

# *Person/ne*

writing and curating vulnerability in the public sphere

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**Declaration of Authorship**

I, Lisa Teresa Baldissera, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

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## ABSTRACT

To be embodied is to be vulnerable. At any point, one can fall sick, be injured, be disappointed, have one's heart broken, fall out of love, be left at the roadside or be tossed in a rogue wave when one was expecting to swim on through. One can fail to be heard, understood, cared for, held or accepted, and ultimately one will fail altogether, to die. How then can one think, speak and be with others and take action within this world, despite these risks? What forms of life, of enlivened being, are possible within this inescapable vulnerability? How are they enacted within the public sphere, and with others? This thesis enfolds and examines these experiences within a paratactical and interdisciplinary methodology, through fiction and storytelling, curatorial work and reflective writing, to ask, *how can we be vulnerable within the public sphere? And how can one be both a political and vulnerable body? Further, how is a resilient subject cultivated, as one who is able to remain vulnerable in the public sphere?*

In addressing these questions, the thesis mobilises three areas of inquiry: curatorial projects, reflective critical writing and creative writing. The thesis thus comprises three component parts that relate equally: (i) curatorial projects, including an exhibition project titled *Convolute Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr*; an art writing symposium titled *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?*; and a final exhibition project, *Person/ne*; (ii) reflective critical writing, in which aspects of the curatorial projects are mobilized in three reflective writing chapters which consider the work of three writers: Emily Carr, Chris Kraus and Lisa Robertson; (iii) a collection of short stories entitled *Dead Peasant* that engages imagination and detail to cultivate an understanding and empathy that might otherwise be neglected, and to employ observation in fiction as a form of power.

These three distinct but related areas of practice are crucial in investigating vulnerability within public life since, as the thesis progresses, the figures of artist, curator and writer become enjoined, their convergence marking a point of entry into the public sphere: 1. The figure of the artist as curated by the curator, 2. The figure of the curator as told by the storyteller and 3. The figure of the storyteller as written by the artist/art writer. The thesis sections thus work cumulatively to address the following phases: entry into the public sphere (Arendt, 1958; Cavarero, 2000); vulnerability and precarity as pressures which inform public life in art contexts (Belcourt, 2019; Butler, 2016; Feher, 2009; Rankine, 2014; Sharpe, 2016; Tiqqun, 1999); refusal/non-productivity; shame, resistance; bullying/troublemaking (Ahmed, 2010); retreat; compassion and knowledge experienced as affect and emotion (Berlant, 2011; Ngai, 2005); and finally, collaboration, community and ethics of care (Reckitt, 2016), and how a resilient subject emerges from these forces and gestures. Throughout, the thesis employs and examines forms of memoir, poetry, art writing and fiction as storytelling practices to explore what writing and language can do (Robertson, 2012; Riley, 2000), and how these might inform art and curatorial practices, working in public and with vulnerability as a form of political agency.

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## I. Introduction

Every story tells how a life has answered the call and care of the world, how it has been exposed, how it has decided to appear, so that to recite, to tell, is to witness what is experienced, to resist.<sup>1</sup>

To yearn for something is to open to the possibilities of loss as well as the joys of being. To desire, and through this desire to be called to action and to speech, is to appear to the world. The desire for one's own story animates our participation within that world and ultimately leaves a record of our experiences. We are brought into being through our appearance before others and through our participation in the world, to join in its collectivity with our own unique expression.

Yet to be embodied is to be vulnerable. At any point, one can fall sick, be injured, be disappointed, have one's heart broken, fall out of love, be left at the roadside or be tossed in a rogue wave when one was expecting to swim on through. One can fail to be heard, understood, cared for, held or accepted, and ultimately one will fail altogether, to die. How then can one think, speak and be with others and take action within this world, despite these risks? What forms of life, of enlivened being, are possible within this inescapable vulnerability? How are they enacted within the public sphere, and with others? And is it possible to appear in a way that is supported, supportive and not shaming?

The impulse for this PhD project emerged from my experiences as a curator, artist and writer. This thesis enfolds and examines these experiences within a paratactical and interdisciplinary methodology, through fiction and storytelling, curatorial work and reflective writing, to ask, *how can we be vulnerable within the public sphere? And how can one be*

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<sup>1</sup> Fina Birulés, "Contingency, History and Narration in Hannah Arendt," at Hannaharendt.net, 2009, <http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/149/264>. Accessed March 13, 2020.



*both a political and vulnerable body? Further, how is a resilient subject cultivated, as one who is able to remain vulnerable in the public sphere?*

## **Prologue**

One afternoon, when my son was very young and I was still in art school, I took him to our regular free-of-charge haunt, the beach near our home, where he played in the tidal pools for the afternoon. We had made our way through this time, while I completed an undergraduate art degree, with a combination of student loans, parental help, and minimum-wage summer jobs in administration. A middle-aged couple also out for the day struck up a conversation, and when it came up in the course of chatting that I was in art school, they said, “That must be fun!” It was a privilege to pursue the career I wanted, but it was not entirely fun. It was frightening. I could not see our future; I did not know if my choices were putting us at risk or supporting us to a life where we would be able to thrive. I believed very much in a life in the arts, in making work and in finding a way to reflect on, resist, critique, come to terms with and express the world we lived in.

But later, after graduate school, I made a practical choice to work as a curator in a public art gallery in Canada in order to support us, moving away from my art practice. I now experienced the institutional realities of production in the art world through the daily negotiations and transactions of a curator in a public museum, even as I looked to continue a form of creative practice in curatorial work, albeit in a more mediated form than I had experienced as an artist. As an artist, I felt as though the texts of each work and exhibition were mine to determine. I held the conviction, as I entered the public realm, naively ready with artist statements and formal rationales for my creative work, that the terms of my work were my own to define.

Curatorial activities introduced me to the fact that artistic practice is always moderated by relationships with others, co-workers, boards, volunteers, docents, students, members, contractors and artists themselves, along with the navigation of mandates, budgets and policies, public and private funding realities, the compromises and daily negotiations required to work across departments with others more or less specialized in the visual arts. What I had perceived as the freedom to speak and act freely in the public realm in my identity as an artist was necessarily and effectively challenged as I realized creative projects within, and through, an established institutional framework. As a museum curator, rather than an independent curator, my intellectual labour and day-to-day activities were also governed by, and considered to be part of, the institution.

As the curatorial work progressed, I also experienced institutional quandaries when an artwork or some aspect of the curatorial research intersected or directly contradicted a museum policy or procedure. I was responsible for navigating that terrain and advocating and defending the nuances of artistic practice. In my initial curatorial experiences I enjoyed a great deal of autonomy, collegiality and support; however, this gave way in subsequent environments to more fraught conditions in which on-the-ground institutional and managerial directives and imperatives were at odds with not only the creative and practical work of curating, research and artistic practice, but also, on occasion, the institution's own mandated commitments and policies. These places of work instead became sites of contradiction and confusion for their workers and, to another extent, their audiences, artists and other stakeholders. I also witnessed the ways in which policy tools such as privacy clauses and non-disclosure agreements were the managerial method of choice to deploy against resistance to the ecology and leadership, sometimes mitigating against the organization's own stated policies,

procedures, vision and goals. I learned directly about neoliberal models of thinking, marketization and precarity, and of care or its abdication.

These experiences, and the silences that surrounded them, began to provoke a series of questions about the nature of public life and work within the greater realm of the art world. How does one resist and continue to account for one's inescapable and ongoing vulnerability? Fraught cultural spaces—museums and galleries, but also academic institutions and even art movements—are marked by unwritten rules and regulations, or power relations that privilege some voices over others. For all of its aspirational messages, the art world is not removed from neoliberal economies, social norms and the effects of colonization, patriarchy and violence.

In these instances, the aspirational ideas, ethos and values of progressive 'cultural enterprise' can stand in as a thin spectacle, while leadership becomes paternalistic, culturally conservative, neoliberal in expression and market-oriented, with workers who are more and more exposed to administrative violence. Mandates and vision statements suddenly become ironic, ideological, disillusioning and sometimes dangerous, their unactualized aspirations and ethics neutralized by annual reports highlighting audience numbers, the preoccupation of new museum building projects or successful cultural branding exercises. Working within this system can sometimes be unbearably—and unspeakably—vulnerable.

In the volume *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay challenge the formulation of vulnerability and resistance as opposites, and the assumption that "vulnerability requires and implies the need for protection and the strengthening of paternalistic power at the expense of collective forms of resistance and social transformation." They argue that rather than a view that enforces "paternalism [as] the site of agency, and vulnerability ... only as victimization and

passivity, invariably the site of inaction,”<sup>2</sup> vulnerability can be understood as a *precondition* for resistance and part of what gives this activity its meaning.

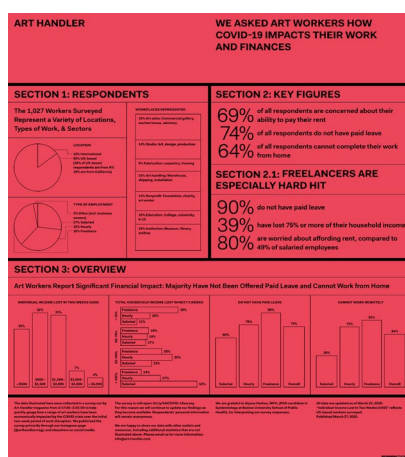
In this thesis, I explore the way in which vulnerability in the public sphere gives rise to the political through resistance, refusal and resilience. I do so through storytelling and fiction writing, through an archive of curatorial work and through the examination of the work of three artists and writers: Canadian modern artist and writer Emily Carr, American writer and filmmaker Chris Kraus, and Canadian poet and art writer Lisa Robertson. Each component presents a set of forms and methods as examples, case studies and sites of resistance and agency.

This thesis demonstrates the potentiality of these activities to suggest how one can be vulnerable in these instances, since working in public through writing, curating or creating artworks requires that one must be open to the world. From that vulnerability comes a set of discoveries, practices and responses as well as injuries—political, creative, psychic. To appear in the contemporary art world is to find oneself within a vortex of entangled economic, institutional and political forces which expect progressive and pioneering acts of artistic and creative daring and intimacy performed in public, but which are often, at the same time, nominally or outright unsupportive of the vulnerability that produces these acts—leaving artists, art workers and writers mostly in the position of precarious labourers, dependent on market and industry forces that unevenly and capriciously assign value and recognition for their efforts,

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay, “Introduction,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance* ed. Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2016), 1.

while ignoring the profound economic and psychic risk of their work.<sup>3</sup> During the global pandemic of COVID-19, this situation has grown exponentially worse. According to *ARTnews*'s featured survey conducted by the online magazine, *Art Handler*, in the USA, during the current emergency, 74 percent of employed art workers do not have paid leave and 64 percent do not have the means to work from home. For freelancers, the figure for those without paid leave rises to 90 percent. Almost 70 percent are worried about being able to pay their rent.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1** Graphic from a survey conducted by the online magazine *Art Handler* on the impact of Covid-19 on art workers. *Art Handler: We Asked Art Workers How COVID-19 Impacts Their Work and Finances*. From the *Art Handler* website: <http://art-handler.com/covid-19.jpg>.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See the website of the seminar “Art Production in Restriction: Possibilities of Transformative Art Production and Coalition-Building,” <http://transformativeartproduction.net>. Some historical background is also found in Issue 16 of *OnCurating*, “Precarious Labour in the Field of Art,” at OnCurating.org, <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-16.html#.XycugUI7nOQ>. Also, Jo Littler, Nina Power and members of the Precarious Workers Brigade, “Life After Work,” a blog post at [www.compassonline.org.uk/life-after-work/](http://www.compassonline.org.uk/life-after-work/) provides further context. The Carrotworkers’ Collective has also mounted a response to precarity, particularly with regard to unpaid internships: <https://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Zachary Small, “Art World’s Labor Force Faces Serious Coronavirus Threat, Survey Finds,” *ARTnews*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/art-handler-survey-workers-coronavirus-1202682414/>. Accessed August 2, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> The full survey can be accessed at: [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1lXnSqQjiCc1RQ2aXM-ZE3kJ7yDweZLrh0LwU76dJ\\_10/viewform?ts=5e715014&edit\\_requested=true](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1lXnSqQjiCc1RQ2aXM-ZE3kJ7yDweZLrh0LwU76dJ_10/viewform?ts=5e715014&edit_requested=true). *Art Handler*’s goal is to “uncover the inner workings of labor and logistics in the art world—conversations that are too often buried and ignored. Through this lens, the magazine reconsiders the consequences of workers in museums, galleries, and studios, as well as other sites not traditionally considered art spaces.”

Within this vulnerability may be the terms for resistance, as Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay have outlined:

Drawing from recent demonstrations that mobilize important forms of embodied resistance as ways of calling attention to the unjust effects of austerity, precarity, neoliberalism, authoritarian control, and securitarian politics, we track the emergence of a vocabulary that breaks with masculinist models of autonomy without essentializing the feminine or idealizing vulnerability as an ultimate value.<sup>6</sup>

And if, as suggested here, these institutional systems of support are flawed but still functional and generative, and if the very work that one must do to survive is to continue on, whether or not these sites foreclose radiant being, what is the appropriate response? It is clear that the systemic issues are located not only within the art world, but also within the globalized power structures of an increasingly neoliberalized world generally. With this in mind, what forms of resistance can take place? As Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay ask,

The terms we examine take on very specific meanings under neoliberal and austerity conditions when the state structures of social democracy and institutions of social welfare are losing their own resources and standing, thus exposing more populations to homelessness, unemployment, illiteracy, and inadequate health care. How, then, is the political demand to address these issues to be directed toward those institutions that should be responding to these conditions, at the same time that we seek to resist the models of power represented by those institutions?<sup>7</sup>

Despite the vicissitudes of the art world and its institutions, it is all we have. How then do we grapple with the realities of unenacted harassment policies and underpay, society-minded but politically milque-toast board performances, professional competition and, on occasion, the abdication of leadership at the very time when one might be most expected to enact its ethics at a high standard (at, say, the moment a new art gallery is

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<sup>6</sup> Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay, "Introduction," 6–7.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay, "Introduction," 2–3.

being built, or an ambitious show is being mounted, or when an artist or a colleague most needs support in a devastating workplace or community environment)—and continue to participate?

Lisa Robertson tells us that “Value moves between us or is foreclosed. The conversations are conditioned by profoundly ancient and constantly reinventing protocols—protocols we enliven, figure, and transform with our bodies and their words, by beginning. This beginning is what anyone belongs to.”<sup>8</sup> So let me tell you about beginning.

### **Public Life/Creative Acts**

One morning, as I prepared for another day of institutional encounters at the museum, I opened my computer and began to write. I had written fiction before, but not like this. Taking form on the page, the words gave me a clarity, a muscularity, a power that was energizing. It felt dangerous. It was unequivocal where equivocation had been demanded. It was direct where directness had been punished. It was bracingly and furiously vivid, a deeply satisfying testimonial, but it was also a story, an act of fictioning. As I paid attention to the affects of narrative, to the sound of the word and the line, its rhythms, shape and sensations, something vitalizing emerged.

This was the beginning of a series of stories which allowed me to express these concerns as *conditions* in order to explore their dubious affects and contradictions, while at the same time providing a workaround for neoliberal non-disclosure clauses and other institutional and reputational edifices that at best attempted to keep such stories at the level of gossip rather than allowing them to be openly spoken—an open discussion that might result in institutional change and political action. And if

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<sup>8</sup> Lisa Robertson, “Untitled Essay” in *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias* (Toronto: Book\*hug, 2012), 73.

fiction and storytelling might also result in change and political action? Robertson writes, “Any subject is supported, spoken, and carried—or disallowed and foreclosed by others, in a matrix of reciprocity, empathy and power that conditions the very possibility of embodiment. As soon as she speaks and names, the political subject emerges.”<sup>9</sup> Fiction offers such a matrix. Its capacity to elicit both an individual and a collective witnessing of one’s story by others has the potentiality to provoke empathy and to provide the emergence of a political subject. This key matrix, in Robertson’s terms, also conditions its readers to the possibility of embodied political alliance, to remain attuned and ready to act.

Writing also has the potential to create a community, a public sphere and an empathic matrix in which to work, to be witnessed and to foster solidarity. Writing directly to the embodied centre of this matrix and its unmentionable fraughtness, dependent on a claustrophobically small art world driven by an unforgiving reputation economy and wizeningly limited employment opportunities, this thesis explores how storytelling, in curatorial work and in writing, succeeds in smashing deadening operations open into enlivening ones.

By becoming a storyteller, I take up the provocation of becoming, and appearing, in the public realm and ask, in the stories and in this thesis, the following question: What calls one into personhood and, therefore, into public life? Its beginning is often love—of an idea, of another person, of a set of ethics, values or aspirations. These acts of personhood can also constitute acts of care. Storytelling provides a method for taking up one’s place in the world, and one’s obligations as a citizen and a subject. This project has evolved out of my experiences of this public life as an artist, a writer and a curator.

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<sup>9</sup> Robertson, “Untitled Essay,” 73.



## Thesis Components

In addressing these questions, the thesis mobilises three areas of inquiry: creative writing, reflective critical writing and curatorial projects. The thesis thus comprises three component parts that relate equally: (i) a collection of short stories entitled *Dead Peasant* that engages imagination and detail to cultivate an understanding and empathy that might otherwise be neglected, and to employ observation in fiction as a form of power; (ii) reflective critical writing in which aspects of the curatorial projects are mobilized in three reflective writing chapters that consider the work of three writers: Emily Carr, Chris Kraus and Lisa Robertson; and (iii) three curatorial projects, including an exhibition project titled *Convoluted Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr*; an art writing symposium titled *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?*; and a final exhibition project, *Person/ne*.

The collection of stories titled *Dead Peasant* sits alongside the curatorial and reflective writing components, as it collects the debris and detail that archive the figure of the curator and speaks to the affects and effects within these sites, while being itself a method for addressing the thesis's concerns. The curatorial projects—*Convoluted Beauty*, the art writing symposium and the *Person/ne* exhibition—move the argument of the thesis forward by formulating the figure of the curator within the research, a figure working in the public realm. In other words, the curatorial projects provide the *conditions* for the figure of the curator to appear in the thesis. The practical curatorial projects are therefore significant not only for their research outputs, but also for the fact that they additionally advance the argument by making the figure of the curator visible in the thesis.

Aspects of the practical projects are mobilized in three reflective critical writing chapters, which take up the emergence of *a resilient subject* by considering storytelling and writing in the work of Emily Carr, Chris

Kraus and Lisa Robertson. These critical chapters demonstrate how the thesis proceeds towards the resilient subject through the different characteristics and the bodies of each writer. Each has her own method for becoming a resilient subject.

To consider the political, creative and ficto-critical possibilities of writing and of storytelling as a way in which to appear vulnerably in the public sphere, I evoke in these chapters the ideas of the following theorists and writers: Hannah Arendt for her investigation of the public sphere and the conditions for appearance within that sphere; Sara Ahmed for her investigation of shame; Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism; Adriana Cavarero's relational approach to narrating appearance; Michel Feher's investigation of the self within the realm of the neoliberal ecology; Sianne Ngai's location of ugly feelings as a site of truth-telling and liberation; Denise Riley's examination of language and poetics as method; Claudia Rankine's figuration of citizenship and vulnerability within Blackness; Christina Sharpe for her interrogation of vulnerability within the representations and narration of Black bodies and being; the collective, Tiqqun, for whom the figure of the Young-Girl reveals the violent constraint of the neoliberal subject; and poet Billy-Ray Belcourt for his consideration of resilience and figuration within Indigeneity and queerness. Reading closely alongside these thinkers and writers, I examine vulnerability, appearance and the public sphere through writing, and consider how each theorist's model assists in nurturing and conceptualizing resilience, resistance and refusal within textual and curatorial acts.

The form and methodology of curatorial work *and* fiction writing is intrinsic to the research and production of new knowledge for this thesis. These two components together explore the *conditions* for working vulnerably in public, both in lived projects and in fictioning, while the critical writing explores the progress and terms of *becoming a resilient subject*.

The first chapter, entitled “In Her Own Words: Emily Carr, Storytelling and the Entry into Public Life,” examines two distinct storytelling methodologies used by Canadian modernist artist Emily Carr to explore her experience of internment in East Anglia Sanatorium at Nayland in Suffolk, England, from 1903 to 1904: her sketchbook, which included drawings and writing, and *Pause*, her collection of retrospectively written auto-fiction stories. In this examination, I work with concepts developed by Arendt, Riley and Cavarero to consider storytelling as a means to address oneself as a subject and engage in the task of creative work in the public sphere.

The chapter, “Falling Stars, Love and Figuration: Chris Kraus, Inertial Moments and Unprestigious Feelings in the Art World,” focuses on Chris Kraus’s novel *I Love Dick* in order to consider prevalent emotions and affects as they emerge in, and are produced by, the conditions of the contemporary art world, and how their appearances in the public sphere, in the forms of suspended agency and failure, illness and self-disclosure, provide models for resistance within this context. I examine Kraus’s text through the work of Berlant, Feher, Ahmed and Ngai, along with figuration and emotion in the poetry collection, *This Wound is a World*, by Billy-Ray Belcourt. Finally, I consider the further emancipatory possibilities of writing to be found in methods of irony and new sincerity in Kraus’s work.

A third and final chapter, “Revolution Is a Lived Process: Lisa Robertson and the Figure of the Menopausal She-Dandy,” addresses figuration as a formal textual operation and the revolutionary impulse within language itself. This final reflective component examines the work of Canadian art writer Lisa Robertson, in particular to consider the writer’s production of the figure of the menopausal dandy, and again draws on Riley’s research on poetics and the self. The chapter extends the discussion of how figures are formed within language, by examining the poem *Citizen: An*

*American Lyric* by American poet Claudia Rankine through the work of Judith Butler and Christina Sharpe, to think about how naming, addressability and language are used in the shaping of figures, and how Black resilience and resistance may be formed in language, as a response.

Each of these chapters moves the research forward by exploring the different characters, figures, embodied conditions and methods unique to each writer and how she deploys these in order to shape a resilient subject.

### ***Fictioning***

The first section of the thesis is a short story collection, titled *Dead Peasant*. The collection works across disciplinary frameworks, using multiple registers, fiction forms and genres. I combine these diverse forms, sometimes within one story, to cultivate a voice for, and a ficto-critical response to, a resilient subject who is able to remain vulnerable in the public sphere.

The cross-genre approach arises out of a necessity for experimentation with multiple registers as a method for decentring authority and power by offering different voices and, by so doing, refusing a meta approach. Through a pluralism of forms, voices and registers, I am able to enunciate this multiplicity. Rather than approaching the research question of how to be a resilient and still vulnerable figure in the public sphere through realism or surrealism, I instead regionalize fiction's power through many genres, to distribute their effects throughout the collection, and sometimes, each story, in order to address power relations in the art world and recalibrate their conventional hierarchies.

Each fictioning gesture has a unique and diverse capacity for the expression of form, register change and genre clash. Fiction also offers the opportunity for ambiguity or paradox. Fiction can function as a kind of

collage of many voices and tensions, without the task of persuasion that is an aspect of academic writing. In this sense, fiction offers a neutrality from the academic argumentation of the rest of the thesis. As a result, rather than autobiography, memoir or ‘realist’ short story, or even one unique ficto-critical structure, I work with many: sincerity and irony, with the lyric form as well as meta-fiction, with magic realism as well as fabulism, theoretical fiction and found text. Fictioning provides a form of information embedded within affect, emotional detail, trace and instance, a place for injury without a before and after—it is instead a relation: always in process as emotion, realm, cosmos or aura.

Vulnerability is powerful in fiction. Openness to the world allows one to write, while fictioning performs the graft of vulnerability onto power. Fiction’s relationality also connects to the vulnerabilities of the reader. There is a kinetic interior quality—a dynamism in how we read and interiorize fiction that differs from the vulnerability that is addressed within visual arts practice—that is enacted through storytelling. The voice of the storyteller and writer exists in the mind of the reader in a way that is durational, intimate, non-communal and highly individualized. We may choose to read fiction not as a manifestation of cultural capital, but privately. As Lisa Robertson says, “Reading does change the world, but usually not in the way one might wish it to, and perhaps not visibly. Its acts are clandestine...I am only certain that I think insofar as I read.”<sup>10</sup> Though some may perform the knowledges they find there by later sharing them in a community of readers, the first point of contact is the quiet mind of the reader, in solitude—something well understood by Robertson, and we will see, in the chapter that addresses her work, how much reading informs her own practice as a writer.

Reading provides a space of interiority, where affect, vulnerability and emotion are undisturbed and resonantly present without witness. As we

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<sup>10</sup> Robertson, “Lastingness: Réage, Lucrèce, Arendt,” in *Nilling*, 23.

dwell in the pleasurable interiority of fiction, the plane of the fictional world allows us to move from the public sphere to the private, giving us a space to consider how we publicly appear and how we privately operate. Indeed, this is even a place for the ‘social’ that emerges, in Arendt’s terms, in the contemporary world—an intermediary and equivocating space that attempts to navigate the incursions of the neoliberal. As Robertson attests, “I read to sense the doubling of time: The time of the book’s form which pertains to the enclosure and topology of rooms, allegories, houses, bodies, surfaces; and the time of my perceiving, which feels directional, melodic, lyric, inflectional. Then, because of the book’s time overlaying my own, reading opens a proposition. It receives me in the rhythm I didn’t know I missed.”<sup>11</sup>

The ability to narrativize public vulnerability is also uniquely addressed in fictioning. In the stories, I respond to the research question with interior thoughts, bodies and sensations of figures who are not me: a writer of fortune cookies who has turned away from curating, a weeping academic, an underpaid guard, an astronaut who has left Earth for a free zone on Mars. These dramatized, embodied, characterized scenes offer a discontinuity between the ‘I’ and the voice that is speaking, and allows us, as readers of the thesis, to embody other speaking positions. Fictioning is a space for a figure that is neither the writer’s nor the reader’s and as such is a site of potential empathy, since fiction offers multiplicity and invention—the opportunity to temporarily occupy the figure of the ‘opposing side’ or of another, whose experience is not one’s own—which is conventionally presented in critical writing through the juxtaposition of a selection of theorists and concepts to arrive at original research. Within the critical writing chapters of this research, I assemble the voices of others, with a commitment to fidelity to those voices.

In this thesis, I also chose to include prose fiction as a process of divin-

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<sup>11</sup> Robertson, “Lastingness: Réage, Lucrèce, Arendt,” 15.

ing what was and wasn't my own experience, of accepting what was and wasn't me. Fiction is a place where sensing and openness, where injury and sadness, where puzzlement and not knowing, where political incompleteness and becoming a category, are addressed without fear of reprisal within the reputation economy of the art world—indeed, where they are necessary research tools. In fiction is to be found the idea of “negative capability” in John Keats’ formulation: the uncertainty of offering myself up to the governing vulnerability which is the focus of this particular thesis.

Keats coined this phrase in 1817 in order to address how creative writers in fiction and poetry pursue an idea of “artistic beauty” despite philosophical uncertainty: “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”<sup>12</sup> It also expresses a turning towards writing, and away from conventional scientific and philosophical logics, where the “Poetical character” in Keats’ description is a figure, and is figured: it is “not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated.”<sup>13</sup>

While I appear as a figure in this research through the curatorial, I am an embodied researcher, a “poetical character,” in this work through fiction writing. From this position I embrace and invite the philosophical uncertainties of the research question. Fiction writing is the only place where I do not leave myself out, where I feel vulnerable and where I use vulnerability as a source of knowledge and as a practice. Here, in fictioning, I languish in “negative capability” the way Robertson tells us she lounges in her bathtub, Carr lies in a grassy warren in England, and Kraus

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<sup>12</sup> John Keats, quoted by Stephan Hebron in “John Keats and ‘Negative Capability,’” on the British Library website, <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/john-keats-and-negative-capability>. Accessed August 31, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Hebron, “John Keats and ‘Negative Capability.’”

is mesmerized by an artwork she encounters or in her solitude of thinking “tripping out in layers of complexity in total silence”—feeling the comfort and luxuriousness in uncertainty, in not knowing, not expecting clear answers about complexity. I wallow, I linger, I daydream, I forget, I remember. In this way, I pull apart the loose threads of ‘mastery,’ which comes to us as a form, and an end point, from patriarchy.

Uncertainty as a position is a vulnerable one in an academic setting. In fictioning, as one does in memoir or autobiography, I occupy a luxuriating un-mastery. Where the conventional voice of academic writing within this notion of mastery has perpetrated myths about uncertainty, tentativeness, misunderstanding, misapprehension, mishearing, missing the point and falling down the rabbit hole, fiction, memoir and autobiography hold us in the lap of all this strange travesty that is the unfolding of lives lived—of one unprepared moment of being (for how could one have foreseen the moment where the lover would leave, the limb would fail, the wave would swell above your head in a sudden storm, the organ would turn against itself, the fire would be given new life by a gust of wind, the mother’s mind would be overcome by dementia or grief, or the beloved would die?). In fiction particularly, I found a liberty, a nuance, that feeds into the transdisciplinary pluralism and openness that is the lived life, that is the body’s inherent vulnerability, that is the succumbing to this central force. Fiction allows the writer to work directly from within and inside a position, a condition and an orientation—a position that is the source of being able to work. Vulnerability is the foundation of all fiction work.

I wrote fiction because I fell out of love with the art world. I felt it had turned its back on vulnerability—not as a critical notion, but as a lived practice. It seemed to me that no one bothered with that anymore—vulnerable subjects as abstractions, as conceptual notions, were supremely acceptable, but live vulnerable beings showing up in the office, at the faculty meeting, in the classroom, in the boardroom



or at the demonstration were oddly and mystifyingly unwelcome—and furthermore, unprotected. Indeed, it seemed there were a fleet of policies and procedures that mitigated against their presence in these environments. A normative performance of mastery and power has continued to condition the industry and to follow many of its contested hierarchies, despite all the critiques of such power relations.

Fidelity has continued to be to the existing power structure—despite the precarity, the incursions of the art market, the erosion of people, the fear, the experiences of those who couldn't support themselves any longer as art workers. At first this fidelity represents professionalism, good form, but then it turns into silence, to being colonized by a value system. Through creative writing, I experience a reprieve from these conditions, a disconnect from performing a public self. This is the pleasure I have found in fiction writing—like the work of painting in the studio: there is an absolute autonomy and sovereignty to be found there. Fiction writing has returned me to the primal pleasure that the art world has slowly corroded. Rather than autobiographical, the fictioning presented here is a compilation of affects which I have witnessed, experienced or known, that friends and colleagues have shared, that I have seen at a party, conference, staff meeting or art opening, that I have felt in a board room or staff lunch room. These have been a great privilege to witness, since these are the vulnerabilities of public life and political appearance. By appearing before others, the people I have thought of have often congregated as themselves in all their glorious grief, fury and joy, often accumulating into layered aggregates. These I think of as figures.

Fictioning is not my primary form the way curating has been. By taking part in this experimentation within my thesis, I further embody the vulnerability that is the core of this research. I have seen first-hand the despair and lack of agency in the instances I write about. Fiction allows me to speak, to participate, to create a new worlding—it is activism as

naming and as writing. Rather than pretending that this has been a purely intellectual exercise of satire about the art world, I have placed myself, through fictioning, within the algebra of the thesis. I believe that naming my place within it, occupying this space directly, is politically powerful.

Influenced by academic writing, artist statements, curatorial essays, grant writing and employee manuals as much as by works of fiction by creative writers, the collection of short works created for this PhD are at the heart of this enquiry. They take aim at the vulnerabilities, excesses and cruelties of an art world that eats itself alive. The collection explores the ‘I’ of the art precariate, multiply fictioned and radically positioned, telling the stories of those whose aspirations and desires, indeed their very bodies, go unnoticed. The stories question work in the public sphere of the art world. They are an exploration of the figure of the art worker as told by the art writer. They formally break the corollary between ‘I’ and the one who speaks, and, further, they consider shame as a legitimate methodology: a form of release, a puncture, akin to the rationale for forming consciousness raising groups to share stories. Ultimately, the presence of the uncertain shows, like the ineffable in academia and the art world, that there is no simple resolution for how fiction might work to help form resilient subjectivities—much in the way, in one story, the cure for the father’s heart has tainted the chemistry of his personality.

I am also influenced by the writers I address in this research: Emily Carr, Lisa Robertson and Chris Kraus, as well as Belcourt and Rankine. *Dead Peasant* is, therefore, a collection of thirteen short fiction pieces which address forms of resistance, resilience and failure in museum contexts and art practices through my own body, witnessing and experience. Fictioning is adopted here as a method to consider figuration, affect and vulnerability as an overall structure, which parallels Carr’s and Kraus’s use of this writing form and its conceptual space. The project both addresses and constructs the figure of the storyteller to effect a transdis-

ciplinary approach to knowledge in order to examine creative work in relation to working in public: the specific areas of knowledge production the stories address are vulnerability, ethics of care, experimentation of form, affect, non-productivity, relationality and collaboration.

In *Dead Peasant* I share stories and acts of fiction that are also a set of conditions. The fiction writing is a gesture towards finding, at the level of the sound, the texture, the line and the body, a language for resistance with which to navigate public life—one that can make proverbial Tolstoyian hay with the censorious administrative impulses that govern the neoliberalized, concretized, historicizing and brand-sensitive logic of contemporary art institutions and, by association, of twenty-first-century life itself. I report here on what I am doing as a way to anticipate any protest against the combination of these forms in one collection of fiction.

### ***Critical and Reflective Writing***

In 2009 my son left home to attend university, and I resigned from a comfortable position where I had curated more than fifty exhibitions over the course of ten years, all the while questioning whether I wished to continue with curatorial work. I took a sabbatical in Europe, where I found myself, for the first time in many years, alone for days on end. As I struggled to make a home in a new place without friends or family, the world at times took on a distorted and lonely character, and I began to think of Emily Carr and the story that was told about her hospitalization for hysteria when she went to art school in England in 1899, an event that was highlighted in her biography and which has persisted as a way to frame her as a subject to the present. I began to wonder if the characterization which haunted the telling of her life was in fact not hysteria at all, but the very kind of homesickness I was experiencing. My own career as a painter had long since dissipated. I wished to return to it and did so in a gesture of optimism that, in hindsight, can be seen as emblematic

of Berlant's terms:<sup>14</sup> moving to a foreign country to write and to become reacquainted with this earlier notion of living my life as an artist.

In this thesis I turn to non-fiction, to critical writing, to consider the work of writers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—artist and writer Emily Carr; filmmaker, critic and writer Chris Kraus; poet and art writer Lisa Robertson, alongside poets Claudia Rankine and Billy-Ray Belcourt—who navigate their vulnerability within the public sphere with political and aesthetic insight, courage and experimentation and, in so doing, demonstrate a set of methods and registers in which one can appear vulnerably.

In Chapter One, “In Her Own Words: Emily Carr, Storytelling and the Entry into Public Life,” I examine the writing and drawings of Emily Carr, whose work initially inspired this thesis. The Carr family home and the boarding house that she later ran during a fallow period, when she stopped participating professionally in exhibiting her work, were just a few kilometres down the road from the museum where I worked, which held a significant number of her works in its collection. The local community had often heard stories of her eccentricities, alongside her artistic achievements, as a matter of course. Sometimes they were published and sometimes they were personal stories: someone who, as a child, remembered seeing Carr's figure through the car window, at her easel painting in Beacon Hill Park, and upon asking her father who she was, being told that she was an artist but also a very bad-tempered, eccentric lady. She was a figure of pride and estrangement in Victoria and in Canada, despite her achievement. I knew about her writing and had read a number of the books she had written about her life when she was near its end. She was accomplished, and that was accepted, but her challenging personal life was very much part of her professional biography as well.

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<sup>14</sup> See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

As the loneliness encroached during my own travels, I thought of her, and I became more curious about how her body had expressed its absolute refusal, and how that story of her body's refusal, through hysteria, had not gone away in the biographies of her life over a century later. In fact, it was a story that had framed her life, the word 'hysterical' later being replaced by 'eccentric.' This focus led me to follow her footsteps to the United Kingdom, where she spent her time from 1899 to 1904 when she had hoped to sharpen her artistic work by attending the Westminster School of Art: from London to Cornwall, to Bushey and to the site of the sanatorium where she had been interned, and to its archives, in Suffolk. Carr had been lonely and homesick. While she was away, her brother died from tuberculosis and her family continued to struggle financially. Overwhelmed by the city of London and its scales of wealth and privilege, Carr came into a new understanding of herself as a deeply colonial subject: she was homesick for the less-urbanized, natural landscapes of Canada and for its somewhat more egalitarian social order. She experienced unrelenting migraines. Hospitalization followed at East Anglia Sanatorium, where she was diagnosed with hysteria and forbidden to paint by her doctors. She was able to draw and made droll, pithy cartoons and sketches of what was a horrendous time. Many of her fellow patients died, while at the same time she slowly healed. Carr returned to Canada cowed and ashamed, initially re-entering quietly by spending time at a friend's ranch in the British Columbia interior before returning to the West Coast. She felt this period of her life as a profound failure.

I walked through muddy spring cow fields to find Treganna Wood in St. Ives, where she had painted in the shade to shield her eyes from migraine-inducing glare of the beach and ocean, and located what would have been the boarding home she stayed in, where she scandalized the landlady by requesting a weekly evening bath. I saw the stone walls where the sound of the waves bashing against the house, which fronted the ocean, had made her fear the walls could be washed away. I visited the

upper floor of the St. Ives Archives to read the files of artist colonies of St. Ives and the Porthmeor School, and found traces of Carr's presence there. I visited the studios where Carr had worked and, back in London, found Belgrave Square, where she had stayed with wealthy family friends when her sister was called from Canada to her bedside, and together they decided she should be hospitalized in order to be well enough to make the journey home. At the Wellcome Collection, I located correspondence, blueprints and plans that documented Dr. Jane Walker's path to the creation of her sanatorium at Nayland. Back in Canada, I discovered Carr's small plain black sketchbook during a visit to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Ontario; in it, she had drawn Walker's figure along with those of her staff and patients. Later, in her collection of fiction, *Pause*, written retrospectively at the end of her life, Carr finally used storytelling for herself as a practice in which to think through her struggles in England, and engaged its narrative methods to navigate their political and autobiographical signatures. In this chapter I argue that through this storytelling and the vulnerability and resistance that help her to speak and to appear, Carr finds her way to becoming a resilient subject.

In Chapter Two, "Falling Stars, Love and Figuration: Chris Kraus, Inertial Moments and Unprestigious Feelings in the Art World," I address how rejection, failure, abjection and invisibility are transformed into agency through writing, in the work of Chris Kraus. Writing the novel *I Love Dick* almost a century after Carr's stay at the sanatorium, Kraus creates a work of theoretical fiction that blurs the line between life writing and fiction. Taking as her novel's target art world patriarchy and the neoliberalization of art as expressed through professional snobbery and marketization, Kraus speaks back to the artworld's narratives of abjection, shame and failure as forces that subjugated her, in order to disentangle their threads of power. Writing to the actual figure of Dick Hebdige, an art theorist and amateur artist who is the object of her infatuation,

Kraus presents us with the figure of ‘Chris’ as she explores the various ways in which she is rejected by lovers, by the contemporary art world and by the world at large with its precarious relations. Kraus’s writing speaks directly to the unspeakable spaces, most often kept private or shared only among trusted female friends: the shame of undesirability and rejection, the rage at being made invisible, at having personal and professional desires undercut, often as the price of daring to articulate them publicly. By making this experience visible through storytelling, Kraus reveals how agency can be found within such vulnerability and lays bare the art world’s terms—without taking responsibility for them. Storytelling enables Kraus to resist being contained by this reading: *I Love Dick* shows ‘how it all works’ behind the scenes, naming the forces that produce ‘failure,’ and problematizing it not as the responsibility of an individual subject, but instead addressing its structural violence.

When I met Kraus in person over the weekend of the *Never the Same* symposium,<sup>15</sup> I was struck by her curiosity and vulnerability—how generous she was with her readers and those around her, and openly interested in their own work and lives. Several young students and emerging writers later told me of the warm and interested connections she had made with them that endured for months and even years, and her keynote address, “Face” (discussed in this chapter), described an encounter resulting from the support of an ambitious young emerging curator who had hoped to leverage the writer’s interest by inviting Kraus to an exhibition installed in the curator’s apartment, just for her. One evening during the event, Kraus improvisationally participated in another artist’s performance, called out from the audience to join the performers onstage. She was disarming, candid, funny and earnest—and she was vulnerable. She embodied her research.

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<sup>15</sup> *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?* was a symposium I produced in September 2017, with co-curator Joanne Bristol, in Calgary, Canada. The project will be discussed and presented in the Curatorial Practice sections (Section IV, VI and VIII) of the thesis.

Shortly before the symposium, I had attended a public presentation by the poet Billy-Ray Belcourt in Calgary, at a panel imagining the Indigenization of the major Canadian contemporary art publication *Canadian Art*, celebrating the occasion of its first issue devoted entirely to Indigenous artists and guest editors. Belcourt spoke of the practices of appearance as a young queer person and as an art worker within institutions that are led by settlers, and of the necessity for solidarity and care. Within this chapter on Kraus's work, I also examine the poem, "Sacred" from Belcourt's first collection of poetry, *This Wound Is a World*, which addresses rejection as a political instance and the unspoken spaces and structural violence of neoliberal forces, by naming their colonial origins and making way for a resistant and resilient Indigenous figure through writing.

In their work, both Belcourt and Kraus reflect without shame on the way in which external forces have produced each as a figure, and through writing they reveal and resist their categorization, replacing it with their own figuration—as figures who speak and who know, occupying their desires fully. As Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay note, "vulnerability and invulnerability have to be understood as politically produced, unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power."<sup>16</sup> By recognizing how the idea of vulnerability is shaped, and is an operation of power, one can rescue it from a misleading binary. Kraus, in writing *I Love Dick*, rather than only feeling at the mercy of these forces, understands her vulnerability and her invulnerability together, activating the latter by writing frankly about the abjectness of her sense of failure as a filmmaker and artist, and about the forces of erasure embedded within the late capitalist and patriarchal logic of the art world. Her testimony shapes the figure of 'Chris,' the subject of her novel, as she recalibrates the power structures within which this figure is embedded, revealing Chris through a kind of *mise-en-abyme*, a story within a story, taking

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<sup>16</sup> Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay, "Introduction," 5.



action as much as she is acted upon, as does Belcourt who writes the figure of the young queer Indigenous person, who has entered the scene of settler colonialism. This chapter, finally, presents Kraus's and alongside her work, Belcourt's methods, for arriving at a resilient subject through resistance.

Finally, in Chapter Three, "Revolution Is a Lived Process: Lisa Robertson and the Figure of the Menopausal She-Dandy," I examine the work of Robertson, focusing on her text *Proverbs of a She-Dandy*. Robertson writes the figure of the menopausal Dandy into life by crafting a set of proverbs that shape her appearance. Robertson's work resonates as an acknowledgement of the ways in which public life is gendered and charged for women, especially during the aging process—where one finally recognizes how the conditions of visibility were entirely dependent on, and defined by, patriarchal and capitalist models of productivity and its platforms for women, on supportive relations to current power structures, as well as on fecundity and beauty as forms of state institutions, futurity and preservation. Within the formal operations of her text, Robertson celebrates and flaunts menopausal embodiment, its achievements and its failures, through experimenting with gesture in language and recording each categorical nuance of resistance. Like the older Carr's confidence in occupying the public sphere in her final years, when she was spied by a child from the car window, painting, in Beacon Hill Park, Robertson's proverbs reveal a sheer dame-mastery, and begin with a description of herself in the bath, redolent and celebratory—unlike Carr's hasty Saturday evening baths in Cornwall—instead lounging, reading and thinking, as she is inspired by outrage to produce her prose. Within this chapter on Robertson, I also turn to the work of Claudia Rankine, who in her long poem, *Citizen*, presents her research on instances, affects and scenes that may be seen as testimonial proverbs. Through her citations of lived experiences in the public sphere of white imagination, Rankine's proverbs are a collage of media represen-

tation, art history, political violence and everyday micro-aggressions which shape experiences of Black being, vulnerability and embodiment. Through writing, Rankine makes these experiences visible and by so doing, displays their violence. These contemporary women, and to some extent Carr, directly take on the forces that attempt to shame them. Chapter Three focuses on how, through these means, Robertson, and Rankine figure a resilient and resistant subject.

All of these writers take on forces, resisting their attempt to shame and to silence them, and in so doing they cultivate the resilient subject that I work towards in this thesis, a figure which remains vulnerable while also possessing agency.

