

THE BAD GOOD LIFE
ON THE POLITICS OF IMPASSE

by
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Abstract

The Bad Good Life: On the Politics of Impasse addresses the narrowness of conditions of political change. Political theorists have detailed the promise of events in sparking political change but few have examined why events occur rarely or not at all. Impediments to political change are also not fully captured by important analyses of coercion, ideology, and disciplinary power. Meanwhile, the pursuit of social justice in the United States has been at an impasse due to unresolved issues of racism, the normalization of sexuality, settler colonialism, global war, and ecological crises. *The Bad Good Life* addresses these theoretical and political predicaments by developing a concept of “impasse” from critical comparisons of political theory, American studies, feminist and queer theory, and anthropologies of ordinary life. It finds impasse to be more than a deadlock in beliefs, values, or political positions; impasse involves deeply rooted affective attachments that impede change even when it is strongly desired. *The Bad Good Life* clarifies how dominant political systems in the US manage to persist despite the powerful efforts of minoritized subjects to build alternative worlds. It also develops forms of politics that risk the loss of attachments even when full-bodied alternatives have yet to arise.

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with megan

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Appetite won't attach you to anything no matter how depleted you feel.

—Claudia Rankine

Already Stuck

The Bad Good Life was written across a United States that has been strained and enriched by economic crises, eruptive histories, minoritarian protests, and ecological fragilities. It presumes that these intensities have made increasingly untenable an image of the good life that is bound up with the US nation-state and its social fantasies, economies of affect, public cultures, terms of belonging, and future aspirations. Nonetheless, powerful forces have been scrambling to suture together the good life as they desire it. They range from militarized police squads that have brutalized black and indigenous peoples in particular to the post-9/11 machinery of surveillance, detention, torture, and slaughter. They resound in stern voices of economic austerity that have called for water to be shut off to the racialized poor in cities like Detroit and Baltimore while deeming water filled with toxins to be okay for Flint, Michigan. They clamored “Love wins!” in response to the legalization of same-sex marriage but have been largely quiet in the face of the ongoing, everyday aggression and violence faced by queer and trans people, especially those of color. At the same time, movements have gained traction on national and global fronts, such as: Occupy Wall Street and its many offshoots; the antiracist movements rallied under “Black Lives Matter” (a slogan created by three queer black women); and Native Hawaiian protection of Mauna Kea from the construction of a Thirty Meter Telescope (an effort that has attained global support under the hashtag #WeAreMaunaKea).

These and countless other activist movements contest political business as usual. Rather than supplying one position amongst others, they anticipate a US that is unhinged from capitalism, racism, hetero- and homonormativities, and settler colonialism. Because

those legacies of power have long taken root in the US, such imaginations are radical; they demand the loss of the US as it has been, along with its identities, fantasies, privileges, and violences. The United States is caught in an impasse between a world that hasn't worked for so many for so long and a world that is yet to come—a world that is less exploitative, less violent, more rich, more equitable, more sustainable, more plural, more wild. What such a world could be is presently unimaginable. Nonetheless, it has a real life in longings that teem on the verge. One political question is how to discern the differences already made by them. Another is how to amplify their pressure until they burst into being even as the process may be risky, jarring, and deeply painful.

Informed by these problems and possibilities, *The Bad Good Life* gauges how life persists without much traction. It does not aim to document the links between neoliberal capitalism, white supremacy, racism, settler colonialism, and hetero- and homonormativities. This is not an investigation into how specific demographics have been affected as dominant systems of power strive to persist, oftentimes violently. Nor is it an investigation into the histories that have created the predicaments in which the US finds itself today. Instead, *The Bad Good Life* develops a concept of “impasse” that emerges from many situations and may be calibrated to many others. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari observe that concepts are not tools of analysis that can be merely applied to the world. They are consistencies drawn across disparates whose charge may be modulated but not neutralized. Essential to concepts is their adaptability. The life of a concept is not found in core features and sharp contours; it is found instead in a capacity to transform through different connections and to inflect a variety of situations in turn.¹

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 15-34.

The present inquiry elaborates a few dimensions of impasse: the attachments that hold together lives and worlds; the affective atmospheres in which anxiety and hope become a muddled mess; the temporalities in which alternative futures are half-present but forestalled; and the mixed fortunes of a politics that accepts the possibility of loss, even when full-bodied alternatives are undesirable or unavailable.

Impasse resonates with a rich family of other concepts. My endeavor is not to clearly delineate impasse from similar situations. Part of the troubling nature of impasse is the lack of certainty that it is one: can't a situation at hand just be a temporary setback on the way to better times? And while I seek to deepen our understanding of impasses, I do not seek to tailor that knowledge to resolution and surefire action. I aim to open more wiggle room within the strange, befuddling, oftentimes depressing experience of impasses. Because this experience is at once personally and politically meaningful, it calls for revisions to what is usually denoted by "impasse."

Deadlock

"Impasse" typically refers to a deadlock of beliefs, values, morals, or political positions. It became a political buzzword during the Fall of 2013, when the US federal government veered close to financial shutdown over the inability of Congress to form a budget. Disagreeing on numerous matters, Democrats and Republicans hit a block that had long been in the works. The non-negotiating stance of the GOP had intensified since the George W. Bush years and throughout the Barack Obama presidency, especially as the Affordable Care Act was being hotly debated. The approval rating of Congress plummeted to a low of fifteen percent in 2014 as the American public viewed Congress to

be largely inept at compromise and progress.

Although impasse usually evokes an opposition that is irreconcilable, I develop an understanding based on the notion of difference elaborated by Deleuze. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze criticizes Hegel for pigeonholing difference into a framework of opposition. That extreme mode of difference, notes Deleuze, is merely epiphenomenal to difference as an open multiplicity of divergences. Deleuze insists that differences do not negate each other; they intensify each other, alter one another, in an affirmative mode.²

I emphasize this abstract philosophical point because I sense in impasses a plenitude of alternatives that do not manage to gain traction and become inhabitable. This blockage is not merely the result of mechanisms of violence, coercion, discipline, regulation, and ideology, though these surely play a role. Rather, it is due to complex relations between attachment, affect, and time. Intensive differences vie for a space in the world, and it is due to the dissonance and friction between these propensities that some attain greater solidity while others fizzle for the time being.

Impasse helps to address a long-standing puzzle across pursuits of social justice and numerous academic fields (such as political theory, American studies, and feminist and queer studies): how is it that an abundance of desires, wild thoughts, and experiments in living otherwise tends to *not* attain the traction and durability that are enjoyed by power-backed worlds? I am not suggesting that wayward potentialities only ever seek a habitable world; their propensity if not intention may be to maintain energetic transformations in defiance of calcification and stagnancy. But conditions could be surely be forged that would allow minor moments and tiny intimacies to fade beautifully without

² Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 50-2.

being targeted for denigration and death. I develop *impasse* to insist that alternative worldings are not unrealistic, undesirable, or impossible, to suggest that regimes of power are not the only reason why they do not attain greater traction, and to maintain that utopian imaginations and radical desires are not inept. In short, *impasse* depicts how dominant worlds can be remarkably resilient even as they swell with intensities to the bursting point.

To take up *impasse* is to ask how it is that political change can be so rare despite there being a plenitude of creativity in ordinary life. *Impasse* touches upon a question that is at once theoretical and political: given the inconceivably broad range of intensities that shoot off in so many directions, how do things ever manage to hold together? Deleuze and Guattari discuss this matter in “On the Refrain” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, partly to address how it is that an ontology of becomings could account for the emergence of states of consistency from intensive flows.³ Arun Saldanha captures this puzzle best when he writes, “It is not difficult to affirm the rhizomatic, the nomadic, and the creative potential of the world. The trick is to explain how, even then, we are faced with the slime molds of racism, sexism, capitalism, and what have you.”⁴ For Lauren Berlant, it is affective attachments that bind people to worlds that are unsustainable, inequitable, and even harmful to them; she finds *impasse* to be “a holding station that doesn’t hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dog paddling around a space whose contours remain obscure.”⁵ Informed by these concerns, my account of *impasse* draws

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 310-50.

⁴ Arun Saldanha, “Re-ontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006), 18.

⁵ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 199.

together the ontological and the experiential, the personal and the political.

I work alongside scholarship that has elaborated connections between politics and events. Within and around political theory, scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, and William Connolly have elaborated the capacity of events to instigate political change. In these accounts, the event marks a dramatic interruption in business as usual. In some versions, the event allows something new to emerge (an identity, a right, a sensibility, or a political formation) that in turn sparks a chain reaction of disturbances and adjustments. My project shares this interest while exploring in greater detail the period that hangs between rupture and novelty. I argue that we do not yet know enough about the conditions under which disturbances may amount to events. *The Bad Good Life* develops impasse to offer a better understanding of blockages to events and the long preparatory work needed to pursue political change.

Seeking Good, Feeling Bad

The Bad Good Life further revises the conventional understanding of impasse by developing an affective framework. It recasts impasse from cul-de-sac between conflicting interests to socially situated peoples at odds with a dominant world. More specifically, it concerns affective attachments that bind selves to worlds that don't quite work for them. If, as I argue, impasses concern the potential loss of deeply rooted attachments, then affect is a pivotal site where politics in an impasse plays out.

Feminist and queer studies have addressed the affective experience of impasse. Scholars of "Public Feelings," such as Berlant, Ann Cvetkovich, Sara Ahmed, and Kathleen Stewart, have, in distinct ways, taken up the problem of impasse due to

longstanding concerns over the tenability of minor desires in a world that offers little sustenance. Politics here concerns the navigation of tensions between threat and promise, anxiety and hope, negativity and utopia. These scholars foreground affect to emphasize the inability of abstract reason, clear knowledge, or sharp evidence to amount to political change on their own.

Berlant has given the most attention to the vexing affective experience of impasses. For her, contemporary conditions of neoliberal precarity have impeded attainment of the good life. Pursuits of the good life end up wearing out people, who come to hit an impasse in what has defined their lives and aspirations for so long. Yet without alternatives in place that could be taken up with confidence, when what could happen is rightly sensed to involve drastic changes in oneself and one's world, people may remain bound to things that are ailing, failing, and downright dreary. What results is “the bad life”—that is, a life dedicated to moving toward the good life's normative/utopian zone but actually stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding onto the ledge, treading water—the time of not-stopping.”⁶ Just what can one do when what seemed to be so good turns out to be so bad?

What I call “the bad good life” is central to understanding the composition and experience of impasses. Here, the good life is a placeholder for a complex set of desires, social ideologies, public cultures. It is a force-field of aspirations and repulsions that hold together a life, shape a world, etch out trajectories, and divide time into the past, present, and future while aligning them toward particular ends. The good life is not so static or consolidated to appear in one form, in no small part due to alternative visions of it.

⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 169.

Nonetheless, dominant notions of the good life are not dispelled by simple choices to opt out. They have accrued enough mass to hold people in their gravity even as they fight to escape. In the United States, those forces are composed of, among other things, neoliberal capitalism, hetero- and homonormativities, sexism, racisms of various types, settler colonialism, ableism—you name it. The good life organizes so much of this world that crises in it may throw even the most deviant of us off our wheels. Whatever exclusions and hierarchies it has enforced, whatever damage it has exacted, the good life has magnetized rhythms, identities, aspirations, ways of sensing, knowing, and experiencing the world that, without being determinative, have at least served as powerful coordinates. And so, as Sara Ahmed writes, “It is difficult to give up an idea of one's life, when one has lived a life according to that idea.”⁷ Fissures in the good life open both the possibility for marginalized groups to ascend into greater livability but also for unexpected changes to be made to aberrant desires, fanciful dreams, and wild intimacies. As a result, anticipation, excitement, and relief at the possible loss of dominant brands of the good life are criss-crossed with anxiety, worry, and concern over what's next.

The “bad” of the “bad good life” is meant to register this capacious range of affective and bodily experiences of impasse, which also includes the damage endured by bodies therein. These experiences arise within the double-bind between sticking with a damaging world in hopes that it will turn out better and running against the grain without guarantees that one will find intimacy, community, and belonging. It is from this predicament that Berlant writes, “‘Impasse’ is the name for the space where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurances of futurity, but

⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 75.

nevertheless proceeding via durable norms of adaptation. People are destroyed in it, or discouraged but maintaining, or happily managing, things, or playful and enthralled.”⁸ People might grow exhausted and sick in the pursuit of the good life. They may adjust themselves to its demands at great cost to their physical and emotional health. Even when an impasse can be experienced as promising, the pursuit of other worlds therein will confront a battery of people and institutions that strives to save the bad good life through all sorts of ugly, cruel means. Never underestimate the lengths to which people will go to defend their world, especially when they are positioned with great power.

Ahmed elaborates that socially authorized notions of happiness coordinate fantasies of the good life in unevenly accessible ways. Ahmed reveals how the “promise of happiness” is shaped by lines of gender, race, sexuality, and nation. Underlying that promise is what she calls a “political economy of the good life”: “Some people have to work in order to give others the time to pursue the good life, the time, as it were, to flourish.”⁹ This clustering of bodies, time, and the good life pertain to the domain of impasse. Some people are poised to effortlessly attain returns on the promise of happiness. Others are left in a rut. People of very different social positions get swept up in an impasse that is zoned in very unequal ways. I find that some groups, both human and nonhuman, are abandoned to impasses so that others may seek the good life. These latter construe impasse as a setback on the way to better times, throwing others under their boots as they march onward. The minoritized and the abjected are made to live an interrupted or foreclosed flow. An impasse between body and world.

⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 200.

⁹ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 13

Between the World and Me, an Impasse

That impasses are encountered very differently across various social positions is reason to criticize Berlant's narrative of impasse, which seems to center on those who have had attachments to the good life. This narrative is due to Berlant's distinctive approach to normativity, which exceeds the rubric of disciplinary practices. Berlant calls normativity "aspirational" since it promises safe haven from the crunch of power. She develops this understanding throughout her work on national sentimentality and particularly in her essay "Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal," which details the precarity of those who hustle for sustenance within gray economies. The precarious maintain an attachment to the good life even as it remains inaccessible. Berlant phrases this impasse as a "situation tragedy," in which "one moves between having a little and being ejected from the social."¹⁰ By framing impasse in relation to a potential loss, she seems to presume a prior situation of having had, however tenuously or fantasmatically. Her notion of impasse thus does not accommodate well enough what impedes attachments from taking root. Even in the extreme case of situation tragedies, attachment is about being in the same room as something. What of those who have been far removed from proximity to the good life such that it has not been viewed as a possibility? What of those who cannot be ejected from the social because they were always already denied entry?

To illustrate the capacious range of experiences of impasse, this section explores the bad good life through recent predicaments involving the American dream. Following the economic crisis of 2008, the American dream and its promises of financial well-being, job security, and upward mobility came under fire. Unable to find adequate employment,

¹⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 177.

many graduates from elite universities admitted that hard work wasn't the sole or dominant factor in determining the attainment of the dream. They also acknowledged how one's well-being rested in the hands of a fickle economy as the weight of student loan debt dragged them down. Nonetheless, they also maintained hope for a better tomorrow, claiming that more job applications and more patience would eventually pay off.¹¹ They reinvested in the American dream, whose promises were deferred but not destroyed. They treated the recession as a setback but not an impasse.

President Barack Obama also acknowledged that intensification of economic precarity had shifted the conditions of the dream. Gone were the days when hard work secured one's own welfare. Now, as Obama has put it in numerous speeches, hard work sets up your children for their success. What Lee Edelman has called "reproductive futurism" facilitates an understanding of this deferral: it is in the name of the Child that persons and societies engage in feats of self-amputation to preserve hope for a future that is defined by a heteronormative image of the present.¹² Here, the American dream is made for the Child instead of oneself. If "queer" denotes anyone who rejects the nation-state's call to reproduction, then this updated version of the American dream is predicated upon the continued elimination of queerness. Denial of this crisis to be an impasse in the American dream is founded upon a recommitment to reproductive sexuality, which has recently expanded marginally to include gays and lesbians so long as they approximate white heteronormativity in domestic, public, and legal life.

¹¹ This narrative was repeated in an explosion of articles published by *The New York Times* during the early years of the "Great Recession." For one example, see Louis Uchitelle, "American Dream is Elusive for New Generation," *The New York Times*, 6 July 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/07/business/economy/07generation.html>. Accessed on 6 July 2010.

¹² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

The conjunction between neoliberal fantasies of the good life and reproductive futurism in the American dream is a powerful tool for renarrating systemic racism in the United States. In a speech on 17 July 2009 at the centenary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Obama acknowledged how the American dream is denied to large swaths of people “by accident of birth” under systemic racism.¹³ He doubted that government programs could rectify these injustices and insisted that black parents and neighborhood communities would have to take charge. So too would their children. In Obama’s speech, “structural inequalities” became “hardships” and even “challenges” that, if met and overcome, would make black children “stronger” and “better able to compete.” While Obama began his speech with an acknowledgment of the potency of collective action (regarding electoral politics and the civil rights movement), he quickly shifted to notions of individual responsibility and neighborhood vigilance. These disciplinary mechanisms patched up the American dream by turning antiblack racism from wound into bandage. The neoliberal capitalist rhetoric employed by Obama rescripted systemic antiblack racism into opportunities for stronger resolve and heightened competitiveness in a twisted version of Nietzsche’s famous insistence that “What does not kill you makes you stronger.” This repackaging denies that the American dream is at an impasse.

The conjunctions between neoliberalism, heteronormativity, and antiblack racism may be seen from a very different angle. In his recent book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates details the trepidations of being black in the face of the American dream.

¹³ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President to the NAACP Centennial Convention,” The White House, 17 July 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-naacp-centennial-convention-07162009>. Accessed on 17 July 2009.

“In America,” Coates writes, “it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage.”¹⁴ That heritage involves two fantasies: the belief of oneself to be white and the American dream. Both depend upon the plunder and destruction of black bodies. The pivotal concern for Coates is “how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream” (12). Blacks are caught in this impasse because people who believe themselves to be white are in hot pursuit of the American dream—a dream that is foreclosed to blacks because antiblack racism lies at its heart.

Struggle is the response, which occupies a central place in *Between the World and Me*. It is *struggle* because no amount of willpower on part of blacks could *alone* determine whether antiblack racism will be overcome; while he acknowledges that change can and does happen, Coates emphasizes that “history is not solely in our hands” (97). He alludes to the fact that belief in an exaggerated, centralized account of agency feeds into a dangerous fantasy of democratic progress. That fantasy is not only misguided; it recuperates the past in a narrative of redemption that buries the singularity of lives that were lost and the alternative futures they might have envisioned:

You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable

¹⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 103.

glory of dying for their children. (70)

The belief that blacks could effect political change overlooks the intransigence of antiblack racism, which scholars in African American studies have shown to have lasted through Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Era. Following what Saidiya Hartman has called the “afterlife of slavery,” Jared Sexton writes, “it is not inappropriate to say that the continuing application of slave law facilitated the reconfiguration of its operation with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, rather than its abolition.”¹⁵ The expansion of civil rights has been insufficient redress to the ongoing plunder and destruction of black bodies.

So too will be anything short of a tremendous loss on the part of those who believe themselves to be white—a loss that they are often unwilling to face. “Without the right to break you,” Coates writes, “they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream. And then they would have to determine how to build their suburbs on something other than human bones, how to angle their jails toward something other than a human stockyard, how to erect a democracy independent of cannibalism” (105).

An instructive example of the unwillingness to face loss is found in David Brooks’s “Listening to Ta-Nehisi Coates While White,” an op-ed in *The New York Times*. Mimicking the style of *Between the World and Me*, Brooks’s op-ed is a letter to Coates that performs white level-headed paternalism in a feat of disrespect as evident in, among other things, the glaring lack of a signature. Brooks does affirm the importance of reading Coates’s book, but he sharply criticizes Coates for, in his eyes, being overdramatic in argument and

¹⁵ Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer 2010), 37.

tone, especially regarding the American dream: “Sometimes in your phrasing you seem determined to be misunderstood.”¹⁶ Brooks criticizes Coates for “distort[ing] American history” by not acknowledging the goodness of some people and groups. The American dream has been tainted by antiblack racism but is, in his eyes, redeemable: “The American dream of equal opportunity, social mobility and ever more perfect democracy cherishes the future more than the past. It abandons old wrongs and transcends old sins for the sake of a better tomorrow.” According to Brooks, the American dream is what lured his ancestors to “here”—which, as a vague referent stripped down of any history, supports a settler mythology that has obscured European conquest of the Americas in a narrative of harmless immigration. To insist on the continued power of antiblack racism and maintain that the United States as we know it lies on stolen lands would be to extinguish optimism; according to Brooks, “By dissolving the dream under the acid wash of an excessive realism, you trap generations in the past and destroy the guiding star that points to a better future.”

That sounds good to me, but Brooks writes as though it would be a bad thing. Here, Brooks finds the Dream to anchor hope and progress, themselves tightly connected. The loss of the Dream represents the loss of optimism for better times—an optimism that seems to be more for those who believe themselves to be white than for those who have been forced to live through ongoing legacies of racial slavery and dispossession. Brooks finds that loss to be unbearable. According to Edelman, the unbearable “names what cannot be borne by the subjects we think we are. We build our worlds in the face of it so

¹⁶ David Brooks, “Listening to Ta-Nehisi Coates While White,” *The New York Times*, 17 July 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/opinion/listening-to-ta-nehisi-coates-while-white.html>. Accessed on 17 July 2015.

as to keep ourselves from facing it, as if we implicitly understood that the unbearable as such can have no face and works to deprive us of ours.”¹⁷ What does it mean that losing the power to destroy black bodies is felt by a white man to be unbearable? How might the loss of the dream entail the loss of a teleology that guarantees a better future? How might such a loss turn us to dark pasts that are unresolved and that unsettle liberal fantasies of democratic progress that have anchored national identity in the US and optimism in the state?

Should blacks devote themselves to getting people who believe themselves to be white to not only face the unbearable but to welcome it? Coates says no because such an engagement would distract blacks from more vital tasks. “It struck me,” Coates observes, “that perhaps the defining feature of being drafted into the black race was the inescapable robbery of time” (91). The immediate context of this statement is Coates’s observation that blacks are often pressured to “be twice as good,” which demands so much vigilance and fine-tuning throughout every moment of every day just to minimize the possibility of being violated or killed. His statement is nonetheless related to his belief that blacks ought not waste precious time and energy; as he advises his son, “you cannot arrange your life around [people who believe themselves to be white] and the small chance of the Dreamers coming into consciousness. Our moment is too brief. Our bodies are too precious” (146).

Struggle does not adopt an oppositional stance that seeks to change the hearts and minds of people who believe themselves to be white. It is certainly not an attempt to secure the good life by working twice as hard. It is to foster love, truth, and beauty without

¹⁷ Lee Edelman, “It Isn’t Over” in Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 121-2.

forgetting for a second just how delicate they are. Hope is besides the point. As Lester Spence notes, “Black people have never been threatened by the realities of struggle, nor have black people ever been demobilized by the lack of hope.”¹⁸ This world-building endeavor surely provides indirect friction to worlds organized by antiblack racism, if only by crowding out the latter’s efforts to appear natural or inevitable. But it is foremost about cultivating life in the impasses between the world and me—without hope, without optimism, without progress but, at the same time, without despair.

This montage of encounters with the American dream illustrates a range of social positions in and experiences of the bad good life. It juxtaposes efforts to deny impasse with those that acknowledge it. At the heart of the former is the reinstatement of hope, optimism, and progress as demanded by the machinations of neoliberal capitalism, heteronormativity, and antiblack racism. The costs of keeping the American dream on life support are distributed widely, but experienced more often, more acutely, more severely if you’re black, poor, and queer. To find the American dream at an impasse is to take up the call to struggle, which looks different if one faces immense loss only recently or if one has long been captive to a state of never-had.

The Matter of Impasse

One of my principal points of departure from current scholarship on impasse is over the status of matter and materiality. While Public Feelings scholarship has generated important insights into the experience of impasses, the human remains centered in their

¹⁸ Lester Spence, “‘Coates Is a Realist, Not a Pessimist’; Lester Spence Responds to Melvin Rogers,” *Dissent* 13 August 2015, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/ta-nehisi-coates-is-a-realist-not-a-pessimist-lester-spence-melvin-rogers>. Accessed on 13 August 2015.

inquiries. Anthropocentric starting points have recently been challenged from numerous angles. Posthumanisms, new materialisms, speculative realisms, object-oriented ontologies, and critical animal studies are but a few strong force-fields of inquiry that have unsettled the borders between the human and the nonhuman, the animal, nature, matter, and so on.

I draw upon these lines of inquiry while noting that some of these concerns have long been anticipated by other fields. For example, the “newness” of the new materialisms is questionable given that challenges to the inertial status of objects have been a longstanding concern in, for example, African American studies.¹⁹ I do not mean to suggest that there is nothing distinct about the new materialisms; rather, part of my concern lies in the politics of intellectual genealogies. Theory tends to be centralized in certain forms and objects of inquiry and performed by typically white, male subjects such that examinations of race, sexuality, and nation are not seen to bear on seemingly “larger” or “more philosophical” issues of the human, life, and matter. As Alexander Weheliye points out, critical theory tends to be demarcated from so-called “minority discourses” as though the latter pertain only to specific demographics and do not engage ontological or theoretical matters.²⁰ Weheliye’s observation is evident in how new materialisms have become popular at the expense of similar, long-established work within fields associated with people of color. That is, why has the scholarship of those who have been dehumanized not often been taken up in discussions of the human?

