, privately, in another form of externalization. "Werewolf Smile," the second piece of short fiction, is the more revealing of the two. The memories and affects permeating it are a provocative instance of prose that "gives rise to new theoretical articulations of the relation between sex and trauma as forms of bodily violation that destroy the self's integrity [...] discourses that fearlessly and shamelessly explore the imbrications of pleasure and danger in sexual practice provide a model for approaches to trauma that resist pathologizing judgments" (Cvetkovich 2003, 35). One of the doubled memories Imp relates through the seventh chapter, during a period in which she is unmedicated, revolves around the wolf Eva, whom she met on the side of the road—unmoored from human flesh and turned into a "long-legged beast" that she allows to fuck her. She describes the sexual encounter in a poetic and animalistic collection of phrases: "I lay down, and she climbed on top of me. She glared down at me, all iridescent crepe-paper crimson eyeshine appetite, insatiable and wanton, and I spread my legs for the wolf she'd always really been. Her wet black nose snuffled my welcoming sex, her lolling mottled ice-cream licking me apart before she roughly rolled me over onto my stomach and wounded breasts and mounted me in the fashion of a wolf" (Kiernan 2012, 214). The memories of the werewolf woman haunt her, as much as the siren-mermaid version of Eva, who might also be a river monster, and so she writes them outside of herself through the second necessary fiction.

Significantly, Imp sets out to *purposefully* write "Werewolf Smile" after having returned to her doctor and medication regimen, as well as reconnect with Abalyn after their initial relationship dissolution. The story itself follows a young woman whose lover, Eva Canning, falls in with the edgy and abusive painter Albert Perrault and then acts as the model for his disturbing taxidermy-and-sculpture series showing the Black Dahlia murder victim transforming into a wolf. Eva ultimately kills herself; the protagonist is left unsure of what she could have done to prevent this outcome, but still haunted by the knowledge that she allowed Eva to go to Perrault, knowing it would likely destroy her. Afterward, she says of the tale,

It came out as it needed to come. Because I couldn't manage a recitation of false facts, I managed a recitation of truth. I was worried Dr. Ogilvy might question the utility of having written a story about the wolf that was only indirectly my story of the wolf. But she didn't, even when I suggested I'd only set one box within another, that all I'd accomplished was the creation of a fiction to contain another fiction. [...] I'm never going to try to sell it to a magazine. It belongs to no one except me. (238)

Through the fantastical frame of a fiction, Imp approaches her *felt* sense of guilt (and loss, and affection, and helplessness, and culpability). As a result, she is able to integrate an understanding—though unstable and fuzzy—of the actual events behind her complex set of memories: Eva was her lover, she drove them to the beach together, and she could not prevent Eva from walking into the sea. The disorienting, disruptive ghost of the troubled and troubling Eva, who herself suffered unmanageable, intense trauma, does not disappear. Rather, she merges into the trauma archive, her haunting given place and space among other specters. Imp then closes the memoir on a hopeful note—that *sometimes* it's possible to save oneself—though that "sometimes" recollects the lethal ending suffered through by Sarah in *The Red Tree*. The archive of trauma doesn't aim to prevent or erase its contents; instead, it makes the pain a public feeling, shareable and dispersed among the broader life-worlds of queer women in a contemporary culture full of violence, love, loss, and need.

## Conclusions

*The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl* together narrate an approach to understanding, processing, and communicating stories of queer trauma that values the construction of truth around affect—a method that allows alternate forms of knowing to flourish. At the same time, the texts themselves enact the same project proposed thematically within them. The simultaneity of being-and-doing allows the reader to be open to the possibilities of the archive of feelings, perhaps to the potential for creating necessary fictions of their own, while viscerally *experiencing* the collected