### *Curatorial Practice*

By presenting the three curatorial projects that follow, I work to advance the argument for how a resilient subject is formed that is the premise of this thesis.<sup>17</sup> Through these three projects—the exhibition *Convolutioned Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr* (2014), the symposium *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?* (2017) and the final curatorial project *Person/ne* (2019)—the figure of the curator is located within the research. This curatorial figure is central and provides a specific orientation for the methodology of the work, its political orientations and struggles, and its challenges, all of which take place while working in

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<sup>17</sup> The moral rights to the curatorial projects featured in this thesis are my own since I conceptualized the exhibitions and, in the case of *Never the Same*, I shared this role with independent curator Joanne Bristol. Under Canadian law, the copyright for a project made by a curator who is employed there, rests with the institution where it was made, since it was developed and produced for the institution during the course of employment. This issue has been a matter of discussion and concern for Canadian curators in museum and non-profit gallery contexts for at least the last decade, and has been raised as a point of issue during at least one conference this writer has attended. I refer to curatorial work completed within institutions in this thesis in order to call attention to this fact, which is salient and relevant to the concerns of the thesis and to the relation of the art worker in museum contexts as a vulnerable subject in terms of intellectual property. I also present in the thesis the knowledge that arises from producing this work (separate from the work itself) and consider that knowledge's outcomes.

the public realm. Providing documentation of these projects asserts the conditions for that figure to appear within research generally, and the processes and activities specific to this way of working. They also, as do the fiction stories, specify the vulnerabilities, precarities and silences within neoliberal art systems. The practical curatorial projects are therefore significant not only for their research outputs, but also for the fact that they additionally advance the argument by making the figure of the curator, and the site from which she works, visible in the thesis. The curatorial projects, like the fictioning work, make visible the possibilities for resilience that emerge from these vulnerable orientations and sites, and reveal how the curatorial figure may become the locus for resistance through reorganization of the forces, which produce the tensions of public life in the art world, into meaningful solidarities, research and stories.

#### i. *Convoluting Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr*

Within the curatorial practice, the pressures of public life on creative work was explored in 2014 with an exhibition and publication, *Convoluting Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr*, that investigated a Canadian modernist painter's personal and artistic narrative of illness, frustration and failure during her time in the United Kingdom, where she came to study in 1899. The project was intended to challenge the ways in which subsequent biographies and exhibitions about Carr continued to function within the constraints of that narrative. It was also inspired by Carr's own report of her public life in her written documents and stories. This period of unproductivity was crucial in Carr's life, galvanizing her and fixing her sense of her Canadian identity as a core component of her work as a painter. This identification would later come to be represented by others (curators and art historians) as nationalist expression. Carr's time in the United Kingdom also interested me as a site of unproductivity, as generative space, and for its forms of productive refusal. The exhibition and publication project further considered three questions: What

are the uses of unproductivity and/or refusal in this context? How can vulnerability and empathy be considered as forms of agency and/or resistance? How do the methodologies of storytelling produce knowledge and spaces of empathy, spaces in which to work, in the context of the figures of the artist, the writer and the curator?

*Convolutéd Beauty* examined Carr's legacy through a selection of works by Carr alongside works of contemporary and historical international and Canadian artists. One work from Carr's UK period was included in the exhibition: *Pause*, the sketchbook produced during her internment at the East Anglia Sanatorium. In the company of Carr were German artists Thomas Zipp and Charlotte Salomon, UK artist Mark Wallinger, and American artist Louise Lawler. Canadian artists Cedric and Nathan Bomford, Joanne Bristol, Karen Tam and Kwakwaka'wakw artist Marianne Nicolson were invited to create new commissions for the project to explore specific instances of her experience and the transformational notions elicited by Carr's brief stay in Britain: the sense of exile and illness, the comfort of her ongoing relationship to the natural world and to animals, as well as the formulation of her own artistic identity. The project collaboratively explored the vulnerability and resilience of Carr as a figure.

## ii. Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?

The symposium project *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?*, co-produced with independent curator Joanne Bristol in 2017, brought twenty-one artists and art writers together from France, the UK, Canada and the US in Calgary, Canada, for a three-day symposium, where participants explored the places for, and political implications of, de-instrumentalized forms of writing. In an age of austerity; neo-colonialism; and neoliberal uses of creativity, art marketing, grant writing and practice-based PhD work, the symposium explored how writing by and for artists, in and through their work, enacts resistance to such forces.

It also investigated the language forms (re)emerging in the present, how art writing might be considered as an ethical practice towards an understanding in defence of artistic knowledge and how (re)emergent modes of artistic writing enact agonisms and solidarities in relation to art audiences. *Never the Same* addressed how and for whom these new modes of art writing matter through multiple symposium sessions guided by the following four areas of investigation: (i) Performing and Materialising Art Writing; (ii) Making Space, Place and Time through Art Writing; (iii) Art Writing and Knowledge Production; and (iv) New Modes of Publishing and Distribution. Alongside these panels were an evening performance event, a book launch and reading with Kraus, a group book launch and set of readings, and collateral collaborations with gallerists in the city.

*Never the Same* provided a gathering place, in solidarity with other writers, artists and curators (including Kraus and Robertson), and forms a compendium and a critical literature review within the thesis of the myriad ways in which such solidarities can also form a set of practices of resistance, in public and collectively.

### iii. *Person/ne*

The exhibition *Person/ne*, at Griffin Art Projects in Vancouver in 2019, considered how vulnerable figures are produced in relation to contemporary challenges to personhood that are affected by forces like social media, surveillance technologies, the influence of Big Data and the reputation economy (such as Uber- and AirBnB-style ratings of the self and others), and the marketing language of ‘personal brand.’ *Person/ne* presented alternatives to these challenges through an array of artistic works and practices that may be seen as sites of agency, in Arendt’s terms, and examined the ways in which artists consider contemporary ideas of citizenship, agency and compassion. The works in the exhibition suggested artists’ attention to presence and relationality, to care and inti-

macy, that may call us into solidarity and proximity with one another—ways in which one may be invited, once again, to care.

The works in the exhibition were Canadian and international, drawn from collections and artist studios, and through their processes, methods and conceptual practices they responded to a range of twentieth- and twenty-first-century sites of figuration—of personhood and citizenship in Arendt’s sense, crossing geographic and psychic borders—as well as the agency of taking action through artmaking. The artists’ works revealed acts of care, citizenship and personhood, or cognizance of its lack, through fictional portraiture or portraits that themselves bear witness, through love letters, tapestries and storytelling, through the documentation of crossing national borders, or through the care of remembering—histories, relationships, events and people.

## Methodology

Visual cultures theorist and curator Irit Rogoff, in a lecture titled *Becoming Research: The Way We Work Now*, suggests that curatorial practices and forms of research no longer use inherited knowledge as their primary material, but instead look to the *conditions* of each individual’s life as the site of research.<sup>18</sup> Rather than a process of discovery and interpretation, the contemporary curator embraces what Rogoff terms a set of *protocols*, which includes a range of methods from fictioning, performance, archive, documentary, re-enactment or re-narration of histories, and other forms of invention.

In this sense, the thesis’s shape, how it is constructed, forms a kind of exoskeleton or meta-structure, a body that is an architecture—instead of a comparative approach, which addresses surrounding claims to these

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<sup>18</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Becoming Research: The Way We Work Now*, April 3, 2019, Sonic Acts Festival 2019, video 30:38, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3AcgQoGaSU>. Accessed January 4, 2020.

fields of knowledge and weighs each part, it is structurally strategic in how it asks, *What is at stake?* There is room for paradigm and particularity as a result: the detail of the case study or the practical curatorial projects or my own fiction work. In this sense it is a curatorial doubling, operating against a given sense of licences and prohibitions that are associated with disciplinary logics (e.g., curatorial practice, creative writing, reading, art history and literary theory).

This PhD project therefore includes curatorial and fictioning elements to provide myriad responses to the question of how it is possible to remain vulnerable in the public sphere, attuned and ready to act. The thesis does not take the form of literary criticism or art historical or anthropological investigation; instead it uses a curatorial framework as a methodological basis for writing. The nexus/position from which the writing of the thesis takes place is that of a curator and a writer using a curatorial strategy that navigates temporally and spatially, placing objects for thought to be encountered in a virtual or actual space together.

Curatorial methodology has been essential to shaping these components structurally within the thesis, while both curating and creative writing are mined for their potentialities for resistance, resilience and refusal. Poetics, close reading, syntax, narratability and language are examined for their capacities to give birth to a political and public sphere, while exhibition-making is presented as a way to work together that allows for proximity, solidarity and collaboration.

The approach is therefore not that of literary scholarship, but of a paratactic curatorial method to think about writing and the artist/art writer, and to examine vulnerability and resistance in writing and in curatorial practice. There are also existential questions in this thesis: it considers not only the precarious worker, but also the condition of being embodied and gendered, focusing on the development of a writing practice as a way of appearing, and on writing as an approach to navigating

the complexity of one's particular world in which that appearance takes place, according to terms set out for public life by Arendt. Given that who one appears to is one's world, and that one appears both in physical form (materially) and in writing practices, all three writers who are the subjects of my research appear, in Arendt's sense, in the public sphere through their writing practice (as have I in my own creative writing).

The writers whose work is considered in the critical and reflective writing section of this thesis have different strategies for navigating their appearance. Becoming a resilient subject is key to all, as is developing a form of writing practice that has allowed each to appear in the public sphere despite the inherent vulnerability of doing so. Each asks, in their own way, *how can one be both a vulnerable and political subject?*

The public, or the world of the PhD, is different from the world of each of these practices. This thesis presents fiction as documentation, as affect, and examines the relation of fiction to multiple addresses and multiple publics. To reflect the interrelationships of its disciplines and addressees, the thesis is editorially conceptualized as a series of equal parts. Each component is staged to reflect some part of writing and curating: creative writing and fictioning, collaborating and thinking together, public address and the duality of reading and writing.

The thesis is framed as a transdisciplinary proposition for creating a resilient subject. Its architecture asks its reader to consider a set of conditions: each element, in its own way, treats that proposition differently—the elements are, therefore, test enunciations, cases for how to enact this ambition; all become tentative approaches, attempts to live up to being a vulnerable subject in the public sphere, which is the thematic ambition and overarching architecture of the thesis. Each component of the project represents an individual instance. The structure does not privilege one instance over others, but includes various attempts to mobilise an element of resilience: refusal, refuge, resistance and/or reconciliation.



Rather than being structured methodologically by one practice or categorization, I consider the failures and successes of each instance that is presented, and invoke the collaboration of the reader: collectively we encounter forms of practice to address a shared concern.

*A shared politics* aggregates the different components, rather than their disciplinary, historical, institutional inscriptions. A classical scholar may see these as transgressions, but here I am suggesting a licence to make a proposition through this method of staging. From the provisional and propositional nature of the thesis comes an element of its original contribution to knowledge.

The contribution is therefore not to Emily Carr studies, curatorial studies or art history but to *modalities* by which we might appear in public—and in this comes a different ordering of histories and conventions. The logic is paratactical: each component is equally and equanimously positioned, performing diverse practices side by side. Through this parataxis I identify qualifiers for each of these attempts at enactment: I consider each backdrop—history, literature, curatorship—and ask, How does writing and fictioning perform its discontinuities/discontents *here*? What are the particular affordances that inform each instance? Rather than a comparative analysis of art historical narratives or literary theory, I work to note how efficient they each are in their effects. In other words, how does each instance contribute to the question of how to be vulnerable in the public sphere, and how to be a political subject within, through, arising from or despite this vulnerability?

This editorial staging configures the thesis's approach to vulnerability in the public sphere by considering the paradigmatic, and presenting each instance as an example of certain conditions and protocols that reflect the working methodology of curatorial practice.

## Appearance and Storytelling

If the appearance of a figure in writing is the emergence of embodiment within language, materializing thought, materializing writing, gives an idea a body. Storytelling is a methodology that is invaluable in response to events, and sometimes crises, that occur within the neoliberal logic of the contemporary art world's public realm. This thesis is formulated around the question, *How can one be vulnerable in the public sphere?* and takes an embodied interdisciplinary and paratactical methodological approach to staging conditions and protocols for how one appears as a figure and as a subject in curating and writing. It examines how, through curating and writing, vulnerability may operate as a political form that gives rise to resilience. It considers how storytelling and fiction mitigate and provide ruptures that can prefigure and configure, hold, host and provide methods for navigating such vulnerability. This thesis may provide potential tools for how subjects may move toward resilience. Ultimately, and rather quietly, storytelling allows us to appear for, and to, the world and ourselves. This alone may help us see and understand the political power we wield when we tell our stories.

## II. Glossary

**Character:** A character is called into being by an author, and configured by narration, whether by the construction of a plot or the strategy of a storyteller; she is directed and ordered by another, whether in imagination, speech or text. A character exists within the arc of a story, and we see her as an entity, an object, a contrivance of the author, pushed forward through plot and via the time of the narration; our expectation is that she will move from one state to another, from the first time we encounter her until the last. She may be acted on by exterior or interior forces, but we expect to see her progression unfold as she navigates her choices and arrives at insight or knowledge or chooses to turn from them. In either case, she is ‘moved’ by the author through a series of events which force her to the surface of the narrative. Her insight is both her own and not her own—it may be the author’s and it may also be the witness/reader’s insight or it may emerge from the textual and linguistic signatures of the writing. She is a subject within the schema of the text.

Sometimes we are a character to ourselves: we try to construct a logic to our days and hours, the main components of our lifetimes. It is a distancing method for making sense, but we can apply it to our own movements in the world, to see ‘I’ as a ‘she,’ ‘her’ or ‘they.’ However, ‘character’ can also be something that is a measure of the self—in this sense, ‘character’ as a concept, follows upon the enunciation of character that appears in various storytelling forms: within the long poem, the allegory, the spiritual lesson or the novel. ‘Character,’ then, in this second sense, is becoming that which one has been, someone who has exhibited publicly a feature or features of the self, that can then be assessed within the conventions of storytelling.

**Figure:** A figure is a meeting point between converging forces, an intersection which is revealed in much the way quantum physics reveals a changing particle: through witnessing. She may be an outline, an

affect, an aggregate, an emblem, or she may appear to us as a discrete, self-contained and singular form; we may only see her partially, but she is *configured* by myriad forces outside an author's or reader's witnessing. She appears spontaneously at the nexus of relations (political or intimate). She is brought into being by political and personal will or by happenstance, or by the correlation of non-organized forces. She appears, emerges, is incited, incanted, or called by name—but we do not initially know her form since it is not fixed. She will take any form at any moment. Attempts are made to produce her, but instead she coalesces. She is changeable and, like a quantum particle, she is affected by our realizations of her and our own being. She stands powerfully at the intersection of all we know and all we do not know. She is impervious to our desires. She appears when we fix our eyes in her direction, and she may disappear just as quickly. She gathers herself from the particles of emotion, affect, event, politics, rules, obligations, sound, movement, gesture and declaration as an iteration. She may be both a promise made and a promise broken. A figure has no master; she appears and disappears at will, and is summoned by the most extraordinary, mundane and even contradictory forces. She appears as an assemblage formed of feelings, thoughts and events, and she may reconfigure herself just as quickly, as motile as the feelings, thoughts and events that produce her shift, change, evaporate or consolidate. A figure is autonomous from our will. She is quintessentially political.

**Name:** Naming configures our appearance in the public sphere as a summary. Our name is the shorthand of the affect, events, conditions which predicate and emanate from our individual lives. To be named is to be fixed within the scene of the world. It registers our beginning as archive and as documentation, is hinged to our citizenship, the first decision our parents must make in order to register our birth, and by which we introduce ourselves to each archive that records us in the public sphere as registrants. It accompanies our textual acts as 'author,' our acts

of love, in our marriage licences or our children's birth certificates, and, the moment we cease to be, in our death certificates. Naming also maps us as an inherently vulnerable addressable subject who is a foremost a linguistic entity, for in Judith Butler's terms:

Could language injure us, if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings? Beings which require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms? If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were by its prior power.<sup>1</sup>

As Butler tells us, "Being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language."<sup>2</sup> We chart our moments of appearance via our naming. But "one is not simply fixed by the name that one is called ... by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call."<sup>3</sup> For

to be addressed injuriously is not only to be open to an unknown future, but not to know the time and place of injury, and to suffer the disorientation of one's situation as the effect of such speech. Exposed at the moment of such a shattering is precisely the volatility of one's "place" within the community of speakers; one can be "put in one's place" by such speech, but such a place may be no place.<sup>4</sup>

Naming therefore constitutes a particular and inherent vulnerability, in life and within writing, within archives and in textuality itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997), 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 2

<sup>4</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 4.

**Subject:** A subject may be a figure or a character. A subject may also rest in the space between figure and character. She is not an ‘I’ in the sense that she is held apart to be observed only, but she may incorporate all speaking positions and pronouns. She is articulated by others and her narrative is often claimed by them within the act of storytelling. A subject is formed by having a story told about her, for her, of her. She is a spectacle: she may be the ‘subject’ of gossip or of acclaim, but she is always visible. Her very purpose is that of appearance.

‘I’ is both a speaking position and the naming of a unique being. It is, in Riley’s terms, a lingual position of collectivity, in that we all call ourselves by this one pronoun, as Riley and Butler contend in this thesis. It is a collective naming, which allows for our political connectivity to embodied experience—the other unique feature which we all share, a body—as well as naming a particular position from which to relate one’s story, within the collective story we join as we enter the world. To articulate the ‘I’ fully remains the main responsibility and privilege and project of our lives; to be ‘I’ is to be accountable for that ‘I’—to answer to the ‘I’ we have formed on the ‘relational scene of the world.’

‘you’ has the potential for calling subjects forward into solidarity as well as a naming of the other. ‘You’ can be named as a being, a subject, outside of the ‘I’ but it may also call the ‘I’ into being when it is the self addressing the self within the text. For example, one might say to the self: You always knew it would happen. Or: You wonder why it didn’t happen earlier. In this sense, the ‘you’ offers the self a possibility of accounting for the self, while still occupying the position of ‘I.’ ‘You’ allows us a connective tissue to ourselves and others, to the second person subject in the text which we call into being by the second person pronoun, or by calling forth ourselves as that subject.

‘we’ is a further enunciation of the ‘you’ above, in solidarity with shared politics or being. It is the gathering together of like forces, or of forces

that can momentarily co-occupy a category. These forces are subjects that move from the inside out, into the world. They may speak amongst themselves. They may be one person, severally positioned and in argument with other elements of the self. They may be comprised of few or many others, with which one seeks a relation.

‘**she**’ is the trickiest of subjects—having been once articulated by others within patriarchy, she also struggles to occupy her own naming. ‘She’ is emancipatory in that she is a subject. She allows herself to be seen as a protagonist who functions within the public sphere, within the social and political relations where she moves from one temporality, site or emotion to another, from one politic to another, and she is visible to us all. She is subject to the forces of narration, she is spoken by others, or by herself, to herself, but this latter is an affectation, reserved for those who may struggle to find solidarity with her as an ‘I’ or a ‘you’ or a ‘we.’ In this sense, she is not sovereign, but she appears in order to provide us with a way to find such sovereignty, to clearly see the forces that act upon her, in order to arrive at an understanding of the nature and forces that come to bear on narrative, story, scene or event when she appears as a subject.

**Story:** A story is an event-scape. It may be composed of a narrative, a poem, a set of objects arranged within an exhibition space, a work of literature, a private journal, a set of drawings, performances, gossip or a family history. It is, in essence, a method of arranging the elements of a life, that is a lived experience, with its intellectual, familial, professional, spiritual and erotic pursuits, desires and longings, in order to organize the scene of that life, the life of an individual, a nation, a community, a family. It is a site of appearance, of enunciation and of political becoming within the public sphere—where one is almost always vulnerable—and which may be a combination of domestic, public and private space. Story may be verified or unverified, for story exists in and for its impacts and its power, as a mobile sensation: of gesturing like a dancer towards a grace, of thrashing around in woundedness, of finding an allegorical or

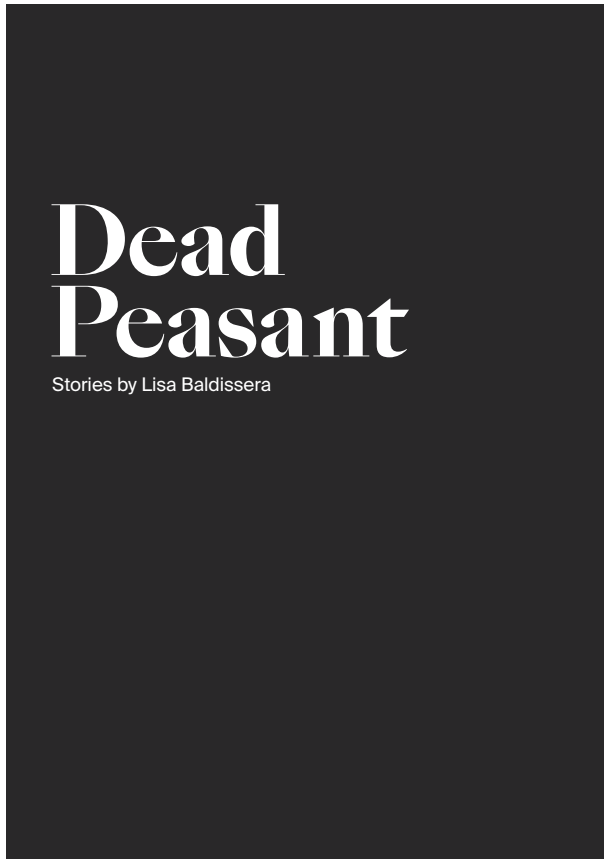
spiritual peace which may or may not be ‘real’ or verifiable, which may only exist in imagination, will, suffering, celebration or desperation. Story is being in the world and surviving it.

**Modern/Modernism:** In this thesis I am concerned with the modern and with modernism primarily in how it approaches story and storytelling. The novel is a form borne of modernism; while in visual arts our concerns have primarily been with aesthetics and the relation of visual culture to broader culture and society, in this thesis I am concerned with how the traits and habits of modernism in storytelling have a tendency to produce characters as opposed to figures. There are traces of modernism in contemporary narratives, family histories, art history, self-narration and conversation. Historically, the conventions of a modern story have shaped approaches of how to structure emerging subjects and subjectivity, and how these have been formulated primarily as characters which congregate around, are delimited by or narrated through central plot formations which themselves have their origins in patriarchal, white-supremacist and colonial assumptions about structural power, colonialization, class, gender and race. These habits of storytelling may in/form what a subject, particularly a queer, female and/or racialized subject, can or cannot do, be, have, desire, say, think, gesture towards, refuse or ultimately, become.



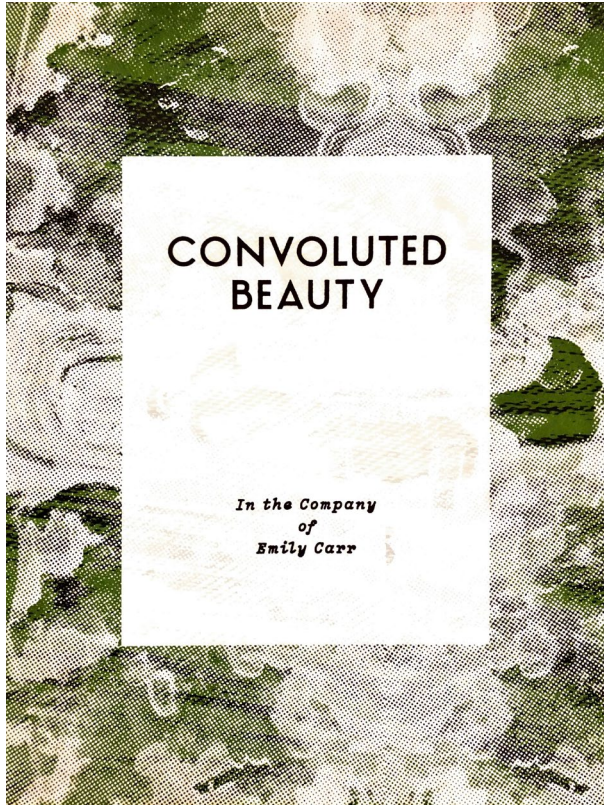
### III. Invitation to Engage with *Dead Peasant* short story collection

An invitation to engage with the attached short story collection, *Dead Peasant* ([https://issuu.com/deadpeasant/docs/dead\\_peasant](https://issuu.com/deadpeasant/docs/dead_peasant)).



#### IV. Invitation to engage with documentation of *Convolutioned Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr*

An invitation to engage with the attached exhibition publication,  
*Convolutioned Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr*.



## **PREFACE: Convoluted Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr**

The exhibition and publication project *Convoluted Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr* was presented at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, in 2014. The project explores the cultivation of a resilient subject by examining how Emily Carr's entry into professional public life was marked by her internment for hysteria, and in the stories that were told about her life and character after this experience. The exhibition's title came from the 1928 term "convulsive beauty" which was coined by André Breton in his novel *Nadya*, whose protagonist strolls the streets of Paris with the narrator, discussing art, literature and philosophy, like a pair of flâneurs until she is hospitalized for hysteria. Earlier that year, Breton had published an article in the French Surrealist magazine *La Révolution Surréaliste* that had announced the fiftieth anniversary of hysteria and called it "the greatest poetic discovery of the late nineteenth century."<sup>1</sup> A series of photographs taken in the 1890s by the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot at Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris had prompted an imaginative fascination with the hysterical body by the Surrealists, who felt that the gestures of hysteria were revolutionary in their depiction of unsanctioned transgression. As literary critic Sharla Hutchison notes, "For a transgression to occur, a social law restricting individual freedoms must be broken; in this context it is fair to say that convulsive beauty emerged as an art of desublimation."<sup>2</sup>

Carr's formulation of her own subjectivity, her sense of herself, was marked by her experience in the sanatorium. Throughout her life she worked in relative isolation on the West Coast of Canada, outside the core circles of modern art practices, which were particularly dominated

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<sup>1</sup> André Breton, quoted by Linda Steer in *Appropriated Photographs in French Surrealist Periodicals, 1924–1939* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Sharla Hutchison, "Convulsive Beauty: Images of Hysteria and Transgressive Sexuality Claude Cahun and Djuna Barnes," *Symplokē* 11:1/2 (2003): 213.

by patriarchal and Eurocentric values of society and culture. Carr's own writings reflect her difficulty in understanding the forces that came to bear on her. She vacillated between shame at her resistant behavior and a resolve that there was no other avenue available for her to express her dissent with the conditions of her life and work. Despite these enormous obstacles, she went on to become one of Canada's most eminent modern artists. As contemporary Canadian artist Jeff Wall has indicated, Carr was an originary force of modern art in the West.<sup>3</sup>

The curatorial project *Convoluted Beauty: In the Company of Emily Carr* unfolded through ten artists who contributed commissioned projects or existing works that addressed issues of hysteria and mental illness, exile, colonization, institutional architecture and inter-species theory. *Figure-Ground Specification in Terms of Structural Information. The Rivalry between Different Pattern Codings* (2013) was an installation and performance project by German artist Thomas Zipp, whose long-standing interest in psychology, psychoanalysis and natural sciences led him to consider the generative qualities of trauma and mental illness, as well as the idea of the artist as resilient self-healer. Themes of exile were examined as Karen Tam explored Carr's friendship with Chinese-Canadian artist Lee Nam in her commissioned project 鷗鷺飛 (*Flying Cormorant Studio [For Lee Nam]*). Marianne Nicolson reflected on issues of ecology, neo-colonialism and Indigenous resilience in her painting *Carnival/Carnivore* (2014) and an offsite billboard project, *Whose Land Is This Anyways?*, in downtown Saskatoon at 19<sup>th</sup> Street and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. *Bird Calls* (1973), an installation by American artist Louise Lawler, was presented in the conservatory adjoining the gallery. The inclusion of this project was intended to acknowledge Carr's special relationship to animals—specifically, during her time in England, to songbirds—which provided an avenue for her resilience, and to offer a critique of patriar-

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<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed., *Documenta 13: The Guidebook, Catalogue 3/3* (Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 148.

chal power structures. Joanne Bristol also reflected on Carr's relationship to animals and created for the exhibition *Le Vol Quotidien* (2014), a newspaper and 'composition' for birds, which was performed by the artist and two performers who used the newspaper as the source of a spoken-word a cappella piece. A response to the architecture of the clinic was created by Cedric and Nathan Bomford in their commissioned installation project *Down by the River*, while Mark Wallinger's 2001 Venice Biennale piece, *Threshold to the Kingdom*, provided a psychic portal to the idea of 'crossing over' into unknown territory, as Carr did when she left Canada to pursue studies in the UK. The concept of artist as self-healer is revisited in Charlotte Salomon's 1941–43 project *Life? Or Theatre?* which documented the impact of mental illness and suicide on the women in her family. Begun when Salomon was twenty-three, this was her major work before her eventual death at the age of twenty-six at Auschwitz, and documents layers of narrative, in a cinematic and story-boarding technique, relating the journey of her own resilience and healing by telling her family's story. The work was presented through a series of facsimiles provided by the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam, whose archivist travelled to Saskatoon to deliver a keynote on the process of discovering and preserving Salomon's works.

The exhibition presented Carr as a figure at the intersection of these projects, as a figure further investigated and produced by the artistic research of the exhibition. It also presented these contemporary responses within the company of Carr's own production, through the presence of her paintings and drawings as well as her sketchbook from the East Anglia Sanatorium.

The publication, *Convoluting Beauty: In The Company of Emily Carr*, included here, was an additional element. I invited Belgian interspecies theorist Vinciane Despret to reflect on Carr's resilience through her relationship to animals, introducing her to Carr's writing by sending for her review all of Carr's texts which reference her interspecies rela-

tionships, in order for Despret to consider Carr's figuration of animals within her stories. This resulted in Despret's essay "Emily Carr: Often the Other ...". I invited Canadian medical historian Erika Dyck to write on asylum structures, and in her essay "Psychedelics, Architecture and a History of Exile," Dyck considers the history and architecture of the development of psychedelics as a treatment in Canada, as well as the redesigning of the asylum model in Saskatchewan by modernist architect Kiyoshi Izumi. Along with my curatorial essay for the publication, I also developed a photo essay for the book, titled "They Who Hold The World Together: Emily Carr's Ecological Poetics," which featured a selection of photographic portraits of Carr from the Royal British Columbia Museum archive that featured Carr with the domestic animals she often considered as among her primary relations.

Working in collaboration with contemporary artists, as well as with the writers, archivists and museums responsible for the stewardship and care of the archives and work of Carr and of Salomon, provided a method for asking the questions of how she was able to vulnerably appear in the public sphere and to arrive at resilient subjectivity, at the time of her journey and thereafter, as an iconic Canadian figure in the art world. While this period of Carr's life and work has been referred to as one part of major retrospective exhibitions of her work and in numerous publications, *Convoluting Beauty* was the first major exhibition and curatorial project to focus primarily on this period, and to present this particular historical moment in her biography and artistic practice, as the origin and purpose for its research: Carr's experience of travel, study, illness and hospitalization in the United Kingdom. This project takes its place within this thesis as a form of evaluating the nuances of Carr's resistance to normative subjectivity and her ultimate resiliency which arises from being a vulnerable subject within the public sphere.

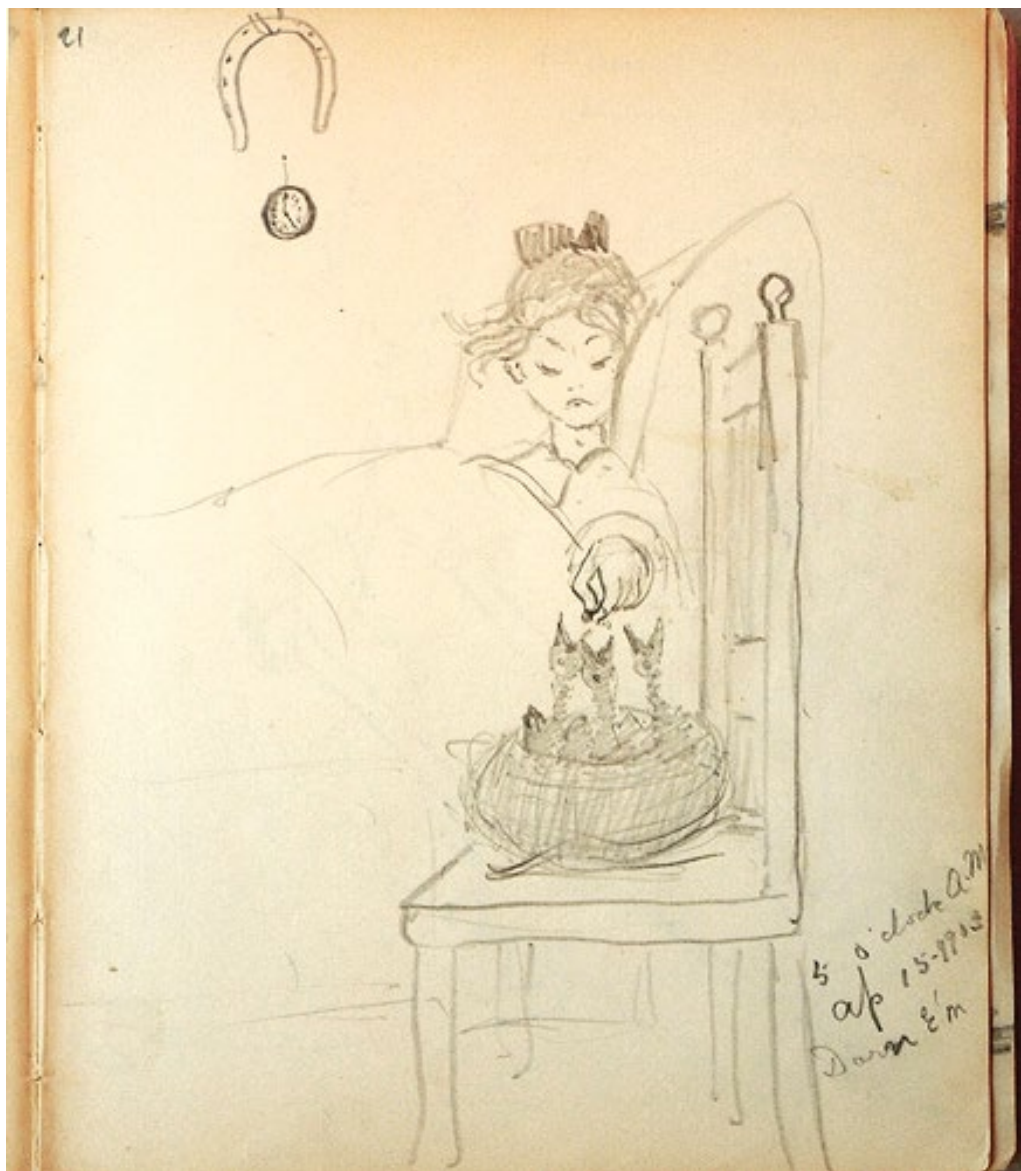
## V. In Her Own Words: Emily Carr, Storytelling and the Entry into Public Life

### Introduction

This chapter will examine two distinct storytelling methodologies used by Canadian modernist artist Emily Carr (1871–1945) to explore her experience of internment for hysteria in East Anglia Sanatorium in Nayland, Suffolk, England, from January 12, 1903, until March 17, 1904: her sketchbook, which included drawings and writing completed at the time of her hospitalization; and *Pause*, her collection of retrospectively written auto-fiction stories, published posthumously in 1953. In this examination, I will work with concepts developed by Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, Adriana Cavarero and Denise Riley to consider storytelling as a method for addressing oneself as a vulnerable subject, as a method for engaging in the task of creative work in the public sphere through writing, and as a means of cultivating resilience. The chapter asks the following questions: How does Carr account for the figure of the self and the public sphere she occupies within the stories she tells, and in so doing, how does she reveal and account for her vulnerability? What kinds of authorial ‘truth’ or sincerity are possible, and do her forms of observational detail become useful accounts for the relating of emotional knowledge and as political gestures within the realm of the public sphere? What affective knowledge does Carr make visible as ways to work within her vulnerability within these elements, by occupying the temporally dual positions of storyteller, in her sketchbook, and as a fiction writer in her end-of-life accounts of her experiences? Do Carr’s approaches to the figure of the self and to vulnerability within writing and drawing differ? Following this, does Carr address ideas of ‘failure’ and its appearance in the public sphere in the auto-fiction collection *Pause*? How does Carr’s methodology of storytelling in each case produce a form of knowledge and a politic that emerge uniquely from these choices of form, and how

does Carr emerge from her writing as a resilient subject, who continues to be vulnerable in the public sphere? As has been outlined in the introduction, we will be reading this chapter, and all three of the reflective writing chapters in terms of the cultivation of a resilient subject as one who is able to remain vulnerable in the public sphere.





**Figure 1** "5 o'clock a.m. Ap 15-99-02 Darn E'm"

Emily Carr (1871–1945)

Sketchbook for "Pause," 1903

56 pages of drawings and 23 pages of hand-written text and notations, in graphite and ink on paper

20.7 x 16.5 cm

Gift of Dr. Jack Parnell

McMichael Canadian Art Collection

1973.8

Further images from this work are indicated by the title of the work and "Emily Carr, Sketchbook for 'Pause'"

## Beginnings

It is true that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it, that it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

### *The Fat Girl & Her Failure*

*The fat girl came from the far west where the forests are magnificent and solemn but no singing birds are there. The fat girl found birds in the early days of her sojourn in England. She heard a thrush sing. It was a poor prisoner in London, broken tailed and bedabbled, in such a dirty cage, but the pure song coming from its dreary prison touched the fat girl. By and by illness came and the fat girl subsided into a San with a limp and a stutter. Then it was that the plan came to her to rear some thrushes and take home to her glorious silent woods. The fat girl bucked up. Spring came, birds built. The fat girl waddled forth with her stick and watched for many weeks the pretty mothers build and sit and hatch their clean and ugly babes.<sup>2</sup>*

Storytellers have existed for millennia. The telling of stories is a trait that emerges spontaneously across human cultures and is already present in childhood. It is one of our most crucial human adaptations towards collective life and empathy. We tell our stories instinctively, and in as much as we are storytellers, we are also listeners and readers of each other's stories.

"All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them," Isak Dinesen is quoted as saying, in one of political theorist

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Isak Dinesen 1885–1963," in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1968), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Carr, "Author's Note," in *Pause: An Emily Carr Sketchbook* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1953), 3. Hereafter cited in text as *Pause*, with page reference.

Hannah Arendt's most influential publications, *The Human Condition*.<sup>3</sup> For Arendt, storytelling has the capacity to reveal meaning in a world that "otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings."<sup>4</sup> Rather than believing that the task of a story is to create a form of reality—that is, to reproduce existing ideas and models—for Arendt, its function is *political*: to demonstrate an *acceptance of the events of life as they are*. Through this acceptance, a 'truthfulness' might be arrived at that would inform an ability not only to think, but also to judge the events of the present and the past.<sup>5</sup>

This method of coming into political agency and 'truth' is an essential signature of human experience and its evolution. As Arendt says of Dinesen, "all she needed to begin with was life and the world, almost any kind of world or milieu; for the world is full of stories, of events and occurrences and strange happenings which wait only to be told."<sup>6</sup> For Arendt, storytelling is an expression of the fullness of human experience and being in the world, for "without repeating life in imagination you can never be fully alive."<sup>7</sup>

In 1903, during the third year of her art studies in England, Emily Carr met with unexpected adversity: a long-term illness diagnosed as "hysteria" in the intake records at East Anglia Sanatorium in Suffolk, England. The diagnosis prompted the prescription of an extreme treatment: one year of absolute rest. This year involved an initial three-month period of strictly enforced bed rest. Significant intellectual activity was forbidden, including any form of painting. Carr was able to keep only a small sketch-

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 175.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, "Isak Dinesen," 104.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, "Isak Dinesen," 105.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, "Isak Dinesen," 97.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt, "Isak Dinesen," 97.

book, where she drew and annotated drawings with prose and poetry.<sup>8</sup> For Carr, this time represented a turning point in her life.

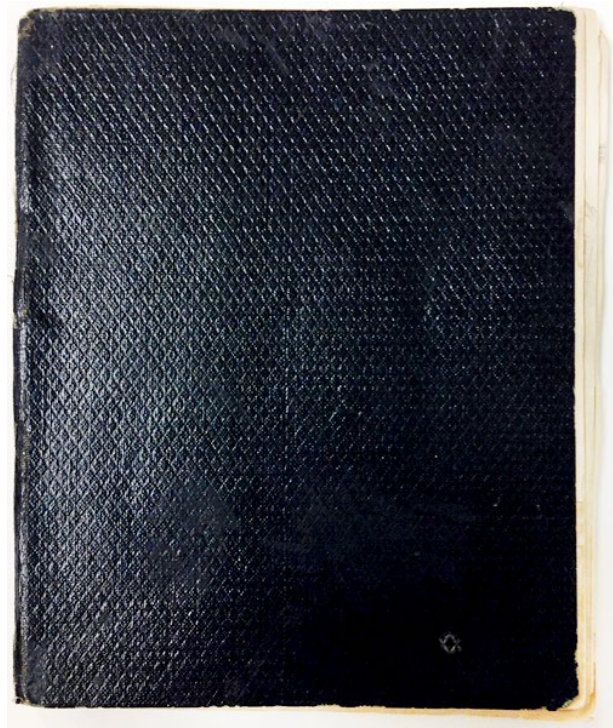
She filled her sketchbook with events she encountered, a stream of scenes and quick studies. The sketchbook was a small, cheap, store-bought notebook with black stamped fabric covers and manila pages (Fig. 2). The drawings and texts are mostly executed in lead pencil, and occasionally black fountain pen. She did not write daily, but when she did, the notebook offered a place and a process to focus her attention and hold up a mirror to her experience.

Carr had just come from the Meadows School in Bushey, the third of a series of art schools she attended in London. Far away from the hope and the camaraderie of the other students who were her friends, she now found herself not only among non-artists, but also among patients stripped of their liberty and their power. Once they were admitted, it was the doctor who decided everything about how their days and weeks would unfold: what they could eat and how much of it, the treatment they would take and its duration, if they could move or exercise, the temperatures of their rooms and, importantly, when they would be able to leave. They were all exceedingly vulnerable: ill and without agency.

The notebook's wide range depicts nature, the goings-on of the hospital, and the hospital's staff and patients. The figures are often exaggerated, according to Carr's own feelings about them, and the poems and texts are efforts to make sense of things.

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<sup>8</sup> Although there has been speculation about whether the sketchbook drawings and verse were developed during or after Carr's time at East Anglia Sanatorium, biographer Paula Blanchard in *The Life of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1997), and curator and art historian Ian Thom have concluded the drawings were executed while Carr was at the sanatorium. Thom notes in his introduction to the 2007 edition of *Pause* that annotated dates found in the sketchbook correspond with the period Carr was hospitalized from January 12, 1903, to March 17, 1904, as well as Carr's own notes on this time in her life in the story "Me" in *Pause*. For more discussion, see Ian Thom, "Introduction: Nobody's Patient, Emily Carr's Pause," in *Pause* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007).



*Figure 2 Front cover*  
*Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"*

Even at this early stage of her career, Carr's record of these happenings is not simply an archive, but is, in Arendt's sense, an attempt to reconcile herself with *the events of life as they are*. It is a work of imagination and a place of thinking, yet its function was ultimately political: it revealed Carr as a figure and the forces that shaped this chapter of her life not simply as 'sheer happenings' but as nuanced, textured and complex ideological tapestries. The figure that emerges on the pages of the sketchbook is twofold: she is in view (described and drawn) and is also the one who is speaking and telling her story. By creating this series of drawings and writings, Carr gives birth to herself as a figure, picturing herself not in a simple exercise of documentation, but through the work of investigating, without presumption as to its ending or its effects, the events of her own life. She begins by taking up the sketchbook and articulating what she sees in its detail. Bringing herself into view by writing allows for her appearance as a political subject and disembeds the vulnerability represented by her internment for hysteria as purely a gendered, individual, emotional or social response. Instead, Carr's raw evidence shows us a

figure who is produced, and she names the institutional, political, ideological and philosophical forces that do so. Her vulnerability is not only produced by these conditions, but is predicated by this signification, a relation that provides a pathway to cultivating a resilient subjectivity.

Birth is action, Arendt contends. Beginning (natality) is an act itself. To be born is to join a world that existed before our arrival and that will continue after our death; our birth (natality), that is our first appearance in the world within the realm of the public, is that of a newcomer who interrupts the flow of history in order to add her particular story to its collective enterprise. It holds within it, as one of its primary signatures, newness and freedom, and brings with it an unpredictability and a vulnerability. No one knows what might result from this newcomer, including the newcomer herself.

Intersecting with this unpredictability and vulnerability are the events of a world already underway. Every action takes place within a collective, within a constellation of relationships and worldmaking apparatuses that already exist. The task of the beginner, newly appearing, is to go further within the collectivity of these relations in the public realm. To be significant, in Arendt's formulation, these actions necessarily must exceed what is present: "The real history in which we are committed to while we are living does not have any visible or invisible creator, because it is not made."<sup>9</sup>

### **Her Lost Text**

It is natural that the forgetful one searches in the memory of others for her lost text. By making others recount her own story, she is in fact attempting to stitch her narratable self together with the story into which she was constitutively interwoven. She is attempting to

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<sup>9</sup> Arendt, quoted in Fina Birulés, "Contingency, History and Narration in Hannah Arendt," at [Hannaharendt.net](http://www.hannaharendt.net), 2009, <http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/149/264>.



fit her *having been that which she is* into the life-story that has been interlaced with others' stories on the exhibitivite and relational scene of the world.<sup>10</sup>

Vivid scenes had engulfed Carr during her early days in the new country in 1899: the wet streets of Victorian London in wintertime, picking her way through squalor and coal-stained buildings on her way to school, or fainting at Queen Victoria's funeral procession, where we are given in one auto-fictional story a description by which to witness her, leaning on a self-fashioned chair due to having her toe amputated just before her journey—a wound that wouldn't heal.<sup>11</sup> By telling stories, Carr 'stitches' herself as a figure and ensures she will, in Cavarero's terms, appear in the "exhibitivite and relational scene of the world" in order to address her desire for her own story.