¹⁹ As Fred Moten writes, “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist” (*In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003], 1).

²⁰ Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 6-7.

Alongside this concern is my effort to bring together questions that have largely been conducted separately. Specifically, new materialist inquiry often brackets questions that have been seen as best examined within frameworks of social constructionism and representation—questions of race, sexuality, and nation. This parsing generates an intellectual periodization that elides the scholarship of those who have worked between, to use Karen Barad’s formulation, “matter and meaning.”²¹ Scholars such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have examined the materiality of discursive practices. Others, such as Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz, have maintained that sexual difference itself is material. Mel Chen, Zakiyyah Jackson, Rachel Lee, Jasbir Puar, and Arun Saldanha have been forerunners in elaborating new ontologies of race that avoid the pitfalls of racist essentialism and the limits of social constructionism.

This project lies within the orbit of these theorists and their concerns. It views impasse as a situation in which materialities of various sorts are being rearranged in ways that unsettle anchors of the good life. This means that the matter of race, sexuality, and nation cannot be untangled from the matter of matter. I continue to employ the term “new materialism,” not because I adhere to its implied periodization (which new materialists themselves have questioned) but simply to use a referent for work in the past decade or so that have tended to questions of materiality, especially as it is vibrant or lively.

I navigate new materialisms and work on race, sexuality, and nation in American studies out of a hunch that impasses in contemporary political life increasingly confront a dire question: what does it mean to be human in a world that is becoming increasingly

²¹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

inhospitable to human life and has long been unsustainable for so many humans for so long? As the ecological impasses in which we find ourselves intensify, it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore how race, sexuality, nation, and matter bear on each other. The costs of doing so are hinted at in, for instance, Coates's observation on the recent intensification of violence by those who believe themselves to be white. Through technological developments, the destructiveness behind antiblack violence has expanded to the Earth itself (150-1). Though it is not elaborated in detail, this imbrication between antiblack violence and ecological devastation provokes further thought. It raises questions of how human life and its others (death, matter, nonhumans, and the dehumanized) are increasingly difficult to disentangle from questions of race, sexuality, and nation.

As chapter one argues, contemporary impasses in the good life raise questions of the human, matter, agency, and attachment that cannot be separated from the machinations of neoliberal capitalism, imperialism, settler colonialism, racism, sexism, and heteronormativity. Development of more sustainable, equitable, and hospitable relations amongst humans and nonhumans requires a heightened sensitivity to our imbrications with the fragility and capacities of matter, an expansion of those entities and ecologies that fall under the umbrella of care and concern, and ultimately an abandonment of forms of the good life that afford agency, value, and life to only certain humans—and all this without forgetting how the heart of these issues is shaped by lines of race, sexuality, and nation.

The Air Will Not Be Cleared

While I encounter the historical present as an impasse, I am not quite trying to demystify it. Behind demystification lies the presumption that the historical present masks subtle truths about the workings of power. It also presumes that the unearthing of power would set off tremors of political change. In short, demystification is a critical tool concerned with relations between knowledge and power.

The value of demystification is undeniable, as demonstrated by countless works that have shed light on the damaging and deadly conjunctions between capitalism, imperialism, settler colonialism, racism, and homophobia, among other things. Demystification is, however, of limited use where impasses are concerned. As I will argue, impasses are emergent situations; what they have been and will become remains indeterminate. This condition entails that the contours of impasse are obscure, the composition to some degree unknown. Impasse is a period in which systems of power reorganize themselves to maintain particular ends that are sensed to be on the cusp of loss, as when the American dream absorbs shifts in political economy. While there are good reasons to treat the historical present as an impasse—which I do—final, definitive confirmation will never occur. It is on account of the indeterminacy and uncertainty of impasse that demystification, in its quest for truth, falls short.

Some may rightly point out that impasse is a rather nebulous situation and that a concept of it may be difficult if not impossible to generate. I insist that impasse calls for shifts in what a concept could be and how it matters politically. As mentioned earlier, Deleuze and Guattari maintain that a concept offers practical connections instead of

clear knowledge. The concept of impasse developed here calls for revisions to notions of knowledge, method, and politics, which I explore toward the end of this project.

For now, I note that this understanding of impasse suggests the untenability of pinning hope for political change on the exposure of good-life fantasies as costly delusions. While surely that endeavor is part of the process, it needs to be complicated and supplemented by techniques that affectively work on attachments. Part of the political value of impasse lies in anticipating and even preempting the ways in which power reorganizes itself—practices that are not served well through efforts to secure clear knowledge. The political wager here is that instead of only striving to directly engage the powers that be, the proliferation of alternative worldings may stretch and thin out the conditions under which more nefarious futures seem like they'll arrive.

Moreover, I do not believe that political change entails moving beyond impasses per se. Such would presume that impasses are mere barriers to a predefined end that is held to be valuable and that change cannot happen in and around impasses themselves. To follow these presumptions may be to wield a model of agency that is unfeasible and to recenter a notion of progress that, for so many forms of life, has been dangerous and lethal. My rendition of impasse rethinks the centrality and value of blockage. While “impasse” generally denotes a stopping point, I find it to be full of potentiality, movement, and alternatives that have just been unable to gain enough traction to be lived in any robust way. This unusual understanding of impasse shapes my effort to detect the possibilities that are opened when a world seems to be at its end.

Indeed, blockage itself bears a lot of potentiality. For the good life to serve as an end, there must be a particular track, a series of benchmarks, and a timeline. It grounds a

notion of progress that is enforced by all sorts of disciplinary, coercive, and biopolitical mechanisms. Impasse marks an interruption that may or may not be temporary. Could be a little glitch. Or a turning point. No one can tell in advance. Rather than maintaining the value of forward movement, I destigmatize blockage and being stuck to develop impasse as a space wherein the reproduction of the world grinds to a halt. In such periods, novelty becomes possible even as it remains forestalled. One might explore lines of flight within impasses even if the world as it has been persists in some loose way.

This is an argument that favors persistence in the face of the impractical. More accurately, it favors persistence *with* and *from* the impractical, which is not an impediment but, as Jack Halberstam puts it, “a space of possibility and newness.”²² To speak in terms of practicality is to cede too much to a world that is in no way destined or determining. It is also to diminish the world’s capacity to become otherwise and to neglect the alternative worlds that are budding and thriving today. Mine is an argument for greater sensitivity to shifts afoot and for the value of what is depicted by a dominant world as too fleeting, perverse, impractical, or wild to be worthwhile. In this vein, to be halted in a track laid down by a damaging world can be a plus—even if the outcomes of that pause cannot be determined in advance of the unfolding of its life.

Finally, I also develop impasse as a political technology of the minoritized and the abjected. For examples, one might think of Occupy Wall Street reclaiming of public space, Black Lives Matter protestors bringing highway traffic to a standstill, and Native Hawaiian protestors blocking construction vehicles atop Mauna Kea from desecrating what is at once land and kin. When impasse operates as a political technology, it generates

²² Jack Halberstam, “Go Gaga: Anarchy, Chaos, and the Wild,” *Social Text* 31, No. 3 (Fall 2013), 125.

a crisis at the heart of formidable and long-standing systems of power, such as antiblack racism, homophobia, and settler colonialism. This activity is radical as it takes up the seemingly impossible task of uprooting systems of power that have saturated political life. To insert an impasse in what has appeared to be natural and inevitable for so long is not quite to seek a true understanding of the present moment. It is to scramble the conditions by which understandings of the present offer simple solutions that oftentimes reinforce the powers that be. It is to reject models of politics that merely seek recognition and inclusion, for these efforts more often than not further entrench systems of power without much modification. It is to find interim and piecemeal efforts valuable though ultimately unsatisfying, partly for being too slow, partly for being overly cautious, partly for not venturing far enough from what is held to be practical. It is to open worlds yet to be imagined.

Hopeless (A Trigger Warning)

The bad good life lies raises issues of optimism and pessimism, hope and despair. The experience of impasse is being caught between a rock and a no-place. People may feel helpless. They may veer dangerously close to despair. And yet, impasses overflow with potentiality. Should this “it-could-be-otherwise” be solid ground for optimism and hope?

I remain suspicious for numerous reasons. Hope and optimism are often brought in the service of realigning people with the bad good life when it is in crisis. In *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*, Barbara Ehrenreich has documented how positive thinking has saturated numerous sites in the United States, including breast cancer circles, positive psychology, megachurches, business schools and

corporate workplaces. Positive thinking is an ideology and a disciplinary practice. A whole industry that has spawned around it has been extremely lucrative for a few while incredibly damaging for many. The public culture of positive thinking has shrunk the place and diminished the value of negative affects, repackaged subjectivity from the collective to the individual, reduced change from redistribution of social goods to adjustments of one's affect, attitude, and behavior, and furnished oversight of economic and ecological fragilities. Importantly, Ehrenreich argues that pessimism is not the antidote to optimism. The world projected by optimism and pessimism alike is simple and static. "The alternative to both," avers Ehrenreich, "is to try to get outside of ourselves and see things 'as they are,' or as uncolored as possible by our own feelings and fantasies, to understand that the world is full of both danger and opportunity."²³ This realism is scientific in ethos; it is vigilant to change and experimental in practice.

I follow Ehrenreich in moving away from optimism and pessimism, and the ethics and politics I develop affords value to vigilance and experimentation in impasses. Nonetheless, realism is not the framework that I would adopt. It has valences of truth and veracity that can disparage what is cast as unrealistic, impractical, or utopian. It also posits that more knowledge and better information are slaves for the ills of optimism and pessimism. In its effort to be distanced from "feelings and fantasies," realism does not capture the affective hold of impasses, which is not necessarily loosened by the best evidence for the costs of the good life. Like proponents of demystification, Ehrenreich exaggerates the political efficacy of knowledge while treating feelings as impediments

²³ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 196.

rather than as vital resources. At its worst, Ehrenreich's call to realism may actually keep impasses in place.

I am also not interested in hope because it often projects an image of progress that follows too conservative a notion of what is "better." To be overly interested in betterment is to maintain too much of the world in which that measure has emerged. It is also to follow an idea of progress that separates now and later while placing them on the same path; the future is held to be predetermined and thus implicit in the present and the past. What I pursue is shifts in the conditions of possibility for other worlds to take hold—worlds that mark a departure from what could be considered better, worlds that are in some sense already here. The pursuit of novelty contains the necessity of surprise. The arrival of a new world would change us, which means that what and how we have dreamed and desired will not be the same, in the words of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "after the break." As Halberstam writes of them, "We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming. What we want after 'the break' will be different from what we think we want before the break and both are necessarily different from the desire that issues from being in the break."²⁴ In short, I am not interested in hope because I pursue what is presently unimaginable. Unable to imagine precisely what the future may be, we might cultivate greater space for intuition, speculation, and surprise.

In short, I shift politics away from hope and despair, from optimism and pessimism. None of these coordinates are necessary for prying open the good life enough

²⁴ Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons," in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013), 6.

to question its seeming inevitability and to open more breathing room for alternatives even as they may not secure traction in this world.

The Bad Good Life asks people to face the unbearable experience of impasse without hope and without optimism. Yet, it is deeply utopian. This seemingly counterintuitive orientation arises from a hunch that other worlds are indeed possible and, in some ways, are already here—worlds that do not reproduce the damage of ones that have been salient and have seemed inevitable for so long. Within impasses are so many possibilities and alternatives that do important work today even if they cannot be lived in a robust, safe, sustainable way. They might also enjoy greater traction and a different life tomorrow. I call these alternatives “worlds” to emphasize the unbound cluster of things that are pulled in their wake. It is also to shift “world” away from the imperium of solidity, traction, and longevity, which are often used as measures of viability to disqualify alternatives. Acknowledgment of these possibilities is a lifeline out of despair; acknowledgment of their fragility is a flag against hope. Politics is the exploration of alternative imaginations, discernment of the potencies that spark up along the way, and cultivation of the tiny intimacies and worlds that bustle all around us regardless of whether they may rind up with any durability.

Finally, the utopian aspirations of this project make it a queer one. Although I briefly take up critiques of same-sex marriage and homonormativity in chapter four, the queerness of *The Bad Good Life* lies in its valuation of wayward desire. I do not mean anything special or idiosyncratic about desire, which has been explored by countless others in great detail. I am lightly informed by psychoanalytic accounts of desire as lack and Deleuze-inspired understandings of desire as productivity, both of which, in very

different ways, point to the insufficiency of what is available. Here, I connect desire to impasse because it conjures images of attraction, propensity, and longing for something else. Politics that follows desire astray from socially enforced destinations might be seen as queer. “For a life to count as a good life,” writes Ahmed, “it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return.”²⁵ This queerness does not quite seek the erasure of “bad” from the bad good life per se; it gets lost in the aura of the bad and, having fallen off the track to the good life, finds detours to new worlds, new futures, and new forms of life. In short, the queerness of this project lies in its conception of impasse as a personal and political situation of impasse in which people burst with longing and find that there isn’t enough satisfaction and sustenance.

Chapters and Pockets

The first three chapters of *The Bad Good Life* detail key aspects of impasse: attachment, affect, and temporality. Chapter One, “Impasse Matters,” argues that attachments inhibit political change. It elaborates attachments as complex webs of psychic, social, disciplinary, and material forces by drawing upon new materialisms and Public Feelings scholarship, the work of Lauren Berlant and Jane Bennett in particular. Whereas Berlant develops a concept of impasse without attending to the vibrancy of matter and Bennett develops the vibrancy of matter without regard to impasses, I argue that matter plays a crucial role in the composition and experience of impasse because they shape

²⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 21.

attachments. I read Jennifer Egan's short story "Found Objects" to develop this line of thought and to bridge typically distinct accounts of affect: one that tends to nameable feelings, another that explores impersonal forces.

The second chapter, "Dark Atmospheres, or Affect at the End of a World," describes the experience of *impasses* as acutely felt but not clearly understood. It critically engages the work of cultural geographers on affective atmospheres, much of which focuses on a clearly defined mood, a given space, and a phenomenology of experience. I find that the atmosphere of *impassé* is better understood through: a plenitude of affect that amounts to mixed feelings rather than a clear mood; a temporal rather than spatial framework; and the experience of a disorganization of sensoria that is not captured by phenomenology. The chapter draws upon Gilles Deleuze and Kathleen Stewart to develop these points while also elaborating the *impassive*, intuitive sensibility that arises in *impasses* and complicates political judgment.

Chapter Three, "Without End," argues that *impasses* are not temporary setbacks on the way to the good life because they raise the prospect of loss. I develop a non-teleological account of time that is appropriate for *impasses* by drawing upon the works of Immanuel Kant, Alfred North Whitehead, and Walt Whitman. Although I criticize Kant's teleological notion of time, I also uncover in *The Critique of Judgment* the possibility, unexplored by Kant himself, of a non-teleological temporality that derives from the self-organizing capacities of what he calls "anomalous creatures." I develop that notion of time by working between Whitehead and Whitman on themes of creativity, poetics, and the dangers of social stagnancy. I elaborate *impassé* as a situation of blocked novelty and abundant creativity within a world that becomes without end.

While the first three chapters begin to develop the political implications of their themes, the final chapter develops the political dimensions of impasse in greatest detail. “Tragic Affirmations, Queer Trajectories...” fashions a politics that resists the temptations to violence, against oneself and others, that arise from the experience of an impasse. I critically navigate Friedrich Nietzsche’s and William Connolly’s theories of “the tragic” and literature around the “antisocial turn” in queer theory by Lee Edelman, Heather Love, and José Esteban Muñoz. Although the tragic and queerness align on the value of nonsovereignty, impermanence, and an openness to loss, they differ on other issues. Nietzsche and Connolly develop the tragic in relation to joy and the sweetness of life while some forms of queerness (that of Edelman and Love) place greater emphasis on woe. Strands of queer negativity resist positive elaborations of attachments while that problematic but important task is undertaken by utopian forms of queerness (that of Muñoz) and the tragic. I sort through this thicket to develop a political response to impasses that welcomes the possibility of loss, explores the potentialities available when change is impeded, and strives to fashion attachments that are flexible and transient.

The last installment of *The Bad Good Life* is not a conclusion but an afterthought that reflects on the question of method. It gauges how the conduct and genre of political theory might be expanded and revised in light of the problem of impasse, which resists efforts for accurate or clear description. Allowing the murky, half-formed character of impasse to find expression in writing might productively alter the theorization and activity of politics. The afterthought performs one such engagement by writing autoethnography as political theory. It works through a thicket of forces that gather as “Asian settler colonialism” in Hawai‘i. I encounter Asian settler colonialism as an impasse in my

attachments to Hawai'i as home and allow that impasse to find expression in my writing.

Interspersing the chapters are little pockets. According to Kathleen Stewart, a pocket is a fold within ordinary life. It marks something afoot that may or may not amount to anything significant.²⁶ In an impasse, pockets hold longings, intimacies, and practices that do not sit comfortably with the world at large. The pockets of this dissertation are folds between the chapters that connect themes, but not only. They are also resting points that unfold with the life of a pause. They are snags that might pull thought and feeling on tangent. They are holding stations where all that falls in the cracks can have some semblance of belonging, at least for the time being.

What Remains

The Bad Good Life is animated by immense love. It is love for the potency of fleeting contact, little gestures, and wild intimacies. For the courage of those who untie their anchors from all familiarity. For the shyness of those who burn with longing for other worlds. It is love for the countless lives that are torn apart and cut short when power double-downs on selfish ambitions. For those who link arms and hearts in feats of survival and creativity. For a vitality that is unbound by death. And, above all, it is love for those who proclaim, by the simple fact of existing, "This is not all that there is nor all that will ever be. You may think that our lives are tiny, but they are the strongest evidence that other worlds are already crowding out this one. So take care, fellow traveler; our time is now."

²⁶ Kathleen Stewart, "Pockets," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, No. 4 (December 2012), 365-8.

The drone of the days: soothing in one phase, grating in another.
Anxiety replaces comfort. Or maybe it lurked there all along.

Lives in mirror are more fragile than they appear. Gaze long
enough and it's not the glass that breaks.

1. Impasse Matters

Attachments to human mastery thrive even as the world is increasingly inhospitable to them. Following the 2008 economic crisis, neoliberal fantasies in the United States largely bounced back rather than being abandoned in favor of social justice. After 11 September 2001, the US showcased its sovereignty abroad and domestically to protect a national identity shaped by global hegemony, colonial settlement, and white supremacy. A host of disasters due to anthropogenic climate change, including the prospect of mass extinction, has yet to be met with widespread shifts toward sustainable living. Underlying these issues is a faith in human mastery, which posits in these moments the capacity of individuals and collectives to preserve the world as it has been by marshaling enough ingenuity and willpower. Alternative responses to these issues, productive though they may be, have yet to gain widespread traction. As a result, many lives remain caught in the gravity of unsustainable, destructive worlds, while minoritized populations—human and not—continue to bear the evermore dire costs of attempts to protect dreams of human sovereignty.

These predicaments are what Lauren Berlant calls “impasses,” whose salience today, I argue, calls for rethinking the human, agency, and attachments. More than a deadlock between values, beliefs, or political positions, an impasse involves the possible loss of a world when alternatives are not available or readily adoptable. “Impasse” emphasizes that change may be slow to happen even when one’s world is so bad. While connoting blockage, an impasse also simmers with all sorts of activity: defense of attachments through adaptation, self-sacrifice, and the surveillance and eradication of

others who are framed to be threats; or experiments to generate more flexible and sustainable lives, aspirations, and worlds. “Impasse,” in short, “is the name for the space where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurances of futurity.”¹

While Berlant has developed “impasse” in regard to neoliberalism, this chapter calibrates it to questions of what attachments are sustainable in the Anthropocene. A controversial term coined by Paul Crutzen, the Anthropocene is a new epoch in which human activity constitutes a geological force as seen in climate change, among other things. It has drawn criticisms of anthropocentrism, which holds that human life is of paramount value and, in versions that advance masterful agency or sovereignty, that humans can secure their flourishing by routing the world to their advantage. Anthropocentrism in the West has long imbued humans with sovereignty, from individuals to the state.²

Investigations of the Anthropocene have largely focused on the disasters that humans have wreaked on ecosystems. Some have urged as well a more exquisite sensitivity to the animateness, liveliness, or even agency of nonhumans. I join these latter efforts because the work of undercutting anthropocentrism demands the cultivation of different modes of relating to nonhumans—modes that, in turn, change our understanding of the human. Critiques of human mastery as a (neoliberal, racialized, gendered, colonialist) fantasy are important but will not make much headway in impasses

¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 200. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *CO*.

² Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Sharon R. Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, “Sovereignty and the UFO,” *Political Theory* 36, no. 4 (2008), 607-33.

unless they are joined with positive accounts of how nonhumans affect human life for good and ill. What if impasses today were shaped by nonhumans, such as rising seas, food, and heaps of everyday things? How might politics be rethought accordingly?

This chapter addresses these questions principally by navigating the work of Lauren Berlant and Jane Bennett. The bulk of this chapter describes the materiality of attachments that are in crisis during impasses. Berlant frames impasse as mediated by fantasy, which supplies humans with a sense of coherence, of continuity between themselves and the world, and the optimism for living and living on. An impasse emerges when the objects of desire that house those fantasies turn out to be jeopardized or toxic. Berlant does not elaborate the role of matter in the anxious, exhausting, exhilarating struggles of humans in an impasse. I thus turn to Bennett's articulation of matter as vibrant and forceful. Matter makes a difference to human life in ways irreducible to human intention, understanding, instrumentality, and, I add, fantasy. Drawing upon Bennett's "vibrant materialism," I treat attachments as shaped in part by matter.

Attentiveness to matter not only develops a more detailed picture of impasses. It alters ethical and political life by shifting agency away from human mastery. Take impasses of the Anthropocene, wherein neoliberal capitalist fantasies of the good life and the drive to privatize the planet have raised the specter of our imminent derailment and even extinction, as well as that of countless species. If a strong anthropocentric bent has played a starring role in creating this fragility, then attuning to nonhumans as lively actors rather than as passive tools or dead meat may enable more sustainable, less wasteful, less harmful living on and with the earth, other species, and other humans. More productive engagements with impasses of the Anthropocene could follow, which question what it

means to be human in a world pulsing with vibrant matter.

This chapter tracks questions of attachment and agency across numerous interlocking scales of impasses in the Anthropocene: a planetary one of ecological crises; a bodily one marked by anxiety, exhaustion, and ailing health; and a national one in which the US has sought to salvage its image of sovereignty. Rather than tracing the concrete links between these domains, I map them together by crises in human mastery. The intensified precarity of life, both human and not, is reason to develop relationalities that are not organized by anthropocentrism. I develop a feminist, queer, and ecological relationality by drawing upon the work of Berlant and Bennett and by reading Jennifer Egan's short story "Found Objects." The effort of this chapter is to explicate the dangers of attachments to sovereignty, to locate human agency amongst rather than above nonhumans, and to discuss the reconfiguration of the human as a productive way of moving in impasses of the Anthropocene.

For the Love of Impasse | Fantasy, National Sentimentality

This section demonstrates that Berlant's work on national sentimentality is part of a longstanding concern with various aspects of impasse: crises in identity, intimacy, and belonging; a suspension of the present in favor of a predetermined future; a politics that strives to remain in proximity to what is deferred, foreclosed, or damaging rather than one in which people welcome loss and become open to being transformed.

Berlant's national sentimentality project tracks "the emergence of the U.S. political sphere as an affective space, a space of attachment and identification that is not saturated merely by ideological or cognitive content, but is also an important sustainer of

people's desires for reciprocity with the world.”³ In the face of a messy or hostile world, people have been drawn to the genre of sentimentality for a sense of belonging. Sentimental subjects don't set out to change that world; they adjust themselves to salvage fantasies of belonging and reciprocity.

Fantasy underpins national sentimentality. Berlant writes that fantasy donates a sense of affective coherence to what is incoherent and contradictory in the subject; provides a sense of reliable continuity amidst the flux of intensities and attachments; and allows out-of-sync-ness and unevenness of being in the ordinary world at once to generate a secure psychotic enclave and to maintain the subject's openness to the ordinary disturbances of experience.⁴

Fantasy makes desire feel realizable. Its work is affective because desiring and imagining a world aren't the same as building and having one. In other words, fantasy expresses desire as an affective rather than an actual fact.⁵ Fantasy does not mystify reality but creates an affective space of thriving, even in the absence of the necessary social and political infrastructure. It buoys the subject in a world that would drown it. National sentimentality depends on fantasy to secure optimism for the nation as a space of belonging, especially for those who are scarred by its historical exclusions.

In *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, Berlant explores the United States's tenuous

³ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), x-xi. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *FC*.

⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2012), 75. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *DL*.