affects—negative though those might be—Kiernan, through the journals of their protagonists, has released into the public culture as hauntings. Cvetkovich argues that "more vivid than concrete memories of the actual events are the emotional memories that convey a sense of traumatic experience" (2003, 258). Her own scholarship contains such diverse materials as a drag cabaret performance, knitting and crafting work, and Gregg Bordowitz's AIDS documentary film *Habit*—creating an "archive of feelings that helps me make the turn from depression to the reparative work of daily living" (2012, 26). As archives of feeling, Kiernan's novels center on stories of queer women processing their emotions through materials including fiction, paintings, monsters, histories, song lyrics, and hauntings, both literal and metaphorical. The protagonists are disoriented and shattered by trauma, seeking re-orientation in the world through the texts that create them and that they then create in an endless recursion. Affects that *feel bad* such as "incomplete mourning, a holding on to the past that keeps the dead with us, can be a resource" (Cvetkovich 2003, 208) or a stifling weight. However, these archives of feeling, attempt to "enable the acknowledgment of a past that can be painful to remember, impossible to forget, and resistant to consciousness" (241) while also aiming toward the creation of a livable future. The queer traumas permeating and radiating from *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* enter the broader culture through their publication, brimming with ugliness but also erotic and relational energies that refuse to retreat from fear or danger. Kiernan's necessary fictions stand as an analytical framework and functional archive, offering the potential for survival and the integration of traumatic experiences through a complex collection of affective truths.

## Endnotes

1. As per Jasbir K. Puar, debility is employed in this article as a concept distinct from "the term 'disablement' because it foregrounds the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled" (Right to Maim, xiii).

2. Affect here is conceived of along the loose, permeable lines suggested by Cvetkovich (2012) in a "generic sense" encompassing "affect, emotion, and feeling ... impulse, desires, and feelings that get historical constructed in a range of ways" (4). This aligns with a queer feminist history of emotion work, including examinations of feeling as a somatic and social process (Hemmings 2005; Fischer 2016), rather than autonomic or presocial intensities (Massumi 1996, 2002).

3. For example, the approach to "feminism as sensational" presented in Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* argues that political consciousness often arises from traumatic experiences (2017: 21-22); the "depressive position" and racial performativity in José Esteban Muñoz's connection of "feeling down" to "feeling brown" (2006) leans in a similar direction. Bad feelings present avenues to identification and knowledge. However, queer bad feelings are also elsewhere linked to neoliberal attachments to institutions such as marriage (Berlant 2011), or the support of state violence enacted in the name of protecting select queer populations (Haritaworn 2015).

4. The author has maintained an active (Livejournal) since 2004; posts under the tag ("Elizabeth") explore Kiernan's ongoing relationship to Aldridge's suicide.
5. As Jack Halberstam notes, "if conventional epistemologies always presume a subject who can know, a cripistemology will surely begin and end with a subject who knows merely that his or her ability is limited" (McRuer et al. 2014: 152).
6. "In memory of Elizabeth Tillman Aldridge (1970-1995). Sic transit gloria mundi."
7. "This is the book it is/which means it may not be the book/you expect it to be."
8. The tagline "a memoir" does not appear on the external cover—only the internal title pages.
9. A materialist-feminist disability studies concept that encompasses an understanding that "mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other" (Price 2015: 269); bodymind in Price's use opens questions of desire, pain, and lived realities within complex states of being and knowing.

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*Untitled (detail)*, Claire Fitch, 2022  
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# THE CLOCK GOES LIQUID



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As a student of geography, in a body called female, as a rock collector, messy painter, allergy-haver, insatiable eater, river swimmer, sometimes rambler, long walker, profuse sweater, and always blusher, I'm thinking constantly of the way my body lands, drips out, and imprints on the world. The way my meat, as a register, touches others. Because of this I feel a great hunger for taking things inside myself or holding them in my hands. So, I chew, and tongue-at all the vegetable of my surroundings, all this liquor on my plate.

I prefer to surround myself with a tangle of junk: found objects, rocks, toys, paints, bits of paper and clay that I can pick up at any moment, and so feel myself becoming woven into the room. A messy space harbors potentiality, gathers-it-up in a net you can play with. And I also like, so much, to wear a lot of jewelry and perfumes and cloth, so that the day's grime can get caked-up in my folds, among sweet smelling metals. All these accessories make my surface very thick with things.

I like this because it complicates my osmosis into space. I think this: the boundaries of myself diffuse into my immediate environment as I *come into contact*. And so to deepen the texture of my skin, to bump it up, makes me meet other surfaces like a topographical map might—with irregularity, all craggy and unpredictable. This makes me aware of the variable and constant motion of the self-becoming through interaction with the world. In all these pourings-in and pourings-out, I'm still a flanked body with edges—just a leaky, permeable one—which is nice because it keeps my body a thing I can hunker-down in and talk to, but lets it bleed out dappled and tap-dancing.