Carr documented her five-year period in England in several formats: journals, chapbooks, the sketchbook, and a collection of stories titled *Pause*. Other stories appear in several volumes of reflective story collections written decades later. Her stories reveal the anxiety of crossing borders—geographic and psychic—and her experience of vulnerability when she appears as a newcomer, in Arendt's sense, at the site of each novel public sphere.

In England, Carr moved from London to St. Ives to Bushey, from one group of art students at Westminster School of Art to another at Porthmeor Studios in Cornwall and still others at Meadows Studios. Before travelling to England, she had studied art in San Francisco; later, in 1910, she would go on to study at the Académie Colarossi in France, where she would again experience a physical and psychic breakdown.

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<sup>10</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 37.

<sup>11</sup> From the story "Pain and Mrs. Radcliffe—The Vicarage" in Emily Carr, *Growing Pains: The Autobiography of Emily Carr* (Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin and Company, 1946), 152.

Her French physician considered it a form of homesickness, declaring, in Carr's telling, that "there was something about these big cities that these Canadians from their big spaces couldn't stand, it was like putting a pine tree in a pot."<sup>12</sup> While she was provided with support through her family and its executor, and she met family friends, students and teachers who provided advice and help as she travelled, Carr was the sole initiator of these journeys. Her trip to England was a journey that took place after years of teaching art to young students in a retrofitted barn in the back garden of her family home in Victoria in order to save for her passage and her study. During her stay in London, Carr refused a marriage proposal from her final suitor, Mayo Paddon, and was admonished for it by her landlady and family friend. In a later auto-fictional account of this time, she describes her refusal of Paddon as an active refusal of the unsuitability of that life for her, and a testament to her commitment to a public life of creative work, not a life of private domesticity. It is not difficult to link the estranging art historical narratives that followed her death to that choice, and to see those narratives as a kind of further admonishment of her agency and her desire for a public life. Her vulnerability also arises from navigating this solitariness as a young woman travelling on her own in the nineteenth century. Far from turning her away from her desire for a public and professional life, Carr's story is one of resisting and overcoming these challenges—a response that cultivated her resiliency.

Her accounts of her experiences vary in their registers and reliability and are set against the parallel narrative that unfolds in the sketch-book's contemporaneous drawings and handwritten notes. Much later, Carr's memoirs and stories, published in several collections (two of them published posthumously), provide a cohesive public account of her early struggles. In all of these forms, Carr's stories and proto-stories are, in

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<sup>12</sup> Emily Carr, *Opposite Contraries: The Unknown Journals of Emily Carr and Other Writings*, ed. Susan Crean (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003), 204.



Arendt's terms, political: in them, she reconciles herself with things as they are—"having been that which she is."

Yet Carr's texts sometimes infer rhetorical questions: What do her desires mean? Where will they lead her? Will they always be a source of abjection and shame? Why do they also bring her feelings of hope and of fulfilment at the same time as delivering rejection by others? Her refusal of heteronormativity is linked to narratives of failure in other authors' biographical writings about her life as well as her own account of loneliness. But she is also self-rejecting. Even when her impulses can be seen, retrospectively, as acts of resistance and resilience, Carr wrestles with her own responses to the world—her impatience with conformity, her directness, her dislike of foolishness or affectations. In her *Pause* collection story "The Joker," Carr writes of her impatience with an irritating visitor to the sanatorium, "a sparrow-like creature with a giggle, and nostrils that bored into her face like a pair of keyholes," who is meant to cheer the patients. Carr complains out loud, "I do thirst for some mourning doves, some weeping-willows," while the nurse "gave my pillow the punch I deserved" (*Pause*, 62).

As gender and queer theorist Jack Halberstam notes, in psychoanalytic terms, "If, in a Lacanian sense, all desire is impossible, impossible because unsustainable, then the queer body and queer social worlds become the evidence of that failure, while heterosexuality is rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfilment, and success(ion)."<sup>13</sup> Carr does not feel a sense of ease in the heteronormativity of the world which surrounds her—not only in the hospital, but also among family, in the community and in the Victorian social world to which she, ostensibly, belongs. But Carr's storytelling presents her wish for a world that accepts her desiring self. Her stories are a hopeful expression that the vulnerability which her self-rejection and internalization of its negating rules has produced

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<sup>13</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 94.

can be transformed through storytelling. Storytelling is a place in which to think and to judge the events of the present and future. It attempts to make sense of her conflicting desire for belonging, free will and independence of thinking that separates her from her family and the social world. Her ill body is, for her, evidence of her failure. But by writing, her vulnerability becomes a site for her political transformation; in the terms used by Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay, vulnerability produces and is predicate for this transformation.<sup>14</sup> Rather than overcoming vulnerability as the condition that precedes resistance, it is a resource for political emergence and resilience.<sup>15</sup> Butler argues that since the self (body, mind, psyche) is the site of political trauma, wounding or care that exists within inescapable political and societal structures, vulnerability and resistance are entangled rather than in opposition.<sup>16</sup> Butler further argues that one can imagine vulnerability as a resource “in political resistance as embodied enactment;”<sup>17</sup> as such, and as Sabsay notes, it is a resource to be claimed or subjected to voluntarily.<sup>18</sup> From this it follows that resistance has the potential to emerge in our bodies, which rather than discrete entities may be seen as relational. Bodies are constantly moving into form as the site of ideas of selfhood and citizenship as much as the expression of physical being. Corporeality and subjectivity are linked, and conjoined as vulnerability *in* resistance, and as Sabsay notes, such a correlation conjures an affective grounding to political instances.<sup>19</sup> In other words, politics lives in, is experienced in and moves across the body in intractable forms.

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay, “Introduction,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2016), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” 13.

<sup>17</sup> Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” 22.

<sup>18</sup> Leticia Sabsay, “Permeable Bodies: Vulnerability, Affective Powers, Hegemony,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 279.

<sup>19</sup> Sabsay, “Permeable Bodies,” 279.

In 1938, while “slaving away at the sanatorium sketch [Carr’s word for a written draft],” she questions any subject’s place in the world: “In a way I think it is the best thing I have written but don’t know ... Every one of us matters so little, and yet all of us must have a reason for being.”<sup>20</sup> Yet she writes, whether or not there is initially a professional audience for her writing or place for her within the public realm, socially or professionally. She is insistent on recovering her ‘lost text.’ That she writes from two distinct temporal positions complicates each telling further: in one, the sketchbook, she is interned and bedridden as a young woman; in the other, the *Pause* story collection underway a year after her first heart attack in 1937, she is ill and semi-invalid. In the story collection, Carr records her stories, it seems, for posterity, when her record of achievement has been established.<sup>21</sup> The two temporal positions are, in turn, marked by two distinct features: in the first, the sketchbook is produced without the intent (or perhaps even the energy) to create a finished professional work. The sketchbook ends before the beginning of her professional life, while she is in her early thirties, poised at what is, to her, an unknown and unknowable future. It further records those whose future is taken from them: the dying at Nayland. In the second, the collection of auto-fictional stories, Carr is newly facing her own mortality, while at the same time struggling with the form of the memoir as a way in which to shape her story.

A memoir is a gesture towards this larger question of the self, appearing within a greater constellation of being, the public sphere. Carr’s writing seems to be driven by a wish to present herself as a subject, an ‘other’ to be evaluated, a site in which to access her own story. It is useful to problematize a naturalization of this ‘other’ in the text, and to instead exam-

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<sup>20</sup> Emily Carr quoted in Thom, “Introduction: Nobody’s Patient,” 9.

<sup>21</sup> By 1941, Carr had published her first book, *Klee Wyck* (Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin and Company, 1941), which went on to win a Governor General’s Award. This was, by some accounts, a turning point that coincided with the end of her career as a painter.

ine how that text's structure functions as a feature of autobiography. As with any telling of the self, the audience for that telling matters and, in a dialogical turn, influences how the story is told. In this sense, the author is vulnerable to others, dependent on them to decipher and decode the way in which she chooses to tell the story. Cavarero notes, "Between identity and narration ... there is a tenacious relation of desire" which is unrelated to whether or not one has achieved any kind of notoriety in the public sphere. The desire is separate from a wish for fame, and "it is the fact of hearing oneself being narrated that is the difference ... through the unforeseen narration of a story of which he is the protagonist but not the addressee." The overheard story of the self reveals an inherent "narratable identity" and "a desire to hear it narrated." In other words,

Now he knows *who* he is, he knows who he exhibited through his actions; but he also knows that it was his narratable identity that allowed him to perform great actions ... narratability belongs to the human existent as something unique. It belongs to him as an irrefutable aspect of his life, not as the guarantee of a *post mortem* fame that sees those who follow as the addressees of the story.<sup>22</sup>

The *Pause* stories provide a straightforward example of this narratable identity; they are origin stories in this sense—Carr wants her public to know who she is. She does not obfuscate, hide or glamourize her beginning; in this respect she demonstrates a great deal of empathy towards the young woman she was. In a story titled "Me" in the *Pause* collection, Carr writes: "I was not always polite, not always biddable. The monotony bored me. I despised the everlasting red tape, the sheep-like stupidity. What one did, all did, and because they always had done such and such it meant that they always must" (*Pause*, 57).

Her vulnerability is the precursor for the political activity of sharing this story of failure and abjection with others. By entering her storytelling into the archive and slipstream of events taking place in the public

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<sup>22</sup> All quotes in this paragraph are from Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 32–33.

realm, Carr makes her reader a witness and potential narrator—whether as researcher, art historian or general reader—to forces which came to shape her: the institutional architecture and administration of the sanatorium and the art schools, the societal forces of her family and Victorian England and Canada. Carr’s act of storytelling is an act of signification in which she demonstrates, publicly, the features and political significance of a vulnerable body who has been acted upon, and in so doing records how such vulnerability arises and is produced, as much as it is experienced, as an interiority or an individual emotional condition.

### **Illness and Resilience**

In the *Pause* stories, Carr articulates herself as a character navigating illness and its treatment, which relates to a set of conditions that produce her figuration in the annotated sketchbooks: a kind of extreme fresh-air treatment for tuberculosis administered by Dr. Jane Walker, one of the first female physicians to join the registry of the Royal Society of Medicine, and only the forty-fifth to be included on Britain’s General Medical Register. It is interesting to note that it was at the hands of a female physician that Carr suffered such restrictions. Walker was both promoting and testing her work on TB in the UK; by building the first clinic on home soil, she hoped to mitigate the effects on healing of being removed from one’s family and country. In her paper “A Contribution to the Hygienic Treatment of Tuberculosis,” Walker wrote,

It is a great thing not to send people so far away from their relations and friends that they cannot get at them easily. It is a great saving of cost in many cases. An anxious parent would trust a young daughter or son alone in a place that they had seen within easy reach of them, whereas they would find it very difficult to allow them to remain far away from their control.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jane Walker, “A Contribution to the Hygienic Treatment of Tuberculosis,” *Magazine of the London (R.F.H.) School of Medicine for Women*, October 1898.

Walker also felt that cold was more effective than heat in dealing with TB, which meant gruelling fresh air conditions in winter, in addition to heavy feeding and bed rest. Though Walker reports that “Tea-time, the only time for any social life, is a really happy sight; no casual observer would believe the patients to be really ill, they are obviously so happy and contented,”<sup>24</sup> Carr, in contrast, devoted a story (“Food”) to the various ways in which the patients suffered during mealtimes:

Forty and more fickle appetites strolled into the San dining-room, unenthusiastically took their places at table ... .Eating was compulsory. If patients refused to eat, the San refused to keep them as patients ... . Were Doctor Bottle [Walker] present, she dictated the helpings, cruel mountains of meat, vegetables and pudding helpings that would stagger the appetite of healthy men and women, and were positively loathsome to invalids. (*Pause*, 65)

Except for the physicians and the cook, the nursing staff and employees of the sanatorium were former patients, and although Walker reports a positive success rate, Carr noted that when she accidentally encountered a former patient years later in Paris, the patient reported that most of East Anglia Sanatorium’s infected staff and patients had died. Why Carr was placed there, despite having healthy lungs, is difficult to say; we know that asylums were not considered suitable for respectable middle-class women, and that her brother and, before him, her mother had died from TB. Ironically, some of the treatments may have inadvertently protected Carr from contagion, as did her refusal to take her rest period with the most gravely ill patients in a confined circular sleeping porch. She notes that people from the nearby village resented the proximity of the sanatorium and avoided the patients by crossing the street when they saw them on their walks, so it was common knowledge that the disease was highly contagious. In the *Pause* story “Legitimate Prey,” Carr is amused to note that she is the subject of patients’ gossip, speculating on why she had spent so long there—was it heart, liver, mental issues—to

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<sup>24</sup> Walker, “Contribution to the Hygienic Treatment.”

which the response was “Mental nothing! Her tongue is sharp enough to mow the lawn” (*Pause*, 95–96).

Carr also sees her vulnerability reflected in the songbirds, whom she discovers are present during the first evening at East Anglia Sanatorium. On her arrival by open carriage in a snowstorm, Carr found that what had just endured outside continued indoors, as the rooms were completely open on one side throughout the seasons. Carr describes how she retreated in defeat, turning out the lights and hiding under the covers in the darkness, disturbed later by the sound of scratching from inside her room: “There, perched on top of the mirror was a tiny brown bird. At the light click she took her head from under her wing and looked at me. After one sleepy blink she put it back. The little bird in my room made all the difference” (*Pause*, 14). The brown bird blinking under the light of the sanatorium fixtures calmed her, the way a rabbit warren later would, as if some form of mutual language, via a series of interspecies gestures, had entered this space of her room and created an architecture for her story of resilience, a legibility from which she could create a kind of scaffolding for her experience and from which she could respond and recover herself.

In her essay “Metaphor and the Ineffable,” discussing Plato, Arendt writes:

... the art of living speech is praised because it knows how to select its listeners ... But if in thinking we carry out this dialogue with ourselves, it is as though we were “writing words in our souls”: at such times, “our soul is like a book,” but a book that no longer contains words. Following the writer, a second craftsman intervenes as we are thinking and he is a “painter,” who paints in our soul those images that correspond to the written words. “This happens when we have drawn these opinions and spoken assertions away from sight or any other perception, so that we now somehow *see* the images of what we first opined and spoke about.”<sup>25</sup>

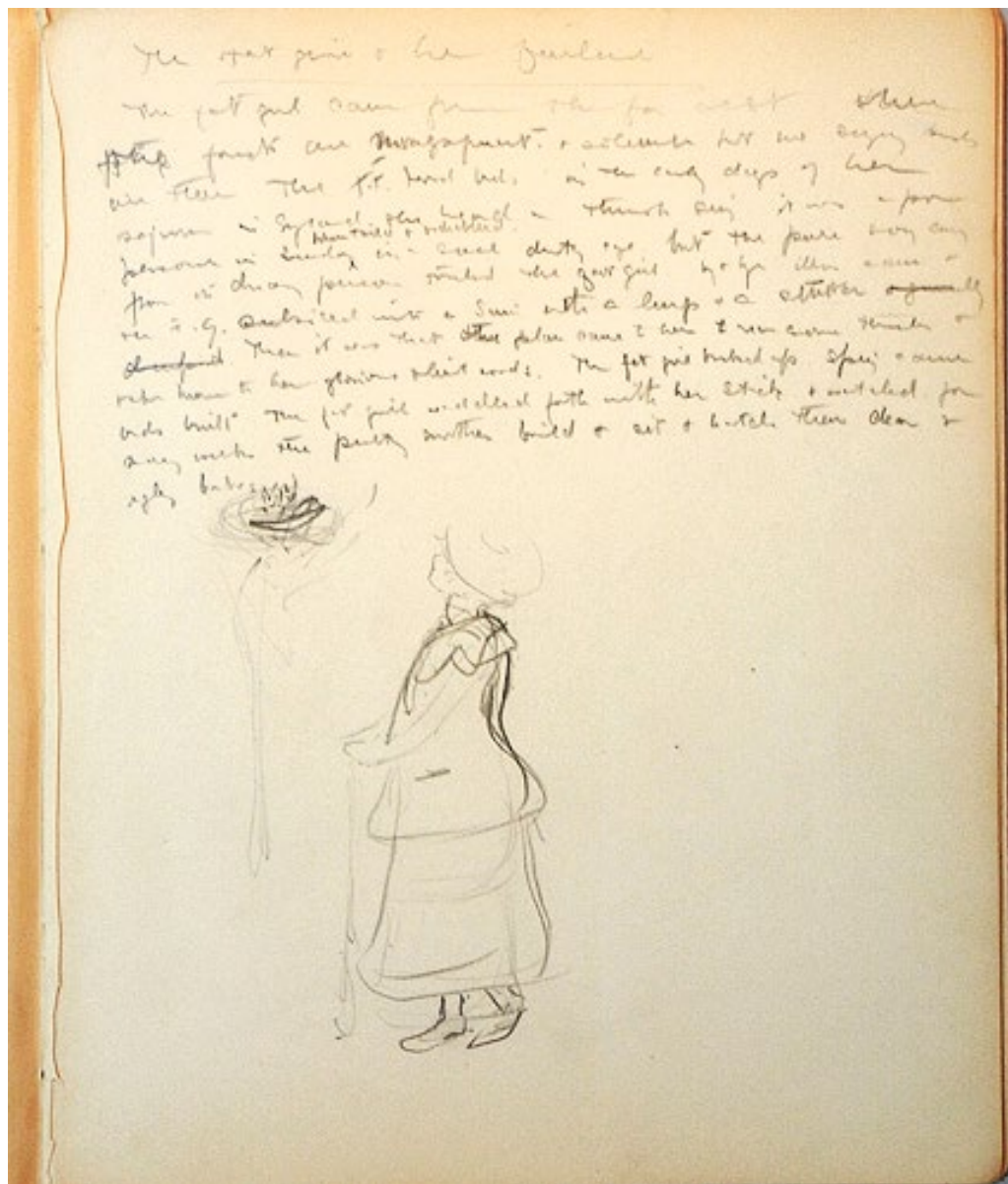
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<sup>25</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1971), 1:116–17.

When Carr links the discovery of the birds, and later thrushes, to her own resistance, and then resilience, she realizes later, on writing the short story in *Pause*, that this gesture had enabled her to reattach to the world of things, to regard these creatures as avenues through which to articulate a story of rescue and restoration of her subjectivity. Suturing the illness-inducing newness of her life in England with the forested spaces of British Columbia, the thrushes gave her a foothold from which to heal and connect to previous places of happiness, health and contentment. Carr expresses this with painterly sensibility, producing two forms of record: image-based and textual (Figs. 1, 3 & 4). Through the figuration of songbirds in text and drawing, Carr is able to further her exploration of vulnerability and to thoroughly investigate the supportive structures which facilitate life and being—and to thrive, to assert herself as a figure worthy of representation, whether or not these supportive structures are present.

Carr's sketchbook therefore exceeded what was simply present in those hospital rooms and corridors and dining halls: her evaluative, precocious curiosity about the narrative to which her life had suddenly been joined engendered a resilience and empathy. What was this place? In Carr's drawings, a world comes to life that would have otherwise remained unknown and unseen in its details. In her sketches, the clusters of men travelling in packs at the edge of the sanatorium lawn are not simply patients having their exercise: they are escaping the rules and regulations of the institution.





**Figure 3** "The fat girl & her failure"  
 Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"



**Figure 4**  
*Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"*

Feeling tricked by the doctors who consigned them there, they instead take comfort in one another's presence and roam the outdoors in a rehearsal of freedom which Carr clearly understands. Huddled under one umbrella that does not cover all of them, the men appear confident with downturned caps, upturned collars and arms akimbo; they also crowd the page of the drawing, long legs emaciated by tuberculosis stretching to its lower edge. Carr shows us their affects as vulnerable subjects as they take refuge together (Fig. 5).

Later Carr depicts the same group, occluding her view and disturbing her quiet as she observes a nest of hatchlings, here inscribing the drawing with a question: "*Why cant men mind their own busness [sic]?*" (Fig. 6). Carr exceeds what is simply present by shaping them as figures imbued with her own way of seeing them, her powers of characterization and observation.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, she records "the San's" daily rituals: the weighing of each reluctant patient (Fig. 7), patients crowded on the outdoor patio for fresh air therapy stacked like corpses (Fig. 8), or the receding

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<sup>26</sup> These men are later taken up as subjects in the *Pause* story collection, over thirty years later.

backs of three burly nurses who ostensibly enforce the rules (Fig. 9). In Arendt's terms, Carr, as a newcomer to this world, does not know the effect her drawings might have as they join the collective archive of its events. The daily rituals of the sanatorium simply come to life as her immediate act of reflecting upon experiences that were once endured by sentient subjects who loved and longed for life.



*Figure 5*  
*Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"*





**Figure 6** "Why cant men mind their own Business?"  
Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"



**Figure 7** "Saturday Morning"  
Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"



**Figure 8 "Rest"**  
*Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"*



**Figure 9 "Sanatoriumites"**  
*Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"*

As Arendt reminds us, despite the fact that we do act, we will never be fully aware of the results of our actions, and this is part of what makes them essentially free. Carr is unaware of the effects this small sketchbook might have in forming a story—except she knows her desire is for knowledge of herself, for reconciliation and understanding, and her work here is an act of ordering the sheer happenings into sequences and scenes.

Writing about Arendt and storytelling, philosophy historian Fina Birulés notes,

In acting, a relationship with the unknown is established so that in a way, “somebody” does not know what is he/she doing, the temporality and contingency of being with others are, to a certain extent, the imposed conditions to be able to disclose his/her identity, to be able to say the “who of somebody”. Arendt thus understands that there is no immediate knowledge of oneself but, rather, continuous appropriations through [the telling] of stories.<sup>27</sup>

The “continuous appropriation” of telling stories through myriad and repeated instances and forms is therefore a way to navigate this “who.” It is a process of self-discovery out of an inherent unknown that points to our vulnerability which is always a present force in our lives. We depend on others to receive us and tell us about our beginning and the constellation to which we belong. We are vulnerable because we must always be in relation to others to know ourselves, to tell our stories and to hear them told. These experiences of exchange collectively, continually and ongoingly shape us, but we are not master of their origins. We have joined a world that is already underway.

### **Storytelling as Thinking**

To give shape to a story is a form of thinking. Arendt, paraphrasing Dinesen, advises: “Be loyal to life, don’t create fiction but accept what

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<sup>27</sup> Birulés, “Contingency, History and Narration in Hannah Arendt.”

life is giving you, show yourself worthy of whatever it may be by recollecting and pondering over it, thus repeating it in imagination; this is the way to remain alive ... . The reward of storytelling is to be able to let go.”<sup>28</sup> Arendt acknowledges that it is not simply a task of relating sheer life, but the specialized creative work of an artist—accepting what life is giving you and letting go—that enables this operation. This specialized work of imagination requires the ability to select the scenes that are most compelling and to remain vulnerable, porous and curious about the world that emerges. To receive the life that is presented to us and those within it cultivates a resilient subjectivity despite such vulnerability.

Carr’s resilience in continuing her creative work is especially apparent since the hospital was a place to be removed from the public: to protect the health of others in the case of the TB patients who were its primary residents, and, for an “hysteric,” to reassemble as a coherent, healthy body and to disengage from the life of the mind: “We came here to *pause* our ordinary activities,” wrote Carr. “Even thinking was prohibited” (*Pause*, 17).

For Arendt, thinking is crucial to the life of the imagination—and impossible to arrest. All thinking, Arendt tells us, is “out of order” in the sense that it interrupts ordinary activities, and is interrupted by them.<sup>29</sup> Yet, at the same time, “the thinking ego, whatever it may achieve, will never be able to reach reality qua reality or convince itself that anything actually exists and that life, human life, is more than a dream.”<sup>30</sup>

Carr’s thinking unfolded in her sketchbook, made material in drawing and writing. Removed from her day-to-day touchstones and unable to return to Canada during her illness, this thinking provided a comfort,

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<sup>28</sup> Arendt, “Isak Dinesen,” 97.

<sup>29</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 1:197.

<sup>30</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 1:198.



a provisional “where” that, Arendt tells us, occurs when we think. For Arendt, all thinking occurs in the time of the now. It is a *being with time*, a mechanism of thought, which exists in a nowhere. For Carr, it may have provided a psychic match, in its ubiquitous availability, to her homesickness and displacement: “The fact of withdrawal [is] inherent in all mental activities; thinking always deals with absences and removes itself from what is present and close at hand,” Arendt contends.<sup>31</sup> The sketchbook provided for Carr’s ‘withdrawal’ from the sanatorium in order to think, by writing, without committing to any one form or genre for this thought.

Within the hospital, Carr’s exposed internal state and external experience were now in sympathy, or, as Arendt frames this condition, “The thinking ego, moving among universals, among invisible essences, is, strictly speaking, nowhere; it is homeless in an emphatic sense.”<sup>32</sup> The thinking ego’s homelessness was emancipatory for Carr. Thinking (by writing and drawing) was readily accessible and capable of transforming the everyday into the ‘letting-go’ of storytelling. The act of withdrawal by thinking was crucial in cultivating her resilience, a state of being that in Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay’s terms, intertwined with her vulnerability.

Carr used the devices of drawing and writing to archive her thinking, extending the “two in one” process, as Arendt describes it, of the self addressing the self in solitary thought that quickly recedes in the presence of the world and of others. These devices not only afforded her a way to keep hold of her own subjectivity inside the depersonalizing experience of hospitalization, but enabled her to confirm her intuition that creative work was a form of thinking, a “life in imagination” that made her fully human and provided for her resilience.

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<sup>31</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 1:199.

<sup>32</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 1:199.



The pressures of her studies, both to professionalize her work and to craft a public identity as a professional artist, were tremendous. Away from home, in a foreign country, Carr had already been ill at ease. By the time she arrived at East Anglia, Carr believed her residency in England to attend the Westminster School of Art was a “failure” (*Pause*, 3). Her journey had tested her own limits economically and psychically, which she refers to in the handwritten poem “The Fat Girl & Her Failure” (quoted at the beginning of the chapter), a painful-to-read text transcribed from Carr’s sketchbook, which it is believed her executor and editor Ira Dilworth decided to use to introduce *Pause*.<sup>33</sup> In this short fragment of prose, the young Carr presents herself as irredeemably abject: fat, waddling, with a limp and a stutter. Her embodiment reminds her at every turn of her own vulnerability. And yet she writes. This short paragraph also charts her thinking about her experience, and her wish to be free of the hospital and her own constrained body. Considering the bodies of other caged creatures, the English songbirds, Carr notes their capacity for injury as well as for freedom—and imagines how their foreign songs might animate the forests of Canada that live in her imagination.

By conjuring the figure of “the fat girl,” Carr also designates herself as a subject—albeit one of shame and self-abnegation—and demonstrates her desire to appear as a figure for her own contemplation. The figure of the self that emerges within Carr’s sketchbook is later re-encountered and ‘polished’ in the *Pause* story collection as a character in the modernist tradition. In Arendt’s terms, storytelling makes experience visible, provides emotionally detailed images and affectively charts the storyteller’s own movements, preparing these experiences as objects for thought.

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<sup>33</sup> This poem introduced the first edition of the *Pause* stories, along with the “Author’s Note” from March 1903, which was the sketchbook’s original frontispiece. Combining them was an editorial decision made by her executor, Ira Dilworth, though they appeared separately in the sketchbook.

It is a political act that retrospectively provides a further space for emergence as a resilient and still vulnerable subject.

### **Resilience in Language**

Writing an account of oneself presents challenges that relate to the formal qualities of language, separate from narrative or autobiographical structures. Language is implicated in all accounts at the outset and is never neutral. Judith Butler notes that “the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our own making.”<sup>34</sup>

As Butler asks in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, “Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?”<sup>35</sup> If one accepts that the self is always interrupted by the other and occurs within existing social and political structures, and is navigated by our addressability, we are always implicated by textual structures and in relation to others. Also present are histories and affects that are inherent in language and continually asserting other forms of appearance and knowledge. As poet and theorist Denise Riley notes,

The very grammar of the language of self-reference seems to demand, indeed to guarantee, an authenticity closely tied to originality. Yet simultaneously it cancels this possibility. Any *I* seems to speak for and from herself; her utterance comes from her own mouth in the first person pronoun which is hers, if only for just so long as she pronounces it. Yet as a human speaker, she knows that it’s also everyone’s, and that this grammatical offer of uniqueness

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<sup>34</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 21.

<sup>35</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 19.

is untrue, always snatched away. The *I* which speaks out from only one place is simultaneously everyone's everywhere.<sup>36</sup>

Language therefore asserts the presence of a public sphere through its evolution and its collectivity, as it is continuously reformed and embedded in a set of shared conventions, habits, sonic presences and their affiliations as well as grammatical concerns. This assertion extends to both the spoken and the written 'I.' Language is, at the most basic level of appearance, performative—whether sonically or textually—and “works at the pervasive level of its musculature, quietly but powerfully, through its grammatical and syntactic joints.”<sup>37</sup> While it presents a narrative, its aesthetic features and tensions, as well as the rule-breaking of its speakers, announce and demonstrate a set of formal textual properties which may or may not be in conformity with the speaker and her stated desire. As Riley notes, “the very architecture of language in itself carries some of the affect common to all speech. Syntax itself bears a formative as well as an informative impulse.”<sup>38</sup> Our exposure to others and our acts of self-narration, which continually reshape our stories, provide a moral and ethical grounding to our political appearance in the world, according to Butler. It is in relation to others, rather than to a priori social and political structures, that one gives shape to a self. And it is in this vulnerable relation to others, or, as Butler attests, “only in dispossession that I can and do give any account of myself.”<sup>39</sup> Butler concludes that “we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us,

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<sup>36</sup> Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 57.

<sup>37</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37.

when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human.”<sup>40</sup>

Language, then, has the capacity to form a figure. The interdisciplinarity of Carr’s approaches to narrative in these instances expresses language’s formative possibility, in Riley’s sense, by revealing a story (and a subject) that emerges at the intersection of such an assemblage. Carr enhances this capacity by calling on the histories of figural and linguistic precedents inherent in text and drawing respectively. “The Fat Girl & her Failure” was composed, handwritten, in Carr’s sketchbook and is accompanied by a self-portrait depicting her gazing at a tiny nest of birds (Fig. 3). The text is written in pencil and hovers in a dense cloud at the top third of the page. Below it is the roughly drawn self-portrait caricature: a woman who appears neither fat nor thin, whose head is lifted as she gazes at a delicate nest of birds. The figure seems to look upward in wonder and lightness as though pulled forward by curiosity. The drawn figure and the written figure do not seem to match one another. Further, the text and image are sutured to the drawing: the occupied nest at which Carr gazes seems attached to the final line of her figure like an enlarged full stop or interspecies footnote.

For Riley, these kinds of elements are significant affective gestures: “If this work of language also embraces its printed conventions and presentation, it’s no news to anyone that a sentence’s punctuation, layout, and typography carry some of its affect, and can be contrived to carry all of it.”<sup>41</sup> Carr’s sketchbook, released from print conventions and hovering between drawing and text, provides us with the writer’s own embodied gestures: energetic or fatigued, a quality of speed or slowness, focus or lack of it. Throughout the sketchbook, Carr executes a kind of formal play with language because it is hers to create ‘typographically’—mean-

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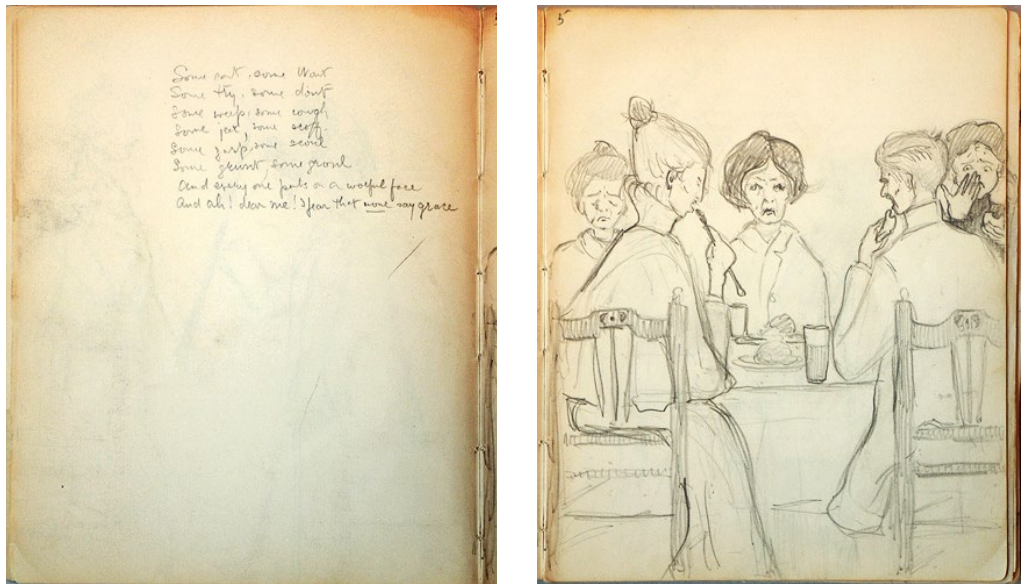
<sup>40</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 139.

<sup>41</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 3.

ing that she is given over to the act of writing itself, both gesturally and structurally. Her work in these pages is an inscription that travels, from image to text, merging marks on the page with syntax that serves her. Carr was a notoriously poor speller and her punctuation was haphazard. Her habits of peppering her handwriting with long dashes, exclamation marks, doggerel-like line and paragraph breaks, and sometimes invented words, create ruptures and qualities of vernacular speech, mark-making and pictorial composition throughout the chapbooks and sketchbooks. The words stutter as she does in life, reach for form, turn away dispirited, and try again. In the the same passage of the sketchbook, she uses the word “bedabbled,” which seems to be her own invention, perhaps a conflation of ‘bedazzle’ and ‘dapple’ or a mistaken alliterative twinning to “bedraggled.” These errors, rather than being an expression of unconscious intent, instead reveal the emergence of a public self, insistent and vulnerable, tactical and tenuous, testing and appearing, all at once.

Adjacent to some of the drawings, Carr’s other passages of prose at East Anglia appear: fragments of stories that were perpetual works in progress, revised on the page with strike-through notations and insertions. Her focus in these passages is how her experience is reflected in that of the other patients and the animals she encounters, creating a larger sensorium and public for her own appearance in the text: Jinny the Donkey, who is forced to wear human boots by Dr. Walker; the fellow patient who finds a way to bury the excess food he is given in the garden while others struggle to eat it all as part of the ‘overfeeding’ element of their treatment (Figs. 10 & 11, and 12). One long passage records an alarming rate of mice deaths, due to traps on the premises (Fig. 13). A set of studies of dead mice (Fig. 14) seems permissible subject matter, while death itself is never spoken of among the patients—and there is no illustration in Carr’s sketchbook of the graveyard in which the patients all congregate to have their lunch at the annual San Picnic. It would seem a dubious place to gather those who are almost all terminally ill. Carr only

mentions this event decades later, in her *Pause* story “Picnic,” perhaps when it is bearable to tell.



**Figures 10 & 11** (facing pages) “Some can’t, some won’t/Some try, some don’t/Some weep, some cough/Some jeer, some scoff/Some gasp, some scowl/Some grunt, some growl/And every one puts on a woeful face/And ah! dear me! I fear that none say grace”  
Emily Carr, Sketchbook for “Pause”



**Figure 12** “The Beast depositing his food in an envelope as soon as the back is turned, prior to burying it.”  
Emily Carr, Sketchbook for “Pause”





Carr's various figures of the self appear grammatically, linguistically and relationally: in a St. Ives chapbook, Carr represents herself as playful, painting among friends in Treganna Wood. This is in contrast to a frightened figure in one sketchbook drawing who is instead being crowded out by a parade of nurses who fill the page of the sketchbook in a perspectively diminishing line, while Carr seems her most dishevelled and 'hysteric,' her face contorted and her blankets covered in quivering lines that emanate her vibrating nerves and nausea (Fig. 15). We know that her treatment involved electricity and massage for up to four hours a day and left her with a stutter. Unlike her caricatures, there is nothing light-hearted about this drawing.



**Figure 15**  
*Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"*

These are methods for performing acts of figuration in order to encounter the self as a vulnerable figure and subject who desires for her story to be told. This work takes place within the quasi-domestic shuttering of the sanatorium, far away from the professional activities of the British schools and city that so disoriented her. Here, the domestic/sanatorium



becomes an alternative public sphere, which although psychically and physically dangerous to her, Carr transforms textually and graphically. Her vulnerability, in Butler's sense of this relation as predicate for political emergence, becomes the condition for her appearance as a resilient subject.

In the East Anglia sketchbook, Carr's point of view slips from first-person to second- and third-person narration, performing "Carr" as a narratable subject to an undisclosed other. Her use of the third person also creates an allegorical quality, bringing to mind the theatrical convention of a morality tale. In "The Fat Girl & Her Failure," calling her experience a "failure" is perhaps a somewhat romantic attempt to soften the injury of shame she experienced as she reflected on how much was at stake. Perhaps it was a rehearsal of how she might tell the story to her friends and relatives: she writes in pencil at the top of the page, "The fat girl came from the far west where the forests are magnificent ... The fat girl found birds in the early days of her sojourn in England ... By and by illness came and the fat girl subsided into a San with a limp and a stutter," and finally "The fat girl bucked up." Or the cursory "March 30–31 Found several nests, mostly thrushes, and built largely in furze and brambles," written in the style of a botanist's notation beside her depiction of herself (Figs. 16 and 3). Here is a leaner Carr, looking fragile with a cane and squinting up through sunglasses at a squawking bird at the tip of a spindly tree drawn with sharp pencil marks—everything in the drawing is teetering, crowded and off-balance, including the text, which seems to have its own wing shape and flies diagonally up behind her as she reaches into the nest, her hand encircling a small egg (*Pause*, 101). On another page she writes four neat lines in what might be seen as a whispered surtitle hovering in a tangle underneath her hospital bed. In the accompanying drawing, Carr is depicted sitting up, writing in what may be the sketchbook itself, the nurse approaching with a bottle-laden tray: "Just as you're feeling better/And joy your bosom fills,/Down falls your heart

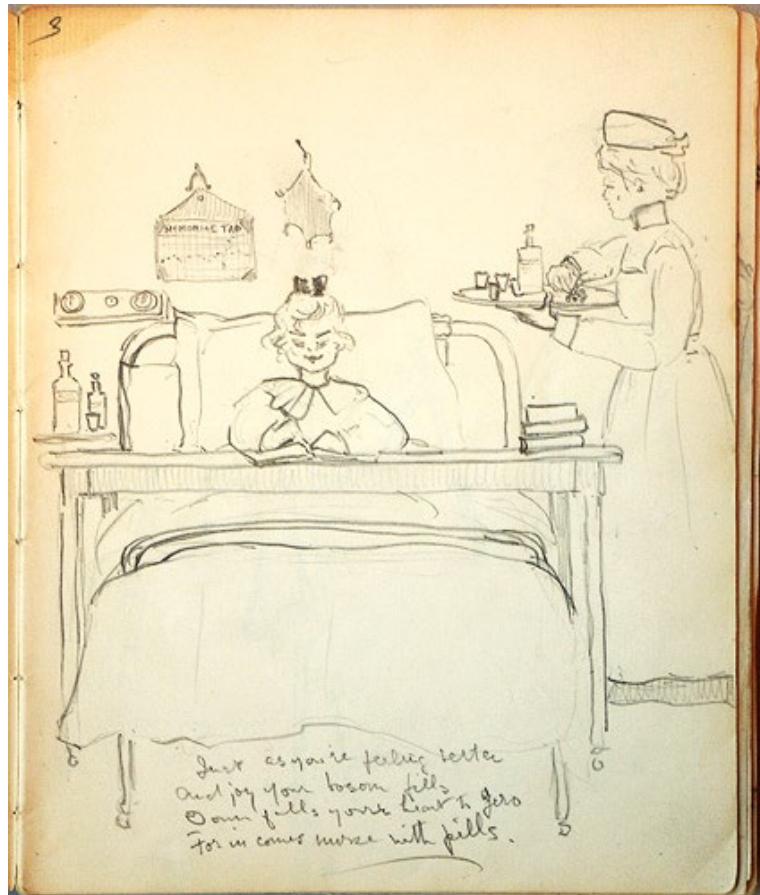
to zero/For in comes nurse with pills” (Fig. 17).<sup>42</sup> Her words reach out across years and bodies, resisting the silencing rules of “the San,” where it was not permitted to speak of unsettling subjects—most especially not illness, pain, treatments or death.



**Figure 16** “March 30–31 Found several nests, mostly thrushes, and built largely in furze and brambles”

Emily Carr, *Sketchbook for “Pause”*

<sup>42</sup> These examples are from the sketchbook writings. They were reproduced as selected archival illustrations for *Pause* and included alongside the stories both in Dilworth’s first edited volume and in the 2007 Douglas & McIntyre edition.



**Figure 17** “Just as you’re feeling better/And joy your bosom fills,/Down falls your heart to zero/For in comes nurse with pills.”

*Emily Carr, Sketchbook for “Pause”*

### Auto-fictioning

The limitation of autobiographical memory is that it “always recounts a story that is incomplete from the beginning.”<sup>43</sup> It is necessary to go back to the narration that is told by others, the story of one’s birth and childhood, for which the individual must rely on others, and “it is this first chapter of the story that the narratable self stubbornly seeks with all of her desire.”<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, the life story that “memory recounts is not enough for the narratable self ... because memory claims to have seen that which was instead revealed only through the gaze of another.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Caverero, *Relating Narratives*, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Caverero, *Relating Narratives*, 39

<sup>45</sup> Caverero, *Relating Narratives*, 40.

This structural error reveals how memory is inherently incomplete, the narrator of the autobiography inherently ‘unreliable’:

It doubles itself in the eye of the other ... in its silent autobiographical exercise, personal memory turns the narratable self into a Narcissus. Its promises of truthfulness are utterly vain ... like an impossible game of mirrors, the self is indeed here both the actor and the spectator, the narrator and the listener, in a single person. The self is the protagonist of a game that celebrates the *self as other*.<sup>46</sup>

Auto-fictioning seems to offer a recourse to this problem.

In 1941, Carr received the Governor General’s Award for Literature, one of Canada’s highest honours for writing, for her book *Klee Wyck. Pause*, consisting of twenty-seven short stories about her time at East Anglia that appear to be drawn from memory, was written over thirty years after Carr’s internment, when she was long safely back in Canada. It is not clear if Carr referenced the sketchbook in order to develop them. In the sketchbook, Carr’s activity is of figuration, while throughout the published stories Carr fashions a narrative that utilizes modernist conventions of storytelling in which she, the patients and the English songbirds she later adopts as her own during that time are *characters* bound by forms of life that fail to sustain them. The stories in *Pause* are auto-fictional accounts, begun as early as 1938, when she worked on a number of other related stories, but assembled primarily in the summer of 1943 when Carr was in her seventies.

Fina Birulés writes that “retrospective storytelling [has an] ability to bring out the significance of the event in its particularity.”<sup>47</sup> What appears in the sketchbook as a notation in Riley’s sense, and as affect, is later taken up in *Pause* as a fully developed scene: on one sketchbook page is a list of names, perhaps those of other patients, circled and crossed out like

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<sup>46</sup> Caverero, *Relating Narratives*, 40.

<sup>47</sup> Birulés, “Contingency, History and Narration in Hannah Arendt.”

a tally or a set of speech balloons or breaths, cancelled out and silenced (Fig. 18). In her *Pause* story “Christmas,” Carr writes about the evening she learns of another patient’s death through the name’s omission from such a list during the reading of a Christmas paper that the patients had been preparing: “My contribution was called ‘Matron’s Dream,’” writes Carr. “It was a skit on the names of all the patients and staff in the San. In the middle of my very best sentence the Reverend Brocklebee stumbled, peered close, reddened, skipped. /Fool! What a mess he had made of it! Couldn’t the man read? Or had some name been purposely omitted?” (*Pause*, 135). In fact, this is the moment she learns of the death that had taken place that morning—someone she had spoken to and who had seemed quite well the evening before. The sketchbook’s prescient shorthand of erasure, disappearance and strikethrough is fleshed out and translated into narrative scenes in Carr’s retrospective telling in *Pause*, transferring from notation to narrative.