⁵ Brian Massumi distinguishes between affective and actual facts to denote effects that are real because, rather than in spite of, something's nonexistence. His primary case is threat as addressed by preemptive power. See “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 52-70.

national imaginary. “America” is a set of practices and an “occasion for exploring what it means that national subjects already share not just a history, or a political allegiance, but a set of forms and the affect that makes these forms meaningful.”⁶ Fantasy consolidates legal, territorial, linguistic, aesthetic, and affective forces into a “National Symbolic” that bears utopian promises of the good life. It also reverses course to render palpable the nation's abstractions. But the pristine geometry of the utopian nation cannot encompass everyday life, which is a thicket of historical trajectories and power-induced embodiments of race, class, and gender. Those who are juridically and biopolitically written out of America come to see the nation as a threat, its promises as untenable and damaging. They intuit their own bodies as battlegrounds between the utopian and the quotidian. A cloud of ambivalence thus shrouds national fantasy. Berlant notes of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s time that “it became a matter of fierce contention whether the nation truly fulfilled its juridico-utopian promise to protect the local while abstracting the person from his body and everyday life experience to another, more stable, symbolic order” (*ANF*, 12). When everyday life upsets the nation's utopian promises, to where might the minoritized turn for belonging and reciprocity, as well as the resources for surviving and thriving?

This question frames *The Female Complaint*, which tracks the turn to sentimentality in the “intimate publics” that emerge amidst disappointment with political institutions of privilege. An intimate public “foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness” (*FC*, 10). Intimate publics posit that its subjects share certain historical experiences of exhaustion, shame, and depression. The intimate public of “women’s culture” in the United States from the

⁶ Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 4. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *ANF*.

1830s to the present emerged in response to the political public of white men. It has gathered fantasies of belonging, surviving, and thriving as mediated by norms of femininity. It espouses a love plot that is viewed to save women from the stresses and incoherence of ordinary life, politics, and history: love is where living *really* takes place. That this love plot is sometimes disappointed doesn't make it any less desirable. As Berlant notes, disappointment makes love promissory. The love plot absorbs disappointment, recalling a line from Terrence Malick's *To the Wonder*: "You fear your love has died; perhaps it is waiting to be transformed into something higher." This is love as an impasse matter; disappointment doesn't lead to detachment but to adaptation, bargaining, and waiting for tomorrow—a tomorrow "in which fantasies of the good life *can* be lived" (*TF*, 2). The intimate public of women's culture stitches historical wounds with the fantasy of overcoming love's disappointments.

Because the love plot sanctifies feelings, women's culture finds its highest expression in the genre of sentimentality. Berlant writes that "what makes a thing sentimental is the presumption of emotional clarity and affective recognition in the scene of the mediated encounter" (*FC*, 271). The sentimental genre translates feelings and emotions into the truth of a person and holds that these true feelings allow people, whatever their differences, to feel right at home together in publics. In the intimate public of "women's culture," sentimental fantasies register love and its disappointments as true feelings.

Berlant criticizes sentimentality as a genre of the political. Sentimental politics in the US has mixed humanism, vulnerability, and empathy into an ethos that exaggerates the capacity of feeling to transform worlds of suffering. It presumes that painful feelings

cement alliances across social and political fault-lines. It also posits that shifts in feeling, such as the generation of compassion, are evidence that a political world has changed even if its material structures remain largely intact. In the US, sentimental politics has been a liberal project of compassionately absorbing the historically wounded into the utopian nation. But “compassionate liberalism” is for Berlant “at best, a kind of sandpaper on the surface of the racist monument whose structural and economic solidity endures” (*FC*, 6). Sentimental politics reduces justice to the solicitation of compassion from political majorities and the maintenance of optimism for liberal equality on part of minorities.

In short, sentimentality is where desires for political change end up against the best interests of the minoritized: “As when a refrigerator is opened by a person hungry for something other than food,” Berlant writes, “the turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety constitutes a generic wish for an uncomplicated world, one wherein structural inequities, not emotions and intimacies, are epiphenomenal” (*FC*, 21). The optimism of sentimental politics lies in “change without trauma,” or adjustments that strive to salvage damaging fantasies rather than losing them to build better ones (*FC*, 146). Sentimental politics does not aspire to gut structural disparities along imbricated lines of race, gender, and class. Nor does it seek the loss of a dominant worlds. At best, it offers at

best a tiny breath of relief from the noose of power.⁷

The Queen of America Goes to Washington City explores national sentimentality during the Reagan years, when the dominant public became an intimate space colored by the dreams of white elites.⁸ Consolidation of this sentimental public by both the right and the

⁷ Berlant acknowledges the achievements of sentimental politics: “As a force for the conversion of the politically privileged, sentimental politics has had powerfully transformative effects on which subordinate populations are recognized as candidates for inclusion in the body politic” (*FC*, 35).

Nonetheless, sentimental politics has tons of problems. Berlant elaborates her criticisms of sentimental politics in “The Subject of True Feeling.” There, she explores the trauma culture of the US in which pain has counted as true feeling. Berlant sees Wendy Brown’s notion of “wounded attachments” at work not only US identity politics but in the longer genealogy of national sentimentality which includes not only minoritized but also privileged populations. Sentimentality renders pain a “universal true feeling,” making it the political instrument of empathic identification and social change. The ameliorative action induced by exposure to another’s pain would transform the nation from a site of historical contradiction into a utopia wherein the absence of suffering signals the securement of justice. In this utopia of belonging, the personal, the emotional, and the universal coincide, providing optimism for the minoritized in the form of overcoming of pain rather than the redressing of historical injustice. As a result, sentimental politics silences “an analytically powerful and political rage,” forfeits “an equivocation of demand and radical critique,” and favors “short-term coalition building” over “a politics of the long haul” (Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, Politics” in *Cultural Studies & Political Theory*, ed. Jodi Dean [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000], 61. Cited hereafter in this chapter as “TF”). Berlant notes, for example, that the conditions of quotidian hardship faced by women remain unaddressed by the focus on trauma and reparation, which can neither detect nor deal with the intricacies of “a world where women are responsible for sustaining the conditions of intimacy and sexual desire; where they are made radiant by having more symbolic than social value...; where their anger is considered evidence of their triviality or greed and lack of self-knowledge” (“TF,” 60). By simplifying the life-worlds of the minoritized, sentimental politics confines them “to spin[ning] negative value into the gold of an always deferred future, meanwhile coping, if they can, in the everyday” (“TF,” 60). In other words, the minoritized become poster children of pain who wait, cope, and relay true feeling rather than demanding and striving for broad social, cultural, and political change outside constellations of nation, utopia, fantasy, and law.

⁸ What makes Berlant’s analysis of the Reagan years distinct is its focus on the sentimentalization of mainstream politics. In this structural transformation of the public sphere, personal, private, and intimate matters—such as abortion, marriage, proper sexuality, and family values—took centerstage such that sex rather than civics constituted citizenship. Political, social, and economic concerns became refracted through the intimate, so much so that sex lurked somewhere in even the most unsexy matters. Berlant notes, for example, how fantasies of upward mobility interwove hard work and heteronormal family-building. Reaganite conservatism repackaged the public through national sentimentality such that one belonged to the nation as a private person rather than as a civic citizen or historical subject.

Reaganite sentimental politics consisted in protecting that private person as a subject unmarked by history. Troubled by “the antiwar, antiracist, and feminist agitations of the sixties [that] denounced the hollow promises of the political pseudopublic sphere,” Reagan’s sentimental politics sought to reinstall the fantasy of the national utopia (Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 3. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *Q4*). It framed the struggles of the subaltern as an assault on its right to be unmarked, inflating its discomfort into trauma and generating claims that the privileged too ought to be free from pain, history, and political trouble. In this era, national sentimentality was “a politics that abjure[d] politics, made on behalf of a private life protected from the harsh realities of power” (*Q4*, 11). It’s not that Reaganite conservatism sought to dismantle politics and the state; rather, like most conservatism in the US, it privatized the state in order to restrict its capacities to provide social welfare and protection for the subaltern, and to enhance its capacities to enforce an official fantasy of the utopian nation.

left had cast political experimentation as an obstacle to realizing the utopian nation; hence, it was viewed to be in need of policing and silencing.⁹ “Moments of oppressive optimism in normal national culture” bubbled up while domination was repackaged as a social good, utopian desires were absorbed into conservative ambitions, and weary people bargained for well-worn fantasies organized by heteronormativity and capitalism (*Q4*, 13). Berlant is concerned with the taming of desire and the loss of sexual and political experimentation.¹⁰ Were the left to desist from sentimental fantasies of the nation, other forms of political world-making could emerge from this impasse.

Cruel Optimism develops a notion of impasse most explicitly even as it is anticipated in Berlant’s previous works. In *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, Berlant notes that Hawthorne, by unhinging the utopian from the nation, opened an impasse in national identity: “If the nation were no longer held to be the ideal type of political structure that secures justice for its citizens, what other forms of identity might be construed to relegitimate its incorporation of utopia-in-practice?” (*ANF*, 208). The nation attempts to close that problem through what, in *The Queen of America*, Berlant calls “technologies of patience,” which align the minoritized with hopes of belonging to the national utopia in the future as they bear the burdens of exclusion in the present (*Q4*, 222). Berlant aims to

⁹ The intimate public of privatized citizenship didn’t become dominant due to right-wing efforts alone; nor was it only because the right adopted a sentimental frame by appropriating the political strategies of the minoritized. Rather, the ascendance of the intimate public was also due to those on the left that who capitulated to the terms of national utopia, privatized citizenship, and true feeling. Berlant criticizes leftist efforts to appropriate normative fantasies of the good life, such as legalizing gay marriage or adopting “critical” consumption practices, because they reify the public as an intimate space, bargaining with rather than challenging “exploitation and normativity” and thus furthering abjecting those who are furthest from exemplifying normativity (*Q4*, 9).

¹⁰ For example, she, along with Michael Warner, respond to the charge that their opposition is too constraining for queers. They write that “the space of sexual culture has become obnoxiously cramped from doing the work of maintaining a normal metaculture” (Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, No. 2 [Winter 1998], 557).

orient politics away from maintenance of those technologies and to detachment from national sentimentality. In *The Female Complaint*, she writes:

The political question is how to understand the difficulty of detaching from lives and worlds that wear out life, rather than sustain it. To interfere with the ordinary precarity of both domains [love and the social] requires a loss of confidence in normativity, which one can sense as the loss of a beloved object. This suggests that, whatever else it is, an object of desire is not only a thing, scene, or person, but an affect: the affect associated with the pleasure of binding or attachment itself. The loss of a world is thus not only of a singular thing, but also the loss of the capacity to keep having the feelings that were represented in the ongoingness of the thing. (*FC*, 266-7).

Berlant's political aim is to incite detachment from problematic objects of desire, to untether optimism from the normative. Detachment entails parting with an anchor in favor of a murk that feels like nothing or overwhelming plenitude, a situation of too much or too little to secure a stable rhythm of living. Detachment is difficult since there does not yet exist an alternative that can be adopted with the confidence of the normative.

These concerns are explored in *Cruel Optimism*, which treats neoliberalism in the historical present as an impasse. This impasse has concerned the jeopardization of fantasies of meritocracy, upward mobility, job security, and durable intimacy. Amidst the crumbling of the aesthetic forms through which people have grown accustomed to apprehending ordinary life, the historical present has spawned the “precariat,” an affective class whose sensoria are clustered around precarity instead of expectation. This tenuous position enables people to detach from neoliberal fantasies of the good life and to

begin the hard work of building more equitable, sustainable ones. The precariat might aim to weave more equitable good-life fantasies from the “loose sense of solidarity in the political that now occupies the ordinary amidst the exhausting pragmatics of the everyday” (CO, 262). Berlant does not champion this “lateral politics;” she warns that it can turn sentimental by overvaluing the “*sense* of belonging in relation to dealing with the hard questions of distributing resources, risk, and vulnerability in the polis” (CO, 262). Nonetheless, she hopes that lateral politics might develop “new idioms of the political, and of belonging itself” as people are drawn together into survival mode (CO, 262). In short, Berlant stages the historical present as an impasse to attend to the adjustments, scramblings, and innovations of precarious lives in the face of crumbling fantasies of the good life that had grounded identities, the nation, and optimism.

Planetary Precarity | Neoliberalism, Colonialism, and the Anthropocene

Scholars have criticized Berlant’s characterization of the historical present, which focuses on neoliberalism in isolation of other political dynamics such as settler colonialism and global imperialism. Jodi Byrd emphasizes that efforts to rebuild neoliberal fantasies in the United States continue the erasure of indigenous peoples; settlers maintain “an attachment to Indians as affective fantasy” in order to protect themselves “from the destruction the United States wreaked upon actual Indian lives.”¹¹ Dia Da Costa criticizes Berlant’s isolation of the West from global relations of power and situates impasses in

¹¹ Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 36.

neoliberalism within centuries of global development, capitalism, and colonialism.¹² In light of these criticisms, Byrd and Da Costa maintain the notion of impasse as a useful lens with which to understand the historical present.

This section builds upon Byrd's and Da Costa's critiques by exploring contemporary impasses through the angle of ecological precarity and by beginning to describe the role of matter in those impasses. Neoliberal capitalism is only part of the picture; matter also helps to intensify climate change and its biopolitical effects. My approach does not mean to displace questions of human responsibility in contemporary ecological issues; rather, it emphasizes that the agency of the human is neither sovereign nor distributed evenly across different populations. Some humans are situated with great power, others with grave vulnerability. As impasses in neoliberal life raise the prospect of human extinction, they become inseparable from impasses in human life: crises in fantasies that define the good life through market freedom become interwoven with crises in fantasies of what it means to be human. They amplify the urgency of reconstructing the human apart from long-held, long-contested beliefs in sovereignty, exceptionality, and futurity.¹³

Accounts of neoliberalism have been richly diverse and deeply conflictual. I follow the understanding elaborated by Michel Foucault.¹⁴ While liberalism allowed the market to follow logics that were not shaped by society, neoliberalism holds that the market logic

¹² Dia Da Costa, "Cruel Pessimism and Waiting for Belonging: Towards a Global Political Economy of Affect," *Cultural Studies*, published online 25 March 2014, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09502386.2014.899607>

¹³ Roy Scranton, "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene," *The New York Times*, 10 November 2013, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/>

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

should dictate the organization of society. Neoliberals espouse the unfettered agency of market processes while treating humans as though their agency were consummate. This construction of humans as free has a dark underside: an emphasis on individual responsibility, which grounds harsh discipline and practices of social abandonment for humans who are treated as failures.

Neoliberalism is the latest phase of a system of power whose ecologically destructive potency has been traced to industrialization. Combined with an ethos of overconsumption and wastefulness, it has been an engine of the “Great Acceleration,” or a period beginning around 1950 of rapid deforestation, human population explosion, unprecedented levels of greenhouse gases, rising sea levels, intensified storms, and long droughts. One study reports that two-thirds of the greenhouse gas emissions since the advent of industrialization were produced by only 90 companies—and that half of that amount was produced in the last 25 years alone.¹⁵ Neoliberal capitalist life has strained the Earth’s resources, intensified regional and global inequality, and proliferated toxic wastes, such as those of electronics that pile up in the neighborhoods of already vulnerable populations in Asia and Africa.¹⁶ Impasses in neoliberalism within the Anthropocene concern how people remain attached to neoliberal life, the role played by nonhumans in exacerbating the unsustainability of neoliberal life, and the biopolitical and ecological consequences that follow.

¹⁵ Suzanne Goldenberg, “Just 90 Companies Caused Two-Thirds of Man-Made Global Warming Emissions,” *The Guardian*, 20 November 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/nov/20/90-companies-man-made-global-warming-emissions-climate-change>. Accessed on 20 November 2013.

¹⁶ John Vidal, “Toxic ‘E-Waste’ Dumped in Poor Nations, Says United Nations,” *The Guardian*, 14 December 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/dec/14/toxic-ewaste-illegal-dumping-developing-countries>. Accessed on 1 August 2015.

Situating impasses in neoliberalism within the Anthropocene necessitates foregrounding the role of colonial and imperial powers. While many scholars date the Anthropocene to the beginning of agriculture, industrialization, or the Great Acceleration, some have recently tied it to imperial expansion, colonization, and genocide.¹⁷ Of particular importance is the work of Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin who, after reviewing various proposed origin dates, defend 1610 as that which best exemplifies a “golden spike,” or a geological event that is both global in scope and rapid in occurrence.¹⁸ That date marks the nadir of a plunge in global carbon dioxide levels. Why was there less CO₂ in the air? The wars, diseases, and famine that followed contact with European explorers and colonists resulted in the death of approximately 50 million Native Americans by 1650. The consequent decline in farming and fire use marked an explosion of flora—over 50 million hectares worth (an area about eighteen percent larger than California). In short, CO₂ levels plummeted because there were more plants and far fewer humans. The epoch heralded as worthy of the name “Man” is haunted by the breath of millions of exterminated Native Americans.

At first glance, dating the Anthropocene to 1610 strays from the term’s usual focus on the dangers of *increases* in carbon emissions. What that date highlights, however, is how the geological impact of Man has a legacy rooted in colonial and imperial distributions of precarity, life, and death that continue today in albeit different forms. As Sylvia Wynter insists, ecological issues concern a “central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle” wherein

¹⁷ For an excellent synthesis of research on this point, see Kent G. Lightfoot, Lee M. Panich, Tsim D. Schneider, and Sara L. Gonzalez, “European Colonialism and the Anthropocene: A View from the Pacific Coast of North America,” *Anthropocene* 4 (2013), 101-15.

¹⁸ Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519 (2015), 171-80.

the former is Western, bourgeois, and white.¹⁹ One might respond that China and India also have been heavy polluters, but that fact cannot be separated from the context of historical encounters with the colonial and imperial West. In any case, Wynter's point remains: humans are not equally implicated in the Anthropocene by either cause or effect. Climate change undoubtedly affects all humans but it does so in different ways and at different speeds. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley underscore, "Although postcolonial nations are lowest in terms of carbon emissions, they are the most vulnerable to climate change."²⁰

DeLoughrey and Handley's point is exemplified by rising sea levels that are already affecting postcolonial island-states such as Fiji, Tuvalu, and the Maldives. Their precarity, marked by intensified flooding and the impending submersion of their homes, involves the biopolitical devaluation of indigenous peoples, carbon emissions, and the impending collapse of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet (which is projected to raise sea levels by up to thirteen feet).²¹ The activities of Man can catalyze and intensify climatological, geological, and oceanic processes that have disastrous effects, even if such was not intended. Oceans, atmospheres, and ice sheets connect pursuits of neoliberal fantasies to the precarity and displacement of indigenous peoples of low-lying island-states.

The colonial and imperial dimensions of ecological precarity call attention to how humans are interwoven with nonhumans and how, as a result, nonhumans shape human

¹⁹ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003), 260-1.

²⁰ Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, "Introduction: Toward an Aesthetics of the Earth" in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, eds. DeLoughrey and Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26.

²¹ Fred Pearce, *With Speed and Violence: Why Scientists Fear Tipping Points in Climate Change* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 56-7.

life. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, argues that climate change is the product of imbrications between human life, natural processes, and capital. Ecological calamities that can be tied to the industrial revolution were made possible by the agricultural revolution which, according to Chakrabarty, “was made possible by certain changes in the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, a certain stability of the climate, and a degree of warming of the planet that followed the end of the Ice Age (the Pleistocene Era)—things over which human beings had no control.”²² Humans have not generated climate change on their own, no matter how ecologically destructive neoliberal capitalism may be.²³ Chakrabarty supplements Wynter’s point that all humans cannot be held evenly responsible for climate change by adding that the human species cannot be held fully responsible, as though its agency were sovereign and as though matter were inert.

While Chakrabarty uncovers the effects of nonhumans by historicizing climate change, William Connolly addresses how nonhumans shape neoliberal life today. For Connolly, proponents of neoliberalism such as Friedrich Hayek are right to believe that markets demonstrate powers of self-organization but overlook how other systems, human and nonhuman, self-organize as well. Neoliberals also pretend that markets are not affected by biological, geological, and cosmic events such as cross-species transfer of viruses, earthquakes, and solar flares. Connolly insists that only by taking stock of nonhuman systems can one “come to terms more thoughtfully with the volatile ecology of late modern capitalism and the contemporary fragility of things.”²⁴

²² Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009), 217.

²³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 1 (Autumn 2014), 21.

²⁴ William E. Connolly, “Steps toward an Ecology of Late Capitalism,” *Theory and Event* 15, no. 1 (2012), muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v015/15.1.connolly.html

Chakrabarty and Connolly, to a lesser extent, elide questions of the role played by nonhumans in making and breaking the attachments that keep neoliberal capitalism running in the face of its ecological destructiveness. Thoughtful engagements with impasses of the Anthropocene, I argue, not only convey how neoliberal life affects, is affected by, and is composed of diverse human populations and nonhumans on a planetary scale; they also would detail how nonhumans play a role in the attachments between humans and their worlds.

The Lively Matter of Cruel Optimism

Neoliberal capitalist life has barely flinched in the face of oncoming waves of ecological devastation, many of which have already shored. Nor has it shifted much in light of the 2008 economic crisis and the important efforts of movements like Occupy. “Why do people stay attached to conventional good life fantasies,” Berlant asks, “when evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?” (*CO*, 2).

People in an impasse aren't stupid. Nor are they masochists, if “masochist” denotes a person who enjoys structurally-induced exhaustion, attrition, and pain.²⁵ Berlant proposes instead that people are optimists; they remain attached to the possibility of overcoming inhibitions to the promises of fantasies (*CO*, 184). They apprehend impasses as glitches on the way to better times. But people are not optimists in the sense of feeling hopeful. For Berlant, optimism is not an affect but the structure of attachment between subjects and objects of desire. Optimistic attachments form partly due to the

²⁵ That is how Judith Butler, according to Berlant, conceives of the subject that, in a mode of infantile dependency, desires its own subordination in order to persist as an “I.” In doing so, Berlant argues that Butler “equates infantile dependency with normative attachments and normative attachments to power and privilege” (*CO*, 183).

efforts of law, the state, and liberal democracy, as well as the technologies of patience adopted by a subject of impasses.

Ideology, repression, and disciplinary power cannot fully account for why people remain attached to neoliberal life. As Berlant points out, attachments to objects of desire ground a sense of self and world that is derived from psychic, social, and disciplinary mechanisms. Something becomes an object of desire when it is misrecognized as bearing the good life. Social fantasies inform subjects to desire certain objects. Disciplinary technologies of patience keep people aligned with those fantasies. Neoliberal capitalism persists because it has organized life for many people regardless of whether they believe in its fantasies.²⁶ Perhaps Slavoj Žižek is onto something when he insists that the end of capitalism is more horrifying than the end of the world.²⁷

An optimistic attachment turns cruel when its subject would sooner destroy others or be destroyed by its fantasies than let them go. “Cruel optimism” denotes “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic” (*CO*, 24). This discovery is cruel because fantasy seems unable to ground the subject's sense of self and world after all. Cruel optimists feel the loss of fantasy as the loss of oneself and reciprocity with the world. It is a situation of potentially losing something fundamental and intimate, no matter how damaging it might be. In the absence of another source of optimism for

²⁶ One might be reminded of Wendy Brown's description of “wounded attachments,” which are fetishized injuries used by minoritized peoples to ground political claims that are inadvertently self-defeating (*States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995], 52-76). Injury may be the object of attachment, but Berlant convinces me that the structure of attachment is optimistic.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “Slavoj Žižek Speaks at Occupy Wall Street,” *Lacan*, http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page_id=1476. Accessed on 20 June 2015.

living and living on, losing a fantasy feels worse than being consumed by it.

An impasse is a situation in which something changes in the objects of desire that have anchored a fantasy. Berlant's conception of impasse accommodates materiality in the form of objects of desire and what troubles them. How does Berlant account for the relationship between matter and fantasies?

When it is summoned as an object of desire, matter is less a lively thing than a fantasmatic investment. "When we talk about an object of desire," Berlant writes, "we are *really* talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could seem embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea—*whatever*" (*CO*, 23; emphases mine). Talking about an object of desire means focusing not on things but the promises hovering about them, so much so that the things themselves don't seem to matter ("whatever"). This emphasis on promises *rather than* objects neglects the solicitation of desire by diverse materialities. For Berlant, social fantasy, desire, and the human psyche do the work of generating optimistic attachments with things, as though those things had nothing to do with the process. It's as though the object of desire were a purely psychic achievement.

Berlant attributes the formation of objects of desire to misrecognition, "the psychic process by which fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire" (*CO*, 122). Because "desire has bad eyesight," humans misrecognize things as objects that promise wholeness and a place in the world (*D/L*, 76). Those promises are misrecognition's gift-wrapping of things in fantasy. Berlant writes that "to misrecognize is not to err, but to project qualities onto

something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those qualities—which it might or might not have” (*CO*, 122). Misrecognition is what gives humans a handle on what lies beyond them.