What's the way to land the self among all this stuff? To nestle ourselves among it all, we need methods of coming into contact that sink down into surfaces, methods of etching the laminae, of tap-tapping the fingertips into the folds of a bark or a rind. Such a peeling-back or excavation might let us see a body like a trajectory instead of an object, might let us make contact in a posthuman practice that dissipates any subject-object feeling like *I hold on to you and you are held*. Might let us feel each surface as the wild concatenation of events or the “region of intensities” that it is, enfolded with the churns and stirs of that which can't be touched (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 22). While landing with this method, you'll remind yourself that held within the variegated knottings of a body is always the potential to come loose, to unravel, and to be knotted anew. You might remember that when you untie a rope which has been knotted into a certain shape for some duration, there may be kinks left in the rope which encourage its strands to fall into a repeated knot-shape when you attempt to retie it. Think, however, that you may be able to soak the rope in fresh water, or apply heat, or expose it to the teeth of a chompy dog to loosen its fibers and make a new knot—one that contains the old kinks of the rope somewhere in its folds, but is capable of generating different impressions and stiffening into new shapes, all that may someday be undone again.

Life is viscous and slippery and terminally re-rooting. Environments might treat us like candy they can suck on. As we encounter the stuff of worlds, and come into contact, it all soaks in and envelops us. Every bulk, or chunk, or sliver infects, and we find our bodies host. In this webbing of parts into wholes, our bodies are thoroughly co-constituting all sorts of worlds. Galores, torrents, wild ecologies of things. And isn't this lovely, all the fat fare, all the carnal alterity emergent in the face of shifty relations? Carnivorous world! I attempt to locate a practice

of thinking about the self in this knotty way; as contorted by the doctrines and residuum of humanism, but perhaps morphable through a certain practice of being with the world. A coming-into-contact that scrubs things together, makes fissures in our presumed bounds.

It's something like an appreciation for the collision occurrent in encounters: that lit-up moment when two things touch, the outburst of the event. It's fun to imagine that exchanges between bodies do not happen quietly, but erupt with the wild ringing of all potentialities. To think of the endless unheard cacophony of the world-becoming through interrelation. And to imagine the sound of the virtual encounters, the could-have-been collisions. It's tasty to think they layer the tenor of a world with imperceptible bedlam and a silent roar of other worlds on the cusp, in the flaps of, uncharted bodily action and intra-action. A stacking of sonic films, dins, wavering and calling-up movement between the states of worlds in motion. I want to turn-up the volume of my room (including the always mute stray hairs, the paint, the dead bugs, the dusts) and hear that slimy place behind my knees and make an anthem out of all that could stick there.

“Contrary to those who argue against the need for a subject, I want to argue both for a dispersed form of affectivity, a flowing type of coherence and for the necessity of reconfiguring the subject” (Braidotti 2002, 268).

“And notice! One major implication here: humanness is no longer a noun. *Being human is a praxis*” (McKittrick & Wynter 2015, 23).

Kodwo Eshun's (1998) *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*—part history and part speculative AfroFuturism—is a practice in exposing the temporal middle-space where things come into contact. He fills the space with stories of soundscapes, bodies, and technologies that sound the world together. The book exfoliates this intra-active contact towards rawness—the writing shucks and strips you down towards a state of kinetic exposure to the past and the future all at once. Out of this, a simultaneous lineage and trajectory of the present emerges: A tracing of bodily contacts that *happen between* temporalities and *emanate out* from the sound of bodies' conjunction in space. Noting the impossibility of writing to capture the messy vitality of AfroFuturist musics' posthumanism, Eshun instead proposes a practice of “Concepttechnics”: thought-machine hybrids that craft sounds which “misshape until they become devices to drill into the new sensory experiences, endoscopes to magnify the new mindstates Machine Music is inducing” (Eshun 1998, -003). In a section titled *Programming Rhythmic Frequencies*, Eshun suggests we should think of drum-machines as posthuman rhythm synthesizers—Posthuman *tools* for crafting “humanly impossible time,” and posthuman *becomings* that thrust bodies into the weirded speeds of their new temporality. Not-drum and not-machine—something else entirely that opens new

corporeal thresholds. Their “spastic pulses seize the body, rewiring the sensorium in a kinaesthetic of shockcuts and stutters, a voluptuous epilepsy” (Eshun 1998, 79). Deviant electro-fat embodiments are shared through the beat of the synthesized rhythm. The pumps of Eshun’s writing inaugurate a similar sort of giddy, transductive becoming. Some new labyrinth-like waveforms for your thoughts to palpate against.