To be embodied and suffering, aware of the deaths of those around her, meant a daily regimen of understanding life’s limits and the inherent vulnerability of the body—whether through neglect, oversight or contagion. Even if the notation is all she can manage at the time, these figures, appearing here only as names on a list in her sketchbook, are later accounted for as subjects by her treatment of them across time and across formal tellings, when they are transformed from drawings and mark-making into characters in her stories (Fig. 19). To meet her vulnerability with an impulse to work, in her sketchbooks and fiction, Carr is resilient. Carr’s resilience, in turn, ensures that their stories are told.





started the pursuit  
 Stacey & Hunt. when will we catch him up? at  
 De Motoc. Kinson will ~~not~~ I shall be late for  
 Carr. dinner then. wait I must write to the  
 Hill. church warden to explain.  
 H. S. G. She says her pen warden she  
 Mackil. with (her pen is filled with Stephen Hart Hard)  
 Austin. The meek, grey, horse two feet and  
 Smith. a paper put on the Smith pen on her  
 Wilson. & shoes. I wrote. Trod on a Copper house  
 Cowel. Jones his hops station for many  
 Vincent. heart & to be imposed. We may  
 Atkinson. catch him in the Asel gun by the  
 May. a bell we are hunting to the wood all  
 Waterman. of us. See if Vince Sent thome to  
 Morrison. London, if not definitely him to renew  
 Thomas. with all haste. My mind is now even, he  
 Meek. said slipping the letter in his pocket.  
 Piper. As they approach the wood the water  
 Preston. is on island. Stay See. There are  
 Dorell. the imprints of a Bear tree.  
 Walker. the imprints of a Bear tree.  
 Charnock. the imprints of a Bear tree.  
 Gray. the imprints of a Bear tree.  
 Stephens. the imprints of a Bear tree.  
 Mc Small. the imprints of a Bear tree.  
 T. Wooddon. the imprints of a Bear tree.  
 Cooper. the imprints of a Bear tree.  
 Gratton. the imprints of a Bear tree.  
 Jones. the imprints of a Bear tree.  
 Kinley. the imprints of a Bear tree.

Figure 19  
 Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"

## Taking Cover

Carr's *Pause* stories, told through the shifting lens of memory and time, allow the potential to re-experience emotional details. She revisits her appearance at East Anglia Sanatorium and considers it now as a public emergence at the beginning of her career, an early experience of life in the public realm as an artist and storyteller. *Pause* offers as a memoir a "cover," a way to understand, know and explain retrospectively what she could not formulate at the time. It provides a public account of her actions through the creative work of fictioning, and by doing so produces a further resilient subjectivity despite the vulnerability of having been exposed.

As feminist writer and scholar Sara Ahmed writes, "The desire to take cover and to be covered presupposes the failure of cover; in shame one desires cover precisely because one has already been exposed to others. Hence the word 'shame' is associated as much with cover and concealment, as it is with exposure, vulnerability and wounding."<sup>48</sup> Shame is an inherently public affect, therefore, and impulses towards its resolution in the revealing mode of auto-fiction fascinate; what has been done cannot be undone—as psychologist Erik Erikson says, "One is visible and not ready to be visible."<sup>49</sup> How best to deal with this impossibility, of having arrived too late to one's own self-knowledge? *Pause* transforms Carr as a figure from a position of extreme vulnerability during her hospitalization in a foreign country, with little to suggest a successful career may come from the experience, and in which she called herself a failure, to a character in a story, with a narrator that possesses a conscious and empathetic understanding of the young Carr as a newcomer, a stranger. It is an association she is able to make as a writer of this story, from the relative security of her own narrative chronology, looking back at 1903–1904

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<sup>48</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 104.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 103.



from her vantage point in the 1930s/1940s, as an established artist and writer now facing the end of her life.

In her story “A Rabbit Warren and A Piggery,” Carr extends this care for her earlier vulnerability further when she discloses an unsuccessful attempt to demonstrate her notion of nature to one of the doctors who runs the clinic, and who in Carr’s estimation represents “the inexorable law” (*Pause*, 104). Carr notes that she found a patch of what she described as “wilderness” on an unsupervised walk near the Sanatorium:

My walks were not set by the Doctors like those of the T.B. patients. I was free to walk where I would, providing it was not too far, and I did not overtire.

Immediately after our noon dinner I slipped out the side door without anyone seeing, past my birds’ cage, skirted the San’s big field, crossed the highway, found the lane that dwindled into a narrow foot-path and ended in the Warren. It was indeed a wilderness! Tired I flung my body down upon the hot earth and shut my eyes, leaving free my other senses—feeling, smelling, hearing ... I had not known you could find such wildness in England. This place seemed so beautifully mine—mine, and the birds’ and rabbits’ (*Pause*, 99–100)

Carr’s description of the awakening of sensation and of belonging transpires through a familiar lever: in Canada she had accessed such spaces to alleviate her sense of strangeness amongst her own family and middle-class settler society. What is notable in this passage is that she documents her attempt to find a way to access this psychic state for the first time in England. Later in the story she shares her discovery with the doctor, who asks Carr to bring her to the warren; she does, initially hoping that “if once Doctor saw it she would surely understand” (*Pause*, 102). Instead, the event creates another opportunity for Carr to sense, and to finally understand empathetically, her own strangeness, as she sees herself appearing in the eyes of another. If we also consider that the memoir is a process of selection, it serves to reinforce the idea that Carr was capable

of a more nuanced and compassionate premise for her “failure” than she was able to write in “The Fat Girl & Her Failure.” In *Pause*, forty years later, she writes:

It was just as fine a day as before. We crossed the field, the highway, the lane, and were in the little path.

“I don’t like this narrow way, the brambles tear me,” complained the Doctor.

“We are just at the Warren; look, there is a dove nesting in that tree. The gorse and broom bushes are full of linnet and bullfinch nests, and, oh, Doctor, you should see the rabbits bobbing about when the cool comes! Just now they are down in the burrows sleeping.”

“A dangerous place, this Warren, Mammy. The ground is riddled; one could easily stumble, break a leg!”

We sat down to rest. Silence fell between us. I could feel the Doctor and the Warren were not in sympathy. The Warren would not do any of the things that it did for me the other day. It went stupid, made me feel a liar. The birds were quiet; no rabbits scuttled; not even a cricket gritted his wings. (*Pause*, 102)

Nature was a realm in which Carr could take cover, where she experienced for herself knowability, unity. Yet when they return to the sanatorium, the doctor forbids her to return to the warren, calling it ‘morbid.’ According to Carr, the doctor responds by supervising her walks from then on, saying later, “Bed is the only place to keep you safe. Other patients don’t go to these extraordinary places, do these queer things” (*Pause*, 106). What had been empowering and strengthening, Carr tells us, instead in England exposes her to shame.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> On her return to Canada, Carr was also unable initially to face what she felt would be the humiliation of going home to Victoria or to Vancouver, and instead spent the early months of her re-entry at the ranch of a childhood friend in the interior territory of British Columbia.

Carr's stories congregate around this central subject: writing about her combined shame and resistance emancipate her as a figure, here in relation to the "inexorable law" of the doctor. Riley notes:

A lack of fit between my self-description as a social subject and my presence as a political subject is not disappointing but benevolent insofar as the subject of political language actually requires a certain impersonality, or a non-identity, to be able to circulate productively at all. In this sense, my awkward navigations to *become*, coupled with my constitutional failure to fully *be*, are what actually enable political thinking and language.<sup>51</sup>

The figure that emerges in the sketchbook's drawings, notes, half-formed thoughts, poems and snippets of scene is open and unforclosed, in marked contrast to the character in *Pause*, where difference is a key narrative architecture. Returning to the scenes as stories, Carr's narration performs an empathetic operation of resilience and seems to bring a degree of comfort to her when she ultimately describes herself as "wildly rebellious at heart" (*Pause*, 6), reconciling her experience in writing. Carr's phrase is revealing. The heart is hidden; to be wildly rebellious *at heart* means that this may not find expression in the world—one's "heart" is a stand-in for desire and for agency, for a "true self" that may also remain hidden from others, unable to be decoded or to become legible in the public realm. But Carr as a storyteller finds a way to take cover, to resist this interiority and the doctor's 'script' for her—hysteria—and to find a form of authority in her own narrative. Or as Riley notes, "A doubtful contrast of inner and outer haunts the puzzle of whether I speak (from the inside outward) or whether I am spoken (from the outside in)."<sup>52</sup> Carr's writing allows the narrative, the Arendtian immortality of the storyteller and of the subject of the story, to become a powerful archive

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<sup>51</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 18.

of her life; it further allows her story to resist other externally imposed forms of foreclosure and silence.

### The Narratable Self

In Arendt's terms, our story begins at the moment of our appearance, the result of exposure to others, of being visible in the way that each human being is unique and unrepeatable. For Cavarero, who cites Arendt as a major influence, "there is a substantial difference between the desire to leave one's own identity for posterity in the form of an immortal tale, and the desire to hear one's own story *in life*."<sup>53</sup> Our unique story belongs to each of us, and we sense it in the other, whether we know its details or not, even on first meeting. Beyond this unique tale, "We are all familiar with the narrative work of memory, which, in a totally involuntary way, continues to tell us our own personal story. Every human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a *narratable* self —immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory."<sup>54</sup>

Carr does grapple with her experience *in life* in the sketchbook. Her later journals also record her reflection on her earlier experiences and her puzzlement and bemusement at them. They confound her in 1938, as much as her sketchbook reveals the confounding experiences as they unfolded. For Carr, the desire to tell her story is not simply to leave an archive for others to judge, but, through writing, to formulate herself as a figure and narratable self within the framework of modernist ideas of storytelling and of character. The figure that emerges in the sketchbook remains, in this sense, open and unforeclosed by narrative habit, while in *Pause*, Carr seems to address this as an incompleteness, instead writing her figure into being as *character*.

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<sup>53</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 33.

<sup>54</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 33.

For Cavarero, memory functions as a structure in storytelling, rather than as an exercise of bringing forward the detail of specific incidents. In Carr's sketchbook, the telling is contemporaneous, structured as a transcription, a shorthand (Figs. 20 & 21). In her *Pause* stories, the self that emerges is wholly dependent on the construct of a narratable self as a feature of memory that produces a subject, in Cavarero's sense. Writing in her journal, later published as *Hundreds and Thousands*, Carr reflects on her stay at the sanatorium at the same time as she is preparing to move from her home after her heart attack, and is sorting and emptying the house's contents:

I took a bag of old letters, childish poems I wrote mainly when in love, dear, kind letters from lovely people when I was ill in England ... What does it all mean, this giving and receiving of love? Love like a merry ball bouncing back and forth from one to another—new fellows joining in the game, old ones dropping out, but the ball always bobbing, gaining something from every hand that touches it. When is its final bob? What is love? ... That old green bag, the one I used to carry my dance slippers in, was chock full of love, love coming to me in letters, love burst from me in the poor, silly little rhymes that eased me in writing. For writing is a strong easement for perplexity. My whole life is spread out like a map with all the rivers and hills showing.<sup>55</sup>

Here, Carr's reminiscence beautifully anticipates Arendt's theoretical formulation of the world and the place of our stories within it. Her description of love as a ball carried forward into the future, with new subjects joining along the way, and whose beginning and ending is never known, parallels Arendt's formulation of natality and its indebtedness to the care of the other in order for anyone's story to be fully told. Carr reflects on the very act of memory itself, its capacity for producing not only a narratable self, but also a relatable world—a map, a cosmos. In this sense, the vulnerability of the subject and its dependency on the care

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<sup>55</sup> Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin, 1966), 220.



I cannot eat my porridge  
 I cannot drink my tea  
 My beef is salt with dripping tears  
 I'm thinking Maud of thee  
 Today the Sanatorium  
 From thee my love must part  
 Each eye doth overflow with tears  
 Bleeding is every heart

**Figures 20 & 21** "I cannot eat my porridge/I cannot drink my tea/My beef is salt with dripping tears/I'm thinking Maud of thee/Today the Sanatorium/From thee my love must part/Each eye doth overflow with tears/Bleeding is every heart"  
 Carr sketchbook (facing pages)  
 Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"

of others is clearly noted by Carr as a metanarrative, and her writing is “a strong easement for perplexity” of the unknowability of the world. She reveals that resilience is also dependent on the care and reception of others.

As with Cavarero, in Arendt’s formulation the bringing forth of specific incidents is inessential to the process of storytelling; instead, “the narratable self finds a home, not simply in a conscious exercise of memory, but in the spontaneous narrating structure of memory itself. That is why we have defined the self as *narratable* instead of *narrated*.”<sup>56</sup> It is this narratable self that Cavarero contends is

the transcendental subject and the elusive object of all the autobiographical exercises of memory. Subject and object are, moreover, ambiguous terms. It is enough to say that each of us *lives him or herself* as his/her own story, without being able to distinguish the I who narrates it from the self who is narrated. We are thus left with a kind of *circular memory*, which simply appears in perfect and total familiarity.<sup>57</sup>

Every human being therefore possesses a life story that is available to her, whether or not she has expressed any desire to tell it:

Someone’s life-story always results from an existence, which, from the beginning, has exposed her to the world—revealing her uniqueness. Only in the improbable case of a life spent in perfect solitude could the autobiography of a human being tell the absurd story of an unexposed identity, without relations and without world.<sup>58</sup>

Not only does the one who appears before others generate a life story, but she is also generated by that story, by the specificity which occurs as a result of the exposition: “Personal memory, intentionally or otherwise, can in fact therefore go on forgetting, re-elaborating, selecting and

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<sup>56</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 34.

<sup>57</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 34.

<sup>58</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 36.



censuring the episodes of the story that it recounts. Memory nevertheless rarely *invents*, as do the inventors of stories. Personal memory is not a professional author.”<sup>59</sup> For Arendt, life stories drawn solely from memory are therefore without an author, but “biographies or autobiographies result from an existence that belongs to the world, in the relation and contextual form of self-exposure to others.”<sup>60</sup>

Carr’s *Pause* stories are auto-fictional in that they recollect rather than record, and they are embellished with afterthought and sensation. Her exegeses do not simply relate how best she can remember what occurred during her time at Nayland, but also draw out their affects, make latterly-arrived-at conclusions about the connections between events, and arrive at new insights. Her frankness and honesty result in ‘truthfulness,’ in the sense that fictioning is intrinsic to truth-telling in a way that simple memory or autobiography is not, in Arendt and Cavarero’s terms. The work follows an arc of time, the slow realization and the placing in *chronos* not only events but also feeling and experience: “How dreadfully real the places and people are as they come back to me! The experiences must have been burnt, as in pyrography,” she declares in her journal as she is writing the stories.<sup>61</sup> Yet they are not ‘real’ in the story but a circular memory, in Cavarero’s formulation. There is a politic in these dialogics as they move back and forth between recollection and reconciliation, accounting with the present-day self. In them, Carr finds expression for how these events were ultimately significant in the text that forms her life. She is able to reconcile her vulnerability with her growing awareness of herself as a political subject, one who has advocated for herself in the circumstances (as is notated in the sketchbook), but who has also, in her late-life *Pause* stories, been able to elaborate the greater context and situation which produced her as a figure. Writing in both instances exposes

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<sup>59</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 36.

<sup>60</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 36.

<sup>61</sup> Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, 299.



her vulnerability and reveals it as predicate to her ability to tell her story, and to her ultimate resilience as a subject.

Carr consciously sees her sketchbook drawings as a sideline rather than finished artworks, even later in life when she describes them in her stories; they are meant to pass the time, to entertain or bring humour to an otherwise distressing situation and to form bonds with those around her who were sympathetic. In the story “Me,” Carr wrote, “Serious work had been put out of my life but I used to make caricatures and silly rhymes about the patients and staff at which they used to laugh immoderately. Because of those laughs they forgave a lot of my shortcomings” (*Pause*, 63).

In this way, Carr’s sincerity is evident as an intention, even as she is an unreliable narrator. She sincerely explores herself as a particular kind of figure through the scene she represents of life in the sanatorium. But many events are missing. They went unrecorded. Other than the substitution of names, Carr’s main strategy for controlling elements of the narrative is through selection and omission. What exactly is the nature of the medical treatments she suffers? What are her symptoms, specifically? What was the effect on her young adulthood to witness so much death? Or her own fear for her life in the wake of the TB deaths of her mother and brother? She fails to mention these, even within the limitations of Victorian strictures. Given the emotional acuteness we know existed in her approach to her painting and her artistic work, as well as how keenly she felt about the natural world, we know she was capable of complex insight and introspection. Carr, therefore, does not construct an unreliable narrator as a figure within the text as a formal device, but, as Cavarero and Riley suggest, must necessarily be one due to the task of self-telling that she is involved in: “If the affect of language extends to its formal structures, then the intricacies of self-description, which is laced

through with strange temporalities, can offer a critical testing ground for this intuition.”<sup>62</sup>

While Riley offers irony as a form of acknowledging these slippages and vicissitudes, Carr’s work is without this as a deliberate feature. It is instead marked by an earnestness for her task of autobiography, a modernist belief in the power of the words to convey scenes through intuited central movements, spiritual and psychic aspirations, that form a trajectory towards emergence as an artist and as a being. The complex self that does emerge through her work happens as a result of the three forms meeting to reveal Riley’s “temporalities”—auto-fiction, drawing and archive—the methodology of each form exposing that of the other within an intersecting assemblage. Within each form, Carr expresses her resilience by exposing the vulnerability which predicated her awakening as a political subject through writing. Carr writes to make the politics surrounding this figure appear, to place its vulnerability in context. By so doing she reveals the politics of emergence onto the scene of public life.

For Cavarero, although the individual understands her uniqueness in its unrepeatability, she

does not know *who* she is, or *who* is exposed. She knows she is a narratable identity, but also knows that only another can correct the fallacy of the autobiographical impulse. The unity of the desire—namely, the unity entrusted to the tale that everyone desires—is not, in fact, an aspect of unconsciousness or a problem of introspection. It is rather the irreflexive object of the desire *for* the unity of the self in the form of a story.<sup>63</sup>

In this way it is possible for a single act to summarize an entire life story, in the ultimate synthesis which a desire for unity-of-self prefers. The unity that this narratable self desires of the story is “never a question of the text. It is rather the question of her innate desire, which can turn

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<sup>62</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 4.

in many directions—to the narration for the thread of the story, or to a single act.”<sup>64</sup> In this sense, autobiography, according to Cavarero, can never respond to the question ‘who am I?’ Only the biography, told by another, can answer this. Ultimately, in her view, “to tell one’s own story is to distance oneself from oneself, to double oneself, to make oneself an other.”<sup>65</sup>

On the one hand, this form of rupture is exactly the purpose of travel and study—to experience oneself anew, as an other, in the act of crossing borders—and it is interesting to consider the knowledge Carr’s body supplied to her about this experience through a diagnosis of ‘hysteria.’ Although its messages are unwelcome, Carr nonetheless mines the details of these experiences, looking for coherence. Her hesitations and inconsistencies in how she reports this experience may be seen, in Riley’s framework, “as mutating identifications, sharpened by the syntactical peculiarities of self-description’s passage to collectivity.”<sup>66</sup>

Riley suggests that “a more helpful poetics will recognize a useful provisionality in the categories of social being,” and she contends, “Hesitations in inhabiting a category are neither psychological weaknesses nor failures of authenticity or solidarity.”<sup>67</sup> Although Carr makes a demand of herself for cohesion throughout her life, which she expressed in her written work as a frustration with her own inability to perform a self that might pass nineteenth-century social and class categories, her writings and drawings also reveal an *at-home-ness* within this schism. Through her writing, her desire for unity emerges, in Cavarero’s sense.

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<sup>64</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 44.

<sup>65</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 84.

<sup>66</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 1.

In her *Pause* story “Sunhill Sanatorium” (her fictionalized name for East Anglia Sanatorium), Carr writes an account of the various procedures of the institution, including her relationship with the nurse who cared for her, whom she nicknamed “Hokey” (Fig. 22). In the sketchbook, we see how Carr’s notes—the “receipt for bringing out the full expression of Hokey’s countenance”—are further negotiated affectively in fiction:

I read my own behaviour in Hokey’s face. If I was suffering, it was sad; were I provoking or contemptible, Hokey’s face set like a junket. When I was simply impossible she went away and left me./ A habit that English nurses had, that of calling their patients “Dear” from the moment they came on a case, annoyed me tremendously. Hokey deared me just once./“Don’t do that to me,” I shouted. “I won’t be ‘Dear’ except to those who mean it and to whom I am dear.” Hokey never deared me again; when I was being dear, though, she would give me one of her rare sweet smiles.

Carr’s activities of drawing and writing are a profound form of thinking, acceptance and, ultimately, in the *Pause* stories, unifying resilience. It is in this reconciliation with things as they are that she arrives at ‘truthfulness,’ in Arendt’s terms. Through writing, her resilience as a vulnerable subject enables her appearance as a political subject: she endures, she continues, even in the face of the unknowable.



*Figure 22 "Receipt for bringing out full expression of Hokey's countenance."  
Emily Carr, Sketchbook for "Pause"*

## Sense Perception and Imagination

Arendt maintains that reality is not a sensation—it exists even if we can't be sure that we know it. Reality “relates to the context in which single objects appear and the *context* in which we ourselves as appearances exist among other appearing creatures.”<sup>68</sup> Carr's response to the conditions of her life during her time at the sanatorium was to attempt to enter into an authority—to literally author an account of herself by accepting the limitations of being that took place in this environment and accepting the losses she incurred.

“The ability to create fictive entities *in* your mind ... ” writes Arendt,

or the fictitious characters of a story, an ability usually called *productive* imagination, is actually entirely dependent on the so-called reproductive imagination; in “productive” imagination, elements from the physical world are rearranged, and this is possible because the elements, now so freely handled, have already gone through the de-sensing process of thinking.

Not sense perception, in which we experience things directly and close at hand, but imagination, coming after it, prepares the objects of our thought.<sup>69</sup>

Arendt's distinction between sense perception and imagination forms a remarkable parallel to the operations Carr engages with. In the first instance, during her internment, Carr makes note of the experiences within the slipstream of life at East Anglia Sanatorium as annotations of a retreat from public life that capture its affects. Two distinct forms of knowledge are at play: the one in which private observations, sensations and responses are recorded, and the latter, in which Carr prepares these sensations once again, this time in stories that she expects will be made public. In the later writings, all must be told through words alone. The expressive marks of the sketchbook have no place in this telling.

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<sup>68</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 1:51.

<sup>69</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 1:86.

The sensorium of the sketchbook cannot pass this imaginative border but is instead transformed. It is a palimpsest; Carr must rely on memory and thinking to turn these scenes into fiction, and here the feeling of estrangement which has prefaced her vulnerability throughout her life becomes understandable to her as she writes.

Carr finds a cipher in which to describe the sensation of vulnerability in the story “Orchid” in *Pause*. She describes a plant received as a gift from a fellow patient as an “uncanny flower ... not only was it unusual, there was a mystery in its dull glowing, too, some queerness almost sinister, very, very un-English,” and a “stranger in a crowd whose language he does not understand.” It has a “pouchy body as big as a pigeon’s egg. It was yellow and splotched with brown-red ... live little veins of red laced its pouchy body” (*Pause*, 58). Its body seems both repugnant and fascinating to her, and allows her to access the sensation of otherness. Carr finally concludes, on the death of the flower, “Suddenly, I imagined that I understood what had been the link between that strange flower and me. Both of us were thoroughly un-English” (*Pause*, 59). It seems possible in this story that she did not have this thought at the time she experienced the orchid. The orchid does not seem to have been documented in the sketchbook, so it exists in her memory alone. The sketchbooks are immediate and do not function in the same musing way, creating a retrospective philosophical context. What does persist in both tellings is her interspecies relationality, her absolute empathy with the worlding of other creatures, both flora and fauna, through senses. Carr finds in them a narratable ‘other.’ Here it is the orchid that invites her imagination, from whom care has been withdrawn, a figure whose vulnerability arises from being unknown and unknowable. In the act of writing and imagining the orchid, Carr realizes in this story that in order to be supported one must be knowable, or, in Butler’s conceptualization, addressable. It is by being named, by being one who can be addressed, that one appears as



a co-constituent in the proceedings of life. Out of this vulnerability to the world arises the potential for care, and for resilience.

## **Conclusion**

Storytelling has a unique ability to transform the fragile record of human affairs into knowledge. Its aesthetic and affective properties reveal a powerful political possibility for vulnerability. Embedded in the formal operation of autobiographical storytelling, which neither witnesses the scene of natality nor of death, and which relies on the fragmentary nature of memory, is the possibility to demonstrate the shape of a life and its losses as facts which must be admitted to, accounted for and reconciled. Instead, vulnerability becomes a multiply-positioned site of resistance. In the act of storytelling, the primacy of uncertainty, the liminal and permeable nature of speech and writing, the reliance on the evolving praxis of language and the narratability of the storyteller herself, in Riley's and Cavarero's sense, inherently resist normative structures and accepted historical accounts.

Through Arendt, we also understand that storytelling reveals power relationships that appear in the fold and in the tension between the private and public realm, between a simple telling of reality and a reconciling with things as they are in order to arrive at a text. Storytelling's operation is political. By traversing these realms in the act of storytelling, we also access the unique ability to link individual desires and collective experience and their inherent vulnerabilities. The result is an embodied storytelling that has the capacity to perform and to reveal loss. By shaping a narrative and performing it through the storyteller's unique operation of imagination, an acceptance of such losses, rather than being understood as simply a restorative gesture, creates a generative political space in which the vulnerable subject can emerge and be accounted for in the public realm. It is a space that acknowledges a loss of certainty. This lack of certainty is articulated as an affect. The creative work of storytelling in

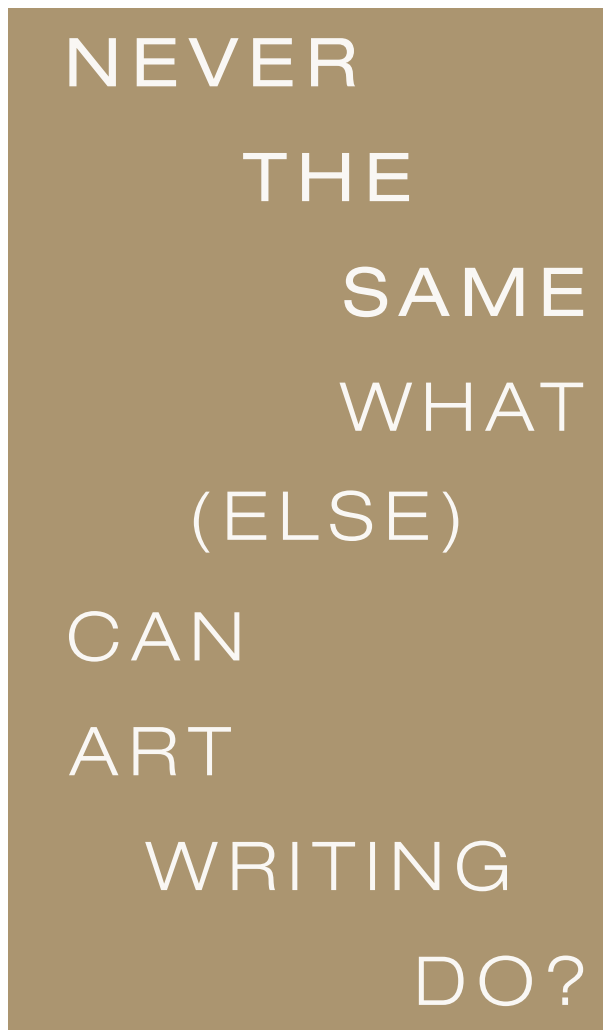
auto-fiction and artmaking uniquely articulates these affects in the public realm and transforms them into embodied sites of political and historical knowledge. As Arendt says, “The dismantling process has its own technique ... What you then are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation.”<sup>70</sup> From this fragmented assemblage, and in solidarity with the care and witnessing of others that is also achieved by fictioning, comes an evolving political subject. From this subjectivity emerges a figure who takes her place in the world already underway and adds her story to it.

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<sup>70</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 1:212.

## VI. Invitation to engage with documentation of *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?* symposium

An invitation to engage with documentation of the symposium *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?* (conference abstract and schedule, and symposium website which features video-documentation of individual sessions: <https://www.contemporarycalgary.com/never-the-same>)





Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do? *symposium, Calgary, Canada*  
*September 15–17, 2017.*

### **PREFACE: Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?**

The 2017 symposium *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?* functions as a literature review within the thesis, gathering twenty-one writers, curators and artists from the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, across disciplinary forms, to consider how, with reciprocity, empathy and support, writing has the capacity to transform the art world, and the conditions that exist and remain to be addressed within that world.

The symposium was presented as part of the program at Contemporary Calgary, the public art gallery in Calgary, Canada, and the project was developed and curated in collaboration with Canadian independent curator and artist Joanne Bristol. The project explored how, over the past twenty years, creative and critical writing has developed in new modalities which have proliferated in the art world, and considered its approaches: ficto-criticism, speculative fiction, performative writing, site-writing, poetic innovations, new mediations and alternative forms

of criticism. We framed the research around the question of how these forms of writing has made political, philosophical and academic space for art writing. The symposium was named for the worldmaking capacity of writing, expressed in the words of Dylan Thomas: “A good poem is a contribution to reality. The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it. A good poem helps to change the shape of the universe, helps to extend everyone’s knowledge of himself and the world around him.”<sup>1</sup> “Never the same” connoted for us how mutable writing approaches find alternatives to existing art discourses and production.

Over the weekend of the symposium, the writers met, shared meals, read poetry, led workshops, attended launches, participated in and attended performance events together, to explore a set of questions—protocols and conditions—which allowed each to appear as a figure and as a writer on this occasion and to each other. Like the writers I have focused on in the critical writing chapters of this thesis, each presenter enters the political realm of the art world, each has something different at stake in this world and each is on the pathway to becoming a resilient and vulnerable subject. Whether it is through relationships with others, holding political space for change through discursive networks and projects, or producing a body of artwork through artmaking, critical writing, writing a book, a short story or poetry—all the while doing other things, including independent or institutional employment, to support making art—we explored the condition of the artist, writer, curator and art worker. This exploration informed my research on how writers continue to navigate their vulnerability through writing as a way to become a resilient subject within this realm.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dylan Thomas, “On Poetry” in *Quite Early One Morning* (New York: New Directions, 1954), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Video documentation of the symposium project *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?* co-curated with independent Canadian artist and curator Joanne Bristol, is archived and can be accessed online at <https://www.contemporarycalgary.com/never-the-same>.



*Chris Kraus (right), in conversation with Jennifer Krasinski, Never the Same symposium, 2017.*

*Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?* reflected on places for, and political implications of, de-instrumentalized forms of writing. We considered how, in an age of austerity; neocolonialism; and neoliberal uses of creativity, art marketing, grant writing and practice-based PhD work, writing by and for artists, in and through their work enacts resistance to such forces. We witnessed how language forms are (re)emerging in the present and how art writing can be considered an ethical practice towards an understanding in defence of artistic knowledge. We provided a site for the (re)emergent modes of artistic writing that enact agonisms and solidarities in relation to art audiences. The project attempted to address how and for whom these new modes of art writing matter through symposium sessions guided by four areas of investigation:

**(i) Performing and Materializing Art Writing:** This set of presentations observed how writing calls and responds in proximity to bodies both present and absent, and allows for performativities of language that embody speaking subjects. By examining spaces between gastronomy (where, literally, the gut speaks) and modes of ventriloquism, narrative and performative dynamics of identity

and voice emerge; we considered how theories of new materialism address the agencies of extra-semiotic forces in artistic production and how art writing's material embodiments could be seen to enliven boundaries between discourse and production.

**(ii) Making Space, Place and Time Through Art Writing:** In these presentations we explored the real and fictional spaces and places art writing conjures, including inscription, gesture and language as formulations of cultural knowledge and difference. The writers and artists considered how language gestures across and within difference, and suggested an approach for how we might consider geographies, histories and futurities in this context. We also looked at how modes of site-writing occupy and form these discursive spaces, how the new iterations of art writing use and transform digital media spaces, and how the spacings and rhythms of art writing act as places of resistance to forces of chrononormativity.

**(iii) Art Writing and Knowledge Production:** Here we examined the impact of the introduction of artistic knowledge into educational institutions and how it has presented frictions to epistemic certainties. The presenters considered how art institutions have grappled with this, and the new agencies of art writing that have been generated out of such frictions. We consider the benefit that might be provided to other fields of knowledge from art writing's speculative, performative and material conditions. Presenters also responded to the question of the kinds of (un)productivities or productive refusals that art writing might contribute to the precarious economies of artistic and institutional labour, and how failure functions as a form of resistance. Their contributions grappled with the question of what alternative forms might be brought forward to address these conditions.



**(iv) New Modes of Publishing and Distribution:** This session considered how new modes of online and print publishing and distribution transform relations between artists, writers and readers, and how modes of publishing and distribution work to assemble and activate different kinds of readers and communities. Presenters looked at the structures of exchange where art criticism thrives, and how the different serial formats or rhythms of distribution perform new critical perspectives or ecologies. The work was also formulated around the unanticipated afterlives and futures of digital critical art forums.



*Book Launch: After Kathy Acker, with Chris Kraus, Never the Same symposium, 2017.*

For me, each presenter demonstrated, in their performances and presentations, a unique method for how to arrive at a resilient speaking position within a set of vulnerabilities, in the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, parallel events were produced in collaboration with community partners: A pre-event book launch with Chris Kraus featured Kraus speaking on her new MIT Press publication *After Kathy Acker* (2017), followed by a book signing. The symposium was presented in conjunction with an exhibition, titled *extratextual*, also co-curated with Joanne Bristol, and a convivial dinner with writers, artists and presenters that were part of both projects began the weekend of offerings.

We curated a Saturday evening social, held in the local Legion Hall, hosted by New Gallery artist-run-centre director Su Strang that featured live music, performances, spoken word poets and readings from Calgary-based and international artists. A camper van, onsite at the conference centre where the event took place, was hosted by Ginger Carlson, director of the artist-run-centre TRUCK gallery and featured micro-workshops with presenters, while a program titled *Brunch Launch* enabled speakers and writers from the symposium, as well as from Banff Centre and the Calgary community, to read from newly published or about to be published text works while having brunch. Local specialist bookstore

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<sup>3</sup> The presenters were Joan Borsa (Saskatoon-based curator and art historian), Susan Cahill (Calgary-based filmmaker, curator and art history professor), Mark Clintberg (Calgary-based artist, critic and art historian), Amy Fung (Vancouver-based writer, researcher, curator), Maria Fusco (Glasgow-based writer, theorist and critic), David Garneau (Regina-based Métis artist, curator, writer and professor), Merry Gerges (Toronto-based art critic, journalist and writer), Sky Goodden (Toronto-based art journalist and critic, founding editor of MOMUS), Emmanuel Iduma (New-York based Nigerian writer and critic), Jennifer Krasinski (New York-based art columnist, performance critic and writer), Chris Kraus (Los Angeles-based writer, filmmaker, editor and art critic), Kristen Kreider (London-based American artist and writer), Christof Migone (London, Ontario-based artist, curator and writer), Jeanne Randolph (Regina-based cultural theorist, performer, author and psychiatrist), Sara Raza (New York-based British curator, writer and art critic), Helena Reckitt (London-based British curator, writer and art critic), Jane Rendell (London-based British writer and theorist), Dylan Robertson (Kingston, Ontario-based Stó:lō artist and writer), Lisa Robertson (Paris-based Canadian poet and art writer), Walter Scott (Montreal and Toronto-based Kahnawake artist) and Kristy Trinier (Lethbridge-based museum director, curator and writer).

Shelf Life Books prepared a pop-up bookstore at the site of the symposium in order to make texts by presenters available to all. Together, the gatherings and offerings are presented as an example, in this thesis, of an invitation to solidarity, friendship and community through writing, and demonstrate how such supportive and co-created acts of care and hosting provide the conditions for resilient subjectivity.

I invite you to view the online resources which document the presentations, as well as to review the abstract and schedules.

## VII. Falling Stars, Love and Figuration: Chris Kraus, Inertial Moments and Unprestigious Feelings in the Art World

There is no greater assertion of something or somebody than to love it, that is to say: I will that you be—

Amo: Volo ut sis.<sup>1</sup>

Disappearance never struck me as a very interesting subject. It's always so much harder to appear.<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Much is at stake in the stories that we tell and the stories that are told about us. In Arendt's formulation, we rely on others to narrate the story of our birth, our initial appearance in the public sphere. In this sense, we rely on others in order to appear as social and political beings; alternatively, denials of such appearance have the capacity to injure and to silence. For Cavarero, the story of ourselves is further sought by hearing it told to us by another.

One of the greatest reminders of our vulnerability to others is the experience of shame. In the Victorian social world, an unmarried, childless woman wishing to pursue a career in art was an obvious object of scrutiny. Emily Carr's response was conflicted: performing resistance outwardly on the one hand, while her internal feelings were those of self-abnegation—an acceptable affectation that demonstrated the effective internalization of nineteenth-century middle-class constraints and their norms of femininity. Self-censure and negation were constructed gendered responses. Even though her writings reveal how Carr bridled against 'society' expectations, she seems unaware that her conflict is

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1971), 2:104.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Kraus, "Calle Art," in *Video Green: Los Angeles Art and the Triumph of Nothingness* (New York/Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Active Agents Series, 2004), 176.

produced by this construction and continues to address it as a private struggle of character and being, a schism that is a recurrent theme in her texts.

As the New Zealand writer Janet Frame tells us in her memoir, *An Angel at My Table*, the stories that we tell or that are told about us circulate as a form of primal knowledge from the beginning, as we overhear and are schooled in who is valued and who is not. In a passage on listening in on the conversations of adults in her childhood, Frame writes:

There were so many ways of talking about people, of admiring them or scorning them for the strangest reasons, sometimes just because they were dead or lived in another country; and then people were admired for what they could do, like Aunty Maggie with her cable stitch and the children who danced and sang in the competitions; or for what they had or who their parents were, and even if you didn't know people, you decided about them, and arranged your feelings for them and told everyone how you felt ... in your lofty adult voice; while below, we children caught all the travelling opinions, like falling stars, keeping some and letting some slip through.<sup>3</sup>

In the public sphere of her published writing, Carr illuminated the dual nature of her resilience. Shame was a kind of debt that must be paid, the 'smiling oil' of patriarchy that American novelist Ursula Le Guin describes in her story "Crosswords":

I always smiled. It was easier to smile. It's like there's a kind of oil that makes their wheels go round and smiling is part of it, women smiling. They expect it. When they don't get it, they may not know what's missing but they tend to seize up, get mean like a motor you don't oil.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Carr's ambition as an artist for her own intellectual development, her belief in modernism's wholistic and spiritual values and aesthetic methodologies, along with her growing confidence in her ability as an

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<sup>3</sup> Janet Frame, *An Angel at My Table* (London: Virago, 2008), 61.

<sup>4</sup> Ursula Le Guin, "Crosswords," in *Searoad* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1991), 115.

artist, especially as she neared the end of her life, placed the private Carr increasingly in direct conflict with her feelings of shame. Although she never entirely overcame these feelings, Carr continued to resist, not only by refusing to supply the “smiling oil” demanded of her, but also by writing about this refusal publicly. She was, in her own estimation, “wildly rebellious at heart” (*Pause*, 6).

Chris Kraus’s 1997 novel *I Love Dick* demonstrates a radical contemporary inversion of this feeling: shamelessness. Kraus’s shamelessness is, further, a political response in the guise of a personal one. While Carr, in her notebooks, figures herself through drawings and contemporaneous writing, in *Pause* she uses a modernist approach to storytelling, writing herself as a character, an ‘I,’ through which she reveals herself as a subject in the public realm in narratives that are lyrical and descriptive. In contrast, Kraus instead writes herself as a figure, using a variety of forms—from letter to art review, from transcription to journal entry and documentary reportage—to create both an ‘I’ and a ‘she,’ that is a figure who has been produced by and conditioned within a neoliberal context. These devices allow us to understand that Kraus writes a story of the self not as a character but as a figure, placed within the framework of a novel. In order to achieve this, Kraus’s method of accounting for herself occurs in the form of an auto-theoretical/auto-ethnographic case study that moves across art criticism and self-narration. Rather than memoir or autobiography, Kraus’s writing is durational and collective. As American artist and writer Travis Jeppesen notes, “all of her writing—whether she is writing a novel or for an art magazine—works to eradicate the artificial border separating fiction from criticism.”<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter I focus on Kraus’s novel *I Love Dick* to consider the methodologies through which Kraus produces a resilient subject. How does

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<sup>5</sup> Travis Jeppesen, “Foreword,” in *You Must Make Your Death Public: A Collection of Texts and Media on the Work of Chris Kraus*, ed. Mira Mattar (London: Mute Books, 2015), 8–9.

eradicating the border between fiction and criticism, and her narrative and structural choices for the novel as a form, contribute to this resilience? How do emotions and affects emerge in her writing formally to support this? Does her writing reflect the way in which these contingencies are produced by the conditions of the contemporary art world, and do methods of irony and ‘new sincerity’ play a role? I explore how a figure appears in the public sphere within this neoliberal condition—in the forms of suspended agency and failure, illness and self-disclosure—to provide differing models for resistance in this context. I also examine Kraus’s text in the context of neoliberalism through the work of Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Michel Feher, Sianne Ngai and the collective Tiquun. To further consider how resilience in vulnerability unfolds within the neoliberal condition, I extend the discussion by addressing the work of Driftpile Cree Nation poet and writer Billy-Ray Belcourt and Kraus’s short story “Face.” As has been outlined in the introduction and previous chapter, we will be reading the chapter in terms of the cultivation of a resilient subject as one who is able to remain vulnerable in the public sphere.

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## A Public Death

Dreams steered her through the day and she needed the slight weight of morning vapor to protect her. She was trying to become a writer. Since she'd never been especially creative, the only way that she could think to do this was to transcribe the pictures in her head. She found that sometimes in the darkened room, the pictures moved outside her head and into her entire body, and these, she realized, were the good times.<sup>6</sup>

In his foreword to the Royal College of Art symposium publication on the work of Chris Kraus, *You Must Make Your Death Public*, Travis Jeppesen writes: "How does one go about summing up a sensibility animated by such a ruthless, anarchic deployment of subjectivity?"<sup>7</sup> Instead of envisioning her writing as a cathartic and self-reflective tool, Kraus follows a logic of the capitalization of the self. When she began work on her 1997 novel *I Love Dick*, Kraus first had to decide on the position she would operate in as the writer, and how the figure of Chris would operate as a subject. Initially, Kraus reports that she was "thrown into this weird position ... Reactive ... if we were living in the Henry James novel *The Golden Bowl*—the Dumb Cunt, a factory of emotions evoked by all the men. So the only thing that I can do is tell The Dumb Cunt's Tale. But how?"<sup>8</sup>

Rather than calling her book a novel, Kraus terms *I Love Dick* as her own new genre: "Lonely Girl Phenomenology."<sup>9</sup> Although it's been widely understood as a work about 'unrequited love' (for the actual cultural critic Dick Hebdige), this is only the armature that Kraus uses to arrange the text—a welcome critique of all the novels that have been written by men about women in love. In fact, both 'Chris' and her husband, 'Sylvère', toy with replacing their names, becoming Emma and Charles Bovary.

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Kraus, "Emotional Technologies," in *Video Green*, 87–88.

<sup>7</sup> Jeppesen, "Foreword," 8.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (New York/Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Active Agents Series, 1997), 10–11. Hereafter cited in text as *Dick*, with page reference.

<sup>9</sup> Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 137.

At one point ‘Sylvère’ refers to himself as Charles in a letter he writes to Dick from the perspective of the cuckold; both are aware of the literary convention that would have “Chris end up in Dick’s arms” (*Dick*, 67).

Kraus recognizes the speaking position the conventional modern novel has given to her as a subject and refuses its focus on symbolism, interiority and transformative narrative action congregated around character development as ways to convene meaning. It is not enough for a ‘character’ named Chris in the novel simply to say: This neoliberal art world is getting me down. I can’t work. I refuse it and its ontologies, its reputational taxonomies, its fleeting and peripatetic allegiances and rewards, its sycophantic market relations and their ensuing top-down relations. Or for Kraus to create an heroic character who refuses the art world’s sanctions on who can participate in its excesses and who cannot. Most critically, a conventional novel would still be beholden to its modern origin and architecture, congregating around plot in order to shape its protagonist. In such a novel, neoliberalism’s aspirational messages might be featured as new ways to describe a path forward for the ‘sublime’ now as a lifestyle, something accessed by the few as an expression of social privilege. Rather, Kraus looks for a new form for engaging with necessarily troubling critiques, refusing aspiration within neoliberalism and the conventional modernist novel’s tale of character progression. In so doing, Kraus embraces neoliberalism, running with it in order to make its forces visible by speaking from the inside out in order to tell her story, refusing characterization in favour of figuration.

The philosopher Michel Feher, in his essay “Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital,” recommends this form of effective resistance, “exploring the possibilities of defying neoliberalism from within,”<sup>10</sup> and outlines the following strategy:

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Feher, “Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital,” in *Public Culture* 21:1 (2009): 21.