But does the materiality of an object of desire have any part to play in allowing or composing fantasy? Berlant’s remarks on apostrophe clarify that, for her, it does not. According to Barbara Johnson, apostrophe is the direct address that summons and animates “an absent, dead, or inanimate being.”²⁸ Berlant observes that apostrophe involves the misrecognition of an absent entity as an interlocutor, and this misrecognition is enacted for the sake of the speaker. A human apostrophizes *x* (Johnson’s examples include lost lovers and aborted fetuses), which is “affectively present but physically displaced” (*CO*, 25). Because *x* doesn’t actually arrive, this apostrophic relation is one that speakers have with themselves; *x* is ventriloquized by me. Apostrophe opens a dreamy moment of imagined intersubjectivity (“affective presence”) due to the “convenient absence” of *x* (*CO*, 25). The subject is vitalized because it can successfully project its fantasies onto an absent object. Berlant concludes that apostrophe is a “physically impossible but phenomenologically vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation” (*CO*, 26). Apostrophe reveals how misrecognition, when it works, turns humans inward to enjoy an imagined scenario. Humans flourish as they shy away from materialities swarming outside their heads.

In cruel optimism, misrecognition no longer works and flourishing becomes imperiled. The materiality of a thing, a human, a pet, Earth—whatever—refuses to be ignored. It makes itself present, gets too close, grows wild, bites back. By unsettling

²⁸ Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” *Diacritics* Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1986), 30.

misrecognition, matter exhibits a power, elaborated by speculative realists and object-oriented ontologists, to tease humans with an inky trace while eluding access and understanding.²⁹ An object of desire, which always defers satisfaction, then seems incapable of ever making good on its promises. The subject enters an impasse in the midst of matter that no longer sustains fantasy.

While Berlant develops a compelling account of the human experience of impasse, I want to bring into focus how the power of matter plays a role in it. In an impasse, matter scratches at the screen of fantasy. In *Cruel Optimism*, there are human bodies, spiders, yards, bees, vineyards, wires, dust, dollar bills, cigar boxes, rubber bands, safes, wedding rings, cartons of canned sardines, books, paintings, tobacco cans, pianos, glass jars of pennies, bagpipes, sections of a dead tree, elevators, refrigerators, mannequins, windows, a watch, a cot, piss, vomit, blood, vending machines, microwaves, sugar, fat, salt, caffeine, alcohol, drugs, and a blind dog named Zora. But the hum exuded by these materialities is soft, muffled by Berlant's focus on fantasy. What if matter is more than a prop in the scene of fantasy?³⁰ What if it sparks desire and forges attachments? If matter solicits, sustains, and troubles attachments, then impasses are entanglements of

²⁹ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Graham Harman, *The Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London, UK: Continuum, 2008); Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2013).

³⁰ "The object of cruel optimism here appears as the thing within any object to which one passes one's fantasy of sovereignty for safekeeping. In cruel optimism the subject or community turns its treasured attachments into safety-deposit objects that make it possible to bear sovereignty through its distribution, the energy of feeling relational, general, reciprocal, and accumulative. In circulation one becomes happy in an ordinary, often lovely, way, because the weight of being in the world is being distributed into space, time, noise, and other beings. When one's sovereignty is delivered back into one's hands, though, its formerly distributed weight becomes apparent, and the subject becomes stilled in a perverse mimesis of its enormity. In a relation of cruel optimism our activity is revealed as a vehicle for attaining a kind of passivity, as evidence of the desire to find forms in relation to which we can sustain a coasting sentence, in response to being *too* alive" (CO, 43).

matter and fantasy.

For example, one might recall Connolly's point that, by situating neoliberalism as one system amongst others, one may better appreciate and address "the pressures on so many constituencies to reinstate faith in neoliberal ideology a short time after the latest [2008] meltdown."³¹ Connolly's words could gesture to cruel optimism though they do not describe enough the perils of striving to protect an attachment to neoliberal fantasies. But if grasping cruel optimist attachments to neoliberal fantasies demands attention to the affectivity of nonhuman systems, then Berlant's account of the materiality of impasse is partial and a different account of matter is important.

There has been increasing attention to the place of nonhumans in and about human life. Differences aside, scholarship from object-oriented ontology to new materialism remove the human from the bookends of the known world. They show the human to be a particular material configuration amongst innumerable others. In doing so, they rethink the human and the humanities.

I enlist new materialisms to argue that matter positively inflects the shape of attachments. Because new materialisms are richly diverse,³² I draw upon those strands that find matter to be neither passive nor inert, that blur divisions between life and non-life, and that dethrone the human from its assumed place atop hierarchies of being.

Jane Bennett's vibrant materialism suspends problematic divisions between life and matter that have dogged classical theories of vitalism. Whereas the latter have viewed

³¹ Connolly, "Steps toward an Ecology of Late Capitalism."

³² Key introductions to new materialisms include William E. Connolly, "The 'New Materialism' and the Fragility of Things," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (2013), 399-412; Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (eds.), *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012); Samantha Frost and Diana Coole (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

matter as inert, Bennett hears “a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such” and heeds matter as self-organizing—that is, freed from “figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance.”³³ (*VM*, xiii). The differences made by matter, however large or small, escape human control. Matter exhibits “thing-power,” or the capacity “to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (*VM*, viii). Part of the range of thing-powers has been theorized by others who articulate matter as a shy object that retreats into its depths, teasing humans with an inky trace while thwarting access and understanding.³⁴ This power of matter inhibits human pursuits. Bennett tends more toward the “productive” power of things—their ability to mark, entice, allure, provoke, enliven. Matter contributes to the shape of lives and worlds.

This latter form of thing-power can be discerned in the allure exerted by matter on humans. I draw this attractive power from an encounter Bennett had with an eclectic mix of matter:

On a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain
to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam's Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in
Baltimore, there was:

one large men's black plastic work glove

one dense mat of oak pollen

one unblemished dead rat

³³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *VM*.

³⁴ Bennett notes Martin Heidegger, Stephen Jay Gould, Theodor Adorno, and Graham Harman as theorists of the thing-powers of “recalcitrance, elusiveness, and the ability to impede (and thus perhaps to chasten) the will to truth” (Jane Bennett, “Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency,” in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen [Brooklyn, New York: punctum books, 2012], 243. Cited in this chapter hereafter as “PH”).

one white plastic bottle cap

one smooth stick of wood

Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing... [S]tuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. (*VM*, 4)

Bennett heard a call and headed over. The items kept her in place for a few moments during which she “caught a glimpse into a parallel world of vibrant, powerful things” (“PH,” 239). Things buzz with their own power, which can lure over an unsuspecting passerby and get her to stay awhile.

What becomes clear in this encounter is that no particular thing encased material vibrancy. The glove, rat, pollen, bottle cap, stick, and Bennett congregated for a few moments. It is difficult to tell which component was key to Bennett’s vibrant materialist revelation: “For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they *were* all there just as they were” (*VM*, 5). These various bits of matter became an ecology, a “contingent tableau” of human and nonhuman forces in this singular place and time.

Bennett quickly shifts from a language of thing-power to the agency of assemblages. She notes that while the concept of thing-power unsettles sharp divisions between life and matter, it tends to present materiality as discrete lumps of matter. It also risks the presentation of things as full-fledged agents and humans as mere patients. A turn to assemblage emphasizes that material vibrancy is not a property of any particular thing but a force that emerges through ecologies of matter. Bennett draws upon Gilles Deleuze

and Félix Guattari's concept of assemblage while inflecting it with vibrancy, tactility, and movement:

Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface... [N]o one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties... Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency *of* the assemblage. (*VM*, 23-4).

Assemblages are the criss-crossing of impacts and trajectories, the knitting of patterns of difference and repetition. Bits of matter jostle and jive together, improvising a rhythm whose maintenance requires “creative compensations” for external shocks and internal discord (*VM*, 22). Agency in an assemblage is impersonal and distributed, not personal and sovereign. Assemblages blossom into effects larger than any one member could produce alone while being reconfigured in turn.³⁵

I return to what Bennett calls “distributed agency” in the next section. Now, I note that the attractive force of matter—what Bennett calls “the power that things have to

³⁵ Manuel DeLanda describes this “autonomy” of assemblages as a result of feedback loops between parts and whole and the irreducibility of interactions between assemblages to their respective parts (*A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* [London, UK: Continuum, 2006], 40).

draw us near and provoke our deep attachments to them”³⁶—resonates with what Berlant calls optimism. The latter is “the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene” (*CO*, 1-2). Whereas optimism is the spiraling-outward of the human subject through the propulsive force of desire, thing-power here is the allure of matter. The former concerns the human power of misrecognition, fantasy, and promises of coherence, continuity, and reciprocity, the latter thing-powers expressed as vibrancy, rhythm, and duration. The former centers upon the human and its needs; the latter foregrounds the hold of matter irrespective of human desire.

I note these differences not to select Berlant or Bennett as the source of a better account of attachments but to better understand the complexity of attachments and hence impasses. While it is hard for me to not see desire, misrecognition, social fantasy, and disciplinary technologies as themselves particular expressions of material vibrancies, I do not feel that vibrant materialism fully captures their operations. To understand psychic, social, and disciplinary forces as material ones is partly to acknowledge how the vibrancy of matter may inflect their effects away from human understanding and control, but it does not account for their relative though distinctive contributions to the form, durability, and fragility of attachments. My endeavor is to discern how materialities of various sorts operate through each other in impasses, sometimes in concert, sometimes with great friction.

Attachments are assemblages that hold together an expanse of materialities. As

³⁶ Bennett, “Powers of the Hoard,” 243.

Kathleen Stewart writes, “An attachment circulates across bodies of all kinds—human bodies, bodies of thought, plant and animal bodies, bodies of pain and pleasure.”³⁷ Each of these bodies contributes, though not necessarily evenly, to the composition of an attachment. In other words, attachments stays intact if psychic, social, disciplinary, and material lines stay in phase. Bennett and Connolly describe a “phase” as a porous, shifting, elastic, and yet relatively stable state that emerges through resonances and frictions.³⁸ Phases vary in duration and degree, from a moment to a lifetime, an encounter to an attachment.

As a form of phase, an attachment emerges only if matter sustains, enables, and even solicits the collaboration of misrecognition, social fantasy, and disciplinary power. If, for example, the Earth is misrecognized as a bounty of resources to be mined for the good life, it is not because it is inert or because humans are sovereign. Nor is it *only* the effect of Western liberal, capitalist, and colonialist fantasies of human sovereignty and of property. Those fantasies take hold when earthly matter changes slowly relative to humans. They are unsettled in events that demonstrate the more spectacular capacities of the Earth, like earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and superstorms.³⁹ In other words, an object of desire emerges on account of misrecognition and matter at work behind the curtain of fantasy. Matter is not a hapless surface that awaits the adornment of human fantasy. Its rhythms, durations, and forces enable misrecognition; thing-power allows

³⁷ Kathleen Stewart, “An Autoethnography of What Happens.” in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, eds. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013), 661.

³⁸ Jane Bennett and William E. Connolly, “The Crumpled Handkerchief.” In *Time and History in Deleuze and Serres*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2012), 156-8.

³⁹ Jane Bennett describes a similar redistribution of human time and geological time. See “Earthling, Now and Forever?” in *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Everyday Life*, eds. Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (New York: punctum books, 2013), 244-6.

fantasy to stick. When matter and fantasy are thrown out of phase, thing-power oozes through the pores of objects of desire.

An impasse is not merely a crisis in fantasy, as Berlant largely depicts it, but a crisis in assemblages. As assemblages, attachments are marked by attraction and repulsion; their diverse materialities are drawn together close enough to affect each other but far enough to avoid tumbling into a larger whole that is devoid of energetic remainders. The tension between materialities nears a breaking point in impasses. In the version described here, matter pulls humans away from where social fantasies, disciplinary regimes, and even those humans would like them to be. Creative compensations seem unable to stop the spread of hairline cracks throughout the assemblage.

Some might frown upon the reach for matter beyond the human: isn't this mere talk? How can a human even hope to shake off human perception to discern and express the "powers" of nonhumans? Isn't vibrant materialism anthropomorphic and performative—that is, isn't it a cultural semiotics of objects or a discursive practice that materializes and animates what is otherwise inanimate or nonhuman?⁴⁰ Wasn't Bennett merely seeing what she had already expected to see due to her intellectual and cultural background? Might the glove, pollen, rat, cap, and stick be Bennett's own objects of desire that house a fantasy of matter as vibrant? Might they be the objects of an apostrophic relation?

These criticisms, neither right nor wrong, issue from an anthropocentric framework. They risk imbuing the human with sovereign power by quarantining thing-power and reestablishing divides between the human and the nonhuman that they might

⁴⁰ For one elaboration of how discourse produces material reality, see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993).

otherwise seek to deconstruct. They neglect the nonhuman materialities that make up the human, such as the minerals in our bones and blood. They overemphasize the distinctiveness of the human's psychic powers of misrecognition without acknowledging enough how they might be particular things-powers. Vibrant materialism insists that the human is not fully human, perhaps by issuing a Whitmanian rejoinder: "I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots, / And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over."⁴¹ It might also adopt an evolutionary view to problematize clean-cut species demarcations and maintain that what we typically reserve as human has been emerging through long genealogies of interleavings with a diverse host of nonhumans.⁴²

Read in this light, the anthropomorphic quality of Bennett's account is partly the expression of things-powers. Bennett isn't quite *describing* her encounter with thing-power; instead, thing-power expresses itself in Bennett's writings through anthropomorphic images. I surmise that things nudged Bennett to reach toward anthropomorphic expressions, appealing for their capacity to flag the material vibrancy running across humans and nonhumans. Along with her rhythmic and sonorous writing style, anthropomorphism is Bennett's tool for tuning readers to the vibrancy of matter; it "can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of being (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations" (*VM*, 99).

Finally, is vibrant materialism a testament to the cultural encoding of perception?

⁴¹ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 52.

⁴² Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

Yes, to an extent. Bennett admits that an “anticipatory readiness,” a “perceptual style open to the appearance of thing-power,” had played a role in her encounter; she had been reading Spinoza, Thoreau, and Merleau-Ponty (*VM*, 5). To attribute the results of this encounter *solely* to cultural and perceptual filters is, again, to dampen thing-powers, to exaggerate the efficacy of more abstract ideas, and to parse ideas and matter instead of viewing them collectively as part of an assemblage.

When encountering impasses of the Anthropocene, it is important to lean away from skepticisms over vibrant materialism, even if one cannot prove that matter is vibrant, to devise new approaches to intense ecological shifts. Chakrabarty finds that climate change, by raising the prospect of human extinction, disrupts a presumption that has been central to the discipline of history: “that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience.”⁴³ He thus argues for a revision in historical sense that would accommodate entanglements between natural history, human history, and histories of capital. Eugene Thacker argues that climate change poses a problem for philosophy: as the intensification of planetary fragility makes nonhuman activities increasingly difficult to ignore and as the prospect of human extinction draws nigh, we are compelled to undertake the paradoxical and even horrifying endeavor of thinking a world that is without us—that is, a world beyond what is thinkable.⁴⁴ Finally, McKenzie Wark insists that “At a minimum, the Anthropocene calls on critical theory to entirely rethinks its received ideas, its habituated traditions, its claims to authority. It

⁴³ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 197.

⁴⁴ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy*, Vol. 1 (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011).

needs to look back in its own archive for more useful critical tools.”⁴⁵ Wark calls for greater alliances with technical and scientific knowledges. These varied historical, philosophical, and multidisciplinary efforts collectively point to the needs to develop new modes of critical engagement in the face of the Anthropocene. They identify the dangers of neglecting the force of nonhumans, which will affect us regardless of our theoretical affiliations. As sea levels rise, droughts intensify, large swaths of vegetation wither, and countless species vanish from the cosmos forever, matter will decide for us whether its roar will be tamed by debates over critique.

When matter veers off a course mapped by fantasy and human desire, it can begin a little world of its own. This potency can indeed be rerouted, but not even the most austere regimes of discipline and violence can neutralize it. The force of matter (exhibited in, say, earthquakes that can level cities and selves) entails that someone, somewhere, might spy through the painful cracks of an impasse a glimmer of another world: “Terrified, bewildered, frantic, covered with blood, quivering all over, Candide said to himself [after the Lisbon earthquake], ‘If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others like?’”⁴⁶

Bad Vibes | Digesting Slow Death

Candide’s speculation is explored throughout this dissertation. For now, I elaborate in the next two sections the affective and bodily dimensions of agency in impasses of the

⁴⁵ McKenzie Wark, “Critical Theory after the Anthropocene,” Public Seminar, 9 August 2014, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2014/08/critical-theory-after-the-anthropocene/>. Accessed on 9 August 2014.

⁴⁶ Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. Lowell Bair (New York: Bantam Classic, 2003), 29. Candide’s question signals an impasse in a Leibnizian optimism that construes the world anthropocentrically—as centered on human flourishing.

Anthropocene: mixed feelings, anxiety, and the sense of being stunned as bodies grow fatigued. How does human agency take shape within impasses? Does it align with the masterful, productive, and responsible forms demanded by neoliberalism and anthropocentrism? What happens when humans remain attached to unfeasible and costly images of agency?

To better understand how talking about impasses of the Anthropocene as an assemblage recasts the agency available to humans therein, I turn to experiences of bodily pleasure and attrition under neoliberal capitalism. This moment has given rise to what Berlant has called “slow death,” a condition in which human life is worn out by the very activity of reproducing it. When burnout is a defining feature of labor under late capitalism, calls for sovereign agency are a drag. The subjects of slow death are exhausted and seek relief from full-throttle sovereign subjectivity.

Berlant’s chief example of slow death is the so-called “obesity epidemic” in the United States. To counter a neoliberal biopolitics of individual responsibility that shames impoverished and racialized populations, Berlant depicts obesity to be the effect of environmental and historical conditions. While beginning with an obesogenic approach, though, she ultimately zooms in on food as a culprit of health problems. Unhealthy foods erode bodies while providing marginal reprieve from intense labor demands. As a result, “morbidity,” Berlant writes, “marks out slow death as what there is of the good life.”⁴⁷

While concurring with criticisms of Berlant’s hasty equation of eating and food

⁴⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 114.

with body size and health,⁴⁸ I develop what food, pleasure, and bodily attrition illuminate about forms of human agency that don't align with neoliberalism's demands for personal sovereignty. That is, what if agency were modeled off eating rather than freedom?⁴⁹

Anthropocentrism, liberalism, and neoliberalism, amongst their differences, have professed an image of agency that is free, centralized in humans, and enacted through the will, intentionally and consciously.⁵⁰ While that form of agency may be approximated in circumstances of high privilege, slow death gives way to what Berlant calls "lateral agency," or nonsovereign experiences of floating sideways that follow hits of pleasure. Examples include eating, having sex, and spacing out. Lateral agency marks what little there is left of the good life for those whose time is tuned to the clock of capital; under slow death, "life feels truncated, more like desperate doggy paddling than like a magnificent swim out to the horizon" (*CO*, 117).

Within the "obesity epidemic," eating is a lateral agency that spans morsels of matter and exhausted, sick-to-the-stomach human bodies. Lateral agency is not locatable in a person, place, or thing; it emerges through an assemblage of humans and nonhumans. While agency is always distributed this way, as Bennett argues, what makes lateral agency distinctive is that it pertains to human experiences of pleasure, relief, or numbness in the suspension of calls to sharp consciousness and robust intentionality. "Food is poison here," as Kyla Tompkins puts it, "but it is also something of a magic

⁴⁸ Anna Kirkland, "The Environmental Account of Obesity: A Case for Feminist Skepticism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 2 (2010), 463-85; Heather Love, "What Does Lauren Berlant Teach Us about X?" *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 4 (December 2012), 320-36; Anna E. Ward, "Fat Bodies/Thin Critique: Animating and Absorbing Fat Embodiments," *S&F Online* 11, no. 3 (Summer 2013), <http://sfonline.barnard.edu/life-un-ltd-feminism-bioscience-race/fat-bodiethin-critique-animating-and-absorbing-fat-embodiments/>

⁴⁹ Here, I draw upon Bennett's "Edible Matter" chapter in *VM*, 39-51.

⁵⁰ Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty*; Bennett, *VM*.

substance;”⁵¹ it carries bodies on tangent from sharp alertness and energetic activity on the one hand and slumped-over states on the other.

Eating reveals that bodies are not self-contained—they incorporate what is outside for sustenance and taste. The processing of food also reveals that a human body is a nest of many bodies: limbs, parts, organs, tracts, membranes, and fluids.⁵² Not all of those materialities are clearly human, such as the two or three pounds of bacteria crawling on your skin and camping in your gut. Human bodies are ecologies of matter of various shapes and sizes, properties and capacities, durations and transformations. “It is thus not enough to say that we are ‘embodied,’” Bennett insists. “We are, rather, an array of bodies” (*VM*, 112). Notions of embodiment, which have fruitfully countered liberal and neoliberal tendencies toward gendered, racialized, and colonialist abstractions of human subjectivity, do not quite capture the most ordinary operations of bodily agency. Ecological images better capture the dispersal of agency in impasses in contemporary neoliberal life.

The dispersed agency signaled by eating hardly aligns with the kind of autonomous, self-directed subject that is demanded by neoliberalism. Alimentary processes such as digestion reflect agential powers other than intentionality, consciousness, and willfulness. When those latter capacities are in play, they are neither fully determinative nor separable from the force of matter. While one could flag that there is no “I” in agency, eating might suggest that the grammar of agency is, as Michael Pollan

⁵¹ Kyla Wazana Tompkins, “How Does It Feel?” *Social Text Periscope*, 13 January 2013, http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/how-does-it-feel/

⁵² I have been inspired to think about body parts by Rachel C. Lee's *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

puts it, the first-person plural.⁵³

That grammar is apt for impasses in neoliberal life, which mark an “I” that becomes increasingly tenuous, fractured, and diffuse. Furthermore (and to repeat the last section with a difference), impasses involve not only the disorganization of identities but the disorganization of matter. Agency under slow death circulates through evermore fragile and volatile assemblages of, among many other things, human bodies, body parts that are aching and ailing, metabolic processes, foods of all sorts, bacteria, fertilizers and pesticides, food markets and community-supported agriculture associations, health care infrastructure, urbanization, and racialized, gendered norms of beauty and body shape. Consider the Anthropocene and add to that list crop failure amongst prolonged droughts and rising temperatures, food shortages and riots, carbon emissions from long-distance transportation of foods and the production of meat, and the hardship that would follow the looming extinction of honeybees.

Amidst this complex ecology, neoliberalism demands that agency be sovereign, exacerbates drastically uneven conditions for its approximation, and marshals draconian responses against those that it casts as failed agents. Impasses in neoliberal life arise partly because it produces bodies that cannot abide its dictates even as it solicits cruel optimist commitments by closing alternative images of agency, human life, and politics. The damage of those impasses is being intensified as we plunge further into the Anthropocene.

⁵³ Michael Pollan, “Some of My Best Friends are Germs,” *New York Times*, 2013 May 15, www.nytimes.com/2013/05/19/magazine/say-hello-to-the-100-trillion-bacteria-that-make-up-your-microbiome.html

Found Objects

To deepen the previous sections and further elaborate how matter refigures human agency, attachments, and impasses, I read Jennifer Egan's short story "Found Objects." My reading crosses different focal points of recent work on affect: nameable feelings on the one hand and impersonal forces on the other.⁵⁴ Greater convergence between these typically separate pursuits helps to clarify how impasses of the Anthropocene take shape through ecologies of humans and nonhumans and webs of feelings and forces. Here, I track what Jasbir Puar calls "ecologies of sensation and switchpoints of bodily capacities."⁵⁵ While Puar develops those concepts in relation to technological and informational control societies, I discern them in the ordinary experience of impasses.⁵⁶ In "Found Objects," pleasure, shame, and immobility shape and are shaped by interactions between humans and nonhumans ("ecologies of sensation"), which allow bodies to move or catch them in an impasse ("switchpoints of bodily capacities").

"Found objects" names an artistic practice that heeds everyday things as, in Marcel Duchamp's words, "ready-mades." The story exhibits this self-organizing power of things as it swarms the main character, Sasha, who is at an impasse in neoliberal fantasies of the good life, intimacy, and sovereignty. Sasha's career and aspirations for self-enrichment are on hold. Her love life is fraught with failure. She is less in control day by day. Her troubles seem to lie in what one could call her "kleptomania" (a word that Egan strategically avoids). Sasha's world has codified the finding of objects as theft and has built

⁵⁴ I follow the divergence between lines of affect identified by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth in "An Inventory of Shimmers" in *The Affect Theory Reader*, 5-9.

⁵⁵ Jasbir K. Puar, "Coda: The Cost of Getting Better (Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints)," *GLQ* 18, no. 1 (2011), 157.

⁵⁶ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

legal, clinical, and carceral institutions accordingly; as Sasha recognizes, getting caught would “unleash a cascade of horrors: arrest, shame, poverty, death.”⁵⁷ The story exhibits a struggle to survive and thrive in an impasse when vibrant matter unsettles neoliberal, gendered, heteronormative, and anthropocentric partitions of agency.