Eshun writes that Edgard Varese, a composer who worked with the principles of “sound as living matter” and “musical space as open rather than bounded” once expressed a yearning for this sort of synthesis: “I need an entirely new medium of expression: A sound-producing machine (not a sound-reproducing one)” (Varese cited in Wen-Chung 1966, 1). He dreamed about the potential advantages of these machines; the way they might create cross-rhythms of unrelation and/or simultaneity, scatter desire, fraction it into subdivisions and/or omissions. “When new instruments will allow me to write music as I conceive it, taking the place of the linear counterpoint, the movement of sound-masses, of shifting planes, will be clearly perceived” (Varese 1966, 11). For Varese, the motion of thought, its shifts and interstitial evolutions, needs instantiation so that it might be danced to. These desires and hopes ring like the feeling of needing to escape the humanist frames at hand; needing new tools, new interdisciplinary methods, genres, vocabularies, formats, or practices to think-through posthumanism. The need for new aids of imagination to make the unfolding of a world in the process of emergence—and all its constituent transductions and relations—sense-able, communicable, danceable.

With Eshun's rhythmic conceptechnics the humanist frame is cut-up, ventilated through the layering, division, overlapping, fractioning, and crossing of time. Disrupting time does a lot to unravel the human—without stable time, no stable space, no stable way to bound oneself as a located subject. A way of coming into contact that welcomes contamination. This disruption might make something like Deleuze’s *Aion*, a time stuffed-full but sallow, yet raving and fraught with a lot of muck and gems, and hungry still. It’s a time twisted into forces of disjunctive synthesis; time may be stuck in a Klein bottle that floats in an acidic eddy. Bobbing manifold in the corrosive element, flexing-dissolving. Applying post-human verbiage to the idea of a clock or a calendar makes the task of envisioning the self-in-time tricky and maybe in need of inebriation. Imagine the week ahead and try to think: *transversality, imbrication, synthesis, knots, eruptions, enfoldings,*

*depth-plunges, digestions, topological movements.* It's not simple, it might make you queasy. Massumi once instructed attempts to imagine the virtual: "think of each image receding into its deformation, as into a vanishing point of its own twisted versioning... take the images by their virtual centers. Superpose them" (Massumi 2002, 134). We're not in the habit of imagining this way, of twisting a day-planner or soaking it in juice. We tend to like living at a pace, in some frame, slugging through hours with a way to say 'right now!' or 'not yet!' that places us in a measured spanse of life. Maybe Eshun's synthesizers could do what Massumi instructs. They're in the habit of "repeatedly overlap[ing] split seconds apart, creating a stratum of seething, prehensile tension. Signals interlock in a web of pulsations, a rhythm forest shower of screams and rustletime" (Eshun 1998, 79). Try to do this rustling-out from the watch-wearing body. Try to discharge enough energy to crack the circuit. Hard to think. How to slice up this round temporal structure? It's just so cozy.

The posthuman time of a vital machine ignites a shock to the body, one instance of the quaking vulnerability of being a body with technology. This confounding of spacetime disallows the human from living settled in a singular form that can be delineated by its boundaries in a body, at a place, of a moment. These disruptions are relational, inciting a motion that always passes-between bodies, it's the entwining of states that can't really be marked in spacetime. It's all too agile. Not a time, or a moment, but between-times and between-moments that offer "the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come and already happened" (Deleuze 2005, 41). Within the immensity of the in-between, a humanly impossible time belches posthuman difference. The rhythm-synthesizer beating here is like a thump punctuating gel or gas, a percussion resonating along twists and scissions, vibrating all the way down, and all the way out, and a bunch of other ways too. This resonance overflows from a moment—it's the stretch, or the projection of a hit into other states, a going-beyond that ruptures or outstrips containment, activating the excess that is always virtual in the moment measured by human time. Posthuman exchanges between bodies might not happen in a time frame easily sensed, making supra-clock attunement essential. "Information circulates universally *within and between* the totality of all existing things" (Serres 2017, 13), and so the *within and between* of a moment is what needs concentration, if a multi-agential, multi-directional becoming is to be heard. This practice of listening needs you getting out of your rhythms. The time-marks of observation from a human viewpoint might mostly be totally trivial; the tenor of a relation isn't like *the afternoon* or *Tuesday*. Staccato pulsations can't live on a watch. A clock goes liquid and becomes a twist.