Critics of neoliberalism should not simply analyze and criticize the notion of human capital as the successor to the notion of the free laborer; instead, they ought to adopt the notion of human capital, or, to put it more bluntly, they ought to embrace the neoliberal condition, much as the workers' movement adopted the figure of the free worker, and allow it to express aspirations and demands that its neoliberal promoters had neither intended nor foreseen.<sup>11</sup>

Neoliberal art worlds do, as Feher suggests, embrace this condition, and its unintended and unforeseen features, via acts of enhanced self-administration undertaken by its players and investors. The inclusion of after-hours and sacrificed personal time along with acquiring an enviable sociability/personality for the performance of a public life are instrumentalized in the new forms of capitalized creative work, creating what appears to be a productive non-intimacy. In her essay "Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction," curator Helena Reckitt discusses the ways in which curatorial work depends for its ongoing support on the charms of the curator, whose skills of hosting, hospitality, friendship and personal warmth have become an extension in the toolkit of curatorial expertise and professional success. Reckitt connects this shift to the impacts of unstable and shrinking public funding, linking it to a condition that has emerged for curators since the financial crisis of 2008, which has "contributed to a redefinition of curatorial care in which the affective labour of human contact and interaction have displaced conventional curatorial responsibilities of conservation and scholarship."<sup>12</sup>

Forms of public acknowledgement, such as art prizes, successful grant applications, publication and public exhibitions, are, on the face of it, meant to reward artists and art workers for their innovation and, in some cases, meant to acknowledge the difficulty of financially sustaining a practice within the wizing forms of state support for the arts, while

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<sup>11</sup> Feher, "Self-Appreciation," 25.

<sup>12</sup> Helena Reckitt, "Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 5:1 (2016): 6–30.

such achievements further indicate, to potential institutional curators, art directors and collectors, who next to pursue as living capital. This reputational economy extends to all workers in the art world, whether they are artists, critics, writers, curators, directors or other administrators struggling within museum complexes. As Feher notes,

Insofar as our condition is that of human capital in a neoliberal environment, our main purpose is not so much to profit from our accumulated potential as to constantly value or appreciate ourselves—or at least prevent our own depreciation ... a change of purpose [that] ultimately distinguishes the neoliberal condition from its liberal predecessor.<sup>13</sup>

Since the aim in this condition is no longer to increase or maximize profitability and prevent depreciation, the concern of the neoliberal subject is now, according to Feher, “the impact of their conducts, and thus of the satisfaction they may draw from them, on the level of their self-appreciation or self-esteem.”<sup>14</sup> Such satisfaction applies not just to forms of actual monetary benefit or income, but also to increased appreciation through an expanded subjectivity: from avoiding anxiety, to sleeping better to enhance productivity, to rigorously pursuing enjoyment in the pleasures of life, to gaining an understanding of the natural world through sciences, spiritual matters, literature or arts and culture. The goal is 24-hour self-improvement, the possibility of a round-the-clock project for a better, more informed and more valuable human subject.

In her text *Ugly Feelings*, cultural theorist and literary critic Sianne Ngai contends that “capitalism’s classic affects of disaffection (and thus of potential social conflict and political antagonism) are neatly reabsorbed by the wage system and reconfigured into its professional ideals,” and are therefore both “perversely functional ... as lubricants of the economic

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<sup>13</sup> Feher, “Self-Appreciation,” 27.

<sup>14</sup> Feher, “Self-Appreciation,” 27.

system which they originally came into being to oppose [and] integrated into the Post-Fordist organization of labour.”<sup>15</sup> The ‘ugly feelings’ of envy, irritation and anxiety, among others, are transformed, as Ngai frames it in Paolo Virno’s terms, into “fear ... [as] *an operational requirement*, a special tool of the trade,” which in conditions of precarity translate into “flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure oneself.”<sup>16</sup>

As a response, Ngai suggests, literature may be a space where these feelings can be potentially mobilized “beyond the domain of the aesthetic proper, since the situation of restricted agency from which all of them ensue is one that describes art’s own position in a highly differentiated and totally commodified society.”<sup>17</sup> Ngai argues that since art and literature as forms of cultural practice have been bracketed, in late modernity, as a separate space of aesthetics outside the political sphere, it also means that their apparent powerlessness to change society as a result of being set outside provides a self-reflexive preoccupation with this condition that may be the very thing that allows it to be “capable of theorizing social powerlessness in a manner unrivalled by other forms of cultural praxis.”<sup>18</sup> Her contention echoes that of Hannah Arendt, who maintains the political power of storytelling in worldmaking, and its ability to produce an “intensity and richness of *meaning* ... without committing the error of defining it ... it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are.”<sup>19</sup> Ngai further suggests that ‘ugly feelings’ “can thus be thought of as a mediation between the aesthetic and the

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<sup>15</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 4, from Paolo Virno, “The Ambivalence of Disenchantment,” in *Radical Thought in Italy*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Isak Dinesen 1885–1963,” in *Men in Dark Times* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 105.

political,”<sup>20</sup> as if the self and the body are, in Simone Weil’s terms, “a lever for salvation.”<sup>21</sup>

While the task of producing a character fuses modernist devices of fictioning with allegory, theme and plot in reflective and lyrical prose, writing a figure is something that is archival, documentary, formed and shaped in the space of present time as an act of accretion and accumulation. It is this mediation that Chris Kraus accomplishes so effectively in her 1997 novel *I Love Dick*.

The ‘narrative’ follows Chris, a married art writer and failed filmmaker, who develops a crush on Dick, a colleague of her husband, theorist Sylvère Lotringer. This event forms the structure by which Kraus constructs a view of the art world and the vulnerable affects of its public life. Together, Chris and Sylvère write almost two hundred letters, their bond renewed through the exercise of seducing Dick. The two consider how to present these to the object of her/their affection: an art installation? A performance? Once Dick is finally notified of the project and Chris’s infatuation, he declines any involvement. The novel is therefore divided into two parts: “Scenes from a Marriage,” where the couple in some way renew their bond as they write and perform cultural analysis on their letters; and the second half, “Every Letter Is a Love Letter,” where Chris moves away from her marriage and constructs the narrative and the address to Dick primarily on her own, and we see her begin to craft a new form for her life as she continues to write to Dick. For his part, Dick remains almost entirely silent and does not respond, though there seem to be at least two encounters between Chris and Dick in the latter section of the book.

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<sup>20</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Simone Weil, quoted by Chris Kraus in *Aliens and Anorexia* (New York/Los Angeles: Semoitext(e), 2000).

In her novel, Kraus exemplifies a form of contemporary writing that provides an archive of feelings through storytelling, without necessarily providing catharsis. Rather than being a sorter of ‘good and bad feeling,’ as Carr’s writing was to her in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Kraus’s novel is emblematic of the fissures indicated by Feher’s neoliberal ‘self-appreciation’: functioning on ‘feelings which go nowhere’; repetitions such as ongoing nomadic professional travel and real estate deals; the idiosyncrasies of others, whose failures and successes seem misleadingly character driven and disembedded from political, structural or systemic relations that doom or protect them; as well as repetitive unhappy experiences of loveless relations—institutional and intimate. Unlike Carr, Kraus focuses specifically on non-cathartic feelings, those which in Ngai’s view “do not facilitate action, do not lead to or culminate in some kind of purgation or release,” but focus on “irritation, for example, as opposed to anger” and are “politically ambiguous, but good for diagnosing states of suspended agency, due in part to their diffusiveness and/or lack of definite objects.”<sup>22</sup> *I Love Dick* is in tone diffuse—a collection of critical writing as well as stories of the figure ‘Chris’ and her encounters with the sublimated political violence of neoliberalism. As Chris summarizes, “Art supersedes what’s personal. It’s a philosophy that serves patriarchy well and I followed it more or less for 20 years. That is: until I met you” (*Dick*, 230). The figure of Dick becomes both a protagonist and a foil that allows Chris to explore how she has been played.

### Let Me Pay

Kraus’s writing has been called auto-fiction, epistolary novel and “theoretical fiction.”<sup>23</sup> When *I Love Dick* was published in 1997, the

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<sup>22</sup> Adam Jasper and Sianne Ngai, “Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai,” *Cabinet*, 43 (Fall 2011): [http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper\\_ngai.php](http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php). Accessed December 15, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Joan Hawkins, “Afterword,” in *I Love Dick*, 247.



novel was questioned as memoir, confession, bona fide account of a ‘woman scorned,’ self-indulgent, narcissistic and “secreted rather than written.”<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that when it was first published, the work garnered little attention, but it received acclaim on its 2006 re-publication, some reviewers suggesting that the work was written ten years before its time and had now landed in its appropriate zeitgeist.<sup>25</sup> Kraus’s novel is prescient; using the details of her own life as political example has an even greater public in 2020 than it did in 1997—intermediated by the shared, decentralized, ‘self-publishing’ platform of the internet and social media.

Kraus’s work is exemplary of ‘ugly feeling,’ in Ngai’s conceptualization, as a key emotional constellation that operationally reveals the heteronormative conditions of patriarchy, late capitalism and neoliberalism. However, rather than resting at naming its systemic repression or simply providing a description of it as a non-personal condition of the art world, Kraus fixes her gaze directly on it to consider its *methods*, as an object and a body who has deeply felt its injuries—creating a figural ‘Chris’ who is sometimes devastated, sometimes enraged, often defeated and ironic. In the “Lonely Girl Phenomenology” or “The Dumb Cunt’s Tale” (*Dick*, 27), her primary question is “WHO GETS TO SPEAK AND WHY?” (*Dick*, 91).

In *I Love Dick*, Kraus examines her ‘ugly feelings’ by narrating the figure of Chris within her text. This protagonist is inscribed with a kind of journalistic bird’s-eye view, cataloguing universalized and omniscient forms of rejection that produce failure and abjection as a collective affect. The infatuation that makes Chris vulnerable as a figure in the novel, and

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<sup>24</sup> David Rimanelli, quoted by Leslie Jamison, “This Female Consciousness: On Chris Kraus,” *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/this-female-consciousness-on-chris-kraus>. Accessed on February 23, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Elle Hunt, “Chris Kraus: I Love Dick Was Written in a Delirium,” *The Guardian*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/30/chris-kraus-i-love-dick-was-written-in-a-delirium>. Accessed June 12, 2017.

which destroyed the female protagonists of modern novels like *Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*, instead provides the condition for her appearance. By writing from this vulnerability, her position in the public realm is revealed. It is an act of creative self-determination that seeds her resilience within the debilitating subjectivity framed in earlier modern patriarchal novel conventions for a desiring female subject.

Within this subjectivity, as well, is a cognizance that global pressures have produced her vulnerability—ultimately identifying these feelings as the art world’s primary affects. Her entry into the public sphere via this world is enacted through writing, which, as Ngai suggests, reflects the fact that

situations of passivity, as uniquely disclosed and interpreted by ignoble feelings like envy (of the disempowered for the powerful) or paranoia (about one’s perceived status as a small subject in a “total system”), can also be thought of as allegories for an autonomous or bourgeois art’s increasingly resigned and pessimistic understanding of its *own* relationship to political action [within the condition of seeming irrelevance, and are] ... a prime occasion for ugly feelings.<sup>26</sup>

Kraus’s unique contribution stems from her ability to describe emotional responses to this condition with an understanding that they represent a shared affect, tooling her intellectual curiosity to present Chris not merely as a figure within the context of the art world, but to present ‘Chris’ as a *constellation* of figures that together are emblematic. Relating to *conditions*, rather than self-expression, the figure of Chris is produced and configures the apparatus of its emergence—that is, the condition that produced her, in Rogoff’s terms.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> As noted in the introduction, Irit Rogoff asserts that a useful methodology for research is an assemblage of practices arising out of a set of conditions as a way of resisting the capturing of subjectivity by instrumentalizing forces. Rogoff posits that this focus on conditions grounds the research differently, encouraging researchers to regard the output of one’s work as a set of protocols and methods.

In the novel, Chris, Dick and Sylvère are each critically placed within contexts that not only inform their actions, but are conditions which produce their collective figuration within a neoliberal logic.

As mentioned, *I Love Dick* is divided into two parts, “Scenes from a Marriage” and “Every Letter Is a Love Letter,” separating the text into a figural before and after for its protagonist, Chris. “Scenes from a Marriage” follows her conjugal life with her husband, Sylvère Lotringer. It also delineates a shift in Chris’s appearance as a figure in the public sphere, from wife/failed filmmaker to an afterward that she seeks to orient herself within. “Scenes from A Marriage” begins the novel in the third person and introduces Dick to the couple. Its initial format resembles a screenplay synopsis and is affectively distantiating: establishing protagonists and antagonists, setting, time, immediate preceding action. At the same time, its date entry and tone seem to suggest a journal, letter or police report:

December 3, 1994

Chris Kraus, a 39-year-old experimental filmmaker and Sylvère Lotringer, a 56-year old college professor from New York, have dinner with Dick \_\_\_\_\_, a friendly acquaintance of Sylvère’s, at a sushi bar in Pasadena. Dick is an English cultural critic who’s recently relocated from Melbourne to Los Angeles. Chris and Sylvère have spent Sylvère’s sabbatical at a cabin in Crestline, a small town in the San Bernardino Mountains some 90 minutes from Los Angeles. Since Sylvère begins teaching again in January, they will soon be returning to New York. Over dinner the two men discuss recent trends in postmodern critical theory and Chris who is no intellectual, notices Dick making continual eye contact with her. Dick’s attention makes her feel powerful, and when the check comes she takes out her Diner’s Club card. “Please,” she says. “Let me pay.” (*Dick*, 19)

This ‘scene’ efficiently gives us the ‘landscape’ that will be the core of the novel. Chris is ‘no intellectual’ (says who?—the tone of Kraus, the doubled narrator and writer, is as neutral as a voiceover), and she reports

that attraction and potential seduction make her feel powerful. It's a power that is expressed by her offer to pay for the meal for, as Chris writes later in the novel, "after building up my husband's academic/cultural career and investing all his money I have enough to live on so long as I don't spend too much. And luckily my husband is a very reasonable man" (*Dick*, 192). Afterwards, Dick suggests they stay overnight at his home to avoid snowfall predicted on the highway that evening. We learn that Chris was, years before, a performer, and that her co-performer, Liza, was "dazzlingly sexy and dangerous and beautiful," while "no one at the show that night had found Chris's pale anaemic looks and piercing gaze remotely endearing. Could anyone?" (*Dick*, 20).

At Dick's remote hideaway home in the desert, he shows them his own "hopelessly naïve" art which, Chris notes, functions as "certain kinds of bad art" does, offering a "transparency into the hopes and desires of the person who made it" and making "the viewer much more active." She realizes retrospectively in the text that this operation she performs so easily is linked to Jane Eyre's attraction to Rochester: "bad characters," she concludes, "invite invention" (*Dick*, 21). Accepting Dick's gracious offer to stay the night, Sylvère and Chris camp out on his pull-down couch; in the morning they wake to an empty house and leave, beginning their analysis of the evening at a neighbouring IHOP restaurant. Chris, we find out, "does not express herself in theoretical language," so "no one expects too much from her and she is used to tripping out on layers of complexity in total silence" (*Dick*, 21). In the novel, Dick crosses boundaries of both character and figure as one who invites narratorial invention and projection, while himself a 'layered' figure in the art system: an ambitious professional who seeks affiliation with Chris's well-known theoretician husband. Chris's feelings about Dick are what we come to know, and they are as perplexing to her as her inability to find an expression for her own thoughts outside of the theoretical. It is here that the novel begins:

What touched me was all the windows of vulnerability in your house ... so Spartan and self-conscious. The propped up *Some Girls* album cover, the dusky walls, how out of date and declassé. But I'm a sucker for despair, for faltering—that moment when the act breaks down, ambition fails. I love it and feel guilty for perceiving it and then the warmest indescribable affection floods in to drown the guilt. (*Dick*, 11)

Chris, as a protagonist, is an emotional researcher the way that Kraus, the writer, is: she observes her own movements in a deadpan way. She is curious, emotionally divested from the 'love story,' locating it in a kind of quizzical reportage; this is an equivocation that provides, as Ngai outlines, "surprising power." And Ngai further suggests that "weak affects and aesthetic categories [have] become ... paradoxically central to late capitalist culture ... [as] aesthetic experiences grounded in equivocal affects ... grounded on feelings that explicitly clash."<sup>28</sup> Rather than the story of a broken heart or an abject failure, the tone of the text is a kind of strategic rumination on infatuation—that is, the use of rumination as a methodology reveals its instrumental and produced features as a collective rather than individual affect. Or, as Kraus notes, "Maybe actions are all that really matters now. What people do together overshadows Who They Are. If I can't make you fall in love with me for who I am, maybe I can interest you with what I understand" (*Dick*, 11).

Formally, Kraus signals her focus on collective affects by how she structures her novel. It is a method that neatly expresses the 'weak affects' in Ngai's terms, of how a neoliberal subject replaces 'Who They Are' with what they do together and what they understand. The initial 'screenplay synopsis' that opens "Scenes from A Marriage" splits into two interiorities, that of Chris and Sylvère, in second-person narrations told via letters addressed directly to Dick. The character of the husband takes a central role in constructing the conceptual form of the writing and the format by which Chris should write; in fact, he writes the first letter to

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<sup>28</sup> Jasper and Ngai, "Our Aesthetic Categories."

Dick himself. It is through their address that Dick becomes a character. The second letter they then write together, “passing the laptop back and forth,” and it is summarized in omniscient third-person narration. Sylvère is narrated as writing to Dick (but he may well be speaking of the power of such figural appearance within Feher’s notion of ‘self-appreciation’): “Thanks to you, she’s been reminded of a bigger picture ... and we’re all potentially bigger people than we are” (*Dick*, 29). This seems to be almost a jokey reference to the meta of a modern novel—its aspiration to provide a ‘bigger picture’ as a tale that is instructional, allegorical or telling a tale of morals or ethics.

At the beginning of the novel the husband feels the animation provided by the letter writing is positive—“Why does Sylvère entertain this?” Chris asks, and then conjectures, also in third person,

It could be that for the first time since last summer, Chris seems animated and alive, and since he loves her, Sylvère can’t bear to see her sad. It could be that he’s reached an impasse with the book he’s writing on modernism and the holocaust ... It could be that he’s perverse. (*Dick*, 21)

The intimacy of the shared letter writing and discussion of Dick and the feelings he elicits in Chris at first reignite a new bond between them—since “they are no longer having sex, the two maintain their intimacy via deconstruction: i.e., they tell each other everything” (*Dick*, 21). Chris tells Sylvère that she and Dick, during their shared evening together, experienced a “Conceptual Fuck” (*Dick*, 266). She also tells Sylvère about “the subcultural subtext she and Dick both share: she’s reminded of all the fuzzy one-time fucks she’s had with men who’re out the door before her eyes are open” (*Dick*, 266).

Chris at first attempts to write about it as a story, called “Abstract Romanticism.” It’s the first one she has written in five years. She begins by addressing it to the ghost of an old friend, David Rattray, who she feels is posthumously “pushing her to understand infatuation, how the

loved person can become a holding pattern for all the tattered ends of memory, experience and thought you've ever had" (*Dick*, 23). Using an omniscient narratorial device to tell the future, Chris tells us that when Dick eventually calls her she could have confessed, but "there was so much static on the line, and already she was afraid of him" (*Dick*, 24). If she had been able to confess, the narrator tells us, "this story would've taken another turn" (*Dick*, 24).

Taking up the idea of stories 'taking turns,' one might consider how at each 'turn' the figure is further revealed, and that this is the process of figuration in both painting and writing—emergence rather than a priori stasis/discovery. It is a turn that is not epistolary but conversational. Kraus's texts shift between these turns, first-, second- and third-person narrations, in order to piece together the conditions of Chris's life and production within art world(s). Kraus refuses the art world's 'one-way conversation,' insisting on having the last word on its delegitimizing forces by speaking anyway, speaking without the privileges, as she narrates them, of success, beauty or wealth, and turning these conditions into empirical objects to be critically examined and witnessed as non-subjective, non-intimate forces.

The character Chris addresses the bulk of her observations in the novel to Dick. Dick is initially her prompt, and then a silent recipient, an imagined listener who does not respond but invokes a liberating effect on Kraus's ability to write a novel, something that she has long aspired to but which had eluded her. Thus, Dick galvanizes her own 'one-way' conversation back out into the world. Although she may seem an object of disdain within a patriarchal construction—as a thwarted lover, in anti-feminist terms—she gets exactly what she wants from Dick by using him as an object for her own 'self-appreciation'—which incidentally includes the erotics of finding a voice after feeling voiceless, and becoming visible after lamenting a career and a life that ended up, in her experience, as a feeling of being not just sexually or privately on the edges, but



also professionally Lotringer's 'plus one.' Addressing Dick then allows her to begin, for this infatuation becomes a scene of natality: it gives birth to her desire to write. Chris tells us it has been years since she felt any passion to tell a story. By writing to Dick as an addressee, she is motivated by her desire to hear her story told, to hear 'who' has appeared by narrating the self, in Adriana Cavarero's terms. To do so, Chris embraces a 'shameless' figuration. As Mira Mattar writes,

Shamelessness is key in making the personal political, the private public, without which neither release nor action are possible. Nothing is (only) personal. But this self-speaking must be distinct from confession, identified by Foucault as an act of shame and guilt, laced with a plea for forgiveness—insidiously compulsory at this moment in history ... How can candid speech about one's own experience allow for abstraction from it? What starting point does the self offer?<sup>29</sup>

Candid speech allows the injury to be addressed and in so doing offers the possibility for resilience. Kraus's uses of persona, self-disclosure and personal archive function as the novel's self-rupturing methodologies to consider how such methods cultivate a resilient subject.

### **Desire without Love/Love without Desire**

The Young-Girl wants to be desired without love or loved without desire. There is no threat, in either case, to her unhappiness.<sup>30</sup>

One answer to Mattar's question of a starting point may be in a model of abstract figuration which occurs in the text *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, originally published in France in 1999 by the journal *Tiqqun*—a name that became synonymous with the philosophical concepts emanating from its publications. Developed as a figural conceptualization that emerges as *a set of conditions* rather than a singu-

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<sup>29</sup> Mira Mattar, "Introduction," in *You Must Make Your Death Public*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Invention Series, 2012), 29.

lar subjectivity, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* was subsequently translated in 2012 by Semiotext(e), the journal founded by Kraus and Lotringer.

Both Tiqqun and Kraus work within the dialectical structure of the *mise-en-abyme*, but Kraus's configuration differs in the sense that there is a mode of address: Chris addresses Dick as a listener, an addressee who is also becoming figured through this act of storytelling —a reversal of the modernist novel's female protagonist as a figure shaped and written by patriarchal codes.

In Tiqqun's terms, Chris can be understood as a Young-Girl figure, although she precedes Tiqqun's publication of the *Preliminary Materials* by two years. Tiqqun provides an incisive language, beyond the psychological, to theorize the experience of figuration as human capital. While Kraus shows how we can appear vulnerably in the public sphere, Tiqqun reveals how this vulnerability is operational, strategic and self-instrumentalizing as a form of resistance. Kraus sees and speaks to her conditioning within the art world and insists on her positionality as an observer. She is not interested in working through the theoretical as a form of manifesto, as Tiqqun does, and instead works on the *conditions*, so that despite the silence she describes in Chris, Kraus is able to resiliently occupy a speaking position through writing, transforming her novel from confessional tale to political undertaking, to resistance.

Tiqqun's work, influenced by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and his concept of 'bare life,' does not refer to a specific author but is indicative of a 'point of origin.' From this point of origin, the figure of the Young-Girl emerges. The Young-Girl is a collage of conditions, "the *model citizen* as redefined by consumer society since World War I, in explicit response to revolutionary menace. As such, the Young-Girl

is a *polar figure*, orienting, rather than dominating, outcomes.”<sup>31</sup> She is shaped by a manifesto-like table of contents, partitioned into a series of techniques or “*anthropotechnical*” categories:

1. The Young-Girl as Phenomenon
  2. The Young-Girl as Technique of the Self
  3. The Young-Girl as Social Relation
  4. The Young-Girl as Commodity
  5. The Young-Girl as Living Currency
  6. The Young-Girl as Compact Political Apparatus
  7. The Young-Girl as War Machine
  8. The Young-Girl Against Communism
  9. The Young-Girl Against Herself
  10. Putting an End to the Young-Girl
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The Young-Girl is an aggregate. She (although she may be any gender or age) is the beloved object of the narcissistic subjectivity of consumer society—at once elevated and devalued, always in-relation-to and never autonomous. Her figure represents libidinal freedom while it is completely constrained by the affects which produce her. If Tiqqun’s Young-Girl figure could write a book about her besiegement (released quietly via underground, or retroactively in the 1970s pulp magazine *True Confessions*), we might find a construct similar to what Kraus invents as a category for writing in *I Love Dick*, as when Tiqqun states that “Seduction is the new opium of the masses. It is liberty for a world without liberty, joy for a world without joy.”<sup>33</sup> After modernism’s attempt to define the nature of being and of progress, what remains? A series of disintegrating ideological “post-” prefixes, cleverly evolved into the only accessible site of political and philosophical mediation in neoliberalism: the self as an abstraction produced under surveillance. Neither autonomous nor expressive nor psychological, it is simply instrumental. It is “this ideologically emaciated self and its non-place, the body of the Young-Girl, through which one senses instead an *orientation* where

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<sup>31</sup> Tiqqun, excerpts from *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, on the Triple Canopy website, [https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/preliminary\\_materials\\_for\\_a\\_theory\\_of\\_the\\_young\\_girl](https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/preliminary_materials_for_a_theory_of_the_young_girl). Accessed on March 15, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Tiqqun, *Young-Girl*, x.

<sup>33</sup> Tiqqun, *Young-Girl*, x.

these transactions take place. This figure, expressed by Tiqqun, emerges because

capitalism realized that it could no longer maintain itself as the exploitation of human labor if it did not also colonize everything that is beyond the strict sphere of production. Faced with the challenge from socialism, capital too would have to socialize. It had to create its own culture, its own leisure, medicine, urbanism, sentimental education and its own mores, as well as a disposition toward their perpetual renewal.<sup>34</sup>

Young-Girls are therefore primarily distinguished by their appearance as “conduits and victims of contemporary capitalism’s pervasive violence.”<sup>35</sup> The Young-Girl performs a kind of figural death according to Mattar: “a detachment from one’s own boundaries of self in order to transgress them. A happy disregard for the integrity of the self, a necessarily public death of that self.”<sup>36</sup>

Rather than turning away from the violence of this figuration, Kraus turns towards it, laying out its injuries and unpunished transgressions against it as losses for all to see, and they shimmer with eternal (non-time) presence. This is an act of resistance. The figure of Chris predicts Tiqqun’s theoretical framework. As Kraus says, “the crime scene becomes the only place where time stops.”<sup>37</sup> In this sense, Kraus’s protagonist in *I Love Dick* not only shifts narratorial position but also collapses temporalities; her figure is uniquely anachronistic as well as aggregate/collective. Her stories condense as Young-Girl scenes: Chris moves in the text from early memories of her first abject sexual encounters to her early realization that Sylvère, then her lover, was not in love with her, and from there to her experimentation with S

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<sup>34</sup> Tiqqun, *Young-Girl*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Tiqqun, *Young-Girl*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> Mattar, “Introduction,” 15.

<sup>37</sup> Kraus, “Calle Art,” 176.

& M, and on to a scene of literally getting lost in her own backyard in the wintry countryside of upstate New York after her separation from Sylvère, a scene that is more life-threatening since they are no longer together and no one is likely to discover her missing should she not return. Kraus indicates these appearances as temporalities that resist placement in narratorial or character-driven arcs, as in a conventional novel. She is not interested in character development to drive plot, nor is she interested in the form of time-shifting, relativistic diaristic confession. Time, for Kraus as for the Young-Girl, is another material in which to place the forces that produce the neoliberal's affective conditions, the scene of the crime and nothing more:

The old age of the Young-Girl is no less hideous than her youth. From one end to the other, her life is nothing but a progressive shipwreck in formlessness, and never an irruption of becoming. The Young-Girl wallows in the limbo of time.<sup>38</sup>

In *I Love Dick*, Chris travels back in history and across real estate, also shuttling from place/time to place/time. Each of these represents a scene, a backdrop but also a signature of how lives can be lived, who falls away and who has access to visibility and to care. In the small village in upstate New York where Chris owns a farmhouse, the former site of a failed holiday camp—a ruin of the past within which the present unfolds as a further event—there are also people whose lives are in ruin: real estate venturers whose risks didn't pan out (as they have for the protagonist, who suddenly finds herself 'getting by' but only after a lot of time and effort have passed). For these vulnerable others, their get-rich schemes are strategies for the good life that didn't get a 'purchase.' All of these lives not taking hold begin to feel like a body count as the novel progresses. The equanimity with which the narrator charts them is tender: the 'failed' are infinitely more beloved to Chris than those whose privilege protects their bourgeois expressions of value and intellectual

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<sup>38</sup> Tiqqun, *Young-Girl*, 29.

engagement. The terrain that Kraus, the writer, maps is vast: people moving across country and across continents, packing up, unpacking again, hosting, being hosted, camping out, squatting, or, like Dick, living alone in a desert house that represents a retreat and a new performative start, a cowboy-persona existence despite the fact that all the while he is scrutinizing her motives and ultimately rejecting her, Dick laments his loneliness.

Landscape, land, property and place become imagined sites for recognition as well as sites for the removal and political disenfranchisement of those who are deemed not to belong, whether for economic, social or racial and cultural reasons. “Loving you was a kind of truth-drug because you knew everything,” Chris says of the man who actively resists knowing her (*Dick*, 235). Dick is a figure she creates and around which she coalesces, becoming her own resilient figure who may vulnerably appear in the public sphere, for, as she says,

You made me think it might be possible to reconstruct a life 'cause after all, you'd walked away from yours. If I could love you consciously, take an experience that was so completely female and subject it to an abstract analytic system, then perhaps I had a chance of understanding something and could go on living.  
(*Dick*, 236)

For Kraus, the “case study” apparatus provides clarity for approaching the figure of Chris. *I Love Dick* examines a writer and female art worker as a figure of the underclass within a capitalist framework, a figure under siege. Kraus’s novel sits at the crossroads: her protagonist is quixotically confident in her abilities and perplexed by the lack of recognition she receives. She does not debate the rejections she receives on the level of the work and its merits (though she may agree or disagree, this does not form the subject for her writing), but, rather, she holds up for scrutiny the ways in which these rejections are realized and disseminated, almost as an archaeological shard of neoliberal affect in crystallized form:

To be female still means being trapped within the purely psychological. No matter how dispassionate or large a vision of the world a woman formulates, whenever it includes her own experience and emotion, the telescope's turned back on her. Because emotion's just so terrifying the world refuses to believe that it can be pursued as a discipline, as form. Dear Dick, I want to make the world more interesting than my problems. Therefore, I have to make my problems social. (*Dick*, 196)

In Kraus's hands, the creeping knowledge of her film not shown at the film festival, her name not appearing on the guest list, demonstrate the failing ethics of this world, its forms of emaciating disengagement from real lives lived vulnerably, such as those of her neighbours, who fall away at the margins in upstate New York.

Kraus speaks instead to the structural violence that makes populations vulnerable: "I think class is the big barrier in the US," she has said in an interview.

No one wants to talk about it, no one wants to admit to it, and very few people want to advocate for it ... To be of the lower class is to be a loser, and everybody wants to be a winner. The persistent lie of American capitalism is that everyone can be a winner ... [It's] a very political act, to admit that I'm a loser, because then maybe you can admit it too. And then maybe we can all together look at why we're losers and how the system is rigged against us.<sup>39</sup>

Kraus's position of resiliency is to speak from within the logic of capitalism, to speak from inside the injuries it inflicts. Political action reveals vulnerability, in Butler's terms: in turn, to be vulnerable is to make way for political life. By speaking from within this structural violence, from which there is no outside, a new architecture is formed for its appearance. Kraus notes, "Don't you think reality is best attained through dialectics?" (*Dick*, 14). Rather than being spoken for by others, whether in gendered, economic or classist frameworks, Kraus's invitation demon-

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<sup>39</sup> Julie Phillips, "The Art of Losing: A Talk with Chris Kraus" (2016), on Julie Phillips website, <https://www.julie-phillips.com/wp/?p=879>. Accessed on February 27, 2018.



strates how to bear being vulnerable in the public sphere, not by keeping secrets, but by telling one's story of shame, shamelessly. By doing this, one can find a place to appear, to renounce it. In fact, the very telling is what makes it "shameless," for as Sara Ahmed tells us, shame is the exposure of the self to others, having failed to live up to some ideal of the self that is a shared value, an aspiration and

shame requires an identification with the other who, as witness, returns the subject to itself. The view of this other is the view that I have taken on in relation to myself; I see myself as if I were this other. My failure before this other hence is profoundly a failure of myself to myself. In shame, I expose to myself that I am a failure through the gaze of an ideal other.<sup>40</sup>

By exposing this relation of the ideal other to the readers of her novel through the figures of Chris and Dick, Kraus calls into question the gaze of the other not only in feminist terms, but also as an act of making visible the reproducibility of neoliberal forces within that imagined gaze. As Ahmed writes,

Idealisation, which creates the effect of an ideal, is contingent because it is dependent on the values that are 'given to' subjects through their encounters with others. It is the gift of the ideal rather than the content of the ideal that matters. Such an 'ideal' is what sticks subjects together (coherence); through love, which involves the desire to be 'like' an other, as well as to be recognised by an other, an ideal self is produced as an approximation of the other's being. Through love, an ideal self is produced as a self that belongs to a community; the ideal is a proximate 'we'. If we feel shame, we feel shame because we have failed to approximate 'an ideal' that has been given to us through the practices of love. What is exposed in shame is the failure of love, as a failure that in turn exposes or shows our love.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 106.

<sup>41</sup> Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," 106.

Here, the practices of the beloved other, the acceptance into the fold, are revealed as a poison, as a flawed community, where an ideal has been eroded and has in fact not provided the sustenance, and has not lived up to its promise, of love. It is this failed promise that becomes the precondition for Chris to be released from shame: in being exposed, in being a vulnerable subject and in understanding the lack of care offered by the current condition, she is free from the shame of longing for it. If, in Ahmed's terms, one can only be shamed by the one you love, be turned away from that which you aspire to cleave to—a community, a person, an ideal—liberation from shame, shamelessness, comes from devaluing the object of one's attention and desire. Kraus's recognition of 'Dick' as a formal invention that has come into being through her desire allows her to begin a public life as a writer, and allows the aggressions she describes to become clear to her as structural violence. Her resilience is therefore arrived at by writing through this recognition.

### **Love/Sick**

*I Love Dick* links systemic and personal lovelessness, rejection and failure metaphorically to illness. Chris suffers from attacks of Crohn's disease which sometimes leave her hospitalized—attacks which, the narrator explains, Sylvère knows how to circumvent. It is during one of Chris's hospitalizations, Kraus writes, which occurred after she realized Sylvère's lack of true feeling for her, that the attachment which results in their marriage, paradoxically, begins. He becomes, as a result of her vulnerability, her greatest and keenest listener. Before this attack, Kraus writes that their relationship had been a series of lunch-hour encounters, which Chris had not known how to decipher. Her body registers her inability to perform this detachment. Denying her vulnerability, the precondition in Butler's terms for her political emergence, has instead created a crisis in which she begins to see how illness is part of the conditioning of the

neoliberal subject for either defeat or insight. Later, recalling working overtime in a film studio, Chris writes,

The week I spent doing post-production at the Wexner Centre in Columbus I was sick with Crohn's Disease, as if my body was negating the illusion of momentum. Functioning over waves of pain by day, throwing up at night, it's like a hysteria of the organs, walls of the intestine swollen so it's impossible to eat or even drink a glass of water. (*Dick*, 85)

It is interesting to note that Kraus links this inflammation to hysteria. Novelist and theorist Susan Sontag, in her text *Illness and Metaphor*, traces the development of modern ideas of politics with a change in approach to ideas of disease. As Sontag notes, "with the French Revolution ... disease metaphors in the modern sense came into their own ... not to be managed or treated; they are to be attacked," which in times of totalitarian crisis can mean that "to liken a political event or situation to an illness is to impute guilt, to proscribe punishment ... it amounts to saying first of all, that the event or situation is unqualifiedly and unredeemably wicked."<sup>42</sup> Using cancer and TB as her primary examples, Sontag writes that

the most striking similarity between the myths of TB and of cancer is that both are, or were, understood as diseases of passion. Fever in TB was a sign of an inward burning: the tubercular is someone "consumed" by ardour, that ardour leading to the dissolution of the body. The use of metaphors drawn from TB to describe love—the image of a "diseased" love, of a passion that "consumes" ... TB was

conceived as a variant of the disease of love ... [while cancer was considered a disease of] insufficient passion.<sup>43</sup>

If passions are what invoked the doers of great deeds in eighteenth-century revolutionary literature, chronic illness may be seen as the literary

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<sup>42</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 80.

<sup>43</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 20.

device for the twenty-first-century malaise of ugly feeling. These suffering bodies become evidence, as well as the site of politics. After meeting Dick, Chris looks back on her marriage and pieces together scenes that testify to her belief in its lack—her having to vacate the house before Sylvere’s daughter’s visits, for example. Where Sontag sees the uses of illness as metaphor as “punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation: not real geography, but stereotypes of national character,”<sup>44</sup> for Kraus as a writer, Crohn’s damaging erosive effects on her protagonist indicate suffering as the quotidian, nauseating, repetitive and emaciating effect of rejection. Sontag objects to the ways in which these metaphors reduce illness and foreclose scientific understanding, care and treatment, while Kraus links her illness to ideation, not as historical or nationalistic metaphor, but as affects that align in a neoliberal art world about certain types of ideological expressions or methods, and how these methods are reproduced in and emanate through bodies and across temporal registers of capitalism.

In her book *The Sick Rule the World*, Dodie Bellamy writes, in a melding of memoir, theory and essay, about the excesses of sick bodies, of how the amelioration of illness begets a subset of activities and accoutrements. The negating force of autoimmune disease, for example, might for the legion of the sick be the result of cell towers, cleaning products or proximities to golf courses, rather than a matter of passion. The technology of wellness, rather than providing an emotional catharsis, as in Sontag’s evaluation of illness’s appearances in previous centuries, becomes in Bellamy’s text a set of practices for self-improvement or, as in Feher’s framework, ‘self-appreciation.’ The emaciation of Crohn’s disease, which interferes with work and erodes the body, is, for the army of the sick in Bellamy’s writing, an archive of remedies: “The sick rinse their bodies with vinegar and dry off with a blowdryer to prevent mold growth,” Bellamy tells us.

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<sup>44</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 3.

The sick travel in used cars which they sell to one another, cars that have never been detailed, that have been aired out and cleared with activated carbon felt blankets and zeolite. Behind their used cars the sick pull teardrop-shaped trailers made from steel and non-fragrant wood. Or vintage bullet-shaped trailers made from steel and porcelain.<sup>45</sup>

The sick are involved in a taxonomy, an administrative task, where they create new genealogies and affinities based on their illness: “The sick will create new families based not on blood but affinity of symptoms. The sick will travel in packs commandeering porcelain-lined fragrance-free buses. The well will no longer delete the email of the sick.”<sup>46</sup>

Bellamy also seems to suggest that the sick may have capacities to disrupt supply chains, markets and economics, for “when the sick rule the world hotel rooms will be obsolete, airplanes will be obsolete, new cars will be obsolete. All existing new cars will be remaindered and shipped to Cuba.”<sup>47</sup> Further, the sick have the capacity to invert the world order, where the sick rule and the well are “breathers” for whom illness inevitably waits:

When the sick rule the world fragrance-free auto shops will keep the old cars running smoothly. All service stations will be full service, the well filling the tanks for the sick. Mechanics and gas jockeys who do not wear gasmasks will soon themselves become sick. The sick refer to people who do not wear gasmasks as “breathers.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Dodie Bellamy, *When the Sick Rule the World* (Los Angeles: semiotext(e)/Active Agents, 2015). Quote from excerpt available online at <https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/bookworm/dodie-bellamy-when-the-sick-rule-the-world/excerpt-from-when-the-sick-rule-the-world>. Accessed June 11, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Bellamy, *When the Sick Rule the World*.

<sup>47</sup> Bellamy, *When the Sick Rule the World*.

<sup>48</sup> Bellamy, *When the Sick Rule the World*.

Bellamy's descriptions brilliantly connect the current conditions of Covid-19, presciently showing us how an intractable virus may make visible the values which structure and shape political life.

The sick are those who have been shown the door, who are capitalism's outside, yet are as dependent on its structures for recognition as are the well. Similarly, Chris's illness shapes her body and creates a tenuous relation to her work. She does not enter its realms so much as understand its emaciation of her will, likening it to an hysteria of her organs, where Bellamy externalizes the hysteria, placing it outside the body in order to reshape the world. Illness becomes a set of *conditions* and *methods*. The 'conditions' which produce wellness or illness are attached to the recognition of capital. An ill body cannot work.

In Bellamy's text, the ill reshape the passivity and exclusion of not working by becoming a tribe that focuses on restructuring their worlds as microcosms where threats are removed. Women artists and their 'performance' of illness are troubled within capitalism, so rather than demonstrating the territory of illness as an erosion of the body's reproducibility, its capitalization, such performances are reduced to further illness, this time of the ego. Kraus, challenging the criticism of Hannah Wilke's work, which later included her own body undergoing cancer treatment, as narcissistic, writes: "As if the only possible reason for a woman to publicly reveal herself could be self-therapeutic. As if the point was not to reveal the circumstances of one's own objectification" (*Dick*, 215).

### **Naming Names**

Kraus's own public revelations are recollected through Chris and immediately told via letter to a second figure, Dick, much the way that Gertrude Stein writes through the figure of the other/her lover, Alice B.

Toklas, to tell her own life story.<sup>49</sup> In that instance, however, Stein brings forth herself as both figure and writer through Toklas, and relies on no intermediary—Alice is merely the transcriptionist. For Kraus, Dick is the addressee, neither taking the role of the narrator nor speaking as a direct unmediated character (until the end of the story, when he sends a letter to Sylvère, and its anaemic duplicate, a photocopy, to Chris). In fact, the whole enterprise is mobilized by his silence, which in the final chapter of the novel he tells Chris he regrets, feeling that if he had spoken, this would have ended the ‘obsession,’ as he sees it, early on. As Cavarero describes, the desire for one’s story rests on hearing it from another. While Carr has desired to hear her story in order to unify herself as a figure, as Stein does, Kraus instead relies on the loveless and silent Dick, who is mute in his confirmation that she exists at all. He is neither transcriptionist nor loving witness. Instead his silence escalates Chris’s anxiety, a metaphor for the nihilistic vacuum of capitalism in the face of vulnerability, while she circles around the ‘how’ of telling her story. Ultimately, the assemblage she arrives at fuses art criticism, journaling, fictioning and film script to create a resilient transdisciplinary figuration. Chris speaks to the *structure* of the novel in a further *mise-en-abyme* passage, considering how figures and characters have functioned in its history as a form:

Because most “serious” fiction, still, involves the fullest possible expression of a single person’s subjectivity, it’s considered crass and amateurish not to “fictionalize” the supporting cast of characters, changing names and insignificant features of their identities. The “serious” contemporary hetero-male novel is a thinly veiled Story of Me, as voraciously consumptive as all of patriarchy. While the hero/anti-hero explicitly is the author, everybody else is reduced to “characters.” (*Dick*, 71)

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<sup>49</sup> This conceptual framework for narration is problematized by Adriana Cavarero in her essay “The Necessary Other” in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2000).



To expand this concept, Chris reflects on Paul Auster's description of his lover, Sophie Calle, in his novel *Leviathan*—"a waif-like creature relieved of complications like ambition or career" (*Dick*, 72)—and how the position of the woman writer is further complicated: "When women try to pierce this false conceit by naming names because our 'I's' are changing as we meet other 'I's,' we're called bitches, libellers, pornographers and amateurs" (*Dick*, 72).

She goes on to tell how writing the 'I' may also locate more specifically a speaking position for the 'I' as an assemblage:

Whenever I tried writing in the 1st Person it sounded like some other person, or else the tritest most neurotic parts of myself ... But now I think okay, that's right, there's no fixed point of self but it exists & by writing you can somehow chart that movement. That maybe 1st Person writing's just as fragmentary as more a-personal collage, it's just more serious: bringing change & fragmentation closer, bringing it down to where you really are. (*Dick*, 139)

In naming names, Kraus the novelist challenges this disciplinary action, yet she uses only Dick's first name throughout the novel (only after its publication was his identity revealed by an article written in *New York* magazine). His discomfort, which is revealed at the end of the novel in his single letter, is flat-footed in the sense that he believes he has been captured by her prose, that it is he who exists there and has been written to, when, instead, he has been deployed as a figure produced by the conditions, methods and pressures of Kraus's own narrative. We know that Kraus attributes some of her own work to Dick—for example, some elements of her publication *Aliens and Anorexia*. As Joan Hawkins tells us in the book's afterword,

Intersubjectivity in the text occurs through intertextuality when distinction between original and citation become blurred ... Given the context, it's hard to say who is quoting from whom [since Kraus is also reading Dick's theoretical work]. And in that sense he can be seen as an "author" of her work. But this doubling up of language and self-referentiality is also an elaborate part of the "game"—a

reminder that even (or perhaps “especially”) critical texts are unstable, are signifying chains which feed off themselves. Even critical texts can be/should be seen as “fiction.”<sup>50</sup>

Chris also tells us, “For years I tried to write but the compromises of my life made it impossible to inhabit a position. And ‘who’ am ‘I’? Embracing you & failure’s changed all that ’cause now I know I’m no one. And there’s a lot to say” (*Dick*, 221). Chris’s reflection on the “I’s” that are transformed in the presence of other “I’s” speaks to Cavarero’s notion of witnessing, the desire to hear one’s story spoken, as well as Arendt’s theorization of natality, our dependence on others to speak the story of our own beginnings. In her novel, Kraus attempts to fuse the witness and the storyteller to break open the notion of the novel itself. “To see yourself as who you were ten years ago can be very strange indeed,” Kraus’s protagonist notes. Indeed, the temporality that provides an assemblage of Chris’s experiences expressed in epistolary novel form includes her past history as first an actor, then filmmaker, in the art world with aspirations. Kraus says, “Oh D, it’s Thursday morning, 9 a.m. and I feel so emotional about this writing. Last night I ‘replaced’ you with an orange candle because I felt you weren’t listening anymore. But I still need for you to listen. Because—don’t you see?—no one is, I’m completely illegitimate” (*Dick*, 191).