Because I am drawn to Sasha’s exquisite attunement to the charge of matter, I encounter Sasha as an “aesthetic figure” and not a “psychological character.” Michael Shapiro observes that the “movements and dispositions” of aesthetic figures “are less significant in terms of what is revealed about their inner lives than what they tell us about the world to which they belong.”⁵⁸ Framing Sasha as a psychological character aligns with the disciplinary gaze of her therapist Coz, reduces attachments to psychic constructs, turns matter into mere property, shames the appetites, enforces neoliberalism’s restriction of social change to personal and private life, and views Sasha’s struggles as setbacks on the way to a neoliberal good life. On my reading, Sasha’s psychic subjectivity matters less than how her “movements and actions (both purposive and non-purposive) map and often alter an experiential, politically relevant terrain.”⁵⁹ Although Sasha ultimately does not practice a politics of detachment, her impasse reveals how alternative connections with matter are stifled by demands for sovereign agency within neoliberal, gendered, heteronormative, and anthropocentric frames of the world. I follow Sasha as an aesthetic figure because commitments to human mastery might be broken through a more open relationship with matter.

⁵⁷ Jennifer Egan, “Found Objects” in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 10. Hereafter cited in text.

⁵⁸ Michael J. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013), 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

Sasha is at an impasse, she is “hanging by a thread” (11). Sasha is caught up in what Berlant describes as “a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure” (*CO*, 199). The story is Sasha’s recounting to Coz of yet another night in her impasse. Its first few words, “It began in the usual way,” could be phrased into the ending: “It ended in the usual way” (4). The story ends in Coz’s office:

They sat in silence, the longest silence that ever had passed between them.

Sasha looked at the windowpane, rinsed continually with the rain,
smearing lights in the falling dark. She lay with her body tensed, claiming
the couch, her spot in this room, her view of the windows and the walls,
the faint hum that was always there when she listened and these minutes
of Coz’s time: another, then another, then one more. (18)

This lyric atmosphere registers the rhythm of an impasse as absorptive of all sorts of swerves and impacts and happenings without becoming an event.⁶⁰ It expresses what is episodic and elastic about treading water. It sounds the present as an ongoing hum against the repetitive ticking of time.

“Found Objects” depicts ordinary things as quasi-agents. Sasha is not attracted to things that house consumerist fantasies of the good life; she has stopped taking things from stores since “their cold, inert goods didn’t tempt her” (4). She is sensitive to specific things, and that sensitivity is neither law-like nor random; her found objects include “five sets of keys, fourteen pairs of sunglasses, a child’s striped scarf, binoculars, a cheese grater, a pocketknife, twenty-eight bars of soap, and eighty-five pens” (4). Things exert a

⁶⁰ Berlant cautions the use of event rhetoric whose scale distorts that of ordinary happenings and episodes. See *CO* 100-1, 278 fn 17.

hold on Sasha when they make her hungry. In the story, things have the allure of food: a wallet is “tender and overripe as a peach” (5); a screwdriver has the sheen of a lollipop. That Sasha’s found objects bear the qualities of food recalls how agency is dispersed amongst humans and nonhumans.

Just as matter can spark desire, so too can it shift moods. Sasha is disgusted when a dirty plumber crawls around her bathtub in search of a leak. Then, she spots a screwdriver in his tool belt, “the orange translucent handle gleaming like a lollipop in its worn leather loop, the silver shaft sculpted, sparkling” (7). Egan’s lyricism expresses a circuit of material vibrancy that sparks an urge in Sasha. She “plucks” the screwdriver: “Not a bangle jangled; her bony hands were spastic at most things, but she was good for this—made for it, she often thought, in the first drifty moments after lifting something” (8). Sasha slides into lateral agency, a moment of “instant relief” followed by a “blessed indifference” (8). Her whole body is set in motion, though not by an external power nor by the will, intentionality, or consciousness. Instead, it is her hands and a host of nonhuman materialities that excite a mix of feelings and electrify a stream of happenings.

After the plumber leaves, however, the screwdriver oddly looks “normal... like any screwdriver” (8). It had been a vibrant thing; it resembles a “cold, inert good.” This transformation recalls Thoreau’s insistence that huckleberries in the market no longer supply their sweetness because “the ambrosial and essential part of the fruit is lost with the bloom which is rubbed off in the market cart.”⁶¹ They become “mere provender,” having been plucked from one ecology (bushes, soil, fields, and open air) and inserted into

⁶¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Walden*, *The Maine Woods*, *Cape Cod* (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1985), 461.

another (wooden carts and market prices).⁶² The screwdriver is no longer part of the assemblage in which it had been desirable; or, it is no longer a part of the assemblage in which it had *become* desirable. When an attractive thing has been plucked from its assemblage, it turns into a found object. But while Thoreau's concern lies with authenticity, Sasha's is with attachment. Found objects are not flavorless fruits but the stuff of impasses.

Matter continues to exert a hold even if the feelings they once provoked seem to be lost. Sasha piles found objects in a heap to stop "their power from leaking away" (17). Her efforts bespeak an attachment to things whose initial vibrancy has fizzled. That she cannot resuscitate their former powers reveals a power beyond human control and not designed for human flourishing. It also shows that cruel optimism is more than a realignment of oneself with fantasy; it is partly the experience of being bound by things. An impasse is a complex ecology of desire, fantasy, and matter. Though it had once "seemed like a way station to some better place," Sasha's apartment "had ended up solidifying around Sasha, gathering mass and weight, until she felt both mired in it and lucky to have it—as if she not only couldn't move on but didn't want to" (14). The apartment is a symbol of Sasha's impasse, a stale object of desire, and a rut in itself.

"Found Objects" dramatizes how matter can redirect a happy flow into an impasse. The plot follows Sasha on a ho-hum first date with Alex. Sasha goes to the restroom, spies an open purse on the sink, and plucks a wallet—not for its money but due to its peach-like allure. Though previously "in the grip of a dire evening," she returns to her table "postwallet" to find the "scene tingl[ing] with mirthful possibility" (5). Sasha and

⁶² Ibid.

Alex return to her apartment, where he is captivated by its sights and scents: “The place smelled of scented candles, and there was a velvet throw cloth on her sofa bed and lots of pillows, and an old color TV with a very good picture, and an array of souvenirs from her travels lining the windowsills: a white seashell, a pair of red dice, a small canister of Tiger Balm from China, now dried to the texture of rubber, a tiny bonsai tree that she watered faithfully” (13). “It feels like old New York,” says Alex, “*You know this stuff is around, but how do you find it?*” (14; emphasis mine). Shaken by a question that evokes her impasse of found objects, Sasha sees her apartment as Alex might: “a bit of local color that would fade almost instantly into the tumble of adventures that everyone has on first coming to New York” (14). The feeling of being forgettable unsettles Sasha; it recalls how her objects have forgotten her as their initial charm faded away.

When Alex spots the heap of objects, Sasha is filled by both pride and shame over the “raw and warped core of her life” (14). Those mixed feelings lead her to initiate sex with Alex—next to the objects, though he tries to lead her to the bedroom. This is a moment of queer lateral agency, wherein desire emerges from mixed feelings and is energized more by nonhumans than by a differently sexed human; it is a vibrant materialist intimacy, not a heteronormative romance.⁶³ Afterwards, “All [of Sasha’s] excitement had seeped away, leaving behind a terrible sadness, an emptiness that felt violent, as if she’d been gouged” (16). Alex proposes a bath. He runs the water and Sasha watches him poke about the pile for a packet of bath salts, “hoping for a tremor of the excitement that she’d felt before, but it was gone” (16). Alex bathes, leaves, and never

⁶³ Chad Shomura, “Love in a Cinematic Time of Race: Deleuze and Race-Intimacy Assemblages” in *Deleuze and Race*, eds. Arun Saldanha and Jason Adams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 208-24.

returns. The objects lie in a heap. Sasha ends up on Coz's couch again. Her impasse continues.

This episode details the twists of promise-threat in an impasse, the mixed feelings, the turns of matter. Fantasy and matter can hum with promises for a while, but a phase shift sours things. Feelings emerge, take shape, and change by the fickle powers of things. An impasse trembles with rhythms that feel too truncated or too wild for traction to be possible. It upsets what had once supplied pleasure, secured optimism, sealed attachments, generated a sense of possibility and anticipation, and grounded habits and paths to the good life. Humans and nonhumans stick together in stuckness. Humans find themselves in a rut which they cannot resolve at will. What if they were to follow the worldings of matter away from a predetermined end?

Sasha's Longing, or Touching Fleeing

Human mastery presumes a teleology: there can be setbacks but not impasses, the hope of personal redemption but not political change. Coz does not believe in impasses; he refers to Sasha's episodes of finding objects as "personal challenges," as opportunities for "Sasha to assert her toughness, her individuality" by leaving things rather than taking them (4). This form of personal sovereignty bespeaks a mind-over-matter mentality that supports: a neoliberal fantasy of atomistic individualism; a gendered valuation of the rational over the sensory; a heteronormative sexualization of sensual pleasure; and an anthropocentric denial of the agentic capacities of things. Commitment to sovereignty generates a moralizing gaze of discipline and pursues a teleology of normalization. Sasha and Coz are "writing a story whose end had already been determined: she would get

well” (6).

Social fantasies of redemption have been prevalent in the contemporary national culture of the United States. “Found Objects” takes place in post-9/11 New York City, which emblemizes an impasse in a US national identity based on fantasies of global sovereignty and on a teleology of neoliberal democratization. “[Sasha] hated the neighborhood at night without the World Trade Center, whose blazing freeways of light had always filled her with hope” (12). The Ground Zero of shattered hope connects a personal impasse to a national one, the micropolitics of found objects to the macropolitics of the “war on terror.”

The “war on terror” exemplifies the cruel optimism of post-9/11 national culture. In this impasse, the US could have developed greater international solidarity by abandoning its claims to global sovereignty. As Judith Butler suggests, the US could have “agree[d] to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.”⁶⁴ Mourning in an impasse suspends fantasies of sovereignty and affirms vulnerability, codependence, and an openness to being changed. Instead of mourning, the US turned to melodrama; it largely asserted *its* “toughness,” *its* supposed “individuality” to repair a national and capitalist track.⁶⁵ Soon after 11 September 2001, George W. Bush urged an end to mourning and insisted on a return to consumer life—of shopping for commodities (“cold, inert goods”)—that contains the vibrancy of matter. The US declared itself to be a beacon of democracy as it restricted civil liberties, intensified surveillance, solidified its colonialist

⁶⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, UK: Verso, 2004), 21.

⁶⁵ Elisabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 17-8.

claims through tropes of the “homeland,” and extended its imperial reach through an intricate machinery of detention, torture, and slaughter. The upturned lives and landscapes of the last fourteen years register the havoc generated by a nation-state that desperately holds onto a dream.

Sasha also clings to fantasies of sovereignty and of the good life she once pursued. Yet, like many within the US, she is also ambivalent: “Redemption, transformation—God how she wanted these things. Every day, every minute. *Didn't everyone?*” (18; emphasis mine). That she pauses to ask whether everyone desires redemption signals uncertainty and hesitation, as though Coz’s couch isn’t the only place to be. Her desire for redemption attests to the gravity of a good life that would sever her connection to vibrant matter while soliciting a desire for commodities. Her ambivalence attests to longings for a less neoliberal, less consumerist, less gendered, less anthropocentric world; she desires redemption, but she also loves the touch of vibrant matter.

An impasse is a murky window into other lives, other worlds, other futures. What if its openings were pursued? What if one were to, as Sasha describes the cusp of finding something, “seize the moment, accept the challenge, take the leap, fly the coop, throw caution to the wind, live dangerously?” (3-4). That pursuit would confront, in Berlant’s words, “the difficulty of detaching from lives and worlds that wear out life, rather than sustain it. The hardest acts of changing are acts of breaking, even when desire is on the side of a break: they require being optimistic about loss” (*TFC*, 266-7).

In an impasse, loss becomes palpable in lateral agencies that upset fantasies of sovereignty. Although Berlant rightly cautions against viewing lateral agency as inherently political (*CO*, 116), the integration of mind, body, and things in lateral relations could be a

feminist, queer, and ecological experience that runs aslant from human centrality and mastery. Ann Cvetkovich draws attention to how lateral relations emerge in ordinary activities such as swimming, yoga, and crafting. Some ordinary activities are political in themselves when they are practices of self-fashioning that integrate mind, body, and matter in non-sovereign ways. Lateral activities may also produce political effects when they foment what Cvetkovich calls the “utopia of ordinary habits,” in which “the affective cultures of nuclear family life, consumerism, mass media, and neoliberal culture” are remade.⁶⁶ Crafting, for example, “emerges from the domestic spaces that are at the heart of women’s culture to provide a model for ways of living that acknowledge forms of structural inequity while also practicing modes of bodily and sensory life that incorporate or weave them into the fabric of a daily life that literally includes texture, color, and sensory pleasure.”⁶⁷ Crafting is a feminist lateral activity that knits together gender, class, culture, humans, and matter into an intimate public that runs aslant from ones that gather around sentimentality. Regarding impasse, the political question is how to turn laterality into solidarity, not only with other humans but also with other life forms, ecosystems, and the earth. Such a process involves experimentation with situations in which human sovereignty and centrality are suspended and in which selves and worlds are creatively refashioned.

Within impasses, politics that is attuned to the vibrancy of matter does not issue a universal call to nonsovereignty. To dispense with sovereignty entirely would ignore nonwestern figurations of it and may amount to complicity with colonial power by

⁶⁶ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 183.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

inhibiting a key goal of many indigenous movements. For example, Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller and Noenoe Silva criticize the dominant Western metaphysical tradition that aligns sovereignty, anthropocentrism, and coloniality. In settler Hawai'i, sovereignty could be reconfigured through Native Hawaiian cosmology, which holds that "humans are part of a vast family that includes celestial bodies, plants, animals, landforms, and deities."⁶⁸ Distributed agency and indigenous sovereignty are productive alternatives to Western notions of human agency as masterful.

Nor does such a politics advocate a dispensation of the human. Black studies scholars have challenged this posthumanist creed; as Tavia Nyong'o asks, "have we ever been human? And if not, what are we being asked to decenter, and through what means?"⁶⁹ In a short dossier, Zakiyyah Jackson similarly insists that attempts to move "beyond the human" reproduce "the reach of antiblackness into the nonhuman": "Whether machine, plant, animal, or object, the nonhuman's figuration and mattering is shaped by the gendered racialization of the field of metaphysics."⁷⁰ Jackson's critique is important but remains underdeveloped due to the space constraints of its present form (a short dossier). At the moment, it is predicated upon the consolidation of an image of Western metaphysics without enough attention to internal dissent by minor ontologies and cosmologies. Nonetheless, I agree with Jackson that efforts to move away from Man need to take up alternative humanisms, like those of Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter.

⁶⁸ Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller and Noenoe K. Silva, "Sharks and Pigs: Animating Hawaiian Sovereignty against the Anthropological Machine," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (Spring 2011), 436.

⁶⁹ Tavia Nyong'o, "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2015), 266.

⁷⁰ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement 'Beyond the Human'," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2015), 216, 217.

Rather than dispensing with sovereignty and the human, I have been elaborating more expansive notions of being and relating within impasses of the Anthropocene that defy colonialist, imperialist, and anthropocentric distributions of vulnerability and could facilitate the survival and flourishing of humans and nonhumans. As José Muñoz suggests, “Once one stops doing the incommensurate work of attempting to touch inhumanity, one loses traction and falls back onto the predictable coordinates of a relationality that announces itself as universal but is, in fact, only a substrata of the various potential interlays of life within which one is always inculcated.”⁷¹ Keener sensitivity to the powers of matter may help the cultivation of relationalities that differ from those that have been organized by human mastery. Human species thinking, as urged by Chakrabarty, is important, so long as it develops a more capacious understanding of the human. At the same time, the human needs to be refigured by an ecological relationality, for nonhumans are members of the Anthropocene’s precariat.

Impasses of the Anthropocene halt pursuits of the good life that have intensified slow death under looming planetary devastation. More sustainable relations become possible within them. They are explored in efforts to touch the nonhuman and to be more sensitive to the nonhuman’s touch of us—a touch that draws us away from centrality and mastery through a rush of anxiety and allure. That touch might lead us to take up the hard work of unlearning harmful attachments, cultivating new solidarities, and pursuing futures whose aura can be faintly felt in impasses today. Those are, anyway, a few paths in impasses of the Anthropocene that have been opened by the powerful longings of Sasha, which burn with the vibrancy of matter.

⁷¹ José Esteban Muñoz, “The Sense of Brownness,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2015), 209.

Sometimes a touch is all it takes. We get caught up in something vague and powerful. Whispers from the growing ruins hint at the frailty of attachments that can only be lived ambivalently if at all. Disbelief sets in. Things that bottled so much potency fall flat while latencies bloom as tiny promises. Aspirations hit road blocks. Or pipe dreams branch out wildly. The present begins to flicker as the undead past looms up in the mist.

We feel a brush with the end of a world and just don't know what to do about it.

2. Dark Atmospheres, or Affect at the End of a World

Something is in the air. Vague, but palpable. The senses get caught up in a swarm of forces. They are pulled into a dim sentience amidst nascent forms. Into a loom of ghostly histories breathing open the present. Mixed feelings stir about. Hard-won attachments unravel. Lifelines to the world are actively cut short. Half-formed thoughts bubble up. Bodies tense up. The architecture of action and reaction hangs in suspense. As a world cracks open, lives are carried through fog on tangents and surges. On waves of threat and promise that might induce tender moments of watching and waiting.

This chapter performs the dark atmospheres of impasse. Lauren Berlant argues that impasses are experienced through an atmosphere and Ann Cvetkovich describes that atmosphere as a muddled mix of threat and promise, of stuckness and movement.¹ This chapter develops these points with guidance from Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos's insight that "atmosphere is a seductive thing, an earthly force of attraction that does not let bodies escape."² I adopt these felicitous words to draw the last chapter's vibrant materialist rendition of impasse into questions of affect through a concept of atmosphere. Dark atmospheres gather from chains of affect that spark up in an impasse, the potential end of a world.

I call the atmosphere of impasse "dark" because it arises as the undead past opens the present to an uncertain, indeterminate future. Because its swarm of affects doesn't amount to a clear mood. Because it registers the decay of worlds when there isn't a new

¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 5-6; Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 21.

² Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, "Atmospheres of Law: Senses, Affects, Lawscapes," *Emotion, Space and Society* Vol. 7 (2013), 41.

world to inhabit. Because it can turn expression poetic amidst the inability to pinpoint what is going on. My elaboration of dark atmospheres is partly a response to Berlant's question of why people remain attached to fantasies while "evidence" of their costliness piles up. The darkness of impasse atmospheres obscures whether a given situation is really an impasse rather than, say, a momentary setback on the way to brighter times. This indeterminacy can, as will be elaborated in chapter four, generate responses of self-damage and outward violence. But it might also breathe life into delicate forms of care for what may be rising out of a mist of potentialities.

By tending to the affects of impasse, I provide an account of atmosphere that differs from those in cultural geography and performance studies. In those fields, atmospheres are often discussed in regard to a stable time with a clear mood. Confusion of temporality for spatiality ensues, which renders atmosphere as a soft enclosure in which humans are immersed. While that notion of atmosphere is certainly appropriate for many situations, it is not so for impasses. It may overlook circuits of material vibrancy, identify a mood at the expense of a rich plurality of low-level affect, leave the ephemerality of atmospheres unelaborated, and overlook nonhuman becomings. The atmosphere of impasse is full of transpersonal, preindividuated affects due to haunted temporalities. I develop this notion by drawing primarily upon the work of anthropologist Kathleen Stewart and philosopher Gilles Deleuze (as well as his writings with Félix Guattari). Notions of atmosphere are productively inflected by Stewart's and Deleuze's attentiveness to unsettled rhythms, subtle intensities, and low-level attunements.

Why "atmosphere" instead of environment, ecology, intersubjectivity, abstract machine, or plane of consistency? This rich family of concepts inspires me, but I

foreground atmosphere because it, more than the others, emphasizes felt experience. It also enfoldes the crossings of nature and culture, floats amongst ontological and experiential registers, gathers without collapsing the concrete and the abstract, bodies and affects, highlights the intertwining of multiple timelines, evokes a consistency strewn with porosity, emphasizes becoming over being, and remains open to the strange effects of ghosts, spirits, and magic.

This chapter holds open the tensions and opacities of atmosphere in defiance of intellectualist and disciplinary calls for coherence, categorization, and closure. It draws politics away from nameable phenomena to sense forces in their emergence, resilience, and diffusion. At its best, such a politics suspends judgments based on readymade morals and knee-jerk reactions in order to more carefully and generously tend to atmospheres that are messy, elusive, ghostly. Atmosphere becomes a breathing space for the ineloquent, the intuitive, the tentative. I begin to develop a politics in impasses that depends upon ethical practices of (1) a heightened sensory awareness to the potentialities that loom within a haze of threat and promise and (2) experimental refashioning what is too brittle or too resilient, overwhelming, or damaging. It cultivates openness to being transformed, for good and ill.

Swarming Feeling

Intensity was the air they breathed.³

—Kathleen Stewart

I begin by elaborating how atmospheres are composed of affects. Then I develop a notion

³ Kathleen Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* Vol. 29 (2011), 447. Cited in this chapter hereafter as "AA."

of atmosphere that departs from discussions that focus on a clearly defined, single mood.

When describing the *mise-en-scène* of stage productions, Gernot Böhme writes that atmospheres are *ekstases* that pull things into a gathered radiance.⁴ Tonino Griffiero writes that atmosphere is a “a quality that things do not ‘have’, but in the manifestation of which, if anything, they extinguish themselves.”⁵ Although Griffiero overstates the absence of things in atmospheres, he rightly points to affect as that which transcends the contours of things. In these accounts, atmosphere is a soft and strange something-more that emerges in the midst of solid things.

These and other discussions of atmosphere recall Deleuze’s concept of bodies. Following Spinoza, Deleuze defines bodies not by properties, forms, or functions. Bodies may be distinguished by their relative speeds and slownesses and their capacities to affect and to be affected. They are “ambulant couplings” of events and affects, or timely clusters of unformed materialities in shifting relations of mutual affection.⁶ Put simply, bodies are defined through the differences they make in specific connections.

Atmospheres are composed of bodies in their affective state. Although critical work in the humanities often refer to humans when they invoke “the body,” for Deleuze, “a body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity.”⁷ Stewart shares a similar

⁴ Gernot Böhme, “The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres,” *Ambiances*, 10 February 2013, <http://ambiances.revues.org/315>. Accessed on 25 January 2014.

⁵ Tonino Griffiero, “The Atmospheric ‘Skin’ of the City,” *Ambiances*, 20 November 2013, <http://ambiances.revues.org/399>. Accessed on 13 January 2014.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 408. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *ATP*.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988), 127.

understanding when she describes her sensitivity to the many “bodies literally affecting one another” in ordinary life: “human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water.”⁸ Griffero draws upon a similar understanding of bodies when he writes that atmospheres are also composed of more abstract bodies like “geographical-climatic situation, historical and socio-economical condition, architectural-infrastructural quality, value expressiveness, language, nutrition, and so forth.”⁹ What matters for atmospheres is how bodies of various types gel together. The rhythms that develop.¹⁰ The variations played on capacities to affect and to be affected.

Atmospheres are consistencies of affect that score across bodies. The affects come from bodies of all sorts: humans, plants, ideas, gestures, accents, fantasies, norms, histories. From an eclectic range of bodies emerges a consistency that is not due to a common feature or origin. Nor is that consistency purely the organized effect of power. Consistency is a dark precursor, a force-field that gathers bodies into a composition underway. Take the dark precursor that is Vermont:

It is fall colors, maple syrup, tourist brochures, calendars, snow, country stores; liberalism and yet the fight over gay marriage; racial homogeneity and yet everywhere white lesbian couples with babies of color; the influx of New York wealth long ago rushing in to shore up that certain look of rolling hills and red barns and yet also the legacy of the dairy industry

⁸ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 128. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *OA*.

⁹ Griffero, “The Atmospheric ‘Skin’ of the City.”

¹⁰ Henri Lefebvre writes that “there is no separation nor an abyss between so-called material bodies, living bodies, social bodies and representations, ideologies, traditions, projects and utopias. They are all composed of (reciprocally influential) rhythms in interaction” (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore [New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2013], 51).

written onto the landscape and property laws; and the quirkiness,
quaintness, dullness, and/or violence of village life in this time and place.

(*OA*, 30)

And surely many things besides. Vermont is neither a geopolitical entity nor a social construction; it is a “regionality,” a place that culls itself from a potpourri of elements that fall into phase, stick together, change with time.¹¹

“Atmosphere” names the palpability of this assemblage: Vermont is a regionality, but Vermontness is an atmosphere. An atmosphere has a “character,” a certain feel that is experienced.¹² Accounts of atmospheres often posit this character as a predominant, clearly definable mood or set of feelings. Böhme describes atmospheres as “totalities” that “unify a diversity of impressions in a single emotive state.”¹³ Ben Anderson begins his notion of atmospheres from transpersonal, preindividuated affect but ultimately echoes Böhme by qualifying atmospheres in terms of “singular affective qualities,” such as “serene, homely, strange, stimulating, holy, melancholic, uplifting, depressing, pleasant, moving, inviting, erotic, collegial, open, sublime.”¹⁴ In these and similar accounts, bodies

¹¹ Kathleen Stewart, “Regionality,” *The Geographical Review* Vol. 103, No. 2 (2013), 275-284.