The posthuman beat rides its soundwaves through weirded plural spacetime and weirded plural bodies too, “Electro like Techno affects nerves and muscles... resets the shapes of sensation, demands a new dynamotion” (Eshun 1998, 81). “Oscillations wince across the body in wave motion” (Eshun 1998, 83). Convulsions, spastic reflexes, swells, endless twitches from multiple zones, transient itches, boneless, gutless, bald sensations. *It all breaks the count*. New discomforts, and freedoms from discomfort, come with emergence from some frame you’ve always relied on. Like the discombobulation of immersion in any new medium, not typical of the time-keeping, day-counting human. “Immerse Yourself in the Destructiv Element” (Eshun 1998, 91). Relax your spelling habits, break a sentence apart, unwind your watch, and see what the bodies can do.



*Untitled*, Claire Fitch, 2022

Untitled, Claire Fitch, 2022



## Looking for Rocks as a Posthuman Practice

I take a break, leave the house, walk away, and climb-slide off a trail, submerging myself in a water-worn chasm in the Earth. Down in this gulch the hours are marked only by the chatter of my feet kicking along uneven ground. The carved path made by water's spate and flow directs my movements into loping tides. I trace the whiff of a fluvial gait, take on the contoured intonation of the parched gully. Shoes start a song: silty *tiss tiss thump*, ore ore ore. Looking for rocks, I'm thump-thumping the arroyo, nasty sneakers toeing nested tufa. I ride the currents left behind by the rainfall four days ago. This erratic flow I travel with, a layering of old rains, lets me live on a new scale. All rubble. Some shifty lithic register. I'm tuned-in to different swerves of ovoid shapes and honed-in on variations of grays and browns. Between-colors and between-shapes hit me with a lilt unregistered by the smart watches counting steps on the runners who pump the trails above. They grip me hard against some spectral crunched-up metronome that keeps a more-than-human tempo. Time slows to a strange melt because of this.

To encounter the event of each rock is only to capture one beat of a tune that's imperceptibly immense. Slow-bouncing between a standing height and a bent-down squat, you'll be walking so gradually you're barely moving, swinging lethargic on the downbeat, always pausing to look left and right and back again. But really, you'll still be covering a lot of ground because the eye-pace is skipping along at such a quick flicker.



*Untitled*, Claire Fitch, 2022

Depositing your weight on curved heaps of calcareous surfaces leaves the body perched at odd angles. An oscillating ped-o-lith with a *tiss tiss thump* pace. The weight of your limbs and belly will push down onto the rounds, and the rounds will push back with a funny cadence that hits your wet feet in uneven crooks. It's all very slippery, there's no settling-down between the endless intra-rock intervals. The body is the vehicle, gotta let it get destabilized, or sort of slanted and muddy, in order to make the eyes bulge-out into a time outside the tick tick of losing sunlight, or growing hair, or becoming hungry. It's a disruption that begets a type of seeing outside the tempo of the nervous system—out into the air, through leaves and bugs and trash, landing-on and sweeping-up particulates in the constellatory mineral milieu. It's a haptic visuality that never stops multiplying and spewing your salty eyes out.

The dynamism of this vision-in-motion involves the body with and as an ecology of practices (Stengers 2017)—a wide continuum involving the rocks, the lichen on their skins, the critters riding their underbellies, the soil, the time of day, the temperature of the air, the season, the tracks, the tracings, the litter. Thinking-feeling in the act, walking out-of-tempo as a methodology. Jussi Parikka (2019) tells me that “these are forms of thinking that emerge in practice and with their material situations” (42), “ecologies of practices in landscapes which unfold in time... practices which are by necessity involved in rescaling the temporal” (56). Looking for rocks you need to set out a big expanse of time that is left very open so that the body can slow-way-down and encounter enough tiny boring things that it may finally locate an errant one. All of this doesn’t match any type of day I know, and so I find myself out in the creek for hours, forgotten by the live world, abandoning all responsibility. Being undisciplined and also meticulously, fruitlessly disciplined is one of the only ways I’ve found to escape the pace of the day. What time do we occupy, rock and I? Rocks can’t live next to a clock, that’s real irrelevance. There’s not a timepiece big enough to keep track of their slow emergence or presiding stagnancy.