Chris’s revelation of the dialogic—which Stein performed by writing her autobiography as ‘biography,’ and which Alice in fact transcribes—is that she has needed a listener all along in order to write. The dialogic form of writing to Dick has allowed Chris finally to explore herself as a vulnerable figure and as a writer. One of the most difficult things that Dick’s ultimate rejection causes is to trouble him as a projected listener. Kraus’s experiment with epistolary novel intersecting with critical art writing also includes, in a new twist on Stein’s method, Chris as narrated and transcribed by Kraus. Or as Sylvere articulates within the novel to

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<sup>50</sup> Hawkins, “Afterword,” 256.

Chris: "In a sense, Dick isn't necessary. He has more to say by not saying anything, and maybe he's aware of it" (*Dick*, 39).

The tone of the narration melds public and private with art criticism in the chapter "Kike Art," writing "DD" as she begins, for "Dear Dick" but also "Dear Diary." Kraus/Chris (for here, in the critical review style of this chapter, she seems to reside in both figure and art writer) then examines the objectifying narrative of the Metropolitan Museum of New York's first major retrospective of Jewish-British artist R.B. Kitaj, whose paintings, Chris tells us, are "never one single statement or one transcendental thing" (*Dick*, 187). Her account of experiencing Kitaj's paintings in the museum, for example—where she is anxious, or peaceful and roving, as she moves between first- and third-person narration and letter writing—demonstrates her taking space within an art historical narrative as its voice. She notes:

[The] facts of Kitaj's life are sketched so bare that he becomes exotic, mythic. The text is telling us that while it may be impossible to love the artist or his work we must admire him ... And so at 62, in his first major retrospective, Kitaj becomes revered/reviled. All the rightness of his work is undermined by singularity. He's a talking dog domesticated into myth. (*Dick*, 188)

Kraus's novel shows us the ways such singularity is a political tool, an imaginary within capitalism. Chris writes about how the exhibition is accompanied by didactic materials and exegesis produced by a museum which seems overanxious to make the artist palatable and that serve to create more distance between the artist and his viewers and peers, noting: "'Exegesis': the crazy person's search for proof that they're not crazy. 'Exegesis' is the word I used in trying to explain myself to you. Did I tell you Dick, I'm thinking of calling all these letters *The Cowboy and the Kike?*" (*Dick*, 187). Turning her gaze to the painting *Nice Old Man*, of venture capitalist and collector Alan Patricoff and his wife, Susan, Kitaj's benefactors and prominent members of the New York art and social scene of the 1960s, Kraus gives us an

elegant description of the painting's space, palette and compositional organization, interweaving historical, social and art historical analyses, finally writing, "*Nice Old Man* draws an outside circle around the giddiness and wit that characterizes Pop Art, a movement read by some as the closest thing the art world's come to Sophisticate Utopia. It's a painting, finally, for victors, reminding us that there're winners & losers in every game" (*Dick*, 191). Kraus has told us who some of those losers are, in fact: in her essay "Pay Attention," she writes:

I'd often wondered why so many of the confrontational, conceptual female artists who were [Chris] Burden's prominent contemporaries in 1971 have disappeared in middle-age to live around New Mexico in teepees, or become massage therapists and cranial-sacral healers. What makes rage become New Age? By all logic, these women now should be our leaders.<sup>51</sup>

Kraus critically and logically tracks how vulnerable figures go public—or go away.

### Compassion

The Young-Girl requires not only that you protect her, she also wants the power to educate you.

The eternal return of the same styles in fashion is enough to convince: The Young-Girl does not play with appearances. It is appearances that play with her.<sup>52</sup>

Kraus's work predictively provides us with an example of the collective affect that Tiqqun's Young-Girl produces, eschewing autobiographical self-expression for *action* ("maybe action's all that really matters now. What people do together overshadows Who They Are" [*Dick*, 11]).

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<sup>51</sup> Chris Kraus, "Pay Attention," in *Video Green*, 61.

<sup>52</sup> Tiqqun, *Young-Girl*, 35.

Kraus's protagonist is also annoyed by some of those who reveal their vulnerability: a young woman friend of Dick's whose feelings are not returned, whose lamentable voice message she overhears the first time she visits Dick's home, and whom Sylvère calls a "bimbo"; the art world couple she finds bourgeois and boring, who have nonetheless seemed to warmly host her and Sylvère at the last minute. The effect is complex: Kraus is abject, but she also knows the worth and strength of her own abilities and is angry about these rejections and enforced invisibilities. Her incisive account of the art world figures she encounters, and to whom she has privileged access, is itself a demonstration of her political power, as her set of professional and collegial associations and her long archive and history in the American art world demonstrate. What the figure of Chris is able to demonstrate are the markings of that history on her as a subject produced by ideologies, politics and specific techniques of repressive state and social systems. Kraus has compassion for Chris, the figure in the text, because of her cognizance of how envy and depression are produced, in Sianne Ngai's terms; but they are, in Kraus's text, affects that contain within them the seeds of healing and re-emergence, rather than simply the repetitive and deadening effects of their sorrows. In this sense, one of *I Love Dick's* revelations is how empathy and compassion for others are suspended within these worlds, and on whose terms.

Sociologist Lauren Berlant proposes what she calls a "counterintuitive view" of compassion, because "knowledge always shapes and is shaped by the scene of its emergence," and,

in the context of the United States, the word *compassion* carries the weight of ongoing debates about the ethics of privilege—in particular about the state as an economic, military, and moral actor that represents and establishes collective norms of obligation, and about individual and collective obligations to read a scene of distress not

as a judgement against the distressed but as a claim on the spectator to become an ameliorative actor.<sup>53</sup>

Therefore the scene of compassion is not one of collective care, enunciated and administered by the state through its policies and procedures, but one which is attended to on a case-by-case basis by individual citizens, who may choose to deny or reject some objects of compassion, while accepting others—in other words, deciding *against* some subjects and advocating *for* others. Kraus interestingly conveys this process of selection along the lines of privilege and disenfranchisement, aligning her experience of care within the art world with those who she sees as equally damaged by systems that do not sustain them. As noted, her compassion does not extend to those whom she sees as privileged, either monetarily or by professional recognition, but to those she sees as vulnerable, struggling to get by in the midst of the systemic lack of compassion they experience on a quotidian political level.<sup>54</sup>

Performativity, according to Kraus, is a key signature of survival in the art world, but “to perform yourself inside a role is very strange. The clothes, the words, prod you into nameless areas and then you stretch them out in front of other people, live” (*Dick*, 177). Her descriptions of key emotional events detail her choices of outfit for scenes of particular stress—for example, when Kraus bumps into Dick unexpectedly at an opening after he had refused her invitation by saying he had a previous engagement. Chris comments on her luck at having chosen a more subdued black ensemble for the occasion over gold lamé. Or on her first trip to see Dick on her own, when an outfit that at first provided a kind of exhilaration

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<sup>53</sup> Lauren Berlant, ed., *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

<sup>54</sup> Kraus’s compassion extends from neighbours struggling with poverty and addiction in the small town to her own art world fans of the past few decades after the publication of *I Love Dick*. In her novel *Summer of Hate* she refers to them as “Asperger’s boys, girls who’d been hospitalized for mental illness, assistant professors who would not be receiving their tenure, lap dancers, cutters, and whores.”

fades, as her anxiety increases, into a signifier of wrongness: “for despair, for faltering—that moment when the act breaks down, ambition fails” (*Dick*, 27). Dressing up, trying it on, keeping up, even a mild aspiration to the ‘good life’ are forces of mobilization, of desire. Berlant defines “cruel optimism” as an attachment to “compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be either impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic.”<sup>55</sup> It exists when “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”<sup>56</sup> These relations are not necessarily “inherently cruel” since all attachment is “optimistic”—it becomes “cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.”<sup>57</sup>

### **Affect Aliens**

Within her “fictional liaison” (*Dick*, 28), Chris emerges as a figure from the joinery of these structures, one who is both crushed and resilient, who registers the shame and pain of rejection both in her body and in her writing, yet is defiant. Kraus’s ‘Story of Me’ is neither heroic nor unheroic. It gives us no relief as a reader by way of modernist recuperation or punishment, or by a narrative of personal mastery, of overcoming odds. Her shamelessness is not a cavalier rejection of its debilitating effects, but an acceptance of shame as a norm within this neoliberal economy. It is the price of keeping on, for, as Chris notes, “We suicide ourselves for our own survival” (*Dick*, 28).

In her essay “Happy Futures, Perhaps,” feminist scholar and writer Sara Ahmed says, “I want to consider how anxiety about the loss of the possibility of a future might give us an alternative understanding of both futurity and happiness.” Rather than reinforcing a belief in the existence

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<sup>55</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 24.

<sup>56</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.



of a discrete autonomous object called ‘happiness,’ Ahmed begins “with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and what I call ‘the drama of contingency,’ how we are touched by what comes near.”<sup>58</sup> In the public sphere of the art world, where one desires to be ‘touched’ or ‘moved’ by sublime conceptual or aesthetic encounters with art or part of its community, accounting for its compromised neoliberal condition seems to present an either/or to both artists and those who encounter it. As Ahmed writes,

Happiness is attributed to certain objects that circulate as social goods. When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated—out of line with an affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are imputed to be good. The gap between the affective value of an object and how we experience an object can involve a range of affects, which are directed by the modes of explanation we offer to fill this gap. You might be disappointed. Disappointment can also involve an anxious narrative of self-doubt (why am I not made happy by this, what is wrong with me?), or a narrative of rage, where the object that is “supposed” to make us happy is attributed as the cause of disappointment. Your rage might be directed against the object that fails to deliver its promise, or spill out toward those who promised you happiness through the elevation of some things as good. We become strangers, or affect aliens, in such moments.<sup>59</sup>

Ahmed’s reframing of happiness in these terms allows us to consider how the promise of happiness has functioned within the art world, and why its failures are so bewildering. Beyond its visionary and aspirational messaging, brand management and mandates lies the troubling reality of its structural violence. Ahmed provides us, in ways that are affirmative (rather than productive), a clear-eyed assessment of the task at hand. If instrumentalizing messages about how lives are to be lived as Feher’s

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<sup>58</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Happy Futures Perhaps,” in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, ed. E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 161.

<sup>59</sup> Ahmed, “Happy Futures Perhaps,” 166.

self-administrators abound, in the manner of LinkedIn's five-minute reads like "10 Things You Should Know to Be a Successful Entrepreneur," perhaps there are other ways of 'working,' of being involved not in the "creative industry," but being aware of ourselves as figures—writers, readers and artists who are also resilient affect aliens within an economy of happiness by shamelessly telling our stories and shaping, for our own eyes, the 'happy objects' of our lives.

### **Mobility, Sincerity and Lost Futures**

'New sincerity' in literature, has been defined as a movement that turns away from the irony of post-modernism to, instead, provide stories that deal with sentimentality and emotion. The term is attributed to American writer David Foster Wallace from his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." Foster Wallace tells us that these new writers are 'rebels' who

treat plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval ... To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law.<sup>60</sup>

How can such "softness" and "willingness" be politically activated? Softness has been characterized as a condition of permeability, of hyper-vulnerability—after all, softness within patriarchy is associated with female bodies and, subliminally, being a target of violence. And how can new sincerity in writing provide a space for resilience? As we have

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<sup>60</sup> David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13:2 (Summer 1993): 151–94.

seen earlier in Ngai's argument, modern art and literature as forms of cultural practice have been bracketed as a space of aesthetics outside of the political, which results in a powerlessness to change society that still gives these forms a self-reflexivity that may be the very thing that allows them to be "capable of theorizing social powerlessness in a manner unrivalled by other forms of cultural praxis."<sup>61</sup> What kinds of activities can artists and writers therefore attempt in order to adapt to this knowledge? If literature and art were always on the outside, as Ngai suggests, but in a way that used to afford a speaking position towards the inside and now does not—how does one proceed?

In her novel, Kraus works through the figure of Chris, who does risk "being suckered by a world of lurkers and starers," to apprehend the attachments to which her optimism had bound her. Dick is a foil, an absent listener to her confessions of professional failure and its stink of "plain old human untrendy human troubles and emotions." Continuing her one-way correspondence with Dick, Chris tells him about the dead-end reception of her recent film:

Walking, I thought about you or about the "project." How I'm realizing that even though the movie "failed" I'm left with a wider net of freedom than I've ever had before.

For two years I was shackled to *Gravity & Grace* everyday; every stage of it an avalanche of impossibility that I dismantled into finite goals. It didn't matter, finally, that the film was good or that I wrote 10 upbeat faxes every day, that I was accountable, available, no matter how I felt.

Anyway Dick, I tried my best but it still failed ... And now it's over; amazingly, and with your help, I almost feel okay.

(Last night I woke up in bed with cold feet, forgetting where I was, curled up and afraid.)

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<sup>61</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 2.

(And sometimes I feel ashamed of this whole episode, how it must look to you or anyone outside. But just by doing it I'm giving myself the freedom of seeing from the inside out. I'm not driven anymore by other people's voices. From now on it's the world according to me.)

I want to go to Guatemala City. Dick, you and Guatemala are both vehicles of escape. Because you're both disasters of history? I want to move outside the limits of myself (a quirky failure in the artworld), to exercise mobility. (*Dick*, 80–81)

Kraus efficiently identifies Feher's advice to see from the inside (of neoliberalism) out. While she is afraid and ashamed, she also has identified a freedom that her writing has brought. She finds an equanimity between Guatemala and Dick as "vehicles of escape." Additionally, her sincerity—showing herself as a failed filmmaker, who has woken up in fear and shame—allows her to "move outside the limits" of herself in order to have agency: "mobility."

This 'moving outside' oneself may be seen as a way in which new sincerity provides a liberation from the promise of happiness and fulfillment that cruel optimism brings, detached as such 'optimism' is from the real effects of unsustaining capitalist and patriarchal structures that are punishing in their demands on the worker caught between systems, in a neo-Fordian structure to which one cannot make any meaningful end-to-end contribution, where precarious shift work or day jobs might give way to truly useless ones: "Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing: dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity, the whole gamut."<sup>62</sup>

Kraus instead provides a textual method: by writing she makes visible these effects as a *condition* or *operations*: she allows us to see how the power relation is no longer a relation of love or valuation by the desired other, but one of mobility and agency, which she has achieved by writ-

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<sup>62</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

ing. In order to arrive at resilience, one must arrive at a method of understanding the condition which has produced oneself as a rejected figure—and, by doing so, reorient shame into shamelessness. Kraus's work in *I Love Dick* sincerely describes these states of abjection, recuperates the self as narrated by the other, and gives her resiliency through self-narration. As Chris tells Dick in one passage: "This morning I called a New York magazine about my article on Penny Arcade's *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* The assistant maybe did, maybe didn't know who we were, but at any rate, she was discouraging and snippy. Is there any greater freedom than not caring anymore what certain people in New York think of me?" (*Dick*, 81).

### Face-to-Face

When you are not supposed to live, as you are, where you are, with whom you are with, then survival is a radical action; a refusal not to exist until the very end; a refusal not to exist until you do not exist.<sup>63</sup>

*I Love Dick* is haunted by an erotics of sadness, of the self longing for the self and longing for bonds with the world. It is an erotics of the injuries sustained by non-listening, non-appearing and non-witnessing. Halfway through her novel, Kraus's Chris tells Dick, "There's no way of communicating with you in writing because texts, as we all know, feed upon themselves, become a game. The only way left is face to face" (*Dick*, 73). The demand of 'face-to-face' interaction, the taking up of time, the hoped-for platform and reassurance of attention and of touch—touch is what Chris tells us she requires in order to think—occurs through 'face-time,' but also functions, critically, as a way to mitigate against one's disappearance. After all, it is the presence of the witnessing other that one is denied in the story of unrequited love. What exactly does this unrequited

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<sup>63</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare," from her blog Feminist Killjoy, August 25, 2014, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/>.

desire represent politically in a neoliberal economy? How is each figure and each body changed by its appearance or denial?

Sara Ahmed tells us that

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, if you do not love me back, I may love you more as the pain of that non-loving is a sign of what it means not to have this love).<sup>64</sup>

This love, then, is extended to how we belong to others: lovers, families, communities, friends, but also institutions, societies and nations. It is about solidarity, the expectation of compassion and the act of being received by others. To be a resilient subject, we must possess the capacity to resist—as well as to have a community of others who can receive us, in as much as we are dependent on ourselves to at least articulate our longing. That is our political obligation to ourselves and our worlds, but it may not always be met with a warm reception, and its refusal has the capacity to injure us both emotionally and politically.

As Ahmed tells us,

Love may be especially crucial in the event of the failure of the nation to deliver its promise for the good life. So the failure of the nation to “give back” the subject’s love works to increase the investment in the nation. The subject “stays with” the nation, despite the absence of return and the threat of violence, as leaving would mean recognising that the investment of national love over a lifetime has brought no value. One loves the nation, then, out of hope and with nostalgia for how it could have been. One keeps loving rather than recognising that the love that one has given has not and will not be returned. One could even think of national love as a form of waiting.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Sara Ahmed, “In the Name of Love,” in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 130.

<sup>65</sup> Ahmed, “In the Name of Love,” 130–31.

In the epilogue for his collection of poems *This Wound Is a World*, Driftpile Cree Nation poet Billy-Ray Belcourt turns to the erotics of sadness to ‘free’ Indigenous and queer experience from “the apoliticized cages of pathology and the private.”<sup>66</sup> Belcourt addresses the inherent vulnerability of this specific longing in order to arrive at resilient subjectivity, telling us, in Lauren Berlant’s terms, that “love ‘always means non-sovereignty,’” and that it requires we “violate our own attachments, that we give in to instability, that we accept that turbulence is the condition of relationality as such.”<sup>67</sup> Belcourt tells us that in his process of writing, he addresses the ‘unbodied’: “Love is a process of becoming unbodied; at its wildest, it works up a poetics of the unbodied.”<sup>68</sup> Becoming unbodied might be a response to Ahmed’s “drama of contingency” for how we are “touched by what comes near.” To be unbodied is not to be without a body, but to be without the inscriptions of state and intimate violence on determining the parameters of what that body can be, do or have.

In his poem “Sacred,” Belcourt writes of participating in an Indigenous ceremony called a Round Dance “intended to bring people together to acknowledge, honour, and to celebrate life to the fullest.”<sup>69</sup> Such dances are “times for healing and remembrance for the community as a whole.”<sup>70</sup>

Instead for Belcourt, it is a place where

a native man looks me in the eyes as he refuses to hold my hand  
during a round dance. his pupils are like bullets and i wonder what

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<sup>66</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 55.

<sup>67</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World*, 55.

<sup>68</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World*, 55.

<sup>69</sup> “Yes, You Can Round Dance and Other Facts,” The Quad (official University of Alberta blog), <https://blog.ualberta.ca/yes-you-can-round-dance-and-other-facts-771efd549f7f>. Accessed September 24, 2020.

<sup>70</sup> “Yes, You Can Round Dance.”

kind of pain he's been through to not want me in this world with him any longer.<sup>71</sup>

Here the “drama of contingency” unfolds in what Belcourt’s queer body touches—or the touch that is refused—as he draws near. “Sacred” makes visible an event that shows us what proximity reveals and opens. Belcourt’s poem replaces ‘I’ with ‘i’ and performs a lingual and formal resistance to forces which would deny his subjectivity and would erase him as a figure:

i wince a little because the earth hasn’t held all of me for quite some time now and i am lonely in a way that doesn’t hurt anymore.

you see, a round dance is a ceremony for both grief and love and each body joined by the flesh is encircled by the spirits of ancestors who’ve already left this world.<sup>72</sup>

Belcourt’s quiet acknowledgement of the politics of his contingency shows how the attempt to be denied entry into the circle, the dance, is also meant to refuse him as a figure and to deny him as a subject. The rejection and refusal of queerness in this sense, and of the sovereignty that joins this figure to his ancestors and to his present, are told in the poem as a voice speaking to itself. It is again a logic of dialectics that speaks to the ways in which the neoliberal state has denied the protections that must be afforded to a vulnerable body. In “Sacred,” Belcourt’s voice is that of interiority, a story of the self told to the self. It is a story of history, of “memories of native boys who couldn’t be warriors.”<sup>73</sup> Through this naming, across specific incidents as well as in the deep-time of ancestral history, Belcourt demonstrates a path towards his own resilience through resistance, as he continues to dance despite rejection, as he paints his nails because “1) it looks cute and 2) it is a protest. and

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<sup>71</sup> Belcourt, “Sacred” in *This Wound Is a World*, 11.

<sup>72</sup> Belcourt, “Sacred” in *This Wound Is a World*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> Belcourt, “Sacred” in *This Wound Is a World*, 11.



even though i know i am too queer to be sacred anymore, i dance that broken circle dance.” Belcourt writes through the shame of rejection that is experienced both within the circle by the man who dances beside him, but also within the neoliberal, as a colonial enterprise predicated on a history of practices which deny the right to be ‘loved,’ in Ahmed’s terms, on a national scale through the collective violence of colonization.

In this sense, Kraus’s ‘waiting,’ and Belcourt’s, align with the grievability of citizens within states which deny the rights of citizenship, the right to belonging and to care—and ultimately to compassion—to some subjects, while, in Berlant’s terms, advocating for it to others. In Kraus’s case, her political vulnerability is experienced as a female subject who has lived within precarity, while Belcourt’s poem speaks to experiences of the larger history and superstructure which is neoliberalism and capitalism’s foundation: nation states that were built on disenfranchisement and the denial of sovereignty. It is a political foundation that then has made way for the neoliberal to exist and to punish specific bodies in specific ways, to decide *for* some subjects and *against* others.

Belcourt finds a profound solidarity in his knowledge of others who have appeared in this contested space before him:

i dance with my arm hanging by my side like an appendage my body doesn’t want anymore. the gap between him and me keeps getting bigger so i fill it with the memories of native boys who couldn’t be warriors because their bodies were too fragile to carry all of that anger. the ones who loved in that reckless kind of way, you know, when you surrender your body to him.

and i think about the time an elder told me to be a man and to decolonize in the same breath. there are days when i want to wear nail polish more than i want to protest. but then i remember that i wasn’t meant to live life here and i paint my nails because i am still waiting for hands that want to hold mine too.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Belcourt, “Sacred” in *This Wound Is a World*.

Love, in Ahmed's terms, is about alignment:

the ego can assume the characteristics of the lost object of love through introjection. In other words, the loss of the object is compensated for by "taking on" the quality of the object. Mourning and grief become an expression of love; love announces itself most passionately when faced with the loss of the object—

which is most especially evident in considering the queer body:

Love has an intimate relation to grief not only through how the subject responds to the lost object, but also by what losses get admitted as losses in the first place. If I can imagine that the person who was lost "could-have-been me", then the other's grief can also become my grief. This "could-have-been-ness" is a judgement on whether others approximate the ideals that I have already taken to be "mine" or "ours". So there is an intimate relation between lives that are "imagined as grievable" in Judith Butler's terms, and that are imagined as loveable and liveable in the first place.<sup>75</sup>

In "Sacred," Belcourt demonstrates a form of resilient becoming, of accounting for how structural violence is distributed ("he told me to be a man and to decolonize/in the same breath") and, in its itinerate form, travels across bodies and millennia. Belcourt's poem is an act of listening, of the self, to the self, of naming and articulation that allows a "broken circle" dance to become a site of hope, of opening, for a space of emancipated being, because, as Ahmed tells us, "racial capitalism is a health system: a drastically unequal distribution of bodily vulnerabilities."<sup>76</sup>

Writing allows the broken circle to become an opening for resilience through resistance. In his persistent appearance *through* writing, and his proximity to others *by* writing, Belcourt creates a figure that is an enduring political subject. Belcourt's poem names the anxiety about the loss of a possibility for a future, and how this anxiety shifts both conditions of futurity and happiness. Belcourt instead, shows us how, by writing, the

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<sup>75</sup> Ahmed, "In the Name of Love," 130.

<sup>76</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare."

‘messiness of the unfolding of bodies into worlds’ cultivates a resilient subject that remains vulnerable: “If I know anything now it is that love is the clumsy name we give to a body spilling outside itself. It is a category we have pieced together to make something like sense or reason out of the body failing to live up to the promise of self-sovereignty.”<sup>77</sup>

Waiting is a form of violence within the neoliberal, for as Ahmed says, “To wait is to extend one’s investment and the longer one waits the more one is invested, that is, the more time, labour and energy has been expended. The failure of return extends one’s investment. If love functions as the promise of return, then the extension of investment through the failure of return works to maintain the ideal through its deferral into the future.”<sup>78</sup> But waiting, for “the hand that will hold mine,” for the answer of the lover, for the response of the state or institutions to suffering, or for the offer of a future belonging and care, may also be an act of resistance, if in so doing one advocates for a better political outcome. In other words, waiting does not preclude being an activist towards that future through resisting its norms, and forcing its hidden codes to appear, thereby demonstrating how this promise may be fulfilled.

In effect, what we know is that there are ways to wait. As Ahmed tells us, we can wait within the fold of those who would reject us, or we can choose to withdraw from their forms of suspension into an animated waiting, as Belcourt does by writing, which does not deny the suffering of the present while it longs for, and insists on, a future.

Waiting also delineates the vulnerable subject in Kraus’s 2018 short story “Face.” The story designates proximity and the obligation of the listener, who is in this case the writer, as fundamental to any constitutive act of care. Published in the Danish-Australian journal *Oberon*, as well as in the

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<sup>77</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World*, 56.

<sup>78</sup> Ahmed, “In the Name of Love,” 131.

collection of essays and stories entitled *Social Practices*, “Face” was first presented during Kraus’s keynote at the *Never the Same* symposium. In this story, an unnamed protagonist, who may also be ‘Chris’ again, is a well-known art writer who is beseeched by Leka, a twenty-something emerging curator, to take part in her project.

Leka is Romanian, her homeland the site of an impoverished third world within Europe, the location of orphanages our protagonist has visited in the past in a failed adoption attempt. Leka may be the same age as the child she might have adopted years before. Leka is aspirational, but her homeland has denied basic care to its children, and this instance, Kraus’s story, points to a global emblem of state negligence in the 1990s. Pro-family policies pursued by former dictator Nicolae Ceausescu preceded a ban on both abortions and contraceptives. The policy was implemented in 1966 to prevent the population from shrinking, but many families who were poverty stricken by the regime’s failures could not care for their children; the orphanages, called ‘children’s houses,’ were poorly run state institutions for these abandoned children who waited, either for adoption or be old enough to leave.

Leka is a subject who has also been waiting. She is both a figure of waiting and a figure that represents the potentiality for loss, like those other orphaned children who were her peers and were, in many cases, lost to their futures. Leka has invited our narrator to the art world hub of Berlin, a place where Leka has emigrated and hopes to begin a career. She has constructed an exhibition for the narrator’s eyes only, and for which Kraus’s narrator has been invited to write a review. The review promises a certain social capital, since the narrator is a well-known person in the art world (while still constrained by the precarity of making a living wage and by the divorce from a long-time partner she is negotiating). The social capital of the review is meant, for Leka, to be a platform. But as

she struggles with the convoluted language of Leka's invitation letter, our narrator writes:

Clearly, this thick block of text conveyed a demand, but I couldn't actually read what she wrote. Whatever she wanted was way too intense to be processed.

Skimming her email again, I gathered she'd broken up with her boyfriend, he'd moved out and left behind some of his stuff. Did she want me to "review" her ex-boyfriend's belongings as if they were an artwork? She'd use my visit to get back at her ex while making a joke about the arbitrariness of critical discourse? The fee was 1000 euros and the whole thing seemed no better or worse than most of my art-writing work so I said yes.<sup>79</sup>

The underwhelming installation that Kraus's narrator finds on arrival, Leka then narrates and forms signification for. "Face" gives us mostly Leka's own description of her work; in this way, Kraus's narrator, 'touched,' in Ahmed's sense, by what comes near, offers a platform for Leka's self-narration. The narrator is aware that this face-to-face meeting is meant to be operational, instrumental. From it, the young woman, whose position is made ultra-precarious amongst the precariat by her difficult personal history and the political effects of her Romanian heritage, may gain a crucial place for her appearance. In other words, although the young woman is in a precarious position, her 'self-appreciation' may be enacted by the story the narrator will write. Leka seeks a listener for her natality, a witness to her 'birth' and her migration to the new economies of Western Europe and the art world, and has chosen the writer. Understanding her role, Kraus's narrator, having forgotten her computer, handwrites notes as Leka speaks, describing the meaning of her installation. These transcriptions form a considerable bulk of the story. Kraus's narrator shows her compassion: she has bothered, here, to show up, despite the mysteriousness of the invitation, the overly formal English which signals

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<sup>79</sup> Chris Kraus, "Face," *Oberon 2* (2016): 31.

an ‘outsider’ to art world language, to help her in this task. By doing so, Kraus provides a template: an example for how one may operate in solidarity and with empathy within the neoliberal; although it will not change the political structure initially, it offers a future promise: the site of natality of this new ‘voice’ in the art world. Leka, through Kraus’s writing, joins a world already underway to offer her newness.

It is in recognizing the proximity of political instances that the chance to appear as a resilient subject—arising from and within the conditions of vulnerability—is made possible. Belcourt calls his collection “a book that chases after a scene that can barely be spotted.”<sup>80</sup> Kraus here has also discovered a political scene which ‘could barely be spotted’ as her narrator struggles to understand Leka’s invitation.

In addressing the vulnerability of Indigenous bodies, particularly queer Indigenous bodies, Belcourt also considers how suffering is naturalized for some and not others in Berlant’s terms. This is evident in Leka’s Romania, the relegation of this nation to a European economic underclass. In the Canadian colonial imagination, Indigeneity is equated with suffering and genocide, while the colonizer is placed in the role of ‘caring’ for a culture that he has declared over. The correlation of “death and indigeneity [as] co-constitutive categories” may also be considered within the global, of how relations of care or their abdication unfold across bodies and among nations generally. For Belcourt, the fact that “indigeneity births us into a relation of nonsovereignty is not solely coloniality’s dirty work. No, it is also what emerges from a commitment to the notion that the body is an assemblage, a mass of everyone who has ever moved us, for better or for worse.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World*, 55.

<sup>81</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World*, 55–56.

We find out later that the real-life Leka has been asked to respond to Kraus's story about her, and felt initially shocked and patronized by Kraus's writing. Ultimately, Leka believes that Kraus has lived up to her expectation and fulfilled the contract which 'Leka' gave her: that is that Leka has appeared as a figure in Kraus's writing, and by so doing, may be seen, in Feher's terms, as a subject 'worthy' of investing in within this new art world economy. 'Self-appreciation' occurs in this case through storytelling, through being narrated by another. In this sense, in "Face," Kraus provides the generosity of Cavarero's and Arendt's formulation of figuration—of becoming, of natality, of taking one's place in the world of storytelling and storytellers. She is Leka's transcriptionist, and she tells the young woman's story. These textual and writing acts of figuration are not solitary but collective, shared, and are an obligation of care to others.

We may not emancipate only ourselves by writing, but we may also be the site of emancipation for others. Belcourt tells us that the work of his book of poetry is "a tribute to the potentiality of sadness, to showing that a body unbecome or a poetics of lateness of a choreography of mangled bodies might change the rhetoric of protest."<sup>82</sup> He insists that "loneliness is endemic to the affective life of settler colonialism, but that it is also an affective commons of sorts that demonstrates that there is something about this world that isn't quite right. Loneliness in fact evinces a new world on the horizon."<sup>83</sup> It is in this affordance that the rejections and losses that such an economy—historically located in imperialism and colonization—executes may be mitigated, and against which new solidarities may form and new resilient subjects arise, while continuing to be vulnerable. As with all of Kraus's work, the figure of the self in "Face" is durational and is produced by a set of conditions. In 'Chris,' Kraus has offered a figure shaped by neoliberal forces, and she now provides this for Leka, twenty years later, as one who understands the abjectness of

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<sup>82</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World*, 56.

<sup>83</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World*, 56.

invisibility, of denial, of being refused a face-to-face encounter with a listener, by whose very attention one's story may be made visible.

## Conclusion

Across the entirety of *I Love Dick*, Kraus shows us how conditions produce a figure—Chris—through a variety of textual means: journal entry, report, script, art criticism, dialogue, letter writing. This figure joins a world already underway and adds to it, her voice. We must also be aware of the way that the world conditions that voice politically and how self-narration functions as a technology of the self under neoliberalism and produces a shared affect.

A lover's silence or a rejection becomes emancipatory, a conduit for resistance, which produces a tenacious resilience: Chris's renewal of energy allows her to abandon a career which does not sustain her, turning instead to writing for sustenance; Leka waits for emancipation through writing—in this case, transcription by another; Belcourt refuses colonization's paradigms of Indigenous suffering as primary affects, turning instead towards a language of vulnerability and self-determination, while he waits for "hands that want to hold mine too."

If we wish to appear in the public sphere—and according to Arendt, the definition of life itself depends on contributing our story to the larger collective that both precedes and follows us—it is key, as Arendt contends, that the "touchstone of a free act is always our awareness that we could also have left undone what we actually did."<sup>84</sup> Like Dinesen, Kraus delineates "a sharp line dividing her life from her afterlife as an author."<sup>85</sup> For Kraus, to formulate that appearance means to grapple with the uncontrollable conditions of its reception, an 'afterlife' that

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<sup>84</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 2:5.

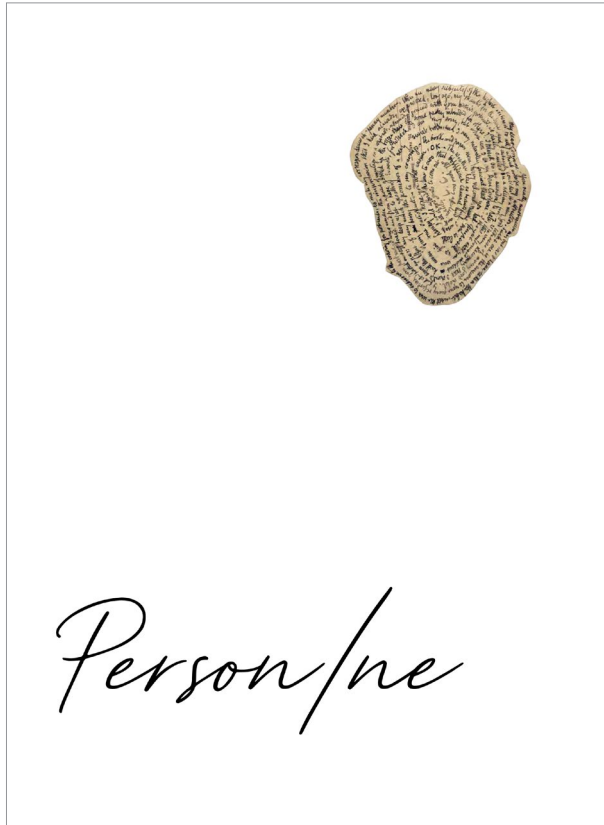
<sup>85</sup> Arendt, "Isak Dinesen, 1885–1963," 98.



occurs while still living and which underlines her vulnerability in the public sphere. Within inherited 'traveling opinions, like falling stars,' in the words of Janet Frame, we might allow some things to 'slip through' and to hold on to and attend to those others which provide a place for self-narration, belonging and love. Kraus, like Carr before her, resists and arrives at a solidarity with the self through writing a site that cultivates the vulnerability which predicates resilient political subjects.

## VIII. Person/ne

An invitation to engage with the documentation for the curatorial project, *Person/ne*, which includes documentation of the exhibition, residencies and its accompanying public programs, *Person/ne Forum: The Ethics of Care*, *Proximities: Artists in Dialogue* and related artist performances.



## PREFACE: Person/ne

The *Person/ne* project is included in this thesis as a set of instances, practices and curatorial methods, proposing conditions and protocols for how artists and curators can be supported institutionally towards resilient and resistant being in the public sphere of the art world. Together, these curatorial methods posit the potentiality for citizenship in terms that will be further discussed in this thesis by poet and art writer, Lisa Robertson: as an embodied co-transformation.

As Robertson writes, “Arendt’s defense of natality as *the form* of life has inflected current discussions around biopolitics, where citizenship is before all else a co-*embodied* belonging. The citizen’s body, in its charged relationships to other bodies, is the temporal matrix and radical mediator of politics. Each body, each birth, each coming into speech, bears the radically unquantifiable potential of co-transformation.”<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition project, as this thesis does, explored ‘co-transformation’: how to be meaningfully and politically in one another’s company in the face of trauma and loss, of political or ideological abdication, and still find forms of solidarity and resilience. This final project acknowledges the inescapable and collective vulnerability of embodiment in order to find, within this state of political being, the promise of worldmaking with others.

As discussed earlier in this thesis, the philosopher Hannah Arendt contends that one becomes a person by inserting herself into the world through action and speech. Arendt also believes that an active process of thinking is the means by which someone constitutes herself into a person. It is also possible, in Arendt’s formulation, for someone to refuse that personhood by refusing to think and to act. The curatorial

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Robertson, “Prosody of the Citizen,” *Contours* 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): [https://www.sfu.ca/humanities-institute/contours/issue1/issue1\\_p8.html](https://www.sfu.ca/humanities-institute/contours/issue1/issue1_p8.html). Accessed June 2, 2020.

projects featured in this thesis end with the project *Person/ne*, named for the modern French word *personne*, which may indicate both someone and no one, while *person*, in English, indicates both an individual and a citizen with inherent rights and freedoms. The word *person* is from the early thirteenth century, derived from the Old French *persone* meaning “human being, anyone, person.” This in turn derives from the Latin *persona* which means “human being, person, personage; a part in a drama, assumed character,” which was originally “a mask, a false face,” such as those made of wood or clay that were worn by the actors in late Roman theatre.

This exhibition considered alternative protocols and conditions for how a figure might be produced and was alternatively meditative, declarative, political and insistent. The artists’ works revealed acts of care, citizenship and personhood, or cognizance of the lack of these elements, through a variety of unexpected means, including fictional portraiture or portraits that themselves bore witness, through love letters, tapestries and storytelling, through the documentation of crossing national borders, through the care of remembering histories, relationships, events and people. The artists’ works were also mobilized for how they might effect a meditative pause in either a set of behaviours or in a narrative of history—opening a gap into which something revolutionary emerges at just the right moment.

*Person/ne* gestures in a variety of ways towards these moments and ruptures, setting aside seamless, market-driven ideas of personal brand and reputation to instead consider the most riveting scenes of a life, or the most quiet, ordinary moments, and to consider the ways in which, despite the chaotic and the unpredictable, one may still espouse a set of values, an ethics of care, whether in micro- or macrocosm.

*Person/ne* was produced for the Vancouver-based non-profit Griffin Art Projects in 2019, and included works by twenty-two Canadian and

international artists: Sonny Assu (Ligwilda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nations), Stephen Balkenhol (Germany), Christian Boltanski (France), Sophie Calle (France), Leon Coupey (France), Stan Douglas (Canada), Duane Linklater (Omaskêko Cree of Moose Cree First Nation), Yevgeniy Fiks (Russia/US), Shawn Hunt (Heiltsuk Nation), Emily Jacir (Palestine/US), Mahdyar Jamshidi (Iran), Sima Khouirami (Iran/Canada), Zoe Kreye (Canada), Ann Newdigate (Canada-South Africa), Ricarda Roggan (Germany), Norman Tait (Nisga'a First Nation), Stephen Waddell (Canada), Ai Wei Wei (China), Janet Werner (Canada), Lam Wong (Canada) and Sislej Xhafa (Kosovo/US). Through this diverse selection of contemporary and historical art, as well as archival materials, *Person/ne* facilitated a nuanced dialogue that addressed care, violence, personhood, intimacy and citizenship.

Selections from artist's studios and local private collections were combined with recent work made by artists while in residence at Griffin: Janet Werner, Mahdyar Jamshidi, Zoe Kreye, and Lam Wong. Works in the exhibition addressed empathy, relationality and fraught contemporary political and social events—for instance, the contested border between Israel and Palestine (Jacir), the 2011 London Riots prompted by the police murder of Mark Duggan (Douglas), political censorship in China (Ai) and the state repression of intellectuals in Iran (Jamshidi). Ceremonial and political textiles, such as an historical Indigenous (Kwakwaka'wakw) dance apron, were paired with contemporary weavings by Newdigate, which reflect on Apartheid South Africa, and Afghan war rugs made by women working in conflict zones depicting unending war in a post-9/11 world. Other works focussed on the formation of relationships and expressions of subjectivity, through portraiture (Werner; Hunt; Tait; Khouirami; Fiks) or love letters (Coupey). By presenting work shaped by political concerns of national significance with more private and deeply personal narratives of citizenship and belonging, the cura-

torial project sought to demonstrate the entangled complexity and intimacy of citizenship and being.

A further component of the project was a set of interdisciplinary symposia, performances and programs. These live events were structured as a series of gatherings that proposed models for practices of care in contemporary art in the administrative, creative and co-configured practices of working together in art institutions, and considered how to generate an ethics that informs curatorial and artistic production.

Experimenting with new arrangements for working together and exploring solidarity, collaboration, dialogue and relationality, these events brought together local and international presenters to examine ideas of personhood and agency. Key events were designed to collaboratively work through the research of the exhibition, including *Proximities: Artists in Dialogue*, which presented artistic research as conversation. The *Person/ne Forum: The Ethics of Care* included residencies with international writers, researchers, curators and artists, who explored topics of political agency, personhood and care. Among the participants were artist and researcher Emily Rosamond (UK), who considered character in the age of Big Data; London-based curator and writer Lorenzo Fusi (UK), who considered care in relation to the history and treatment of HIV/AIDS in North America; Lorilee Wastasecoot (Peguis First Nation), whose process of discovering, archiving and reuniting art made from the 1930s to the 1960s by Indigenous children in residential schools with the now-adults who created them, informed her practice as an emerging curator; and curator, art writer and researcher Helena Reckitt, who participated online to reflect on her ongoing project *Feminist Durations*, which has explored methods of emerging and non-Western feminist collaboration and collectivity. Finally, a collaborative group performance with dancers and audience members, created for the exhibition by artist Zoe Kreye, culminated in a curated feast with local chefs for all who participated. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, Buddhist cere-

monial Tea Master and artist Lam Wong facilitated three participatory performance events centering on the traditional Chinese tea ceremony titled MA, on and offsite, including in the neighbouring natural parkland site of Capilano River, North Vancouver. Wong also facilitated individual meditative tea ceremonies with visitors throughout the exhibition.

## IX. Revolution Is a Lived Process: Lisa Robertson and the Figure of the Menopausal She-Dandy

All the parts and stages of life, which we recognize don't happen consecutively, or even one at a time, are incipiently revolutionary. The change that we need to discover is largely happening at every point in each of our lives. We are already in revolution, now, in the present, and every part of change, even infancy or death, is about to show us something completely new about collectivity and co-existence. So we bring our listening to the organism.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Before language, there is form. There is gesture. Rhythm. Shape. Sound. The libidinal joys of language suggest the erotics of the pre-lingual, the magnificence and possibilities of embodiment and its radical, inherent, insistent jouissance, its expression in form, something that is sensed from the beginning of life.

This chapter examines, through the work of poet and art writer Lisa Robertson, beginnings: of figuration—that is, giving birth to the figure in writing—from the process of gestating language, to revolutionary impulses within writing and language itself. In it, I consider how writing may constitute an act of care, and, through such care, perform revolutionary acts. The chapter also considers the way in which poetic structure invites figuration in Robertson's writing in order to provide a method of vulnerably appearing in the public sphere as a resilient political subject.

I focus on Robertson's 2018 publication *Proverbs of a She-Dandy* which begins with the figure of the "menopausal flâneur."<sup>2</sup> Based on Robertson's reading of Charles Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern*

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Robertson and Matthew Stadler, "Introduction," in *Revolution: A Reader* (Paris/Portland: Paraguay Press & Publication Studio, 2012), iii.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Robertson, *Proverbs of a She-Dandy* (Paris/Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, 2018), 3. Hereafter cited in text as *Proverbs*, with page reference.



*Life*, the older woman who inspires his description possesses a “spiritual reserve, an inner aristocracy” while sharing the “descriptive vocabulary” of the dandy (*Proverbs*, 3). In this chapter I explore how Robertson shapes the figure of the menopausal ‘She-Dandy’ and how her work can be seen as an emblematic and emancipatory work of protest against how language and figures—in this case of older women—are instrumentalized within capitalism. Robertson’s proverbs function as declarations and as assertions, and posit a response for the thesis’s question—*how can we be vulnerable within the public sphere? And how can one be both a political and vulnerable body?*—by demonstrating how a resilient figure emerges in language.