¹² Böhme, “The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres.”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space, and Society* 2 (2009), 78.

gather together and invoke a shared mood¹⁵ or divergent emotions.¹⁶

I return to questions of the experience of atmospheres later in this chapter. Now, I wish to deal with several pressing questions: *how* do diverse bodies compose an atmosphere if they do not share a common origin and are not organized by an overarching force? Is the consistency of an atmosphere located solely within the feeling that is generated by it? If so, does that mean that atmospheres are merely subjective experiences that do not have any ontological reality? Or is there a consistency between bodies themselves regardless of whether and how they are felt? As Stewart asks, “how are such elements constituted *as* an atmosphere for living? How do they sometimes and for some people hang together to produce a felt, or half felt, or barely felt sense of something happening?” (“AA,” 449). These questions recall the last chapter’s understanding of impasse as constituted through fantasy and vibrant matter. How does a fantasy of sovereignty fare against the allure of a wallet? How do the rising seas upset attachments to the good life under neoliberal capitalism? To account for atmosphere, one needs to elaborate how bodies affect each other despite differences between them. What follows is a somewhat lengthy discussion that finds bodies of various sorts to gather and hold together on account of processes of emergence, which become registered in atmospheres.

¹⁵ Teresa Brennan describes this as a process of “entrainment,” a neurological term for the transmission of affect through chemical (olfactory) or electrical (tactile, visual, aural) means (see *The Transmission of Affect* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004], 68-72). I appreciate Brennan’s emphasis on the vibrant materialities involved in the transmission of affect, which flays the dualisms of subject/object, biological/social, individual/environment, mind/body, activity/passivity, consciousness/unconsciousness. Nonetheless, her account sometimes conflates the affective and the emotive, leaves the nonhuman underelaborated in the transmission of affect, and discusses atmospheres through their spatiality rather than temporality.

¹⁶ Sara Ahmed writes of her classroom’s atmosphere: “How many times have I read students as interested or bored, such that the atmosphere seemed one of interest or boredom (and even felt myself to be interesting or boring), only to find students recall the event quite differently!” (*The Promise of Happiness* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010], 41).

Karen Barad thinks there is no mystery as to how different materialities could affect one another: “There is no need to postulate different materialities (i.e., materialities that are inherently of different kinds), and so there is no mystery about how the materiality of language could ever possibly affect the materiality of the body.”¹⁷ But although there may be no materialities of inherently different types, they do operate at different levels of concreteness and abstraction. Louis Althusser suggests as much when he describes the materiality of ideology: “The material existence of the ideology in an apparatus and its practices does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving stone or a rifle.”¹⁸ Barad’s important insistence that all phenomena are composed of matter and meaning overlooks how matter passes into different “modalities”—that is, across degrees of concreteness and abstraction that are strewn across affective and temporal scales. My body might be destroyed but the gender norms I have practiced do not disappear with it (though they too will someday pass). The loss of an object of desire can be benign because the fantasies they housed may have other hosts at hand. At the same time, rocks and air and stardust have been around much longer than norms, fantasies, and social constructions. The elements that compose the human body will float around well after norms, fantasies, and ideologies can no longer be practiced in any recognizable way.

For instance, the Anthropocene draws attention to the geological force of humans as evidenced in, for example, fracking and the mad proliferation of wastes like plastics

¹⁷ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 211.

¹⁸ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 112-113.

and cell phones. Jussi Parikka imagines future archaeologists uncovering a geological stratum defined largely by the remnants of media objects.¹⁹ I aver that its plastics and metals would, as artifacts of consumer capitalist ideology, continue to affect the earth and its ecologies aeons into the future. The lifespan of ideology will continue well after the last human breath fades from the cosmos.

To address how bodies cluster into an atmosphere, I turn to Deleuze and Guattari for their attention to the strange crossings of organized bodies and unorganized affects. While “plane of organization” designates the arena of formed bodies such as matter and semiotic codes, “plane of consistency” concerns energetic fluctuations and transformative events. Because the plane of consistency is not carved up into forms, “it is no longer even appropriate to group biological, physicochemical, and energetic intensities on the one hand, and mathematical, aesthetic, linguistic, informational, and semiotic intensities, etc., on the other” (*ATP*, 109). The plane of consistency is immanent to the plane of organization: the latter subsists with the plane of organization while being “prior” to it; the latter arises out of the former, as when deposits of sediment accrue in a stream.

Although Deleuze and Guattari do not use the language of atmospheres, one could understand atmosphere to involve the indistinguishability of the two planes. As Ben Anderson puts it, atmospheres operate “before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-between subject/object distinctions.”²⁰ Atmospheres have a strange ambiguity; they move across the semiotic and the asignifying, affect and emotion, the personal and the impersonal. I elaborate later how

¹⁹ Jussi Parikka, “The Geology of Media,” *The Atlantic*, 11 October 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/10/the-geology-of-media/280523/>. Accessed on 11 October 2013.

²⁰ Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 78.

that ambiguity also arise from the strange temporality that haunts atmospheres.

Atmospheres are “prior” to the bodies that they rise from, persist amongst, and help to form.

It is in atmosphere that bodies come together across concreteness and abstraction through their affects. When writing of ideology as situated within material practices and apparatuses, Althusser avers that “‘matter is discussed in many senses,’ or rather that it exists in different modalities, all rooted in the last instance in ‘physical’ matter.”²¹

Althusser shares Barad’s insistence that various materialities are not different in kind while also emphasizing that materialities may differ in sense. But by attending to ideology and matter as organized, Althusser misses the abstract realm of affects and events. Deleuze and Guattari steer toward the latter by attending to matter on the the plane of consistency rather than the plane of organization. There, “functions are not yet ‘semiotically’ formed, and matters are not yet ‘physically’ formed” (*ATP*, 141). Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate their materialist commitments in of all places a plateau on linguistics.²² On the plane of consistency,

²¹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 112-113.

²² I refer to this part of *A Thousand Plateaus* by name because it serves as a touchstone in my thinking through, among other things, the relation between nature and culture. In the plateau, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between the “incorporeal transformations” and “corporeal modifications.” The former are the instantaneous effects produced by “order-words,” whose function is not to describe or represent but to intervene in bodies. The latter specifies the actions and passions of bodies. Deleuze and Guattari clarify the distinction through a juridical example: “In effect, what takes place beforehand (the crime of which someone is accused), and what takes place after (the carrying out of the penalty), are actions-passions affecting bodies (the body of property, the body of the victim, the body of the convict, the body of the prison); but the transformation of the accused into a convict is a pure instantaneous act or incorporeal attribute that is the expressed of the judge’s sentence” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 80-1). All sorts of irreducibles emerge: corporeal-incorporeal, transformation-modification, function-matter, abstract-concrete, to name a few. Deleuze and Guattari proceed to refract them through intensities in a way that might recoordinate discussions of matter-meaning, nature-culture, in various, imprecise, productive ways. The attempt hazarded shortly is a promissory note for a longer argument.

We witness a transformation of substances and a dissolution of forms, a passage to the limit or flight from contours in favor of fluid forces, flows, air, light, and matter, such that a body or a word does not end at a precise point. We witness the incorporeal power of that intense matter, the material power of that language. A matter more immediate, more fluid, and more ardent than bodies or words. (*ATP*, 109).

Matter on the plane of consistency are affects extracted from all sorts of bodies: “The most disparate of things and signs move upon [the plane of consistency]: a semiotic fragment rubs shoulders with a chemical interaction, an electron crashes into a language, a black hole captures a genetic message, a crystallization produces a passion, the wasp and the orchid cross a letter...” (*ATP*, 59). Diverse bodies collide and collude. Affects begin to stir. Formed matter breaks down or hardens. Nature throws itself into culture.

Arguments that culture materializes nature have become commonplace in the critical humanities. Less common are arguments that culture emerges from nature in a nondeterminist way. Those who have been inspired by Spinoza have discerned a generative power at the heart of nature, whose products include culture. For Massumi, culture does shape nature, but the opposite is true as well; “the ‘natural’ and the ‘cultural’ feed forward and back into each other,” such that nature and culture must be thought on a continuum.²³ Bennett more pointedly writes that “culture is *not* of our own making, infused as it is by biological, geological, and climatic forces.”²⁴ Patricia Clough writes that “race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and gender are not simply matters of subject identity...

²³ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 10.

²⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 115.

Rather they are rethought in terms of the connections and disconnections on a plane of consistency, the interlacing of given materialities of the human body and cultural inscriptions.”²⁵ The affects of nonhuman animals, plants, and minerals feed forward into the ideologies, fantasies, and social norms of race, gender, class, and ability, which feed back. One might also elaborate, with due caution, material and even natural compositions of race and sex in order to advance antiracist and antisexist politics beyond discursive critique. In this pursuit, race and sex are indeed socially constructed, but not only; they are materialities that are nondeterministic and antiessentialist. In short, “human” culture is partly formed by “nonhuman” nature through feedback loops that dissolve the borderlines of those terms. This argument does not fall on the side of either the natural or the cultural, either the material or the ideal. Its frame is what Massumi calls the “ontogenetic,” which attends to processes of emergence and becoming.

Stewart performs this kind of ontogenetic analysis in her writings by registering the many bodies that throw themselves into an emergent expressivity. Matter sometimes just reshapes matter. Other times, it emerges into a norm, an image, an ideology: “Things can remain ungathered into meanings and may not signify at all. Or they can throw themselves into a full-blown ideology” (“AA,” 452). Stewart recasts ideology as a cluster of things (not all of which are human) that have become expressive. Matter does not house or channel ideology but constitutes it. Althusser might have developed a similar vibrant materialist account of ideology had he subscribed to a different account of matter, like the one he began to pursue in his later writings on “aleatory materialism.”²⁶

²⁵ Patricia Clough, *Auto-Affection: Unconscious Thought in the Age of Teletechnology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 135.

²⁶ Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, eds. Oliver Corpet and Francois Matheron, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York, NY: Verso, 2006).

Atmosphere calls attention to bodies not as realized ideals, semiotic effects, or the products of distant systems but as forces, potencies, affects. The key is emergence. Stewart writes that within atmospheres, “things matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements” (“AA,” 445). What passes for social or cultural abstractions (ideologies, fantasies, norms, representations) are self-organized bodies that have expressed themselves in ways other than formed matter. Gender norms exist through the bodies that perform and are shaped by them even if not all of those bodies are human. Neoliberal capitalist ideologies devastate ecologies through the many humans, technologies, commodities, and wastes that carry and inflect them. These bodies emerge from the affective interplay of vibrant matter; they act upon matter only through matter, with the caveat from Deleuze and Guattari that this matter is more intensive than physical. Atmosphere is where bodies rub together to generate affects.

Stewart’s writings register the planes of organization and consistency through atmospheres of ordinary life. For instance, she draws attention to what she calls “still life.” Stewart writes that “a still is a state of calm, a lull in the action. But it is also a machine hidden in the woods that distills spirits into potency through a process of slow condensation” (*OA*, 18). Still lifes brim with potency even when nothing seems to be going on: “the living room strewn with ribbons and wine glasses after a party, the kids or dogs asleep in the back seat of the car after a great (or not so great) day at the lake, the collection of sticks and rocks resting on the dashboard after a hike in the mountains, the old love letters stuffed in a box in the closet” (*OA*, 19). More than Deleuze and Guattari’s

immanent dualisms, still lifes emphasize feeling. They render palpable a pause that is full of subtle affects and tiny movements. They are the felt hums of atmospheres.

Impasse reveals that mood is not always a defining feature of atmosphere even as it can be full of affect. I follow Massumi's well-known depiction of affect as autonomous from qualifications such as mood or emotion. Whereas emotion is "the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience," affect is a preindividuated, transpersonal intensity that marks emergent difference.²⁷ Affect leads to no necessary feeling. It blossoms fractally. It mostly falls short of the threshold of sensation, perception, and signification. Clear moods are the asymptotes which affects rarely cross. Moods arise only due to fortuitous circumstances. Impasses put pressure on those conditions. Impasses are palpable without qualification. They are felt in hesitations, nagging feelings, and fuzzy tones. As deep disturbances of ordinary life.

Atmospheres of impasse induce half-formed feelings, which are more mixed than distinct, more dark than clear. In an impasse, a world might end and people don't know how to feel about it. Numbness and disbelief or a vague sense of possibility set in when what seemed assured no longer holds a toe of potential. Atmospheres of impasses induce ambivalence, which is a placeholder for waves of affect that pull in many ways at once—which might mean nowhere at all. Affects may tend toward a mood, a new attachment, a new world. Or they hang together in dissonance as forms unwind. As the present is no longer what it seemed to be. As bodies huddle together in dark atmospheres. The dark

²⁷ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28. One could point out that affect and emotion may not be so distinct were Massumi not working with an antiquated account of emotion as a "subjective content" whose locus is the personal. For an account of emotion without a subject, see Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the "Death of the Subject"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). Thinking about how emotions are not housed in bodies but circulate through worlds clarifies emotion as emergent from affect.

atmosphere of impasse undulates somewhere between promise and threat.

Ghostly Matter, Haunting Memory

The concept of atmosphere has two usual valences: a meteorological one that denotes the gaseous envelope of a planet or star; an aesthetic one that references the moods evoked by things, a place, or a work of art. Explorations of atmospheres across the humanities typically reference the latter at the expense of the former,²⁸ though there are exceptions.²⁹

For instance, Derek P. McCormack tracks atmospheres across both registers in his account of a hydrogen balloon flight.³⁰ Tim Ingold lauds this endeavor and calls for more challenges to a worldview propagated by divisions between meteorological and affective accounts of atmospheres: namely, that atmosphere is either an immaterial ether (as

²⁸ David Bissell, "Passenger Mobilities: Affective Atmospheres and the Sociality of Public Transport," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* Vol. 28 (2010), 270-289; Böhme, "The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres;" Tim Edensor, "Illuminated Atmospheres: Anticipating and Reproducing the Flow of Affective Experience in Blackpool," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* Vol. 30 (2012), 1103-1122; Tonino Griffiero, "The Atmospheric 'Skin' of the City;" Stephen Healy, "Atmospheres of Consumption: Shopping as Involuntary Vulnerability," *Emotion, Space and Society* (2012), 1-9; Derek P. McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies: Experience and Experiment in Affective Spaces* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Peter Sloterdijk, "Airquakes," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* Vol. 27 (2009), 41-57.

²⁹ One example is Mikkel Bille's fine essay "Luminous Atmospheres: Energy Politics, Climate Technologies, and Cosiness in Denmark" (*Ambiances*, 20 September 2013, <http://ambiances.revues.org/376>. Accessed on 23 January 2014). Bille connects the Earth's atmosphere with the atmospheres of Denmark homes through political and cultural debates spawned by the 2012 phasing out of incandescent light bulb production in the EU. Efforts to address climate change through the introduction of the CFL light bulb brushed against Danish cultural norms of *hygge*, or the feelings of coziness, informality, and relaxedness that had been associated with the soft light of LED bulbs.

Other notable examples include: Peter Adey's investigation into the biopolitical and securitization practices of the atmospheres of megacities ("Air/Atmospheres of the Megacity," *Theory, Culture & Society* Vol. 30, No. 7/8 [2013], 291-308; Timothy Choy's tracking of air in Hong Kong across bodily, medical, international, and poetic registers ("Air's Substantiations" in *Ecologies of Comparison: An Ethnography of Endangerment in Hong Kong* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011], 139-168); Nicky Gregson, Helen Watkins, and Melania Calestani's discussion of the material, economic, and political effects of asbestos released into the air during demolition of ships "Inextinguishable Fibres: Demolition and the Vital Materialisms of Asbestos," *Environment and Planning A* Vol. 42 [2010], 1065-1083); and Peter Sloterdijk's exposition of atmospheric terrorism which emerged in World War I through the weaponization of air by poisonous gases ("Airquakes").

³⁰ Derek P. McCormack, "Engineering Affective Atmospheres on the Moving Geographies of the 1897 Andrée Expedition," *Cultural Geographies* 15 (2008), 413-430.

opposed to the material, solid Earth) or the aggregate effect of formed matter. Both accounts presume that matter only comes landlocked.³¹ This presumption has been criticized by cultural geographers who pursue matter in different states, such as gases.³² Ingold too is searching for a different account of matter, one that is akin to that of Deleuze and Guattari. Through his attentiveness to intensive states of matter, Ingold holds that atmospheres reveal that “the world we inhabit, far from having crystallized into fixed and final forms, is a world of becoming, of fluxes and flows.”³³

I follow Ingold's powerful recasting of atmosphere as ontogenetic to focus on the temporal rather than spatial dimensions of atmospheres. Ingold's attention to atmosphere might be understood as a form of what Michel Foucault calls “incorporeal materialism,” which describes the strange material status of events: “An event is neither substance, nor accident, nor quality nor process; events are not corporeal. And yet, an event is certainly not immaterial; it takes effect, becomes effect, on the level of materiality.”³⁴ To treat an atmosphere as an incorporeal materiality is to approach it as too elusive to be consolidated as a thing yet consistent enough to assert a force. Moreover, it is to

³¹ “The exclusion of air from the atmosphere of aesthetics and its dematerialization in the atmosphere of meteorology have together conspired to allow a certain view of the world to persist unchallenged. This is a world that has, as it were, precipitated out from the currents of the medium, and one in which all that is material is locked into the solid forms of things. Aesthetics finds the atmosphere in relations among these solid things—whether human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate. Meteorology finds it in the immaterial ether that surrounds them” (Tim Ingold, “Lines and the Weather” in *Vital Beauty: Reclaiming Aesthetics in the Tangle of Technology and Nature*, eds. Joke Brouwer, Arjen Mulder, and Lars Spuybroek [Rotterdam, NL: V2_Publishing, 2012], 23).

³² See the *Aerographies* special issue of *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (Vol. 29 [2011], 435-550), edited by Mark Jackson and Maria Fannin, especially Craig Martin's “Fog-bound: Aerial Space and the Elemental Entanglements of Body-with-World,” Kenneth R. Olwig's “All That is Landscape is Melted into Air: The ‘Aerography’ of Ethereal Space,” and Peta Mitchell's “Geographies/Aerographies of Contagion.”

³³ Ingold, “Lines and the Weather,” 23.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. AM Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 231.

emphasize the temporal aspect of atmospheres because affect, as Deleuze notes in his definition of bodies, bears a close relation to event.

Because Ingold does not detail the temporal dimensions of atmosphere, I turn to Franny Choi's poem, "Notes on the Existence of Ghosts." Choi is like a shaman who channels the undead pasts that haunt ordinary life. Her poem expresses atmospheres (though it does not use the term): "Leaves stained onto the sidewalk from yesterday's storm create gray-green watermarks on the pavement, like the negatives of pressed flowers, or the ghost of a letterpress still whispering up from the page. A sidewalk is a haunted thing."³⁵ Choi's poem exemplifies how atmospheres are littered not with lifeless things. They are full of matter that carries the charge of transpired events in imprints and outlines, negatives and whispers. Even the dead live on. Their traces attest to a strange vitality that is unencumbered by bodily and spatial boundaries: "Dove collides into window, leaving a white imprint of its body. A crime scene outline saying, *Take this, the dust of me. Remember the way my body was round and would not move through glass.*"³⁶ Events do not perish without remainder. They live on, accrue density, exert force. They become present without being an embodied presence. The past rises up in the wake of time-steeped things that compose a dark atmosphere. Ghosts might exist but that's besides the point; Choi's poem is not a treatise but a series of notes, a montage of ghostly matter. Choi does not define atmospheres. She breathes them in and exhales them with a poetic spirit. She gathers details, generates scenes, gestures toward atmospheres that are elusive yet captivating. Tunes the senses to atmospheres that channel the undeadness of the past.

³⁵ Franny Choi, "Notes on the Existence of Ghosts," in *Floating, Brilliant, Gone* (Austin, TX: Write Bloody Publishing, 2014), 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

Others have touched upon the temporal dimension of atmospheres. Tim Edensor treats atmosphere in terms of histories of human arrival in his ethnography of Blackpool Illuminations, an annual festival that draws over three million visitors to a seaside resort in the UK. Over 500 lighting displays generate luminous atmospheres of colors, food, smells, chatter, and laughter. Edensor's interviews uncover a strong sense of anticipation that underlies yearly returns to Blackpool: feelings of eagerness, nostalgia, and familiarity all shape visitors' arrivals and feed in to the festive atmosphere. Sara Ahmed similarly observes that the human experience of atmospheres is inflected through particular trajectories. She desubjectivizes Edensor's rendition: it's not only that people experience atmospheres in particular ways, but atmospheres themselves are "full of angles," shaped by impersonal, historical structures of gender, sexuality, nation, and capital.³⁷

Atmospheres consist of entangled timelines. They bleed into feelings, dispositions, habits, and anticipations if their temporality is smooth and recurrent enough. Or they float into something ghostly—into marks, negatives, whispers. Into little pauses and magical moments.

I appreciate that Edensor and Ahmed draw attention to the temporal dimension of atmospheres. I also appreciate Berlant's insistence that people feel out impasses in the historical present through shared atmospheres before developing a clear understanding of what's going on.³⁸ But if we suspend their focus on humans and human experience, we can see how nonhumans participate in the composition of atmospheres and inflect their temporal character. Dark atmospheres emerge through human and nonhuman affect

³⁷ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 41.

³⁸ See Lauren Berlant, "Thinking about Feeling Historical," *Emotion, Space and Society* 1, No. 1 (October 2008), 4-9.

alike as the past rises up in undead force.

The dark atmosphere of impasse evokes temporalities that are more haunted than familiar. Accounts of atmosphere that have taken stock of time have posited temporalities that are more regular, smooth, or linear than the ones that characterize impasse. Edensor for example describes the familiarity with Blackpool Illuminations as an experience of “flow,” or a “temporal, rhythmic process in which a sequence of events and sensations successively provoke immersion, engagement, distraction, and attraction.”³⁹ The Illuminations ultimately canalize experience into the flow of a “singular event in place.”⁴⁰ Edensor does not emphasize that flow in this and other contexts is neither experienced evenly nor available to all. In her discussion of the “promise of happiness,” Ahmed describes flow as predicated upon an “intimacy of body and world” that is shaped by capital, gender, race, and nation.⁴¹ She implies that histories of power form a plurality of nonlinear timelines that do not amount to flow. Although she does not detail the relationship between atmospheres and obstructed flow, Ahmed does make possible the thinking of the temporal dimension of impasse atmospheres as haunted.

“Haunting” aptly expresses the atmospheres of impasses, composed as they are of ghostly matter. Avery Gordon writes that “being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.”⁴²

Impasses are haunted by the undead past that shapes the affective dimension of ordinary

³⁹ Edensor, 1110.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1111.

⁴¹ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 12.

⁴² Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

life. But the vibrancy of ghostly matter entails that the atmosphere of impasse involves more than social histories of human feeling (themselves inflected by matter). Impasses include histories of capital, histories of racism, histories of patriarchy, empire, and war. But biological, geological, and even cosmic time make up impasses as well. Choi beautifully weaves these with human time: “If the stars have, as they say, been dead for millions of years by the time their light reaches us then my retinas are a truer thing to call sky.”⁴³ Starlight is a ghostly trace of death that converts human eyes into cosmic events. The sidewalks described by Choi are material expressions of technological innovation, resource extraction, transnational trade, urban development, and exploited labor. Those histories intertwine with those of the elemental emergence of oxygen, the patterning of climate to whirl up as storms, the Earth’s secretion of minerals, and the evolutionary appearance of plant and human life, and countless other ones. All of these histories enjoy new life in atmospheres. In other words, in an atmosphere, one feels not only other bodies but other times. Disparate histories become entangled and reanimated through ghostly matter. Densely haunted moments pull humans out of phase from their worlds. “Transformative recognition” might not happen. Movement forward might not happen. An impasse might...

How does ghostly matter figure into the dark atmospheres of impasses? How does the undeadness of the past generate not only haunted moments but more specifically impasses? Does the reanimation of the past merely recollect transpired events as they happened? Or do hauntings entail that the past has been opened to new destinies? To further express how impasses generate dark atmospheres I supplement Choi’s

⁴³ Choi, “Notes on the Existence of Ghosts,” 15.

interarticulation of atmospheres and the ghostly with Deleuze's and Stewart's comments on time.

Deleuze writes that the present is a stretched-out period defined by formed bodies. It is a time of "passive syntheses," or "contractions" of flows and forces into "organisms." These syntheses are passive because they operate at the level of "habit." And while they do not depend upon cognition and intention, they are nonetheless "contemplations" through which an organism derives its composition and sustenance: "What we call wheat is a contraction of the earth and humidity, and this contraction is both a contemplation and the auto-satisfaction of that contemplation... What organism is not made... of contemplated and contracted water, nitrogen, carbon, chlorides and sulphates, thereby intertwining all the habits of which it is composed?"⁴⁴ Even if wheat does not have a human mind, it selects certain elements of the earth amongst others (contemplation) and turns them into nutrients for itself (auto-satisfaction) that allow it to persist as an organism (contraction). This passive synthesis is a matter of time. The organism folds the future into its present through "anticipation" of needs being satisfied. Passive syntheses make the past and the future into "dimensions of the present" (*DR*, 71). They mark a time of formed things and their ongoingness.