*Untitled, Claire Fitch, 2022*



Untitled, Claire Fitch, 2022

There's an intimacy of life-with-rock in this Earthly state, in which everything tip toes along a core, strata, plates, pavement, cement, bricks, dust. Rock scales around and stretches-down from bodies like a hyperextended, super-calloused sole of the foot. And it moves up through us too; particulates get under our fingernails, we might agitate dead skin with pumice stones, we wear the soot of a day on our faces, we hit through a day along paved streets, graveled walls stack far above our heads. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2015) confesses that a world of hu-

man–lithic enmeshment is a romance of the sweetest sort, “Despite relegation to a trope for the cold, the indifferent and the inert, stone discloses a queer vivacity, a perilous tender of mineral amity” (6). How can I desire you so, rough round? How can we meet, the gooshy-hot limbed self of my body and the slow-poised egg of yours? I notice that I salivate a bit, might smile, and my pulse hypes up to something quick when I touch you, or inhale, or press you to my cheek. To find the time to like you, honestly, I’ve gotta botch the hour, throw out the day, still the week in order to caress your clogged and snarled time, and love feeling you get warmer in my hands.

In seeing one dense little sedimentary form you can imagine all the many grounds it has rolled along, so many streams it has floated, so many possible worlds gathered up, so many ways its particulates might have cohered. And, seeing some fossil pressed into a limestone patch, you know it was once swimming and had comrades and meals and its own way of keeping track of a day. This resonance is good, “The temporalities of companion species comprehend all the possibilities activated in becoming with, including the heterogeneous scales of evolutionary time for everybody but also the many other rhythms of conjoined process” (Haraway 2007, 25). What does it feel like to make kin with the trace of a life, its absence, the ghostly flecks of its once–presence? To clutch a “companion species... which might be already long gone and dead” between your fingers (Parikka 2019, 42)? It’s sometimes lonely, I want them talking back at me. I want to make these little solids scream stories of their trips, or the fashion of their proteins and peptides. But it’s good to make kin across time, it enjoins and embeds us in the strata. Like finding a bit of chipped-up flint, you know that somewhere nearby (a while ago, in an era marked with different punctuations) someone else had held that slick hard thing in their hand and cracked away at it to shape it into some tool they needed. Something that fit in their palm just right, which now sits just right in mine. Something like holding hands through time, very tender and impersonal. The lithic medium is a zone of contact, the spacetime in between bodies not–yet meeting, a yowling, silent zone which stretches way beyond whatever hand or landscape holds it in a moment. The rock body folds time, and folds it again, and keeps going along and tracking on, accumulating and assembling, picking everything up. And making sure to throw it all down again, sometime later, somewhere else. It keeps the process going, keeps rolling and squirrelling–about among others. It transduces, “mediate[s] between different orders, to place heterogeneous realities in contact” (Mackenzie 2002, 18). Emulate the lively rock maybe, posthuman thinker, and this way the hours will come quick, or slow, or repeat in loops or never come at all. Days will be punctuated silly, and you’ll be

shifting so many things about you through your movements that you'll never take the same steps twice, you'll stop doing all your pathological pathing, it'll never be the same route rooted. You'll be an endless velocity of erosion and growth that keeps you alert and mutable, and always leaning on the world. Such a circuit makes a minestrone world that boogies.

I think of the laccolith. A swell of magma that intrudes between layers of Earth, forming a bowed-out lens of rock that forces once-straight layers to take new curves. Rock time might push us out of sync and into new bents. Might torque us out from the middle. A rhythm-synthesizer pummeled with rocks might make geologic music from the future. Dancing on a pebbled surface might make hyper-embodied feet imprinted with the indentations of a beat from the past.

When rock-touching, every year reduces and enfolds down through the stratum, and widens and tentacles up/out/into my pockets as I plod along, refusing that zoom meeting I have at 12 o'clock. My little collaborators, clacking together in my tow. I like to think that the runners passing by might hear our ensemble and know I'm not making this meter alone. Wonderful, useless, an hour later I had twenty-four rocks and a few footed miles, and a weighed-down jacket and five or eight words, and had gotten nothing at all done but touched a whole lot of places and times that I hadn't been before. Made contact across disparate planes by splitting seconds apart into atomic magnitudes. Many joys, immersed in the destructiv groove.

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*Untitled*, Dids, 2020 × *Making Space*,  
Wendy Truran, 2018 (DALL-E 2)