I refer briefly and secondarily, for its methodology, to the co-edited volume *Revolution: A Reader* for the purposes of considering the collaboration it represents in terms of the formal process by which the editors (Robertson and Matthew Stadler) designed their book. It is an annotated collection that provides an embodied strategy of working with vulnerability in academic reading and thinking, and demonstrates a model for how this might take place non-hierarchically and collectively. As well, I look to a predecessor of her work in the more recent *Proverbs* in Robertson’s previous book of poetry: the poem, “Face/” from the 2010 collection *R’s Boat*. “Face/” is a work of ‘autobiography’ fashioned from an architectural approach to working with language. Each of these texts notes alternative ways in which Robertson addresses figuration and opens up further possibilities for how the figure may emerge within language. It details how, in Robertson’s work, the figure is also an ‘I’ being made through the experimentation of collation. Finally, I consider the work *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine, who elucidates the vulnerability of the Black body and the cultivation of resilience.

I also consider the work of poet and literary critic Denise Riley and her approach to the materiality of language to propose how an ‘I’ might emerge from an improvisational approach as a critical latticework that

weaves the formal properties of language together to address collectivity and co-existence. I turn as well to the work of Christina Sharpe, who outlines how language, appearance and embodiment merge within and across racialized bodies. For, as was posited at the outset of this thesis, if the appearance of a figure in writing is the emergence of embodiment within language, materializing thought, materializing writing, gives an idea a body.

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### **The Revolution is Happening**

The revolution is happening now, everywhere, in the bodies and faces that pass by in a blur. Our revolutionary potential is considerable. It has not been erased, so much as we have forgotten how to recognize it.<sup>3</sup>

What is the revolutionary capacity of writing? On the one hand, it is expressed through the solidarity of collective action, the desire for legislative, creative, philosophical and ideological acts of textual resistance, but on the other, it is an intimate negotiation with the self and with others, inextricably embodied and shaped by the senses.

As I have asserted in the introduction to this thesis, to be embodied is to be inherently vulnerable. How then can we be vulnerable as citizens, as workers and as political subjects in the public sphere? How can we do so as mothers and friends, as colleagues and as neighbours? Hannah Arendt wrote that one becomes a person by inserting herself into the world through action and speech. Arendt also believed that an active process of thinking was the “means by which someone constitutes himself into a somebody, a person or a personality.”<sup>4</sup> It is also possible, in Arendt’s formulation, for someone to refuse these requirements of personhood and of citizenship by refusing to think and to act.

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<sup>3</sup> Robertson and Stadler, “Introduction,” iii.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Steven Kamposki, *Arendt, Augustine and the New Beginning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 169–70.

In Arendt's terms, a person is also a citizen, ready to think or act—on behalf of an ideal, a desire or another human being. Such actions constitute a form of care. As Robertson has written, we are “supported, spoken, and carried or disallowed and foreclosed by others, in a matrix of reciprocity, empathy and power that conditions the every possibility of embodiment.”<sup>5</sup> The citizen is one who constitutes by such action a set of values, and who can operate both collectively and with agency individually. Action, in Arendt's sense, also takes place in language, in shared speech, in assertion. This chapter examines how action, revolutionary action, occurs in *Proverbs of a She-Dandy* when Robertson constructs an experimental subject in language, the ‘menopausal She-Dandy,’ to respond to and navigate subjectivity, creating a figure that exudes revolutionary potentiality. As Robertson notes, “We citizens constitute ourselves according to the movement of subjectivity in language, as well as being administratively identified by shared, conventional borders, and a historical concept of collective and individual rights (or their lack).”<sup>6</sup> Language, then, has a crucial role to play in revolution; Robertson's tactical use of its poetics demonstrates a potential path to emancipated embodiment in the public sphere, as part of its inherent vulnerability.

### **Shame, Pathology and the Appearance of the She-Dandy**

The figure of the menopausal ‘dandy’ revealed itself to Robertson early one morning as she was in the bath reading *On the Poverty of Student Life: Considered in Its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Particularly Intellectual Aspects, and a Modest Proposal for Its Remedy*, written by the Situationists Internationale in 1966. The volume laments that students, preparing to be revolutionaries, nonetheless readied them-

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<sup>5</sup> Lisa Robertson, “Untitled Essay” in *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias* (Toronto: Book\*hug, 2012), 73.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Robertson, “Prosody of the Citizen,” *Contours* 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): [https://www.sfu.ca/humanities-institute/contours/issue1/issue1\\_p8.html](https://www.sfu.ca/humanities-institute/contours/issue1/issue1_p8.html). Accessed June 2, 2020

selves for professional careers as a safeguard; it contained a phrase derivatively describing an institution's organizational failure as a "menopause of the mind,"<sup>7</sup> an episode, apparently, of life in public in which one has lost capacity for self-management and regulation. "It was the year of my menopause," wrote Robertson (*Proverbs*, 2), and she responded immediately with her own annotation, writing in the margins of the text at 4 am.

Robertson tells us in her introductory "Notes" that the figure of the menopausal dandy appeared to her—that is, the She-Dandy was a figure not created or conjured, but one who *appeared through writing* as Robertson annotated the Situationists' text. Robertson's annotations, where this initial appearance takes place, describe the emancipatory pleasures of menopause: menopause, Robertson wrote into her Google Doc that early morning, "turns females into dandies" (*Proverbs*, 2) Further, the She-Dandy figure thinks. This thinking is distributed throughout the body: where her power within capitalism had been previously located singularly in a set of reproductive systems, the body is now transformed into a aggregate wholistic form whose relative functioning, rather than focused on a "reproductive system," is now "convivial," autonomously pleasurable, "fully present" and operating "outside every economy":

The hormones the ovaries used to make are now made by all the parts of the body, so that every tissue, every limb and fold continuously invents its own mode of transformation. The entire body becomes a fungible thinking whose purpose it is only to express its own communicability, for the pleasure, the intensity, the integrity of it. (*Proverbs*, 2)

From this moment, lounging in the bath, Robertson subsequently focuses her research on how the idea of the dandy had first emerged, turning to the poetry of Charles Baudelaire through her translation of the texts "Hags" and "Widows." "Hags," Robertson tells us, had been

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Robertson, *Proverbs of a She-Dandy*, 2.

censored, on its publication in 1857, as an affront to Haussman's reordering of the social order through his modernization and gentrification of Paris, and the resulting marginalization of the disenfranchised and dispossessed. "Hags" was deemed in contempt of the French court's religious and moral laws, and the publication ban was not removed until almost a century later, in 1949 (*Proverbs*, 32). Baudelaire was inspired in part by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, itself a rumination on the author's self-exile from society, which is in sympathy with the Situationists' concept of the *dérive*. The women figured in Baudelaire's poems were part of the state removals that Hausmann's energetic reshaping of Paris promoted, and even their figuration in poetry was deemed to be beyond the expressible. To convey attention and power to them through writing, to offer a site in which they might continue to appear in the public sphere, was to contravene the state's objectives of modernization and capitalization of the city. Their re-appearance in public as language, as figures, in Baudelaire's writing, was the basis for their impermissibility.

Robertson's study focuses on the emergence of the English word 'dandy' in French literature, as well as the concept of *menopause*, both of which appeared in the same year: 1821. In the early nineteenth century, the word 'dandy' had only recently emerged in English usage and was used to describe a figure whose entire purpose was a certain form of appearance in public, as a "clothes-wearing man." "As others dress to live," wrote Thomas Carlyle in 1835, "he [the dandy] lives to dress." Carlyle described this as a heroic, not minor, element of his character, one that involved "every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse and person,"<sup>8</sup> a fact which is expanded by Baudelaire in his poem "Les Petites Vieilles," notes Robertson. "In Baudelaire the menopausal flâneur and the dandy share a descriptive vocabulary. It is her mysterious austerity that is the instruc-

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Robertson *Proverbs of a She-Dandy*, 2.

tive trait for the new dandy that emerges” (*Proverbs*, 3). Baudelaire’s expansion of the dandiacal figure is characterized by

independence of character, leisure, absolute simplicity, an inner, spiritual aristocracy, an “ardent need to make of himself something original”—all of these self-fashioning gestures were nonetheless contained within the external limits of social propriety. A dandy was not a rebel, not punk. He pertained to the spiritual aestheticization of limits. In a sense Baudelairean dandyism could be seen as a constraint-based practice on the self. The distinctive stance of the Baudelairean dandy is the subtraction of all utility and all ambition from everyday life. (*Proverbs*, 3)

Such a subtraction may be seen as revolutionary within a neoliberal economy, in which everyday life is governed as a system of entrepreneurship of the self, including gestures previously considered as intimate acts or acts purely of self-expression or life force; within this economy these acts are governed, assessed and monetized as utility and ambition. How then can a revolutionary and resilient figure take form from within the capitalization of the self that is a condition of the neoliberal, a condition in which there is no ‘outside’?

Robertson’s response is a set of *Proverbs*, twenty paratactically constructed micro-essays. Here, self-fashioning tendencies, practices not only of self-governance but also of the self, are instead, in Robertson’s instances, sites of deregulation. In the same way that the aggregate organs of the menopausal body will no longer serve a function for the state, the reproductive pressures of family life or, indeed, the very instrumentalized appearance of the female body in public. Unlike Tiqqun’s figure of the Young-Girl, the She-Dandy is not subsumed by capitalism:

**THESE INNER DECORATIONS ARE FOR HER OWN PLEASURE. BY REMAINING VISIBLE IN THE CITY SHE DEMONSTRATES FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO PERCEIVE THAT IN TRUTH, WEALTH PERTAINS TO LYRIC EXPENDITURE.** (*Proverbs*, 23)

In Robertson's *Proverbs*, the image of the menopausal female functions also as "an urban destabilization along with that of the prostitute or courtesan ... two differently sexualized female guises that Baudelaire used to activate a sublime femininity in his symbolist vocabulary ... whose marginal existences outside the economy of domestic enclosure crucially animates the urban landscape, inciting an aesthetic of sensual decadence, ruinousness" (*Proverbs*, 4) However, Robertson's *Proverbs* provide a road-map for another form of destabilisation of the urban landscape: for those who resist the death of public life that may be imposed on them, and who challenge the notion of productivity in which their figures are contained. Robertson instead contends that the "pathological code" of menopause may be seen as a "product of modernity." This proverb is transcribed as:

**SHE WILL CONSIDER THE CONCEPT OF MENOPAUSE  
AND ITS PATHOLOGICAL CODE AS ONE OF THE  
COVERT PRODUCTS OF MODERNITY. (*Proverbs*, 6)**

The biological concept of the phage is a useful conceptualization of how this 'code' functions, arising as it has out of the rationalism and scientific studies of medicine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It may be useful as a model to consider the experience of vulnerability in the art world, as a generative, productive response to such vulnerability and to the challenge that world constitutes to a public life. As a type of virus that infects cells, the phage destroys its host by hijacking its cellular machinery to force it into production. For the virus, the phage is its main method of deployment, an adaptive (or mal-adaptive) component that is inherently, intuitively, formed for the purpose of challenging meta-structural ideas of productivity or of progress, sometimes removing portions of its host's DNA and transferring it into new hosts through a process of transduction.

Robertson's reversals of the pathological codes or gestures of capitalism within language may be seen themselves as sly ruptures or outright detonations of contemporary life's assertions, still dependent and connected,

phage-like, to a modernist superstructure that produces figures (since all bodies are inscribed by ideological apparatuses). Robertson collages together a phage-like set of conditions to reveal their hidden political structures when she rhythmically chants the following—an intersection of forms that also suggests their collective capacity for rupture:

**GERMS, CHANCE, PASSION, TIME, FAT, OBSCURITY,  
OUTDATED GARMENTS, HORMONES, WORRY,  
FRAYED CLOTH, SILENCE AND POLITICS ASSIST IN  
HER IDEAL DEREGULATION OF THE HYPOSTATIC  
MYSTICISMS OF GENDER. (*Proverbs*, 8)**

One can assume, in the denigrating phrase of the Situationists International, that patriarchal power is not in fat, frayed cloth, silence or worry, and that by lingering in the vagaries of a shadowy, mystical approach to biological destiny, the unpleasantness of the secreting, abject and failing body can be sidestepped altogether as a political form, remaining outside the speakable and the writeable. What is not spoken about, written or read becomes a *who* that is unspoken, a political text that remains hidden. This is the target of Robertson's ire, Robertson tells us in *She-Dandy's* "Notes to the Reader."

Robertson gestures to the conflation of menopause with unproductivity and failure in public life by suggesting that this covert deployment of the concept of menopause is a code that may be subverted. The subversion occurs by occupying the menopausal figure shamelessly and fully, in order that it may be understood as a form of resistance to embodied institutional inscription, a response previously relegated to a constellation of affects, such as hysteria, lovesickness or simply managerial or creative anxiety in the art world. As Robertson writes:

**THAT SHE EXISTS AND MOVES IN THE CITY  
IS AN AFFRONT TO THE WILL OF CAPITAL.  
COUNTLESS CLINICS ARE DEDICATED TO  
PREVENTING HER APPEARANCE.  
(*Proverbs*, 15)**



Robertson's She-Dandy exists simultaneously in third-person singular and plural. She performs as a figure in language, but not as a character within a narrative arc or story. The She-Dandy is multiply positioned, a collective. She is a figure comprised of *conditions* that reveal how she has also been governed and constrained by language. Robertson reinscribes this figure, demonstrating, through the reoccupation and reconstitution of language that is made possible by writing, what must take place in order to execute a reversal, a revolution. In Robertson's She-Dandy, sanctioned and unsanctioned materialities are gathered together, frayed, spilling over, in a surplus that alarms and frightens the systemic, the regulated, within a patriarchal system of language and encoding. Robertson's syncopating *Proverbs* destabilize notions of where power is located and where it is not.

Robertson tells us that this insight took place while she was lounging in the bath, reading. We visualize her in the water, mistress of her own time—here is a body shimmering with the interpolating gestures of the She-Dandy, a body that responds with defiance and with energy to these philosophical foreclosures of purpose. She invites us to consider *this* writer's body, *this* site of thinking, of writing and reading, which enters the margins of another's text. She is languid and purposeful. And she is present. There is a body here, and her thoughts come from somewhere, from this site, from this day-lit bathroom:

**SHE DEMONSTRATES WITH HER STANCE,  
HER SKEWED ACCESSORIES, HER SPIRITUAL  
FORTITUDE, HER OCCUPATION OF THE PARK  
BENCH, THAT THE ONLY REAL WORTHINESS IS  
IN THE THEATRICAL AUGMENTATION OF THE  
IGNORED HUMAN FRAGILITY. (*Proverbs*, 14)**

Robertson writes this figure in all caps. This She-Dandy is a billboard-level shout into the silencing apparatus of the state. And Robertson acknowledges another figure: that of the reader, whom she addresses directly, promising, "Here then, in the luxury of my bath,

permitting the Baudelairean correspondences between dandy and old woman to drift beyond the margins of his poems and essays, I will activate the figure of menopause as the new dandiacal body” (*Proverbs*, 4). The body is not only a site from which to write but a political sphere, an occasion, a constellation of heat, memory, birdsong, shame and love. It is out-of-breath on the hillside. It is out-of-time in the text; its urgencies are both real and politicized. It recognizes dying, and it recognizes birth.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes the search for narration, the desire to memorialize the past for a future audience, through her description of the Classical Greeks who searched for poets to tell their story: much is at stake in the desire to leave behind a trace. Further, Arendt tells us that “power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”<sup>9</sup> For Robertson the writer, the doer of great deeds and the poet are infused. Her task will not only be poetic; it will be political. It will join the world of thought objects and of politics, and form part of the ever-undulating cosmology of reading and thinking to which each body, and citizen, belongs.

The relation that a proverb facilitates, as a gentle, secular method of offering advice, in Robertson’s hands fuses with the poetics of a manifesto, razing itself, starting over, circling and suggesting, revealing not a unified directive but a series of emanating figurations, an imaginative collectivity as a figure of menopause, indignation, rupture and agency. Her strategy is to create proverbs that bend and shatter rules of description and directive, of proverbial form, and through this the metanarrative of patriarchal voice, creating a multiply organized text that cannot

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<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 200.

be easily governed. The 'she' of the She-Dandy that then emanates from this list of *Proverbs*, from these methods of working syntactically and paratactically, is the multi-headed She of Medusa; she is never lonely, she continually rewrites herself, she continues past the last page and was in existence before the first. Like a revolving action of revolution, she is circular and unending. Robertson's She-Dandy is a strategic, shame-resisting 'she' that is written through and around, described, opened and admired.

Shame is a legitimate methodology: a form of release, a puncture. In the beginning, telling stories of disenfranchisement and its humiliations constitute the emergence of political consciousness. It is, after all, shame that reveals the extent of our vulnerability in the public sphere. In her essay "Shame Before Others," Sara Ahmed tells us that "the very physicality of shame—how it works on and through bodies—means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies 'turn away' from the others who witness the shame."<sup>10</sup>

The telling anecdote, then, is a method for resisting such formation: a story that reveals rather than denies a problem results in a shared problem and is therefore a site of political awakening. Robertson, in creating the figure of the She-Dandy, works through shame by flippantly making it a public issue. Robertson moves shame from its tool as a scathing, disciplining force into an emancipatory political lever; released from the production of oneself as a figure by others, Robertson takes the 'I' into her own hands. This figure turns this way and that, revealing one textual condition and then another, a series of sensations and affects made material in language. These are not protests but assertions; the She-Dandy is not authority or law but maidenhead, its point of origin. In all capital letters, her figure declares itself. It is unequivocal. We are told not to type

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<sup>10</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 103.

in all caps out of politeness, so as not to be seen as shouting. Somehow, Robertson's text functions as intimately and dearly as the town crier, the insistent occupation of space out of urgency, a message of critical importance being imparted in all capital letters for the purposes of clarity, quick reading and firmness. It evokes the sound of chanting, the protestation of the human megaphone, the call and answer of voices. But it is also tactically humorous and impudent, its resistance not only direct, but seeping slyly through the fissures of the text, for **HER HUMOUR IS INK** (*Proverbs*, 12).

### A Method for Imagining Co-Embodied Public Space

Citizenship is before all else an co-*embodied* belonging. The citizen's body, in its charged relationships to other bodies, is the temporal matrix and radical mediator of politics.<sup>11</sup>

Robertson's collaged shameless figure is also formed from an aggregate of *methods*, methods that extend to her enquiries into editorial methodology as well, such as the collectively collated text Robertson assembled with co-editor Matthew Stadler. Composed as a conversation rather than a collection, their book *Revolution: A Reader* addresses the topic of revolution and includes annotations from both editors, which were composed simultaneously or in a series of responses to each other. The final project, a 1,200-page book, is embroidered in the margins with the editors' call-and-response model of annotation and forms a textual weaving to form a new argument "that stitches across time and texts to make a unified new thing."<sup>12</sup>

Describing their method for working together on this volume, they begin with the body:

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<sup>11</sup> Robertson, "Prosody of the Citizen."

<sup>12</sup> From the website for the book, <http://www.revolutionreader.com/>. Accessed May 14, 2019.

The risk of embodiment is what these texts have in common ... We think that there is no public space that is not an embodied public space. We think that there is not a politics that does not begin in our desiring cells. We think that this corporal surplus, the movement beyond our biographies and our perceived or administered limits, is the force that makes and changes worlds.<sup>13</sup>

Robertson and Stadler remake the term ‘revolution’ as an intimate and collaborative knowledge by exploring it as

specific revolutions we have experienced in our conversations with one another, in our friendships and communities, and with the writers we love. Every one of these texts is in this book because we have been moved by it, emotionally, intellectually, and bodily. And it was our need to bring revolution home into our bodies, to experience the radical potentials of our limit, our human embodiment, that energised our work.<sup>14</sup>

Robertson was part of an experimental Canadian avant-garde at the Kootenay School of Writing, where participants were introduced to American language poetry by writing faculty George Bowering and Roy Miki, who brought such poets as bp nichol, Steve McCaffrey and Robin Blaser, as well as Canadian avant-garde poets such as Nicole Brossard, Erin Moure, Gail Schoot and the Four Horsemen, to the school to work with students. Robertson moved from this context into publishing and then into the cultural work of writing about contemporary art that was being produced in Vancouver in the early 1990s. Robertson became friends with many conceptual artists who were women and became involved in the gallery and artist community on Canada’s West Coast. Of this time she says, “What I was learning from my artist friends was a kind of stance in regards to the relation between theoretical, formal, and historical researches, and material practices and techniques.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Robertson and Stadler, “Introduction,” iii.

<sup>14</sup> Robertson and Stadler, “Introduction,” iii.

<sup>15</sup> Kai Fierle-Hedrick, with Lisa Robertson, “Lifted: An Interview with Lisa Robertson,” *Chicago Review* 51/52:4/1 (2006): 47.

Robertson's education as part of an artistic community of conviviality and support constituted a form of extra-institutional methodology, initiating a model of collectivity as an approach to figuration within her work.

Interviewed about the publication *Revolution: A Reader*, Robertson said,

Our primary tactic in this project has been conversation. There's a turn in the word itself: conversing we face somebody else, somebody, and recognize there our own refusal to assimilate an untenable measure. This conversational turn can take place as we face a text, a stranger, a death, a feast, an animal, a lover, anything that offers itself unknowably, unaccountably.<sup>16</sup>

Reliance on quotidian, routine knowledges, their process unfolded over meals, a party or a visit by a friend. From within the daily rituals came a form, a method, for privileging one text over another, for preparing the book. Conversation was its 'spine.' Stadler, asked about the process of selecting texts for *Revolution*, suggests something which may be our most radical hope as we undertake the tasks of readers and writers in order to transfigure value:

I don't recall which texts were dear or more dear to whom. I do recall very much enjoying how open we both were to each other's enthusiasms and compulsions. The table also held food and drink, and the talk around it came in bursts of enthusiasm, not rational arguments. I think it's crucial that we conducted ourselves this way, with our appetites and bodies, not cowed by authorities outside the room.<sup>17</sup>

These formal tactics opened "a social space around the word 'revolution,'" Robertson says. "The reduction of human relationships to the determinism of the market is the fundamentalism we want to thoroughly critique. Market fundamentalism's refusal of history, of difference,

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<sup>16</sup> Harriet Staff, "An Interview with the Eds of *Revolution: A Reader*, Lisa Robertson & Matthew Stadler," Poetry Foundation website, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/11/an-interview-with-the-eds-of-revolution-a-reader-lisa-robertson-matthew-stadler>. Accessed February 1, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Staff, "Interview with the Eds."

of the proliferation of foci—of life, in short—calls forth our tactical exuberance.”<sup>18</sup>

The She-Dandy is a figure that also embodies this limit—and, in the face of it, exudes tactical exuberance, as Robertson’s proverb directs:

**SHE IS THE DANDIACAL AVANT-GARDE  
OBSCURITY IS EMBROIDERED ON HER  
PURSE. SHE EMBODIES THE AESTHETIC LAW OF  
CONSTRAINT.** (*Proverbs*, 16)

Robertson’s act of resistance emerges from the immediacy of close reading—especially her close reading of detail. In the Baudelaire text *The Painter of Modern Life*, she finds in detail, ideological threads to pull, creating a text that celebrates unravelling as a signature of power. The fraying figure of the menopausal She-Dandy that she produces takes the public sphere as her own, whether she is welcomed to it or not. She is eminently observed and disturbingly observable, like the old women described in Baudelaire’s poem:

Her petticoat shredded and her dress threadbare, she clutches to her side nonetheless a small purse or reticule embroidered with flowers, or with rebuses, allegorical images that represented gallant proverbs or phrases ... Baudelaire’s dandy subtly emanated a spiritual reserve, an inner aristocracy—that same reserve he described in “Les Veuves” as the stoical pride of the old woman like “an old bachelor [ ... ] the masculine character of her ways added a mysterious bite to their austerity”. In Baudelaire the menopausal flâneur and the dandy share a descriptive vocabulary. (*Proverbs*, 3)

Like the She-Dandy, Baudelaire’s old woman emerges as a collaged figure of difference—she is not one, but many, and that alone bears a capacity to be revolutionary. She exceeds limits of categorization by others, including institutional structures. She is a ‘we’ or a ‘they’ that resists cate

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<sup>18</sup> Staff, “Interview with the Eds.”

gorization. Provisionality is used as a strategy of resistance. Put another way, in the words of poet and theorist Denise Riley,

hesitations in inhabiting a category are neither psychological weaknesses nor failures of authenticity or solidarity ... mutating identifications, sharpened by the syntactical peculiarities of self-description's passage to collectivity, decisively mark the historical workings of political language, a more helpful politics will recognise a useful provisionality in the categories of social being.<sup>19</sup>

Methodologically, Robertson and Stadler encourage the 'proliferation of foci' in *Revolution: A Reader* by creating not only a duo, in the collaboration between themselves, but also an open text that extends itself to the reader through its annotations, a call and answer between editors and readers in the margins of the text that ruptures their authority or conclusiveness, and are indeed about difference in reading as well as writing and thinking. Until the website changed in 2019, readers were encouraged to view the book online at A.nnotate.com and add their annotations: this revolution is a collective. As one reviewer notes, "Revolution is felt and enacted through language, but only in the meeting of word, action, object, and circulation. The linguistic, literary quality of revolution—that revolution's cause is language and language's material effect—is the foundation of the book's work."<sup>20</sup> In this sense, circulation is key as a political gesture and the research is radically presented and positioned by Stadler and Robertson as an open text.

*Revolution: A Reader* is organized into the stages of life—beginning, childhood, education, adulthood, death—"because revolution is a lived process."<sup>21</sup> As Hannah Arendt suggests, in her discussion on the operation

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<sup>19</sup> Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Holly Pester, "Invest Your Consciousness /in/ My Idea-Market," on the Three Letter Words website, <http://threeletterwords.org/invest-your-consciousness-in-my-idea-market/>

<sup>21</sup> Robertson and Stadler, "Introduction," v.



of thinking and its relationship to the perception of time, it is a movement from the future through the present to the past, an action of the mind in which memory, intuition and expectation are the key faculties, respectively, which construct the temporal. As Arendt tells us, “The time continuum, everlasting change, is broken up into the tenses past, present, future, whereby past and futures are antagonistic to each other as the no-longer and the not-yet only because of the presence of man, who himself has an ‘origin,’ his birth, and an end, his death, and therefore stands at any given moment between them; this inbetween is called the present.”<sup>22</sup> This awareness of time, Arendt suggests, is key to humanity, which singularly among creatures lives not just in time, but *is* the essence of time, a being who knows of his or her own beginning, and is equally aware that there will be an ending.<sup>23</sup>

**HER OBSOLESCENCE IS INDISPENSABLE TO  
HER WORK WITH RESISTANCE. SHE WILL HAVE  
BECOME THE PHILOSOPHER OF HER OWN RUIN,  
WHICH IS ALSO THE RUINOUSNESS OF CAPITAL.  
BY ENTERING THE THEATRE OF THE STREET  
EACH DAY AND DISPLAYING THE DIGNITY OF HER  
IRRELEVANCE, SHE ALTERS THE INTERPRETATION  
OF NECESSITY. (*Proverbs*, 18)**

## Endings

One cannot speak about embodiment without acknowledging its limits and constraints. Death appears at any moment in any given lifetime, and as Arendt suggests, it shapes our thoughts and our understanding of free will. Death can be a disappearance, a pleasurable abolishment by language or a point of no return. Willing and nilling, we chart a pathway that reveals us as a figure through action. Death appears in myriad configurations: actual physical death; the end of public life through

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<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1971), I:203.

<sup>23</sup> Kamposki, *Arendt, Augustine and The New Beginning*, 169–70.

retirement, failure or redundancy; the end of an era of work in one's life to which one's identity is associated; the erasure of figuration through the erasure of meaningful work, lack of productivity, demotion or the struggles of precarious labour, in which, through an absence of proper compensation or recognition, one's association with labour necessarily undergoes a loss, a transition. Sometimes a partition occurs when one no longer values the work to which one has been devoted, a space in which one concept of a kind of work fades away as a result of ethical concerns, indifference or a change in the nature of that work over time, particularly as the work evolves (or devolves and is destroyed) within a neoliberal context, before its replacement by another job, technology or set of methods. The opposition to these endings, or a desire to move beyond their constraining, annihilating limit, is what Arendt describes as a will to will—life desiring the expression of itself—and its opposite, nilling. “The touchstone of a free act,” Arendt tells us about this freedom, “is always our awareness that we could also have left undone what we actually did—something not at all true of desire or of the appetites ... willing, it appears, has an infinitely greater freedom than thinking.”<sup>24</sup> Arendt's thinking itself was revolutionary, for it departed from her predecessors in focusing not on death but on birth as the primary organizing structure for emergence in the public sphere.<sup>25</sup>

Robertson offers a method for this figure which emerges in natality and resides outside the demands of regulation:

**SHE IS THE MASTERPIECE OF THE ANCIENT  
SUPERIORITY OF THE IMPRODUCTIVE. SHE  
NEITHER BEGETS NOR WORKS, BUT DRIFTS.**  
(*Proverbs*, 19)

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<sup>24</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 2:3.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of Arendt's notion of natality in relation to Heidegger and others, see Robertson, “Prosody of the Citizen.”

Lexically, Robertson's 'drift' folds back on itself—rather than listing or directionlessness, the drift conjures the de-regulated figure in writing itself, what it performs, its rhythms, cadences, rules, norms. Crucially, she is 'improductive,' while at the same time, as a figure, Robertson explores her capacities. This form of movement, drift, is also present in the editors' approach to time and history in *Revolution: A Reader*:

We wanted to, among many other things, bring a lively history to this word, this concept [revolution]. For many, history has become antiquated or irrelevant. I think we're for absolute anachronism though—letting multiple times flood the present. The proliferation of time is for us a politics. Our stance is historical.<sup>26</sup>

Robertson takes up Arendt's formulation of nilling, suggesting that "the ambivalent stance towards complicity in the text has to do with the discomfort in recognizing the organizing, determining strictures of a code, its work and trace on the body, as a form of experienced pleasure."<sup>27</sup> Robertson's notion of a *problematics* of pleasure gestures to the integration of power relations within and across the body, as a constraint that also might "contingently transform that power into something other than a unidirectional compulsion."<sup>28</sup>

Robertson's enquiry has a practical basis, an instructional one for the revolutionary, both in writing and in political action, for "if we can refer to 'arts of users,' the tactical counter-practices of the governed, then ... the seriously ludic acceptance of power's traces constitutes such a detournage ... radically opening identity as a non-teleological, inconspicuous work of abnegation, of nilling *as* agency."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Staff, "Interview with the Eds."

<sup>27</sup> Robertson, "Lastingness: Réage, Lucrèce, Arendt" in *Nilling*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Robertson, "Lastingness: Réage, Lucrèce, Arendt" in *Nilling*, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Robertson, "Lastingness: Réage, Lucrèce, Arendt" in *Nilling*, 33.

Arendt's construction of nilling informs Robertson's She-Dandy, the modern concept of menopause as a useful cipher in which to consider such metaphoric shattering, and the end of life in the public sphere. Robertson notes, in her preface that,

... The 19<sup>th</sup> C invention of menopause as a deficit of femininity, treatable by medical means, must be seen in the more general context of the post-revolutionary privatization and enclosure of women's lives and roles with the family, a condition that accompanied the generalization of industrial capitalism. If in the bourgeois ideology the female body was constrained to represent reproductive value, indeed, functioning as a kind of money (that other value in flux), once freed of this signifiatory role as she entered *l'age critique*, which was the then-common term, more familiar than the new medical appellation, her ruinous social presence problematized the very necessity of productivity. (*Proverbs*, 4)

If an organ becomes purely self-referential as Robertson has framed here, and as she suggests rhetorically in her "Notes to the Reader," it has the potential for an all-over-ness, for all organs of the body to take up the cause of production. If menopause is an ending, a symbolic end of productivity in terms not only of fertility but also of appearance/work in the public sphere, how can its immutability be politicized? Robertson's She-Dandy exposes the nature of this premature foreclosure on "communicability, for the pleasure, the intensity, the integrity of it" (*Proverbs*, 2). Robertson addresses these conditionings and gloriously snubs them:

**WEALTH IS THE AUTONOMOUS EXPERIENCE OF  
ONE'S OWN PLEASURE, A FLAWED PLEASURE  
INNATE TO EMBODIMENT. MOVING EXTREMELY  
SLOWLY ON THE BOULEVARD, IN THE PARK,  
AT THE NEWS STAND, IN THE BOOKSHOP,  
SHE DISPLAYS HER RESISTANCE TO ALL  
APPROPRIATION SAVE THE POEM'S.**  
(*Proverbs*, 24)

The tip of Hannah Arendt's arc of emergence in the public sphere is adulthood, where, in full possession of one's political agency—think-

ing, judgement and reason—along with training and social powers, the individual adds her voice to the archive of collective history. In language, Robertson finds the first appearance before others, and the state of dependence for that appearance, means that one is also multiply constituted from the beginning by her witnesses, all telling the story of her birth. The ‘I’ that is produced is a figure that is multiply fictioned, radically positioned. For Robertson, writing breaks the presupposition between ‘I’ and the one who speaks, to create a space of revolution and resistance. The materials of language reach beyond an ‘I’ into a set of practices. From these practices emerge longings, constituencies, characters, affects and conditions for work, for love, for life itself.

### **Embodied Reading**

To create solitary silences for reading and contemplation, as well as being (and perhaps, if desired, producing), creates a tension and unease in contemporary sociality in which minutes are instruments of productivity, the feeling of missing a crucial conversation, introduction or event. To be alone, a solitary reader is to trust one’s own historical account for the time being. To be situated while, at the same time, to shuttle across texts, to permeate other embodiments, expressions of sense and of situated knowledge, as Robertson does, is also to be so self-reliant. As Sina Queryas writes, a lyric conceptualist is a “master of collision, she is not afraid of entering into other texts ... The Lyric Conceptualist is not necessarily a feminine body, but it has the stink of the impure, a certain irreverence for the master, therefore it is by default, feminine in construction.”<sup>30</sup> The Lyric Conceptualist appears to be a listener of heightened powers:

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<sup>30</sup> Sina Queryas, “Lyric Conceptualism, A Manifesto in Progress,” Poetry Foundation website, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/04/lyric-conceptualism-a-manifesto-in-progress>.

**SHE HAS ENTERED AN UNDOCUMENTED  
CORPORALITY. EXCELLENT. NOW THE  
SCINTILLATING RESEARCH CAN BEGIN.**  
(*Proverbs*, 10)

For Robertson, the body, a site of endangerment by modern and neoliberal ideas of productivity, may also offer a lever in which to reconsider the terms of political engagement through its inherent refusals: its unfortunate losses and ungovernable illnesses and injuries, its insistent cycles of life, its capacity for fatigue and unproductivity and its ultimate failure in physical death. In the She-Dandy, Robertson's approach to knowledge suggests a pathway to understanding how institutional spaces must be circumvented by creating one's own revolutionary rupture, using the most available technology: one's own body. And this body can appear textually, as she indicates when she describes her use of 'the ear' to guide her writing: "I love syllables first. Then I love sentences. I think this is peculiar to writers. After all the research, I work through the ear."<sup>31</sup>

The final "Untitled Essay" in Robertson's *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codes, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias* is concerned with the risks and opportunities of reading and writing, and of poetry: "following the movement of thinking, a woman escapes the confinement of identity moving in to the open of language. Amongst these membranes, speaking begins, plays its tenuous near and in spite of the accreted institutions that compel anyone to obey, violate and buy, to be situated by identity's grid."<sup>32</sup> She proposes this openness for the social sphere, moving it into our public lives where risks are taken to be receptive and vulnerable.

In order to fully appreciate Robertson's formal resistance and the necessity of the *Proverbs*' paratactical logic, it is useful to consider how

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<sup>31</sup> Fierle-Hedrick, with Robertson, "Lifted," 48–49.

<sup>32</sup> Robertson, "Untitled Essay" in *Nilling*, 73.

language's own structures, and its resonances in the mouth and in the ear, as much as in thought, in the mind, can create a figure. Arendt suggests that others witness our first emergence, and we therefore rely on another to tell our stories. But how can these stories be told? How does writing itself, with its sounds and rhythms, its cadences and eruptions, form a figure? Robertson's onomatopoeic rush in the following paragraph displays how the libidinal joys of language may function in this respect:

About syllables—I mean that nubby material edging up of consonants against airy vowelness in a line. How for me a line has to have a presence in this way—this sound structure I go for at first intuitively, then tweak by making small moves and shifts and adjustments so there is no sonic flattening with a line. It has to, for me, have this sort of full knobbly quality, of a torsion or a jaggedness or a swoony kind of movement from syllable to syllable, although now I seem to be exploring flatness as a sound quality ... You can see my vocabulary for describing it isn't theoretical. It's what gives a line body and movement within itself—the internal sound and alphabetic structure of a line as opposed to an emphasis on line break as the definitive energy of what a line could be ... all these gorgeous syllables, nothing to do but bask in them ... That and the additional problem of how to construct movement from line to line, how to install a kinetics that begins at the level of the syllable but moves the entire poem ... I do find each sentence is exciting, even erotic.<sup>33</sup>

Words like *nubby*, *airy vowelness*, *knobbly*, *torsion*, *jaggedness*, *swoony* reveal how Robertson thinks about language as erotics—its form both arises from conditions of the body and its relation to the senses, and is itself figuration. These words have a sound in the mouth and a shape on the page—they return us as closely as possible to a place before we knew what words meant, when they were rolled around in the mouth, when we thought of them as laughter. In this sensual experience and conditioning of the text, Robertson locates Arendt's concept of beginning in language. The language is embodied, as it forms a figure. Further, Robertson writes,

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<sup>33</sup> Fierle-Hedrick, with Robertson, "Lifted," 49–50.

In a vernacular, where poetics and politics circulate through one another to untie the gridded duality of ethics and aesthetics, a poetics of the citizen innovates time as a gestured co-improvisation, in deeply ingrained reference to the shared fact of embodiment, and bodily continuity. The vernacular is the movement for which language is not the state but the condition of presentation of the subject to and for others. It is grammarless rhythm, a mobile patterned regime of compromise. Something infinitely vulnerable.<sup>34</sup>

## Capitalism and Poetics

Robertson has been called a lyric conceptual poet, which by one definition is someone who “remains true to her politics of inclusion, appreciating the thinkership of conceptual poetry, the revelations in mass assemblages that concretize the ephemeral textuality of daily life. Yet she stubbornly continues to bask in the reverie of solitude.”<sup>35</sup> As critic Michael Redhill writes of Robertson, “the poem bursts open into a phenomenological exploration of something present in the everyday. It’s a collage. It’s a list. It’s a meet-market where ideas intermarry and produce shadowy offspring of association and insight.”<sup>36</sup>

Robertson acknowledges that formal threats to language structure may also be seen as ideological in nature. Language as a map of daily life, as

a way of speaking and a way of being ... is waning. It is being replaced with a different understanding and use of language, one that speaks in precisely defined words, whose poetics articulate around principles of limit and control. It is a rigidly categorised mechanism designed to quantify, regulate and subordinate to a

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<sup>34</sup> Robertson, “Prosody of the Citizen.”

<sup>35</sup> Queryas, “Lyric Conceptualism.”

<sup>36</sup> Michael Redhill, “Michael Redhill on Lisa Robertson,” Lemon Hound website, May 10, 2013, <http://lemonhound.com/2013/05/10/michael-redhill-on-lisa-robertson/>.



specific political ideology. It is, in a word, the poetics of neo-liberalism, which is to say of capital.<sup>37</sup>

Expressed as a proverb, Robertson writes,

**UNLIKE ALMOST ANY OTHER ADULT HUMAN BODY,  
HERS NOW POSSESSES EXTRA ORGANS, ORGANS  
THAT HAVE ECLIPSED ALL USE VALUE. SHE WILL  
DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH HER INNER WEALTH,  
WHICH IS ENTIRELY AUTONOMOUS. (*Proverbs*, 22)**

These structural changes are reflected not only in terms of content, but also in form. Or as Robertson writes: “Now language and money circulate using the same medium, a grammar which is digital, horizontal and magnetic, and politically determined. Maybe all language will be eventually administered as an institutional money: a contained and centrally monitored instrumental value.”<sup>38</sup> Robertson’s response to this reduction of language into capital is to return to us a figure who is potentially emancipated from Michael Feher’s ‘self-appreciation’ and to look to poetry as a source of imagination and reading as a source of freedom. Reading provides the opportunity for giving over to the strangeness, the newness and the otherness of the text. It is a vitalizing act: “As I read, my self-consciousness is not only suspended, but temporarily abolished by the vertigo of another’s language. I am simply its conduit, its gutter. This is a pleasure.”<sup>39</sup>

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**SO, BEING AN IDEALIST, SHE HAS CAUSED  
HER MENOPAUSE, SURGICALLY, PSYCHICALLY,  
CHEMICALLY, OR BY PATIENTLY WAITING. IT IS**

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<sup>37</sup> Laura (Alan Reed), “Reading and Thinking: Lisa Robertson’s ‘Nilling,’” Lemon Hound website, September 21, 2012, <https://lemonhound.com/2012/09/21/reading-and-thinking-lisa-robertsons-nilling/>.

<sup>38</sup> Robertson, “Untitled Essay” in *Nilling*, 78.

<sup>39</sup> Robertson, “Lastingness: Réage, Lucrece, Arendt” in *Nilling*, 26.

**HER OWN. THE STATE HAS NO MENOPAUSE, ONLY  
PRODUCTIVITY AND LOSS. (*Proverbs*, 9)**

Taken together, *Proverbs of a She-Dandy* and the methodology of *Revolution: A Reader* demonstrate that difference is key to revolutionary tactics in writing, and that a multiply formed figure may offer an emancipatory approach to vulnerability in the public sphere. It is not the use of common form and language, but the communality of difference and an openness to others that provides hope of resistance to the instrumentalization of thought and of writing. Within such differences is a form of hosting and generosity that can be called a form of care. Robertson's work attests to the commitment to "giving each other the space for such an opening ... we call this gift politics."<sup>40</sup>

The desire for the unity within figuration, especially of the self, as outlined by Cavarero and Arendt, is in Robertson a unity comprised of a collective. Through Robertson's formal capacities as a writer, situated between lyric and conceptual forms, emerges a figure that has a particular capacity to occupy the public sphere and to do so while acknowledging the shaping mechanisms of the institutions which seek to proscribe their limits and capacities. Robertson says, "The most temporary membranes serve as shelter. Among these membranes, speaking begins, plays its tenuous continuities near and in spite of the accreted institutions that compel anyone to obey, violate and buy, to be situated by identity's grid."<sup>41</sup> The process of appearing in public, then, is an activity that emerges, for Robertson, out of language:

We citizens constitute ourselves according to the movement of subjectivity in language ... Language, the historical mode of collective relationship, is also the aptitude by which humans innovate one another as subjects: The ego is the one who linguistically addresses

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<sup>40</sup> From the website for the book, <http://www.revolutionreader.com/>. Accessed May 14, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Robertson, "Untitled Essay" in *Nilling*, 73.

another, and it is only through this address that each in a reciprocal entwining, may fashion herself as “I.” In this co-movement of significance between individual and society, each person comes into an awareness of herself as a speaking being with the society of language.<sup>42</sup>

This figure is not only witnessed and called into being by others, but is called into being by the materiality of language itself. Robertson’s She-Dandy emerges paratactically, beyond the lyric or the conceptual. Robertson places objects for thought side by side to elicit, by their proximities, a commingling centrifugal force from which a set of questions or set of practices moves into “the open of language.”<sup>43</sup>

Parataxis is a literary device that holds disparate elements in a disinterested flotilla; each element may contain elements of juxtaposition or equilibrium variously, but these are distributed equivocally throughout a sentence or series of sentences—from this to this to this—linked by semi-colons, full-stops, commas and in some cases ‘and’s. It is an affect undertaken by Rousseau in *Confession of a Solitary Walker* (also Robertson’s inspiration and starting point for her book *R’s Boat*):

[Rousseau describes] floating aimlessly in a lake observing only the flickering of his consciousness in concert with the various patterns of afternoon—light, water, breeze, foliage. He calls this the pleasurable sensation of existing. There is no longer a foreground and a background, but a cognitive continuum. For me the boat became the figure of this lascivious and boundless perceiving. In terms of composition, this meant an entirely pliable handling of perspective. No subject position, but a distribution of subjectivity as equivalently charged at any point.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Robertson, “Untitled Essay” in *Nilling*, 73.

<sup>43</sup> Robertson, “Untitled Essay” in *Nilling*, 73.

<sup>44</sup> Robertson quoted in Sina Queyras, “All Sides Now: A Correspondence with Lisa Robertson,” Poetry Foundation website, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/03/all-sides-now-a-correspondence-with-lisa-robertson>.

It is an approach that resembles the curatorial. Here a text is not simply a conceptual spine, imperative or narrative that flows through a set of speech acts, notations or through an exhibition, but an interaction between materials, objects, thoughts, spaces, pauses and movements by and of the writer, reader, viewer, curator, artist or artwork; in fact, it is not a text at all but a set of practices and responses. It is materiality and materialization, beyond formalism and capital, and these interactions/encounters serve to reinforce and affirm embodiment and embodied *textual* ontology that produces knowledge, in a reciprocal activity that both forms and informs artworks and their witnesses. But which sites are relegated for these acts of daring?