Passive syntheses occur from the standpoint of organisms looking to the past for materials with an eye to future satisfaction. But the past is more than a perspective taken by the present. Deleuze calls the past in itself "memory," the second synthesis of time. Memory is not something lodged in brains; it glows in innumerable features of the cosmos: imprints of leaves, the light of dying stars, smudges on the window, a vacant lot, a

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 75. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *DR*.

raw electrical wire. It is the whole of the past, the database of transpired events. But memory is not the past over and done with: “it no longer exists, it does not exist, but it insists, it consists, it *is*” (*DR*, 82). The past is an absent presence, an incorporeal materiality, abstract but real. Ghostly. Memory means that the present is not quite itself. The present is held ajar by ghostly events. The undeadness of memory frees the past and future from the sway of passive syntheses. For Deleuze, the past causes the present to pass.⁴⁵ As the past becomes reanimated with a difference, it opens new futures.

Impasses emerge as memory jeopardizes habits. While Deleuze talks about passive syntheses in regard to organisms, I draw attention to an organism’s world. Without things outside it, the organism would no longer persist as it has. Passive syntheses form continuities between an organism and its world: “[passive synthesis] constitutes our habit of living, our expectation that ‘it’ will continue” (*DR*, 74). Deleuze calls “fatigue” the moment when an organism “can no longer contract what it contemplates” (*DR*, 77). He does not describe what happens to the fatigued organism—whether it falls apart or fights back. An impasse is the onset of fatigue. Though Deleuze does not articulate it this way, fatigue is a relation between the first two syntheses of time. It happens when the force of memory hits the pressure points of habit. It marks the incapacity of humans and their worlds to continue as they are. In an impasse, humans are no longer able to contract their world. Contemplations of the good life become overwhelmed. They change. So do what is usually contracted. Contemplation and contraction fall out of phase. Fatigued humans struggle to maintain attachments or to undo harmful ones or to generate new ones.

What atmospheres emerge amidst undead pasts and half-formed futures? What

⁴⁵ “No present would ever pass were it not past 'at the same time' as it is present... Every present passes, in favour of a new present, because the past is contemporaneous with itself as present” (*DR*, 81).

are the experiences, the textures, and the affects of fatigue? I refract Deleuze's account of time through Stewart's accounts of ordinary life. Stewart evokes Deleuze's notion of memory through atmospheres that haunt ordinary life.

Stewart's ethnography of ordinary life in West Virginia's coal mining camps—the “hills”—expresses impasses amongst social decay, or what Berlant calls “crisis of ordinariness,” the slow erosion of ordinary life by the grit of social, economic, cultural, and political shifts. Life in the camps was luminous during the boom years of coal; it darkened when the mines shuttered. Livelihoods collapsed. Dreams faded. Desperation filled the air. Impasses became palpable in “confusions” in which “there is nothing left to say but the social order itself seems to fall apart.”⁴⁶ Stewart writes,

In the camps, where people are often enabled to stay in the hills through disability, and where they suffer the diseases of an economic and cultural double bind with nowhere to go and you can't stay here when “here” is constantly disappearing before your eyes, generalized states of the dizzy, the nerves, and spoils of smothering become a kind of remembrance that brings forces and encounters to life concretely in the workings of the body.
(*SSR*, 130)

Stewart finds memory in bodily states and tendencies. The dizzy, the nerves, the smotherings are corporeal expressions of crumbling worlds. They register how the camps became “a place that in its very abandon to the performance of a world got down include[d] a utopia of latent and remembered possibilities” (*SSR*, 48). Memories of times past and lives that could have been loom up as impasses float across ruined landscapes

⁴⁶ Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 83. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *SSR*.

and stunned bodies.

In other words, the hills bloomed with “spaces on the side of the road,” or detours within ordinary life that catch people in atmospheres dense with potentiality. Stewart writes that “danger and promise mark the space of the hills as a dream world born of contingency and desire” (*SSR*, 51). People drawn toward or abandoned in spaces on the side of the road find themselves amidst happenings and their lingering impacts.

Stewart draws attention to how atmospheres of ordinary life are haunted by history. Recalling Deleuze while emphasizing lived experience, she writes that history is not “an accomplished fact or a formless tendency” but an “occupied space of contingency and desire in which people roam” (*SSR*, 90). People struggle to catch up to the reanimation of transpired events in everyday encounters. Like Choi and Deleuze, Stewart locates memory not in brains but in and across worlds. Humans remember, and so do the most banal things and landscapes: “The vacancy of a lot in Rhodell remembers the fire that burned Johnny Millsap to death while he cried out for help and the others could do nothing but watch; the exposed electrical wire in the hills above Amigo Mines #2 remembers the image of Buddy Hall, a nine-year-old boy, hanging from it” (*SSR*, 90-1). Stewart registers material vibrancy like Bennett but draws attention to its ghostly, memory-laden quality. And unlike Deleuze, she specifies the atmospheric effects produced by the biting of memory into the present, which suspends the architecture of action and reaction in moments of keen sensitivity to something unfolding. “Physical objects, imaginary events, social relations, and moral and supernatural forces are united as aspects of a single poetic effect gathered into a scene. Master narratives of history as progress decompose into the tense confabulations of a continuously re-membered past that hits the

present like a nervous shock” (*SSR*, 96). This “single poetic effect” is akin to what I call “atmosphere,” though the atmospheres of impasse evoke multiple poetic effects without amounting to a scene and that generate cases of the nerves that do not always crescendo in a shock. The temporality of dark atmospheres move on tangent from progress. The undead past creeps into the present as atmospheres that provoke the nerves.

Atmospheres of spaces on the side of the road re-member the past by inflecting its impacts and trajectories anew. Haunted moments are the reverberation of events long after their immediate effects have fizzled. The lifespan of events is not a pinpointable segment but an open-ended branching. One might recall Deleuze’s comments on festivals, which do not repeat an event that they commemorate; rather, an event repeats in advance all the festivals that follow.⁴⁷ An event is carried to new life through its offshoots. It is a repetition of potency that is on the verge of bodying forth, which Stewart expresses as “re-membering.” Like Choi, Stewart attends to the hauntings that reanimate the past as ghostly matter: “Objects that have decayed into fragments and traces draw together a transient past with the very desire to remember. Concrete and embodying absence, they are confined to a context of strict immanence, limited to the representations of ghostly apparitions. Yet they haunt” (*SSR*, 93).

Unlike Choi, Stewart notes how the present quivers with futures: “In the image of a trembling space, then, a reality that exceeds the constraints of history is born of the very remembering of unfulfilled possibilities” (*SSR*, 95).⁴⁸ And echoing what Deleuze calls the third syntheses of time (when the repetition of the potency born of unactualized pasts

⁴⁷ “This is the apparent paradox of festivals: they repeat an 'unrepeatable'. They do not add a second and a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the 'nth' power” (*DR*, 1).

⁴⁸ Here, Stewart is alluding to what I will develop in future chapters as what William Connolly calls the “powers of the false.”

ushers forth a difference),⁴⁹ Stewart notes that the future folded into ghostly matter is partially open: “A rambling rose vine entwined around a crumbling chimney remembers an old family farm, the dramatic fire in which the place was lost, and the utopic potential still clinging to the traces of history” (*SSR*, 93). Ghostly matter is at once a register of what happened and a jar of potency. Stewart describes how the ruined object or landscape that embodies memory is a “sign, at once, of the power of history on a place and of the transitoriness of history itself.” Like Deleuzean fatigue, haunting for Stewart is the re-membering of the past that upsets the present and makes new futures possible.

Ghostly matter strings together haunted moments from reanimated pasts and half-formed futures. Things are not what they seem because they are haunted. They summon the past while undoing it. Possibility and constraint reshuffle, shape-shift. Dark atmospheres express ordinary life as full of contingency and potentiality. “The traces of things that happen haunt the ‘ordinary world’ with the absent presence of what could be despite everything, and what should be if only” (*SSR*, 183).

If only: an expression of what keeps one at an impasse, for either the good life that has been promised or for other worlds that could be.

The atmospheres of impasses are dark. They are dark because they pull humans to the side of the road through whispers rising from the ruins. Because the haunted get caught up in something enigmatic and compelling, in something that is at once threatening and promising. Because latency becomes channeled into a force without a

⁴⁹ For Deleuze, the third synthesis of time is Zarathustra’s eternal return. Deleuze insists that the eternal return is not the repetition of long cycles of time whereby everything that has happened is doomed to repeat itself entirely unaltered. In “The Vision and the Riddle,” that view of the eternal return is proposed by a dwarf who functions as the “spirit of gravity”—as that which would bind difference to sameness. Zarathustra dissents and eventually proclaims that difference is what returns eternally. See *DR*, 88-91; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 157-9.

form. Because things are not what they seem. Because the present becomes unhinged. Because time grows overlapping, entangled, patchy, diffuse. Because the undead past looms up with...

Dark Experiences

Atmospheres move across ontological and experiential registers. You are apart from the atmospheres you feel. Yet you are a part of it. Apart and a part. Your presence means that you experience atmospheres at the same time it changes them. You change the atmosphere for others and for yourself, even if you are doing no more than breathing in and out. “Immersion” becomes an inadequate description of the experience of atmospheres: we cannot be immersed in something of which we are a part, nor can we quite be immersed in something to which we contribute, nor can we be immersed in something that isn’t all there. So you can never quite put your finger on what’s going on amidst an atmosphere, though some atmospheres are surely stranger than others. Atmospheres evoke what Stewart calls a “haunted double epistemology” in which people are caught up “in the midst of things and impacted by them and yet making something of things” (*SSR*, 4). Perception and sensation are emergent and hence elusive. The experience and composition of an atmosphere feed into each other. How might we understand this strange ambiguity?

One understanding of atmosphere proceeds through quasi-phenomenological terms: atmosphere is a mood that floats between sentient subjects and sensed objects. For Böhme, atmospheres are objective (because they are experienced as “something ‘out

there”) and subjective (“without the sentient subject, they are nothing”).⁵⁰ For Böhme, atmospheres exhibit this objective character by their communicability and their capacity to instill surprise within the sensing subject. Other accounts of atmosphere echo aspects of Böhme’s account.

Why sidestep phenomenological frameworks even as experience is an integral dimension of atmospheres? The way that phenomenological accounts link sentience and atmospheres places too much emphasis on the effects that atmospheres have on humans. That important focus underplays how atmospheres may affect nonhumans and how humans and nonhumans affect each other therein. The ethics and politics of atmospheres that I advance resists such anthropocentrism in order to better attend to the many lives and things that make up the atmospheres of impasse.

Phenomenological accounts can also miss the becomings of atmospheres, due in part to an overemphasis on space. For now, let “becomings” denote the qualitative changes of bodies in their affects and summon notions of emergent causality, diffused agency, and distortion of sensation and perception. Phenomenological accounts tend to describe atmosphere as a soft enclosure that immerses human subjects in a specific mood or feeling that they receive and sense. Böhme emphasizes how the atmospheres of stage productions “are no longer something perceived at a distance, but something within which one is enclosed.”⁵¹ Following Böhme and the phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne, Anderson maintains that atmospheres have a “characteristic spatial form—diffusion within a sphere” that denotes enclosure.⁵² These account parse bodies that are in a

⁵⁰ Böhme, “The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” 80.

process of becoming into subjects and objects. Sensation, perception, and sentience tend to be presumed as given rather than as unstable, emergent formations.

Experiences of impasse do not operate in the registers of clear consciousness and feeling but at the limits of perception and sensation. I locate the experience of impasse in a range of hauntings, from dream states to stunned silences. These experiences are akin to what Böhme calls an atmosphere's "possession of us like an alien power," through I find that atmospheres don't possess us as much as they become with us; they feed into us as we become atmospheric.⁵³ The dark atmospheres of impasse intertwine affect and time in becomings, which calls for grammars of self-organization, emergent causality, and impersonal, diffuse agency.

Deleuze and Guattari use "becoming" to describe exchanges of affects between resonant bodies. Becoming takes place along the plane of consistency. It is not captured by frameworks of relations that posit organized bodies, such as imitation, correspondence, resemblance, derivation, or descent (*ATP*, 237). Becoming is not about one thing transforming into another; nor is it a process of actualization, a meaning given by Alfred North Whitehead.⁵⁴ Becoming is what Deleuze and Guattari call "counter-actualization," which cracks open formed bodies unto a plateau of energetic transfers, a plane of consistency.⁵⁵ Untapped capacities are switched on, new ones emerge. Bodies change. They throw themselves into *something* that is not all there but nonetheless exerts a hold.

⁵³ Böhme, "The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres."

⁵⁴ Whitehead writes of becoming as the concrescent process by which actual entities emerge from undetermined potentiality (Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* [New York, NY: The Free Press, 1978], 23-25).

⁵⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 159.

Becomings are dark because where they go and what they amount to remain to be seen. They do not abide by the linear temporality of efficient causation, which posits formed subjects and objects while centralizing agency in the former. Efficient causation is a technology of explanation and prediction that straightens time into an arrow from precise causes to specific effects. Efficient causality ill describes haunted temporalities, swarms of affect, the ongoing life of events, and materialities strewn with concreteness and abstraction. It does not describe atmospheres and darkness due to its efforts to identify all compositional elements, its obsession with clarity, and its inability to grasp how time is irreversible because the undead past bleeds into the present.

Becomings are better approximated through a model of emergent causality, which William Connolly describes as the dawning of new formations and capacities through the partial infusion of dispartes:

Emergent causality is causal... in that a movement in one force-field helps to induce changes in others. But it is also emergent in that: first, some of the turbulence introduced into the second field is not always knowable in detail in itself before it arrives darkly through the effects that emerge; second, the new forces may become infused to some degree into the very organization of the emergent phenomenon...; third, some of these forces also continue to impinge from the outside on the emerging formation; fourth, the new infusions and impingements may trigger novel capacities of self-organization or autopoiesis...; and fifth, a series of resonances may now roll back and forth across two partially separated and partially conjoined force-fields—sometimes generating a new stabilization and

sometimes intensifying disequilibrium.⁵⁶

I add that emergent causality summons the haunted temporalities described above: the reanimation of the past as lived potency in the present, which obscures what counts as a cause and an effect, and how. Under this model, agency is diffuse, strewn through multiple things and multiple times. This atmospheric agency finds expression in becomings that simmer up as half-formed hauntings and consists of the forces that gather a *something* that has yet to emerge.⁵⁷

Stewart expresses the becomings of ordinary life by using a grammar of autopoiesis: the ordinary throws itself together, gets caught up in something, snaps into place, comes together, picks up, surges, submerges, collects into, swirls around, bottoms out, amasses, pops up, pools up, flickers in or out, drifts into, aligns, sparks, proliferates around, shimmers up, buds up, settles into, fashions itself, holes up, bulks up, wraps itself up, gets sidetracked, skids, scores over, quickens, rinds up, lodges in, cocoons. These tropes elude categorization as entirely active or passive. They point to the emergent quality of becomings: *something* darkly this way comes...

Atmospheres are full of becomings. As Stewart writes, “Things have started to float. It’s as if the solid ground has given way, leaving us hanging like tender cocoons suspended in a dream world. As if the conditions and possibilities of a life have themselves begun to float” (*OA*, 51). Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos emphasizes the centrality of becoming to atmosphere in his observation that the etymology of “sphere” is

⁵⁶ William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 171.

⁵⁷ While sharing Bennett's push to delocalize agency, I opt here to describe agency as “atmospheric” rather than “distributive.” While the latter is appropriate when emphasizing assemblages as confederacies of things, it might be inadequate as a descriptor of diffusion, ephemerality, and emergence. The hauntings that emerge amidst reanimated pasts also make “atmospheric” a more attractive descriptive of agency to me when discussing impasses.

a “missile or bullet,” which denotes a “pulsating velocity” or a “continuous yet imperceptible movement.”⁵⁸ Yet, he retreats from this understanding when he recommits atmosphere to specific spatiotemporal coordinates and a phenomenological framework: “at any point in time and space, there can only be one atmosphere. Any development in the atmosphere, change of affect, conflict or confluence will take place necessarily within the ever-changing atmosphere.”⁵⁹ By subordinating temporality to spatiality, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos loses sight of an atmosphere’s consistency that emerges, maintains itself, and dissipates amidst becomings underway. Moreover, there can never be one atmosphere in place because atmospheres are not identical to themselves, those of impasse especially so. Dark atmospheres are not identical to themselves because they are not things but force-fields of affect—of intensities, spatiotemporal dynamisms, markers of differential processes (*DR*, 222).⁶⁰ Because they are haunted. Because their consistency is strewn with porosity. Atmospheres are ephemeral not only because they are incorporeal materialities, not only because they are felt darkly, but also because they are incipient processes of becoming, replete with pluripotentialities. A dark atmosphere is a grab bag of tendencies that pulsate with different speeds, resonate across many things, many of which are unknown.

The dark atmospheres of impasse register shifts in the conditions of blockage and flow, constraint and possibility. Although becomings for Deleuze and Guattari elude

⁵⁸ Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, “Atmospheres of Law,” 41.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Brian Massumi elaborates affect/intensity as a placeholder for differentiation: “Intensity is not only incipience. It is also the beginning of a selection” (*Parables for the Virtual*, 30).

experience, the becomings of an impasse are palpable.⁶¹ Dark atmospheres hover at the shifting thresholds of perception and sensation. What will happen remains unknown, not only because arrangements of perception and sensation are breaking down but because something new might be emerging. Nothing confirms the end of a world before it happens; one could be at an impasse or merely facing a minor setback, though sometimes, there are good reasons to suspect that it is one rather than the other. Even in the absence of clear understanding, however, people cannot deny that *something* is afoot. They feel what's happening, dimly. What kind of sensibility is appropriate for this strange, dark experience?

In an impasse, intuition becomes a dominant form of thinking-feeling. Inspired by Bergson, Berlant writes that “intuition is where affect meets history, in all of its chaos, normative ideology, and embodied practices of discipline and invention.”⁶² Intuition is the means by which Berlant imports affect theory into a genealogy of ideology to emphasize that the human body's supposedly autonomic responses are disciplined by power. This productive riff on Bergson, however, underemphasizes his point that intuition is “the sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it.”⁶³ For Bergson, intuition bypasses preformed concepts to tap into the lifespan of matter as exhibited in its duration—that is, in its preservation and metamorphoses. I recall this point to emphasize

⁶¹ “Movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects, are below and above the threshold of perception” (*ATP*, 281).

⁶² Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 52.

⁶³ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2007), 135.

that part of what is grasped by intuition is ghostly matter and its impacts on affect and history.

Brian Massumi also has recently modified Bergson's notion of intuition. Because no object is self-enclosed, Massumi finds it odd that Bergson would emphasize the distinctiveness of an object through an appeal to the "interior" of an object. He thus revises intuition so that it "transports us into the heart of the event."⁶⁴ Echoing Berlant's focus on affective atmospheres, Massumi views intuition as plugged into a self-organizing field of potentialities that alters both selves and worlds.⁶⁵ He develops intuition in regard to technologies of preemption at conjunctures between neoliberalism and neoconservatism that, rather than normalizing bodies or regulating populations, strive to "prime" bodies for nonconscious action.⁶⁶ At stake in intuition, for Massumi, is the connection between sense and time. Through intuition, one is tapped into the vague overlaps between the present and incipient futures.

Within an impasse, intuition brings us not into histories of ideology, objects, or events per se but into the intensities of ordinary life. In an impasse, ordinary life is sensed to be at once strikingly fragile and remarkably resilient. We intuit the potential dissolution of what has held together a world. We intuit a plenitude of glimmering alternatives, more as affect than clear-eyed vision. We sense something else that may bear the first traces of cascading change without yet being pulled in a clear direction. But those fine lines might also be not much or nothing at all, at least for the time being. This form of intuition also

⁶⁴ Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 32.

⁶⁵ Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 45.

⁶⁶ Brian Massumi, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

senses the intransigence of a situation. The inertia of a world is not due to the supposedly brutish properties and organization of matter, as Bergson believes. It is due to an affective atmosphere of powerful resonances and diffuse potential. Despite Massumi's correlation between potentiality and events, an impasse is no less a field of potentiality for its lack of events. An impasse inhibits events from happening even as it opens the possibility that the present will swerve into new futures. In short, intuition in an impasse grasps the fragility and resilience of a world in a moment when differences between the two are not at all clear.

Intuition is a sensibility that lies at the cusp between a deteriorating sensorium and an emergent one. It is the sensibility appropriate to the experience of perception and sensation confronting their limits. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the imperceptible becomes perceived in leaps between the planes of consistency and organization.⁶⁷ These leaps recall what Deleuze writes elsewhere about the encounter and its generation of new sensibilities: "The object of encounter... really gives rise to sensibility with regard to a given sense... It is not a sensible being but the being *of* the sensible... Sensibility, in the presence of that which can only be sensed (and is at the same time imperceptible) finds itself before its own limit" (*DR*, 139-40). What happens in an encounter is sensed but not felt to be anything in particular (such as a mood). For it to be grasped, the senses must shake off their prior arrangement and reorganize themselves around the intensities of the encounter. In this respect, the encounter resonates with impasse as both involve an experience that is at once enigmatic and captivating. Humans feel out what they feel themselves becoming with. The sensorium of impasse emerges in piecemeal fashion. As

⁶⁷ "It is in jumping from one plane to the other, or from the relative thresholds to the absolute threshold that coexists with them, that the imperceptible becomes necessarily perceived" (*ATP*, 282).

Stewart puts it, “The senses sharpen on the surface of things taking form. They pick up texture and density as they move in and through bodies and spaces, rhythms and tempi, possibilities likely or not” (“AA,” 448).

How are impasses felt if not through clear moods, emotions, or concepts? It is felt in mutations of the senses. In hauntings and in reveries. In rhythms that are now so rickety. In moments of a world slowed down or stunned amidst a sprawl of becomings. In the mind adrift or caught in a web. In the flickering of consciousness.⁶⁸ In palpitations of the heart. In the sensation of being dragged down by phantom hands. But also in glimpses of other worlds that sparkle through the cracks of this world.

Watching and Waiting at the End of the World

Politics is by no means an apodictic science. It proceeds by experimentation, groping in the dark, injection, withdrawal, advances, retreats.⁶⁹

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

The politics of any surge depends on where it might go. What happens. How it plays itself out and in whose hands.⁷⁰

—Kathleen Stewart

Atmospheric darkness is a central feature of impasses. Nothing confirms the end of a

⁶⁸ Alfred North Whitehead writes “Consciousness flickers; and even at its brightest, there is a small focal region of clear illumination, and a large penumbral region of experience which tells of intense experience in dim apprehension” (*Process and Reality*, 267).

⁶⁹ *ATP*, 461.

⁷⁰ *OA*, 15.

world before it happens. Nothing confirms whether one is facing a minor setback or on the verge of drastic change. This uncertainty and indeterminacy scramble trajectories of the good life. They pull one into a rut. Or they spawn fanciful visions and lines of frenetic flight. Stewart writes of an impasse, of a “story of abjection mixed with vital hopes”:

This is the daydream of a subject whose only antidote to structural disenfranchisement is a literal surge of vitality and mobility. A subject whose extreme vulnerability is rooted in the sad affect of being out of place, out of luck, or caught between a rock and a hard place, and who makes a passionate move to connect to a life when mainstream strategies like self-discipline or the gathering of resources like a fortress around the frail body are not an option. (*O4*, 15)

Strategies of self-discipline and barricading oneself may be thwarted in an impasse partly because its time is nonlinear, its rhythms staccato. Stewart writes of the twisted timelines that register impasses in the American dream: “We lurch between ups and downs as overwrought dreams flop to earth, only to rise up again, inexplicably revitalized, like the monster in a horror movie or the fool who keeps coming back for more” (*O4*, 94). The experience of impasses lie on tangent from flow. In times marked by perturbations, choppy feelings, deflated dreams, habits undone, and mixes of blockage and surge. Atmospheres of impasse are overfull. They are haunted, not familiar. Dark, not luminous.

Atmospheric darkness may seem to be a liability to those who wield theory as a framework to neatly analyze a world and reduce politics to practical solutions and twelve-step programs. I maintain that dark atmospheres lend value to ethics and politics in impasses. They lead politics away from demystifying the world and toward feeling its

rhythms, textures, and aura. They turn caution, speculation, and tentativeness into ethical virtues. They suspend judgment when a life is so hard to piece back together. They emphasize the value of watching and waiting as calls to action ring loudly. They promote experimentation amidst uncertainty.

How might politics and ethics in an impasse be oriented toward the darkness of atmosphere? What might such a politics and ethics look like? Choi provides an initial step by poeticizing how sidewalks, leaves, colors, storms, trains, and air help to compose a haunted atmosphere. How atmospheres are already rising up before humans arrive and can find a place and a rhythm therein. How the senses can be spotty and unreliable. How layers of the human body can commune vaguely with ghostly traces. How reflection and writing are infused with nonhuman forces. How they can solicit a keener attunement to the intensities and shifts within dark atmospheres. “Notes on the Existence of Ghosts” develops an aesthetic of gestures through which what is undead but fleeting extends its life. Choi contributes to an ethics that cultivates sensory attunements to ghostly matter. To a politics that suspends sharp judgment to give breathing room to the lateral, the elusive, the spellbinding.