### The Domestic Sphere

Moving beyond Arendt's oppositions of public and private, Robertson instead asserts the non-binary of one site: the *domestic* sphere. This sphere is a "mediating skin" rather than "a private interiority conceptually opposed to a social outside."<sup>45</sup> Robertson argues that time rather than space should shape our understanding of this sphere, since "the *domus* is the place of rhythmic protection of the vulnerable body," where all labours and affects occur (reproductive, work, food preparation, cleaning). It is not "private" in the same way that the "body and its modes of conviviality, reproduction and care aren't private."<sup>46</sup> Robertson argues that both subjectivity and temporality are mediated by this domestic sphere, where they emerge as "an embodied vector that breaks open, floods the habitual containment of the public-private binary," and that in the "shift away from the spatial metaphor of the domestic, a displacement of power occurs." For Robertson the body is

generative, commingled, gestural, enacted; in a temporal interpretation of the domestic, power innovates itself as an improvised

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<sup>45</sup> Robertson, "Untitled Essay" in *Nilling*, 75.

<sup>46</sup> Robertson, "Untitled Essay" in *Nilling*, 75.

embodiment ... Across these constantly shifting melodic thresholds, the flow of spoken language, from the birth-cry to digital transmission, evades spatial containment, and rhythmically innovates the time of our collectivity. This collectively spoken time is the sole incubator of subjectivity.<sup>47</sup>

If time is the sole incubator of subjectivity, and is the primary force on which the domestic sphere depends, how might we consider the way in which language can once again produce a figure? Riley suggests that “language *is* sensibility” and that it finds form “at the pervasive level of its musculature ... through its grammatical and syntactical joints.”<sup>48</sup> However, Riley also acknowledges the constraints of attempting to speak oneself that test the limits of speech and of writing to attend to these tasks, since “the investigating self as its own historian, modest yet vain-glorious, tacit heroine of its researches, poses an obstinate problem for the history it writes.”<sup>49</sup> The constraints of one’s subsequent dependency, in terms of depending on another for our story via interpellation by others, strain the ‘inner-eye’/‘I’ as the self attempts to hold up a reflection of itself to be seen, to compare its interiority to, and which desperately requires irony in order to be free of the categorizations that one might submit one’s own self-telling to, for

any writer will inadvertently historicise herself in her work,  
however nonself-referential it aims to be. Describing myself,  
I set out the stall of myself, however reluctantly, as advertising.  
And if this is so, can speaking the self ever be managed without  
flattery or abnegation?<sup>50</sup>

Beginning with the first building block of the self, the ‘I,’ one must use a category already and always occupied by others. In her *Proverbs*,

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<sup>47</sup> Robertson, “Untitled Essay” in *Nilling*, 76.

<sup>48</sup> Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 28.

Robertson troubles the assumptions of who speaks and is spoken for by experimenting with the pronoun as a syntactical strategy, focusing on ‘she’ where previously, in her work from the Office for Soft Architecture, she had primarily employed ‘we’ as a site from which to navigate the problems being addressed by and through her text. “Pronouns,” says Robertson, “are always a problem. And the first person can get pretty toxic ... Whatever pronoun a work is organized around, you have to trouble it.”<sup>51</sup>

As Riley outlines:

The very grammar of the language of self-reference seems to demand, indeed to guarantee, an authenticity closely tied to originality. Yet simultaneously it cancels this possibility. Any *I* seems to speak for and from herself; her utterance comes from her own mouth in the first person pronoun which is hers, if only for just so long as she pronounces it. Yet as a human speaker, she knows that it’s also everyone’s, and that this grammatical offer of uniqueness is untrue, always snatched away. The *I* which speaks out from only one place is simultaneously everyone’s everywhere; it’s the linguistic marker of rarity but is always also aggressively democratic.<sup>52</sup>

This logic extends even further, resembling Arendt’s conceptualization of a before that must always necessarily be narrated by others, a witness to the self which precedes the self. In language, Riley asserts, “autobiography always arrives from somewhere outside me; my narrating *I* is really anybody’s, promiscuously. Never mind the coming story of my life; simply to enunciate that initial *I* makes me slow down in confusion.”<sup>53</sup> Here, Riley asserts that it is *within* language, not just in its capacity as testament of the self by others to the event of one’s birth and appearance, that precedes the ‘I’ in this case, but that “the word in language is half

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<sup>51</sup> Fierle-Hedrick, with Robertson, “Lifted,” 43.

<sup>52</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 57.

<sup>53</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 58.

someone else's."<sup>54</sup> Riley suggests that language may be even more formidable in its ability to occupy all predispositions towards a self expressed through speech and writing, since "language itself also possesses its own designs and that your word is already not 'half' but is wholly 'someone else's'—is already everyone else's—and can only be copied, or stolen back again."<sup>55</sup>

Into this design possessed by everyone, one must write in the full knowledge that there exists a history and preceding context for a self, emerging from language. One cannot escape this fact by attempting to use the lyric form or convention to arrive at a self, since "the lyric: 'I' also advertises its simulacrum of control under the guise of form. It's a profound artifice, and the writer and reader both know it."<sup>56</sup> Attempting to wrestle back the writing by using form alone does not provide an adequate response since "it can only be exercised retrospectively. Held by form, I work backwards, chipping away at words, until maybe something gets uncovered which I can acknowledge as what I might have had to say."<sup>57</sup> Robertson fully acknowledges that she is held within these precursors and that they exert themselves not only extralingually, but also within language itself.

### **Self-Articulation and the Materiality of Writing**

The publication *R's Boat* is the culmination of Robertson's desire to make "an autobiographical book that was not self-referential."<sup>58</sup> The poems in this volume are 'archival gleanings' collated over a period of five to six years, working from her archive of approximately sixty separate notebooks. Each poem drew from these sources newly, and each piece was

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<sup>54</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 63.

<sup>55</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 63.

<sup>56</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 66.

<sup>57</sup> Riley, *Words of Selves*, 66.

<sup>58</sup> Queyras, "All Sides Now."

written from a different point of view or with a different strategy in mind, sometimes with years between.

Thinking and reading transform into materiality on the page in Robertson's method, reflecting a collating method of approaching writing, and she says she has "always been completely seduced by sentences," declaring herself "a sentence-lover before I'm a writer."<sup>59</sup> Throughout *R's Boat*, lines are composed equivalently, one unbroken sentence ending in a period and, in some, the line interleaved by a line in italics. Lines are repeated, switching in and out of italics. These decisions force the eye to travel down the page in a regimented way—across/down, across/down—and the sentences seem to slide and click as though into a cog, working their way down the page. A figure is revealed, as one might see looking through a letter box, or discover at the end of a session of Exquisite Corpse—giving the sensation of standing long enough on the dimly lit marble floor of the train station, waiting out the messages from an old split-flap schedule, spinning its way through dozens of stark letters and numbers to finally, as if by magic, coalesce in the name of a city, the time of arrival or departure. This is the way a figure is arrived at in "FACE/," a thrumming, moving poem in *R's Boat* in which affects, senses, histories, rhetorical apparitions begin to form the outline of an 'I' that could be understood as a figure, a portrait, executed in an autobiographic autodi-dactic mission. Between and among the sentences, and in surplus to them, emerge the conditions that produce an 'I.'

*Life appeared quite close to me.*

I will construct men or women.

*Limbs, animals, utensils, stars*

I crave extension.

*Look, I'm stupid and desperate and florid with it.*

I do not want to speak partially.

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<sup>59</sup> Queyras, "All Sides Now."



*My freedom was abridged.*  
I speak as if to you alone.  
*O, to quietly spend money.*  
I let myself write these sentences.  
*Of course later I will understand my misconceptions.*  
I doubt that I am original.  
*Sometimes I'm just solid with anger.*  
I have been like lyric.  
*Still I don't know what memory is.*  
I have a chic ideal.  
*Such is passivity.*  
I will not remember, only transcribe.<sup>60</sup>

Robertson's mobilization of the page in this way, using the architectural structure of the line to climb and to descend, provides also a stop-motion animation of image and concept as well as a sonic register. "Rhythm is the poem's—and thus the subject's—agency," Robertson tells us.

In the poem language is not object, it is subject ... a record of the description of the problem of the immateriality of language as politics ... Poetry may show us that when we sing to the subjectivity of the other, without determining that subjectivity, this is politics.<sup>61</sup>

The syncopation of these movements alerts the reader to the space around and between the words she chooses. It is an intimately shaped self-portrait—there are rhythmic admissions and confessions of ambivalence and expressivity. No one sentence lays a claim since they are often cancelled out. Capitalism informs this 'I' and the slippage in which she functions, diffident and assertive, absolute and relational. Here, the private, public and secret self can merge and become one form within Robertson's domestic sphere, one in which all the others are

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<sup>60</sup> Lisa Robertson, "FACE/," in *R's Boat* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 13.

<sup>61</sup> Robertson, "Prosody of the Citizen."

encompassed, for “the autobiographical is always subversive, because the political subject, bios, is subversive, in suspension, always beginning.”<sup>62</sup> The semantics of the autobiographical and the political are therefore not only expressed as conceptual elements, or even within the formal vicissitudes of concrete poetry, but as an ontology that arises from the page in the commingling of these forces of assemblage and organization. Such assemblages have a unique capacity to act on, and emerge from, the body: the ear, the tongue, the brain and its ordering of cognition, and its task of arriving at a past, present and future self.

Robertson’s earlier work tested “the internal structure of sentences as wildly psycho-sexual-social units.” In *R’s Boat*, Robertson instead sought to “include extremely banal, flat, overwrought and bad sentences, by devising a sequencing movement that could include anything.”<sup>63</sup> The task is not evaluative solely in terms of word or sentence, but of the sequence. The sequence moves both her reader and the figure, the ‘I’ with which she grapples, and here Robertson takes paratactic logic to another level. In this implementation, the sequence activates a logic pertaining to rhythm and movement. In this sense, Robertson opens out into the temporal, providing, in her work of assembling, a sensual and embodied cosmology for how one might enact difference in a way that reflects the enlivened body and its experience of being.

Robertson considers each element of how her texts are structured and “float[s] the disparity of the units in a continuum. I think what happens is that the caesura, the space between, becomes extremely active, more active than the sentences themselves are,” which, Robertson notes, “has the effect of making any sentence semantically legible in several registers.”<sup>64</sup> Robertson’s approach is focussed on this spatiality—in how the

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<sup>62</sup> Queyras, “All Sides Now.”

<sup>63</sup> Queyras, “All Sides Now.”

<sup>64</sup> Queyras, “All Sides Now.”

spaces between hold form—and it is here she interrogates notions of the temporal that align with her conceptualization of the domestic sphere. Robertson challenges the temporal by taking it on as a material and bending its form, through repetition, pace and rhythm, through syncope and alliteration. Within Robertson’s approximation of textual and temporal movement, a figure emerges. Attention is placed between the lyric and conceptual, occupying neither category, in order to resist easy reading (for reading is also a focus of her practice). For Arendt and for Robertson, ontological being meets relational in the public sphere, and this must also be the concern of writing. Using writing to navigate the complexity of a being in the Arendtian sense means that one appears as a figure materially in both a physical form and in writing practices in public life. The development of a writing practice is therefore a way of appearing; Robertson’s notion of “registers” is a fusion of these forces.

### **To Know What You’ll Sound Like: Claudia Rankine on Figuring Blackness**

Sometimes “I” is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then *what* is comes apart the closer you are to it.

This makes the first person a symbol for something.

The pronoun barely holding the person together.

Someone claimed we should use our skin as wallpaper knowing we couldn’t win.

You said, “I” has so much power; it’s insane.<sup>65</sup>

If, as Robertson has told us, citizens are formed by “the movement of subjectivity in language” and are also “administratively identified by shared, conventional borders, and a historical concept of collec-

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<sup>65</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf Press, Minneapolis: 2014), 71.

tive and individual rights (or their lack),”<sup>66</sup> how does vulnerability unfold across figures, subjects and bodies where such rights have been withdrawn? Claudia Rankine, in her book-length poem *Citizen: An American Lyric*, weaves together figuration, poetics and political incident to figure within language the forms of in/visibility embedded in everyday contemporary Black experience. Her poem is an assemblage of lyric poetry, found text, images of visual art, images from the media, and a series of video scripts with collaborator John Lucas.

Moving within this thesis beyond Robertson’s She-Dandy, a menopausal figure that has been considered excess to capital, I turn here to Claudia Rankine, who problematizes the figuration of an ‘I’ that has been at capitalism’s economic centre while also being at its political and social outside. Rankine’s poem configures Black subjects who are under siege within a late-capitalist structure and within its language, which is itself rooted in whiteness while producing Black bodies as figures. Rankine challenges how these figures have been formed within the metastructure of white supremacist and anti-Black culture:

Your ill-spirited, cooked, hell on Main Street, nobody’s here,  
broken-down, first person could be one of many definitions  
of being to pass on.  
The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow.  
Drag that first person out of the social death of history, then we’re  
kin.  
Kin calling out the past like a foreigner with newly minted,  
“fuck you.”<sup>67</sup>

Rankine’s work shows us how bodies and experiences are prepared for racist encounters and how, even with such preparation, are constantly surprised and made vulnerable by new enunciations of being configured by others. Her work also demonstrates the resiliency of vulnerable

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<sup>66</sup> Robertson, “Prosody of the Citizen.”

<sup>67</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 72.

subjects within a condition which doubles Robertson's outside in its disenfranchisement, showing how vulnerable subjects can resist threats not only to their ability to appear within the public sphere, but also to their access to the full citizenship which predicates such political appearance. As Rankine notes,

In terms of *Citizen*, the initial drafts were in the first person. But I didn't think it was effective, nor did I think it was structurally honest, because many of the accounts were not actually my experiences. Even though I employed the first person in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* to weave together disparate situations, in this book I wanted the opposite. I wanted the disparate moments in *Citizen* to open out to everyone rather than narrowing inside a single point of view. Only when I employed the second person did the text become a field activated by the reader, whoever that reader is. That's what you want—for the text to be as alive and mutable as possible.”<sup>68</sup>

By naming, writing and self-enunciating, Rankine reveals the specific nature of encountering this configuration of 'you' and 'I' as identities and positionalities in language:

Listen, you, I was creating a life study of a monumental first person, a Brahmin first person.

If you need to feel that way—still you are in here and here is nowhere.

Join me down here in nowhere.<sup>69</sup>

Like Robertson, Rankine's figure resists and reconfigures the terms of how she is distributed as a political and embodied subject within language. In *Citizen* she forms a figure that is assembled by instances; Rankine's figure resists the white normative power relation by creating the conditions for Black appearance through writing. Naming anti-

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<sup>68</sup> David L. Ulin, interviewer, "Claudia Rankine, The Art of Poetry No. 102," *The Paris Review* 219 (Winter 2016): <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6905/the-art-of-poetry-no-102-claudia-rankine>. Accessed July 30, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 73.

Black violences from macro- to micro-instances of aggression, its looking-away, its unspokenness, its affects and the specificity of its violent gestures: a phone call to the police, being called by the name of a good friend's Black maid repeatedly, despite the duration of the friendship, being told you are 'always on sabbatical' even when your schedule is the same as your colleagues.

By naming its demands (for silence, for acquiescence), Rankine resists, writing new terms for visibility and for appearance, in Arendt's sense, as a political being in the public sphere. Her writing further names how these instances move through the body as injuries to be attended to, and demonstrates these injuries as political and historical, as well as carried by individual bodies/embodied:

To live through the days sometimes you moan like deer.  
Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another  
sigh. Another stop that. The moaning elicits laughter, sighing  
upsets. Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull  
in, pull under, who knows; truth be told, you could no  
more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs  
about.<sup>70</sup>

The sigh is the pathway to breath; it allows breathing.  
That's just self-preservation. No one fabricates that. You  
sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sighing  
is a worrying exhale of an ache. You wouldn't call it an  
illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being. What else  
to liken yourself to but an animal, the ruminant kind?<sup>71</sup>

Rankine's text addresses a 'you' who is plural, who moans 'like deer.'  
In this lyric long poem, sometimes this address is to the singular 'you,'  
a figure within whiteness whose name has been confused with the  
name of one other Black person in the office, or who waits for the  
white trauma counsellor who shouts her off her front porch having only

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<sup>70</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 59.

<sup>71</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 60.

heard her voice on the telephone, or who overhears a racist remark before entering a conference room where she will spend two hours:

You like to think memory goes back though remembering was never recommended. Forget all that, the world says. The world's had a lot of practice. No one should adhere to the facts that contribute to narrative, the facts that create lives. To our mind, feelings are what create a person, something unwilling, something wild vandalizing whatever the skull holds. Those sensations form a someone. The headaches begin then. Don't wear sunglasses in the house, the world says, though they soothe, soothe sight, soothe you.<sup>72</sup>

In *Citizen*, Rankine describes hearing Judith Butler explain her concept of addressability in person, and writes: "what makes language hurtful," how "our very being exposes us to the address of another ... we suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness ... is carried by our addressability," and "language navigates this."<sup>73</sup> Butler, as Rankine outlines, shows us how language can also become a *condition* as well as something that *conditions*. As Rankine then turns to address herself, after hearing Butler's answer, she brings forward the possibility for an emancipated appearance within language:

For so long you thought the ambition of racist language Was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler's remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit All the ways that you are present. Your alertness, your openness, and your desire to engage actually demand your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 61.

<sup>73</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 59.

<sup>74</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 49.

Rankine has said about the addressable and collective materiality of this figure within her lyric poem,

I know I'm also writing for people who don't always hold my positions. It's not that I think white people are my only audience. It's that I think of America as my audience, and inside that space are white people as well as people of color. Some white people still believe that white privilege and white mobility are the universal position. If a writer has a different experience of the world, the work is no longer seen as transcendent or universal. So as I'm moving around in a piece, I am hearing all those voices in opposition.<sup>75</sup>

Christina Sharpe, in an essay titled "The Ship: The Trans\*Atlantic" in her essay collection *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, focuses on the figure of a young Haitian victim of the earthquake which took place in January 2010. The girl is pictured in a news photograph from Getty Images simply captioned: "Haiti struggles for aid and survival after earthquake."<sup>76</sup> We see an image of a frightened and dazed Black girl, one side of her face injured, her head resting on an icepack; it is a close-up image of her face, and we can also see, in the background, the edge of a stretcher placed on the ground on which she lies. Three hundred thousand people died in this disaster. This earthquake showed the infrastructural problems of post-imperialist nationhood in Haiti, the first free Black republic that was also named for the Indigenous people who resided there. Haiti was indebted to France from 1864, forced to pay \$21 billion in today's dollars for its freedom, calculated as compensation for

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<sup>75</sup> Afua Hirsch, "Claudia Rankine: By White Privilege I Mean the Ability to Stay Alive," *The Guardian*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/05/claudia-rankine-by-white-privilege-i-mean-the-ability-to-stay-alive>. Accessed September 5, 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 46.



lost slave labour and lost raw materials—an amount which helped to finance that European state.<sup>77</sup>

On the girl's forehead is a piece of transparent tape on which is written the word 'Ship'—as Sharpe tells us, it is a shorthand for medical expediency, for ensuring that this girl does make it to the ship that will provide her with care for her injuries. But it is a word that also sutures her once again to the history that has produced her suffering, the longer arc of imperialist capitalist history—the ships which were the vessels of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. As Sharpe tells us,

In this photographic arrangement, I see her and I feel with and for her as she is disarranged by this process. I see this intrusion into her life and world at the very moment it is, perhaps, not for the first time, falling apart. In her I recognize myself, by which I mean, I recognize the common conditions of Black being in the wake.<sup>78</sup>

Sharpe here refers to 'the wake' as both a physical and political instance—the wake that trails the ship and that trails Black suffering, to be in the wake of an unresolved historical and political condition which is ongoing and 'saying please.' This crucially vulnerable girl is also a figure of that history, in Sharpe's estimation, for she and her suffering are handled as quotidian, normative—and disengaged from the long history of these imperial and capitalist relations which produced her very vulnerability in the first place. While at the same time reliant on compassion and care, the fact that such figures of Black suffering are regularly produced makes Sharpe note, "What happens when we look at and listen to these and other Black girls across time? What is made in our encounters with them? This look-

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<sup>77</sup> Sandy Hudson, "Unborderable Blackness: How Diasporic Black Identities Pose a Threat to Imperialism and Colonialism Everywhere," in *Until We Are Free: Reflections on Black Lives Matter in Canada*, ed. Rodney Diverlus, Sandy Hudson, and Syrus Marcus Ware (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020), 98.

<sup>78</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 45.

ing makes ethical demands on the viewer; demands to imagine otherwise; to reckon with the fact that the archive, too, is an invention.”<sup>79</sup>

Sharpe links the photograph of the Haitian girl to the story of Phillis Wheatly, the first published African American poet, who is named for the slave ship *Phillis* that carried her away from her own family and relations, to become the adopted daughter of a white Boston family in 1761 at the age of seven. Sharpe tells us of the figure of this future poet, Phillis, who is later educated by her white adoptive family because she shows signs of intellectual curiosity, as a kind of social experiment and who now fuses as a figure with this Haitian girl:

In that 2010 photo the meager child is not Phillis [Wheatley], but Ship; that is, she is not a particular ship/girl named Phillis but any ship/child/girl; the part for the whole. And while this is the only photograph like this that I have found, my experience of photographs of disasters that happen in Black spaces and to Black people is that they usually feature groups of Black people, to quote Elizabeth Alexander, in “pain for public consumption” whether those Black people are in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Sierra Leone, the Dominican Republic, Lampedusa, Liberia, or Haiti.<sup>80</sup>

The structure of naming, of addressability, in Butler’s estimation, here conflates with how language shapes some figures for emancipation and others for continued extra-judicial and extra-historical configuration by a white metanarrative of history which denies how this economic structure relied on racialized vulnerable bodies in order to flourish and continues to rely on their disenfranchisement in order to retain white supremacists futures. Sharpe shows us how language shapes both girls as figures within white imagination—as a figure for rescue, for compassion, in Berlant’s terms—as someone who has been *decided for* while others have been decided against—while the eighteenth-century subject, the poet, Phillis Wheatley, is reminded each time her name is spoken

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<sup>79</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 51.

<sup>80</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 53.

of the ship that traumatized her and removed her from her community, family and country.

“The world is wrong,” writes Rankine:

You can’t put the past behind you. It’s  
buried in you; its turned your flesh into its own cupboard  
not everything remembered is useful but it all comes  
from the world to be stored in you. Who did what to whom  
on which day? Who said that? She said what? What did he  
just do? Did she really just say that? He said what? What  
did she do? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just  
come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? Do you  
remember when you sighed?

These vulnerable bodies produce political subjectivities, for

white supremacist logics mark Blackness and Black people as ungeographic, regardless of what borders we reside within. As they demarcated African people, and we *became* Black, we were “anchored to a new world grid that is economically, racially, and sexually normative, or, seemingly nonblack; this grid suppresses the possibility of black geographies by invalidating the subject’s cartographic needs, expressions, and knowledges.” The white supremacist demarcation of the world into nation states has created a landscape this is an assumed “transparent” geography. Such geography, as McKittrick describes, assumes the guise of being both naturally true and innocent; the construction of the land, and the geographic makeup of space and place are supposedly apolitical and objective.<sup>81</sup>

Within this political vulnerability, the bodies of Black subjects become spoken *for*. Writing across, against and through this inherited language promotes the capacity to resist this enunciation, and also to read across and against, indeed overwrite, these structures—not to overcome or put aside this state of vulnerable being within racist inscription which continues, but to resist and disembody it as naturalized. To possess,

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<sup>81</sup> Hudson, “Unborderable Blackness,” 100, quoting Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 3.

to inhabit, to remain in language's capacity for figuration, is to work within its wounding, within each speaking position, and to resist:

Words work as release—well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture. A pulse in a neck, the shiftiness of the hands, an unconscious blink, the conversations you have with your eyes translate everything and nothing. What will be needed, what goes unfelt, unsaid—what has been duplicated, redacted here, redacted there, altered to hide or disguise—words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains.

Occasionally it is interesting to think about the outburst if you would just cry out—

To know what you'll sound like is worth noting—<sup>82</sup>

Butler, Gambetti and Samsay tell us that resilience is fraught—that resistance is the more politically salient position which does not demand that vulnerable subjects continue to absorb the punitive political structures within late-capitalism that demand the rights of some bodies and the curtailment of the rights of others, and who create normative structures to defend these injustices. Instead the authors argue for resistance that provides agency rather than the absorption of wounding.<sup>83</sup> This thesis argues for resilience but sees a way forward for resilience to be produced by and through resistance—and this resistance is made material in writing, an agency and natality that contains within it the capacity for revolutionary being.

## Conclusion

In *Proverbs of a She-Dandy* and *R's Boat*, Robertson's work engages with a revolutionary challenge to self-articulation, addressing the constraints

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<sup>82</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 69.

<sup>83</sup> Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2016), 19.

of time as a logic that can and must be superseded. This temporal criticality located within Robertson's acts of writing, and which arises out of spatiality and rhythm in her work, is also one with which the curatorial has been obsessed. Standing between objects, measuring, discussing, fretting over whether a room, a set of research practices or an installation might be upended by disturbing proximities, crowdedness, emptiness, the curator knows this is more than a formal problem but one of conditions, of how such spaces/ideas function within a paratactical logic of research and encounter. It is a problem that, if ignored, threatens the movement of thought, of being, of ontological knowing through the tethered tool that each witness shares: a body through which the apprehension of any site as a sensorium occurs. Instead the She-Dandy enters the non-space and open-ended time of the sublime, once occupied only by patriarchal utopias:

**THE DANDY ASPIRES TO BE SUBLIME,  
CONTINUOUSLY; BUT LIKE A WEST- MOVING SUN,  
SHE HAS EFFORTLESSLY ENTERED INTO THE  
MENOPAUSAL SUBLIME, SETTING A PERENNIAL  
EXAMPLE FOR THE DANDIACAL CODE, WHATEVER  
IT IS YET TO BECOME. (*Proverbs*, 20)**

"As soon as she speaks and names, the political subject emerges," Robertson tells us.<sup>84</sup> What can gesture more formidably to the condition of vulnerability in the public sphere than the understanding of oneself and one's research as performing in response to a set of situated conditions, allowing for these conditions also to appear—and for the 'I' to be the site of that appearance? Such conditions may account for the erotics of the pre-lingual—sonorous, cadenced, rhythmic—in the same way that Robertson's resonant interface with the figural assemblage of the She-Dandy demonstrates critically how this sublime figure is representative of non-ideological sets of alliances or affinities, or, alternatively, their disruptions and eruptive dissonances. As we have seen as

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<sup>84</sup> Robertson, "Prosody of the Citizen."

well in the work of Claudia Rankine and Christina Sharpe, Robertson's approach to this conditioning of the self is to reoccupy language, an inherited knowledge/form, in order to operationally displace its existing conditions for being. To address our vulnerability in the public sphere, and how this vulnerability may be a precondition for political action, Robertson's She-Dandy fully and completely occupies her conditions—and flaunts herself openly. Rather than a set of conclusions or definitive reforms or new enclosed sets of knowledge (all ripe for recuperation within the neoliberal), an open-endedness results, a figure moving out into a state of becoming, in the “open of language.”

For the poet and art writer Lisa Robertson, the construction of a set of proverbs for a menopausal She-Dandy is an ebullient and revolutionary framework. Both Robertson, in configuring the She-Dandy, and Rankine, in figuring and reconfiguring how Blackness is written for and through others, radically reposition the work of thinking, being, acting and writing as a set of material registers; they do so by considering the materiality of a figure that is produced by the writer—a multiply formed menopausal ‘dandy,’ a multiply formed Blackness—and the methods by which both can address the demands of public life along with the fact of shared, embodied vulnerability within writing. From the final proverb in *Proverbs of a She-Dandy* emerges a figure who may be leaving the stage or entering it, she may be ending or beginning, she is ambiguous in her movement and in her sound:

**AS SHE DRIFTS, SHE HUMS A LITTLE TUNE.  
WHAT IS THAT TUNE. (*Proverbs*, 25)**

Who is that ‘I’ or the ‘She’ that speaks? It is an artifice but also a figure. A fictioning, constructed, but also a lyrical, sonorous ‘She/I.’ It is a figure who is shamelessly exposed. It gestures towards the politically unspeakable and speaks, in radiant solidarity.

## X. Conclusion: When the World Stands Still

*Person/ne: writing and curating vulnerability* in the public sphere has explored how curating and writing cultivate a resilient subject, one who is able to remain vulnerable in the public sphere. It does so through primacy of natality, in Hannah Arendt's terms, and its marking of beginning and the entry into political being and public life. The thesis has employed a paratactical curatorial logic to demonstrate, with each component and practical element, the various ways that one can appear as a figure: to resist and to reconcile, to refuse, and to form a resilience that allows us to join in the collective story of the world. Through curating, writing and storytelling, and in the transformational processes they afford, the thesis has demonstrated *conditions* and *protocols* for cultivating political agency and resilience and for placing our efforts in the public sphere among others, for, as Lisa Robertson writes, "The citizen's body, in its charged relationships to other bodies, is the temporal matrix and radical mediator of politics. Each body, each birth, each coming into speech, bears the radically unquantifiable potential of co-transformation."<sup>1</sup>

The citizen's body in 2020 has been the site of massive rupture: from the Covid-19 pandemic, which has revealed global structural inequalities, to the crucial reevaluation of anti-Black and white supremacists' structures, which meet the neoliberal condition of historically precarious lives. In response, over the past several months, this thesis has sharpened in its consideration of how resilience might be arrived at through resistance. As we have lived through the last six months, we have watched a virus take hold of politics and public imagination, a virus that is not interested in economic theory, apologists for white supremacy or trickle-down healthcare. This phage mines our housing and our labour, dictates how many

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Robertson, "Prosody of the Citizen," *Contours* 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): [https://www.sfu.ca/humanities-institute/contours/issue1/issue1\\_p8.html](https://www.sfu.ca/humanities-institute/contours/issue1/issue1_p8.html). Accessed May 29, 2020

bodies must crowd together under one roof, in one line-up to vote, in one warehouse or meat factory to work. It has exposed us as excruciatingly vulnerable, and exposed the mythologies of our age that have attempted to naturalize structurally produced suffering. The exposure of this injustice has erupted in Black Lives Matter mobilization that has gained global momentum in the wake of the pandemic and the May 2020 murder of African American George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis.

The goal of this thesis, in considering how resilient subjects are mobilised and cultivated while they continue to be vulnerable, has not been to override or abandon the realities of embodiment, nor to assume a romanticized ‘shared experience’ for all bodies who take their place in the world. We know such an experience is impossible and not even desirable—that each being and body faces her vulnerability in the world uniquely. Instead, I have sought to hold a space within this work for vulnerability as a source of resilience, and for writing and curating as a site of emancipation and resistance. Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay problematize resilience as a neoliberal call to absorb the violent structures of its features, and they turn instead to resistance.<sup>2</sup> Such resistance is itself diverse in its expression and embedded within political structures, whether radical, overt, durational, insistent or quiet—it might take surprising forms. As Sara Ahmed asserts,

Sometimes, “coping with” or “getting by” or “making do” might appear as a way of not attending to structural inequalities, as benefiting from a system by adapting to it, even if you are not privileged by that system, even if you are

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<sup>2</sup> Leticia Sabsay, “Permeable Bodies: Vulnerability, Affective Powers, Hegemony,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2016), 279.



damaged by that system. Perhaps we need to ask: who has enough resources not to have to become resourceful?”<sup>3</sup>

This resistance and resilience has intensified as the events of 2020 have unfolded. Difference is in fact key to how citizens may be afforded their birthrights of justice and freedom within the inherent vulnerability of embodiment. In order to understand difference, one must also be aware of one’s own position within any public sphere. In an interview in *The Paris Review*, Claudia Rankine relates how

One man said he was moved by a reading I gave and wanted to do something to help me. I said I personally had a privileged life, which I do, and that I didn’t need his help. What I needed was for him—this was a white gentleman—to understand the urgency of the situation for him and to help himself in an America that was so racially divided. It wasn’t about him coming from his own position of privilege—of white privilege—to take black people on as a burden, but rather to understand that we are all part of the same broken structures.<sup>4</sup>

I have included curatorial projects, creative writing and critical reflective writing to address the work of Emily Carr, Chris Kraus and Lisa Robertson in the three chapters included in this thesis. In those chapters I have also turned to the work of Billy-Ray Belcourt and Claudia Rankine to consider how writing inscribes all bodies for and toward political action and natality, in Arendt’s terms, and to ask what political configuration each body is afforded in its appearance by and through writing.

In the practice-based projects, this approach to writing is further mobilised by the appearance of the figure of the curator within the research. Curatorial strategies included exhibitions, publications,

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<sup>3</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Selfcare as Warfare,” from her blog Feminist Killjoy, August 25, 2014, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/>. Accessed September 4, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> David L. Ulin, interviewer, “Claudia Rankine, The Art of Poetry No. 102,” *The Paris Review* 219 (Winter 2016): <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6905/the-art-of-poetry-no-102-claudia-rankine>. Accessed July 30, 2020.

public programs and performances that address and present diverse cultural, political and social experiences. In the exhibition *Convolutioned Beauty: In The Company of Emily Carr*, the figure of Carr is set alongside contemporary and historical artists to consider vulnerability, illness and exile in a constellation of Canadian and international works. The project *Never the Same: what (else) can art writing do?* formed a space of research, solidarity and conviviality with writers from diverse practices and concerns. Finally, *Person/ne* found ways to acknowledge, through its exhibition, performances and programs, how figures are formed by and through practices of empathy in Arendt's formulation of political subjectivity and citizenship.

Instead of using inherited knowledge as primary material I consider how curatorial practices and forms of research consider the *conditions* of each individual's life as the site of research. Rather than a process of discovery and interpretation, this research is undertaken as a set of *methods*, which include fictioning, performance, archive, documentary, the re-enactment or re-narrating of histories, and other forms of invention. These forms of practice mitigate against a position of objectivity, and instead look to a direct engagement that takes place in both intellectual and cultural forms. In the neoliberal context, research has been instrumentalized as a form of evaluable knowledge. An assemblage of practices arising out of a set of conditions is a useful curatorial or editorial response, a way of resisting the capturing of subjectivity by instrumentalizing forces. Instead, embodied and sensorial elements become a point of emergence for the work.

This way of thinking is a complete reconfiguration of how to know, a paradigmatic shift: moving away from research as a set of 'events' to instead regard the output of one's work as a set of conditions.

As Rankine tells us,

The key is that the anxiety, the stress, isn't a narrative. It's what interrupts the narrative, what stalls mobility. It's an invisible sensation that requires adjustment by the body, beyond the space of words. As a poet, I want to use language to enter that space of feeling. I'm less interested in stories. That's one reason I write poetry. Often when people are speaking with me, I feel what they are saying is the journey to how they are feeling. I mean, it's not that I'm not interested in what they're saying, but I feel like what they're saying is a performance. In many conversations I realize that the thing that's being said is really not the point at all, there's this subterranean exchange of contexts, emotions, and unspoken signals. I think a lot about how white dominance is part of this invisible and unmarked dynamic.<sup>5</sup>

Instead, according to Arendt, by simply appearing in the world, in the process of birth/nativity, one inserts oneself into a story that is already in motion as a subject that must join and be joined by others, as an 'I' already circulating and defined collectively, a figure that is always in the process of becoming.

This concept of becoming has also provided a research structure in this thesis, as it has presented a set of protocols and conditions for writing, which also arise from curatorial thinking. These are assembled methodologically within a paratactical logic. This structure invites one to move within the thesis across disciplines and methods, to consider a set of practices and tools in answer to the research question: *how can one be vulnerable in the public sphere?*

The curatorial projects have extended this enquiry to the work of artists and writers of diverse genders, sexualities and ethnicities within the exhibitions, public programs and symposium. However, the critical writing of this thesis does not address intersectionality directly, and its work in doing so is limited to the collaborations and presenters delin-

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<sup>5</sup> Ulin, "Claudia Rankine."

eated here as part of the broader curatorial projects included, in which diverse contributions have created the conditions for thinking more broadly across non-white, Indigenous, queer and non-binary categories. The research question which has guided this thesis must expand and be continued beyond this dissertation, to consider more fully the implications of anti-Black and white supremacist structures that are embedded in the process of figuration within contemporary global culture. This is the necessary next step in any enquiry that considers vulnerable embodiment across all bodies and all states of being.

Within this beginning, one can establish the methods for understanding that takes place in writing, whether it is taking place through curatorial practice, fictioning, auto-fiction, theoretical fiction, memoir, autobiography or exhibition making. The writers, artists and curators whose work has contributed to the curatorial projects and critical writing in this thesis present examples of how to be vulnerable in the public sphere. Writing and curating has situated vulnerable figures, and has provided us with a way to formulate the script, the record, of individual and collective action. In writing and in storytelling, these events leave their trace and commingle with the traces of others to weave the collective fabric of experience and of political and social life. We have seen the ways in which writing can emanate with its own affects, and that it exceeds memory. Not simply an expression of reality, writing and storytelling arise out of acts of thinking and imagination, create a political sphere and assist in orienting vulnerable bodies within the public realm. Writing provides a place to satisfy the desire for one's story, to hear one's story told and to appear as political subjects within the text of the world.

Emily Carr often spoke of her own self-proclaimed charmlessness, and chastised herself for her inability to behave according to social norms which she felt restricted her unbearably. Through writing, she articulated a public space in which to appear, where her conflict could be manifested without increasing her isolation:

March 5th [1940] The world is horrid right straight through and so am I. I lay awake for three hours in the night and today as a result I am tired and ratty even though the sun is nice as can be. I want to whack everyone on earth. I've a cough and a temper and every bit of me is tired. I'm old and ugly, stupid and ungracious. I don't even want to be nice. I want to grouch and sulk and rip and snort. I am a pall of milk that has gone sour. Now perhaps, having written it all down, the hatefulness will melt off to where the mist goes when the sun gets up. Perhaps the nastiness in me has scooted down my right arm and through my fingers into the pencil and lies spilled openly on the paper to shame me. Writing is a splendid sorter of your good and bad feelings, better even than paint.<sup>6</sup>

In her journals, Carr often identified that “good behaviour” was a duty she struggled to perform in order to win approval, connection and community with others, and that her inability or refusal to perform this prevented closeness to her family, in particular, but also later in her relationships to other artists, collectors and museum administrators. Carr's response is salient and somehow predictive of the outline of what was to come in the twenty-first century: that this network of relations would in future become part of a crystallized neo-economy of reputation within late-capitalism. Carr identifies the power of writing specifically as “a sorter of your good and bad feelings,” privileging the act of writing over that of painting as a place where emotion can be transformed.

Female figures in early modern novels were primarily spoken for by male novelists, dominated by the characters of clever women who are crushed by their own desires which were usually revealed as self-evidently narcissistic and doomed. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (which I refer to in the fictional story “Dead Peasant” in this thesis) or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* are examples of the modern novels that articulated the structural power of the public sphere of Carr's own writing and afforded her little relief in literary form for her personal struggle. Her project arises out of

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<sup>6</sup> Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin, 1966), 20.

the influence of the modern novel on self-narration, which she avoids in the more provisional figure that she forms in her sketchbooks while the short stories follow characterization in the modern novel's sense. Figuring herself in drawings and notes, however, allowed Carr to recalibrate, reassemble the 'I' that she *was*, while presenting for future readers the shape of an emancipated figure in the character she becomes in the stories.

Each of the writers presented in the critical reflective chapters mobilizes storytelling, poetics or other methods of writing, but each in a different form. Rankine tells us, "For me, working on a piece is like playing chess. You're moving the language around to say to somebody, Yes, I know you're possibly thinking this, I know this is a possible move for you. I'm going to include it here so you don't think that I haven't been listening."<sup>7</sup> These forms say something about the particular public sphere and the art world in which the figures appear.

Carr is a transcriptionist of her own experience, recording its affects, and then turning these conditions into works of fiction, using a short story as a form with a beginning, a middle and an end. As a form it has a particular arc, intense but familiar, in a replete, self-contained world—the world of the classic modern novel. In contrast, Kraus presents the figure of 'Chris,' who is made through her responses to a set of conditions and protocols that the work of her novel makes visible. Hers is not a representation, nor representational, but durational, appearing across the whole novel as a set of instances presented one after the other. 'Chris' is constantly moving across states and affects to turn the private into public figuration—the writerly chess game that Rankine describes above.

Within the notion of negative capability comes a response, as Rankine writes: "Beyond the narrative, beyond the storytelling, beyond the anec-

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<sup>7</sup> Ulin, "Claudia Rankine."

dotes is another world of feeling so buried and dark and crippling that it needs its own genre. Poetry!”<sup>8</sup> In response comes Robertson’s figure of the She-Dandy, who in the final chapter of the thesis suggests a way to appear freely within a world which produces subjects that, in Feher’s sense, are governed, constrained and produced by notions of neoliberal ‘self-appreciation.’ The arc of the thesis, from Carr to Robertson, moves through various strategies and iterations for figuration and for how to remain vulnerable, resilient and vital. While Robertson presents herself as a ‘jobbing’ art writer—as a poet who ‘does’ art writing—the She-Dandy configures how to move in the world as a poet, for, as Belcourt tells us, “loneliness is endemic to the affective life of settler colonialism, but ... it is also an affective commons of sorts that demonstrates that there is something about this world that isn’t quite right. Loneliness in fact evinces a new world on the horizon.”<sup>9</sup> The writers and artists presented in this thesis address what happens when a vulnerable subject dares to appear within the sphere of public life in her own way and still remain vulnerable. Each of them searches for a strategy that allows her to flourish, that ever changes and is further shaped by those who receive her. This moves beyond survival into resilience.

The fiction in the collection of stories presented as part of this thesis, *Dead Peasant*, are aggregate, fragmentary rather than novelistic in order to present *conditions*; they do not break up a whole, since there is no totality. The conditions and protocols they present are to be considered as ways to be vulnerable in the public sphere, to be political and ultimately to participate with agency despite the totalizing force of a neoliberal art world from which there is no outside. As Rankine tells us, “There’s no private world that doesn’t include the dynamics of my

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<sup>8</sup> Ulin, “Claudia Rankine.”

<sup>9</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, *This Wound Is a World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 56.

political and social world. When I am working privately, my process includes a sense of what is happening in the world.”<sup>10</sup>

*Dead Peasant* considers a series of instances where methods have gone awry, where protocols have been upturned and conditions exposed. From the abeyance of board members and directors, children, contract workers, mothers, curators, fathers, co-workers and artists, the world order of the art world is examined for its ruptures, fissures and inconsistencies, and for how it produces vulnerable figures. Through writing these stories, political action occurs in the form of holding place for these instances, for their confusion, abdication, silence and violence.

Rankine, in her July 2020 interview in *The Paris Review*, notes,

That’s what makes writing challenging and interesting. How do you get the work to arrive at readers in a way that allows them to stay with it and not immediately dismiss it? It’s something I think about, because I know I’m also writing for people who don’t always hold my positions. It’s not that I think white people are my only audience. It’s that I think of America as my audience, and inside that space are white people as well as people of color. Some white people still believe that white privilege and white mobility are the universal position. If a writer has a different experience of the world, the work is no longer seen as transcendent or universal. So as I’m moving around in a piece, I am hearing all those voices in opposition ... I love finding the lyric in nontraditional spaces ... When I first sit down to write, these movements are all intuitive.<sup>11</sup>

Telling stories, writing poems, fictioning creates the capacity for witnessing and acknowledgement, for the power of figuration, demonstrating how one can appear vulnerably in the public sphere, giving voice to one’s position, finding space with others to speak and to write and to undertake by such appearance, such political action. Our stance may be tactical or exuberant, like the figures of Belcourt’s

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<sup>10</sup> Ulin, “Claudia Rankine.”

<sup>11</sup> Ulin, “Claudia Rankine.”



dancer, Rankine's aggregate citizen or the resistant autobiographical figure that emerges from mark-making and notation in Carr's sketchbooks or perhaps the menopausal anarchist that arises from Robertson's She-Dandy manifesto. As Kraus writes, when 'Chris' begins to formulate her text, "Everything is hilarious, power radiates from their mouths and fingertips and the world stands still."<sup>12</sup>

The larger project is historical. As Rankine asks, "How do you get the work to hold the resonance of its history?"<sup>13</sup> There is much still to be done as we make our way in and through language for a vulnerable while still resilient subject, a figure for whom we anticipate a newness and freedom as she adds her voice to the world, as she forms a language for the uniqueness and the promise of her life. In the beginning of this thesis was drawing, a figure brought forward into being through mark-making, notation, list-making, verse and poetics—a beginning of figuration in drawing. At its end there exists also another kind of figuration arising from rhythm, lyric, sound, pulse and vibration, which holds space as part of the thesis's work for the unexpected and unknown newness that is each new life added to the world, is in fact *for* this world, and which has as its promise the hope of collective and collaborative co-creation.

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<sup>12</sup> Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (New York/Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Active Agents Series, 1997), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Ulin, "Claudia Rankine."

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