Such a politics leans away from nameable phenomena and hardened structures and unfolds in the midst of things. Big systems and big -isms are but shorthand for atmospheres wherein forces and trajectories receive their gravity, feel, and charge. Bodies matter for the forces they exert and the impacts they suffer. For the potency that sparks up

or falls flat. For their generation of what Deleuze calls an “atmospheric element,”⁷¹ whose life is only detectable by a politics that traffics in becomings, frictions, divergences, and generativity.⁷² Such a politics is not concerned with channeling intensities toward narrative closure. It tracks reanimated timelines, wayward affects, and dark becomings through the canals and dead ends of a splintered, haunted ordinary in: the bodies that flow confidently or buckle under the weight of power; the thickening of anxiety as the paint peels and the walls rot and the water is shut off; the talk of get-rich-quick schemes and desperate exits amongst heavy sighs and hollowed eyes; the shame that can accompany descent into old addictions and habits; the hesitation in casting a ballot to reelect a president who has certified mass deportations and slaughter but remains the least bad option; the jitters when you see their name on caller ID despite spots of sweetness that make a relationship free of abuse so palpable; the angry voice and liquored stench that turns a child’s gaze toward the stillness in some sad corner of what is supposed to be “home”; the longing for home as you recognize that it was built on the backs of the dispossessed; the feeling of a world leaving the room when you close the door on an intimate for good. Politics might turn from seemingly fixed and final forms and toward the forces of materialities that are at once concrete and abstract. Politics within impasses moves amongst temporalities, affects, and becomings that do not point to a single future, clear mood, or inhabitable world. It grasps about a dark atmosphere that is cramped with

⁷¹ Deleuze writes that “We try to climb above the strata in order to reach an outside, an atmospheric element, a ‘non-stratified substance’...”

The informal outside is a battle, a turbulent, stormy zone where particular points and the relations of forces between these points are tossed about. Strata merely collected and solidified the visual dust and the sonic echo of the battle raging above them. But, up above, the particular features have no form and are neither bodies nor speaking persons. We enter into the domain of uncertain doubles and partial deaths, where things continually emerge and fade. This is a micropolitics” (Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand [Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988], 121).

⁷² *OA*, 128; *ATP*, 25.

a murky mix of promise and threat.

Impassivity has a special place in this politics. Impassivity is the enlivening of the senses as habituated architectures of action and reaction hang in suspense. It might seem strange to describe the senses as “enlivened” when one is impassive; after all, impassivity typically denotes numbness or unfeeling, those still states of being stunned. We might hold instead that the senses are largely deadened when ordinary life unfolds in relatively smooth ways. The senses are jolted into life when one no longer has the support of reorganized sensibilities, as in the encounter as described by Deleuze. In this light, impassivity is the effect of an abundance of affect, of too much going on, as when one freezes in the midst of something overwhelming. An impasse, as the next chapter elaborates, brims with affects that pull in many directions at once without leading to anything in particular. In this manner, impassivity is, in Stewart’s words, a “watching and waiting, a living through, an attunement to what might rind up or snap in place. The subject finds itself in a situation. Events and outcomes are immanent, unknown but pressing.”⁷³ As atmospheric darkness descends upon the usual repertoire of concepts, habits, and sensibilities, humans grow impassive. Neither active nor passive, impassivity is a mode in which the senses are being calibrated to swarming forces and emergent forms. It is a magical state that is keyed to happenings and hauntings, to potentialities that accompany the reanimated past. It sprouts the tendrils of intuition. Impassivity could be coupled with an openness to being transformed by what is afoot. But it might bleed into violence and destruction when humans launch efforts to hold onto their worlds at all costs

⁷³ Kathleen Stewart, “Pockets,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, No. 4 (December 2012), 365. Stewart is ventriloquizing Berlant, who writes of a “wandering absorptive awareness and hypervigilance” that emerges in the enigmatic and captivating intensities of impasses (*Cruel Optimism*, 4).

or when it lapses into helplessness.

I address these political issues in the final chapter. Here, I note that politics amidst dark atmospheres might connect impassivity to experiment rather than to judgment. If an impasse is a situation without clear contours and a knowable composition, if it trades in becomings that reconstitute people and worlds, then there is no clear answer about what is to be done. People don't have a handle on impasse, let alone on themselves. Judgment carries great risk of damage to oneself and others. To move away from judgment, I pursue a politics that is more impassive, more experimental.

Experimentation is the form of politics most appropriate for agency when it diffuses throughout dark atmospheres. Whereas agency within political thought is typically defined by the will, consciousness, and intentionality, the becomings of an impasse shift the conditions, enactment, and form of agency. Action is slowed down or suspended as sensitivity to the potentialities and blockages is sharpened. Stewart writes that emergent situations calibrate agency "to the labors of sentience and generativity. Nothing is simply intended or unintended. There is no pure agency of marching forward, like a zombie going doggedly after what it wants. And people are not couch-potato-passive either, not even close. They are busy balling up and unraveling states of attending to what might be happening."⁷⁴ In an impasse, human agency becomes an atmospheric attunement, a presubjective mode of sensing things, an intuitive grasping about. Politics turns this agency experimental. It works its magic on low-level registers before popping up in the regime of consciousness, intentionality, and will, if at all. It grafts itself onto flows

⁷⁴ Stewart, "Pockets," 368. Elsewhere, Stewart refracts agency through ordinary affects: "It's lived through a series of dilemmas: that action is always a reaction; that the potential to act always includes the potential to be acted on, or to submit; that the move to gather a self to act is also a move to lose the self; that one choice precludes others; that actions can have unintended and disastrous consequences; and that all agency is frustrated and unstable and attracted to the potential in things" (*OA*, 86).

and absorbs them into tendencies. Or it vetoes incipient surges before conscious decision-making can sense their activity.⁷⁵ It proceeds uncertainly, inch-by-inch or in grand lurches.

The political projects of Berlant, Stewart, and Deleuze and Guattari all carry an experimental ethos. People feel out the intensities of the moment, intuit happenings underway, and let becomings carry them toward *something*—even if that something turns out to be nothing. More than the others, Deleuze and Guattari elaborate steps in an experimental politics: “Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times” (*ATP*, 161). The strata are sedimentations of affect, thickenings of materialities in their concreteness and abstraction. They become atmospheric when spilling into lines of flight that free their intensities and generate a feel of something. Impasses are crisscrossed with strata and lines of flight, rife with viscosities and volatilities. No one can know the precise combination of bodies and affects that make up an impasse.

So experiment. Feel about atmospheres. Gauge distributions of fragility and resilience. Intuitively poke about strata to find their ticklish regions and pressure points. Maybe a body or norm will bend and buckle. Find a line of flight unfolding at breakneck speed. Try to slow it down. Or let it carry you off. Either way, proceed cautiously: “How necessary caution is, the art of dosages, since overdose is a danger. You don’t do it with a sledgehammer, you use a very fine file” (*ATP*, 160). Not quite the cheerleaders of chaotic rhizomes and frenetic deterritorializations they are often portrayed to be, Deleuze and

⁷⁵ Massumi writes that bodily intensities actualize a single course of action only by nullifying other potential tendencies in the cramped half second that eludes consciousness (*Parables for the Virtual*, 28-30).

Guattari insist that “staying stratified—organized, signified, subjected—is not the worst that can happen” (*ATP*, 161). They warn that one might fail to create circuits of intensities or, worse, release large-than-life forces that destroy all in their path, including oneself.⁷⁶ Experimental politics draws upon the virtues of impassivity and intuition: deep sensitivity, sharp attentiveness, and fine adjustment to forces and flows that tug at the nerves.

Deleuze and Guattari’s experimental politics is about disorganizing the habituated body and hooking it to a plane of consistency.⁷⁷ In this manner, Deleuze and Guattari posit a situation that is relatively stable. Their experimental politics needs to be adjusted since impasse already consists of a deep connections to intensities that make ordinary life more jarring than smooth. Is the careful and meticulous nature of experimentation so appropriate in the face of an impasse’s haunted moments and fragile times? When would-be experimenters find it so hard to cobble together the will to pass through a day? Is freeing intensities without going too far the only or most desirable aim? What of sealing up those intensities up to preserve a few lifelines?

The dark atmospheres of impasse make Deleuze and Guattari’s brand of experimental politics seem overly cautious. At first blush Deleuze and Guattari seem to neglect, for example, the possibilities of failure. Their project is experimental because it is

⁷⁶ “If you free [the body-without-organs] with too violent an action, if you blow apart the strata without taking precautions, then instead of drawing the plane [of consistency] you will be killed, plunged into a black hole, or even dragged toward catastrophe. Staying stratified—organized, signified, subjected—is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which brings them back down on us heavier than ever” (*ATP*, 161). Deleuze and Guattari write of Nazi fascism as following a line of flight that became a suicidal line of abolition, the freeing of overwhelming intensities that had only “war as its object” (*ATP*, 229-231).

⁷⁷ “Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of a surveyor” (*ATP*, 160)

conducted without a guarantee of success, not because it explores the possibilities generated in the wake of failure. They write of how one can botch the generation of a plateau of intensities: “Either one fails to produce it, or one produces it more or less, but nothing is produced on it, intensities do not pass or are blocked” (*ATP*, 161). Deleuze and Guattari restrict the scope of failure to the production of nothing or, at worst, the connection of a circuit of violent destruction. Their experimental impulse perhaps is too careful, too meticulous, in the face of impasse. They do acknowledge a greater place for failure when discussing the plane of consistency: “It is a question of elements and particles, which do or do not arrive fast enough to effect a passage, a becoming or jump... And if there are in fact jumps, rifts between assemblages, it is not by virtue of their essential irreducibility but rather because there are always elements that do not arrive on time, or arrive after everything is over... *Even the failures are part of the plane*” (*ATP*, 255; emphasis mine). Atmospheres arise because some intensities show up early or late, recalling Choi’s poeticization of how missed encounters are part of the charge of ordinary life: “I understand the gravity of a train from the empty space and afterbirth air I encounter when I run down to the platform twenty seconds too late. It is the same with all thing son such weight—to know them best when you have just missed them.”⁷⁸ The unfinished quality of ordinary life is full of potential, as Stewart writes: “The vagueness or unfinished quality of the ordinary is not so much a deficiency as a resource, like a fog of immanent forces still moving even though so much has already happened and there seems to be plenty that’s set in stone” (*OA*, 127).

To give greater room to these leftovers, to the ghosts of ordinary life in impasses,

⁷⁸ Choi, “Notes on the Existence of Ghosts,” 15.

and to fold failure even further into the heart of experiment, I follow what Jack Halberstam calls a “queer art of failure.” Although Halberstam writes specifically against the notion of success propagated under heteronormative capitalism, the space he gives to the possibilities of failure inspires my reconsideration of Deleuze and Guattari: “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”⁷⁹ Hitting a block can open all sorts of sparkling vistas and unplanned paths that may, with some mix of contingency and cultivation, lead to new solidarities. Deleuze and Guattari would agree. But whereas they are more concerned with the careful construction of a plane of consistency, Halberstam tarries longer with the possibilities of “rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment, incivility, brutal honesty, and disappointment.”⁸⁰ I find Halberstam to elaborate a more general art of failure that adds to an experimental politics the practices of finding possibilities within dark affects. Deleuze and Guattari’s politics is not impassive enough. In an impasse, political activity might involve watching and waiting to see how failure may be generative (or not) once the dust of experiments settles.

By giving wider space to failure, one attunes politics to the haunted temporalities of an impasse. As Halberstam writes, “All losers are the heirs of those who lost before them. Failure loves company.”⁸¹ This point is unelaborated and thus invites reverie. Halberstam gestures toward the generative possibilities of failure within an accumulative, undead history. I refract this point through the haunted temporalities described above and

⁷⁹ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 110.

⁸¹ Ibid., 121.

the pluripotentialities within impasse. The politics that follows is sharply attuned to undead temporalities, to affects aswarm, to becomings underway. To dark atmospheres.

When shaped by dark atmospheres, politics becomes experimental and impassive. Its experimentation is sometimes cautious, sometimes careless, sometimes oh so fanciful. Its impassive side involves a postponement of experimental activity to dwell in dark atmospheres more—to watch and wait, to let oneself be led here and there. Deleuze and Guattari note that “we can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things” (*ATP*, 291). I amplify this sentiment to emphasize not only that experiment can proceed only through the help of other intensities, but also that it is started by something other than one’s will or intended activity. So although Cvetkovich suggests that impasse is characterized by an inability to move forward “due to circumstance” because “the world is not designed to make it happen or there has been a failure of imagination,” I aver that “the world” might initiate the process under fortuitous circumstances.⁸² It is full of ghostly matter that catch us in a rut in some instances, get us flying in others. Impassivity is not simply doing nothing; it recasts what and where happenings may occur while affirming the capacity of diffuse materialities to begin a chain reaction toward change—a change in which one may participate and inflect to some uncertain degree.

Whatever forms it takes, a crucial part of a politics in impasses is being electrified by the charge of dark atmospheres: attending to disturbances, listening closely, dwelling in the bending of perception, being haunted, not trying to get back on track to the good life, or trying to do much at all, coasting about, flying off on tangents. These impassivities

⁸² Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 20-1.

enrich experimenting, taking risks, and trying things out. Sometimes the riskiest move is to remain impassive. Doing so respects the life of a pause. Undergoes the agonizing experience of resisting calls to recenter oneself and one's influence. Admits of the terrifying possibility of losing one's anchors. Looks into the heart of an atmosphere that rumbles with what could be so promising, but could be so threatening as well, as it darkens, darkens, darkens.

Something sucks the feeling out of the world. Could be the cold.

The gray, soggy sky. Hunger.

As focus deflates and thought slows to a crawl, attention skids across a million surfaces. Things seem so still. Yet they whisper of imprints, connections, departures: an array of impacts and avoidances laced up by time.

The faintest brush with someone carries the charge of centuries. Every face is a kaleidoscope, every expression a constellation. A simple turn shimmers with possibility.

A world is the lure of the seance that is intimacy—at least when a life trembles with so much longing but hits dissatisfaction at so many turns.

3. Without End

Things pile up. Redundancies set in and snowball. The air thickens into stillness and stagnancy. Time stretches like taffy. It serves as a blanket that shields against the elements of creativity. It becomes the walls of a room with a hidden window clamped shut. It is both: when comfort is slow suffocation.

This chapter advances a simple argument: that impasse is not a temporary setback on the way to the good life. This distinction calls for an elaboration of the temporality that befits impasse and the ethical and political consequences that follow. I pursue these endeavors by drawing upon the works of Immanuel Kant, Alfred North Whitehead, and Walt Whitman as they bear on themes of time and creativity. Here, “creativity” denotes those modes of activity that periodically result in novelty. Creativity entails that one’s footing in the world is liable to change; it clears the clutter of the past and opens windows unto fresh futures. I argue that, on account of creativity, time is not teleological.

In this chapter, Kant exemplifies a model of temporality that does not have impasses because it is teleological. Nonetheless, he might have complicated his account of time through his observation of the self-organizing capacities of nonhuman organisms. While Kant subsumes that creativity to postulate a moral teleology, Whitehead and Whitman develop notions of time with creativity at its heart. For them, creativity entails novelty, and novelty, I argue, marks a break from the linear timeline needed to sustain a predetermined an image of the good life. I surmise that there are impasses because there is time, and that part of living in time entails learning how to live creatively in impasses.

Why think about creativity when developing a concept of impasse? Doesn’t

impasse typically mark a block to creativity? Ann Cvetkovich argues that impasses are more than blockage; they involve creative activity that reorganizes sensoria and generates new collectives. Importantly, she notes that “More space for ‘creativity’ also means a higher tolerance for ‘impasse,’ which is sometimes the only route to new thinking and to the creation of stronger, more resilient communities that can do work in the world.”¹

While creativity in Cvetkovich’s account is centered in humans and *their* activities, this chapter develops creativity as an impersonal force. It extends the arguments of its predecessors, which developed the materiality of impasses through attachments and atmospheres. Here, the materiality of impasse is approached through the creativity that emerges across humans and nonhumans. It aligns with speculative theories, such as those of Nietzsche, Bergson, William James, Deleuze, and William Connolly, that hold creativity to be a feature of the cosmos.²

Impasse challenges those theories by exhibiting how novelty may be forestalled even when creativity is abundant. In an impasse, there is an abundance of impacts, avoidances, ordinary happenings, fanciful desires, wild thoughts, self-experimentation, and vibrant social movements that do not yet amount to a dramatic shift in the reigning order of identities, political economy, social fantasies, or cultural norms. No particular line of flight has yet to pull eddies of creativity into a moving current. One might say, borrowing Whitehead’s language, that an impasse is full of processes that have yet to attain “satisfaction.” In this chapter, I show how impasse reveals that creativity can be dislodged from novelty.

¹ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 22-3.

² Not all of these thinkers agree on how creativity is distributed. Bergson, for example, thought that only life expressed creativity and that matter was inert.

Why develop a notion of time as creative and not merely contingent? There have been countless challenges to linear and teleological models of time. Many scholars, inspired by Foucault's histories of the present, have unearthed the contingencies by which regimes of truth have sought to erase alternative histories and knowledges. In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, for example, Lisa Lowe traces the rise of Western liberalism from the late 18th to early 19th centuries. Reading across archives whose organization disentangles the histories of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas, Lowe finds the genealogy of modern liberalism to be inseparable from settler colonialism, imperial trade, racial slavery, and indentured labor. These imbrications reveal that the rise of liberalism involved shifts in economies of colonialist and imperialist power rather than an ascendance of man into greater freedom.

What makes Lowe's critique exemplary is that it does more than dispute the humanist teleology enforced by liberalism. Lowe gestures toward what she calls a "past conditional temporality," which posits that "it is possible to conceive the past, not as fixed or settled, not as inaugurating the temporality into which our present falls, but as a configuration of multiple contingent possibilities, all present, yet none inevitable."³ By recuperating "what could have been," Lowe accounts for alternatives that have been foreclosed by dominant orders but remain available as latent possibilities. Part of what she strives to retrieve are what Lauren Berlant might call "minor intimacies" that were erased as the bourgeois home became the paradigm for intimacy under liberalism.⁴ Lowe gestures toward "the intimacies of captured workers surviving together, the proximity and

³ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 175.

⁴ Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24, No. 2 (Winter 1998), 281-8.

affinity that gives rise to political, sexual, intellectual collaborations, subaltern revolts and uprisings.”⁵ To recover these alternative intimacies is to bring deposits of historical potency to bear on projects of living otherwise.

I explore this idea in the next chapter but note for now that attention to past conditional temporalities allows one to view Lowe as beginning to write what Whitman calls a “history of the future.” In addition to describing a given period as contingent, a history of the future “outline[s] what is yet to be” from those pluripotentialities that buzz in the present.⁶ Lowe begins this endeavor but does not develop creativity into a central element of time. One upshot of viewing creativity to be a feature of time is the discernment of how futures are available in the present even if they are indeterminate. Deleuze might call such an incipient future a “dark precursor,” or a force-field that gathers a system whose path of actualization can only be seen after the fact.⁷

My hope is that an account of the creativity of time can highlight the importance of positive efforts to explore alternative futures that are presently blocked. As impasses in a United States defined by imbrications between neoliberal capitalism, racism, settler colonialism, and heteronormativity begin to intensify, major coordinates of the good life fall under duress despite their continued hold. At the same time, a vibrant array of alternative worlds are working their magic even if they have yet to gain traction. Maneuvering an impasse calls for greater sensitivity to those futures. Theory might describe what people could do politically to cultivate alternative futures. That those

⁵ Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 35.

⁶ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2002), 5. Hereafter cited in text as *LG*.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 119.

futures are half-formed and cloudy means that such a politics should reserve a special place for intuition, speculation, tentativeness, and experimentation.

Good Times

The development of a politics that would loosen the hold of attachments may take cues from Kant's account of freedom from inclinations. Kant seeks to develop in man "a power, unexpected even by himself, to tear himself away from all sensible attachment insofar as this attachment wants to become dominant."⁸ He goes too far by locating freedom in a realm entirely removed from sensibility. As the next chapter will elaborate, though political action in impassés might involve practices of detachment, they are not based on reason shouting down the senses.

Although Kant typically proceeds as though the influence of reason as a "determining basis of the will" is self-evident, he frets that it might not be. "It cannot be denied," Kant admits, "that in order to bring either a still unmolded or a brutified mind onto the track of the morally good *in the first place*, some preparatory guidance is needed to entice it with its own advantage or scare it with harm" (*CPR* 190; emphasis mine). The "pure moral motive" takes hold in the heart only after the capacity to judge by moral laws has become a well-honed habit (*CPR* 190). Reason needs quite a bit of assistance despite all of Kant's talk of how "the moral law is given as a fact, as it were, of pure reason of which we are conscious a priori and which is apodeictically certain, even supposing that in experience no example could be hunted up where it is complied with exactly" (*CPR* 66). The frailty of reason in its battle with sensual influences begs, in Kant's eyes, for

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 190-1. Hereafter cited in text as *CPR*.

pedagogical techniques not unlike the disciplinary forms of power examined by Foucault. Moral cultivation is secured through a “culture of discipline” that concerns “the liberation of the will from the despotism of desires.”⁹ Because it is fragile, reason needs the support of a disciplinary relationship between freedom and morality—a relationship that has informed not only self-disciplined acts of ethical generosity and artistic experimentation but also colonialist violences and imperialist expansion, both in Kant’s time and in ours.¹⁰

Kant draws reason, freedom, and morality into a teleology. The end he sees includes governments based on civil constitutions, lasting global peace, and the attainment of moral perfection. Kant calls this teleology “an idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan intent,” which serves to clarify human affairs, to predict political changes, and to provide a “comforting view of the future.”¹¹ He sometimes admits that such an idea is unavailable but insists that the pursuit of moral perfection should continue anyway. On other occasions, Kant believes that humans would fall into despair without such signs. Only on account of “hope for better times” have humans gathered the courage to improve themselves and each other.¹² Kant’s idea of teleology involves the subjective necessity of moral progress; that is, humans must postulate a teleology as a precondition for morality, towards which progress “may well be occasionally interrupted,

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 319. Hereafter cited in text as *CJ*.

¹⁰ Regarding more positive forms of discipline, see “Ethical Energetics” in Jane Bennett’s *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 131-58.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 39.

¹² Immanuel Kant, “On the Proverb: That May be True in Theory But Is of No Practical Use” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, 86.

but it will never be broken off.”¹³

The teleological image of time generated by Kant is anthropocentric, though it is not one in which the happiness of humans is secure. “Nature,” Kant asserts, “is very far from having adopted [man] as its special darling and benefited him in preference to the other animals, but has in fact spared him no more than any other animal from its destructive workings: plague, famine, flood, frost, or attacks from other animals large or small, and so on” (*CJ* 318). Kant acknowledges better than other anthropocentrists how nature does not guarantee the well-being of humans. If there is something like a teleology of the good life in Kant, it is one of moral purpose. Kant’s teleology holds that the world is designed to enable and facilitate the moral perfection of man. Kant’s anthropocentrism lies in grandiose statements like: “Man is indeed the only being on earth that has understanding and hence an ability to set himself purposes of his own choice, and in this respect he holds the title of lord of nature” (*CJ* 318). Not even God can escape subordination to Man in Kant’s world. It exists only insofar as Man requires the world to have a moral cause (*CJ* 340); as Deleuze puts it, “finality no longer has a theological principle, but rather, theology has a ‘final’ human foundation.”¹⁴

For Kant, teleology is a wellspring of motivation and the justification for austere discipline. Kant barricades optimism against a welter of enemies: internal conflicts due to inclinations, pathological influences, and sensual indulgences; external conflicts of states at war; the inability of even the most righteous people to attain moral perfection within their lifetimes; and a world teeming with critters and organisms that threaten a unity of

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 69.

purpose that could be put in the service of human culture. Rather than revising his concepts of the human, freedom, and time in the face of these disruptive forces, Kant postulates a teleological history, the immortality of the soul, and an omnipotent, omniscient God and argues for pedagogical and disciplinary apparatuses that would normalize people along a developmental track of reason.

A teleological notion of time thus has setbacks but not impasses. Whereas a setback has a predetermined, unalterable end, an impasse raises the horror that the loss of an end could really happen. Impasses do not abide by a teleological notion of time, which grounds a trust that progress will be made even if times are hard. This trust is vital to Kant's teleology. So too are enticement and fright. Despite his objections to the influence of feelings upon moral action, Kant draws feelings into the service of morality, reason, and teleology. He even affords a place to negative affects, so long they facilitate social improvement.¹⁵

Kant draws together time, morality, and optimism such that threats to prefigured ends do not generate impasses. Instead, there are trials and tribulations that focus on individuals and their improvement. Humans are free to obey the legislation of reason and to fall in line with a moralized time. In the face of elaborate disciplinary apparatuses, they are hardly free to pursue alternative ends into other times—the times of impasse in all their potential loss and novelty.

¹⁵ Kant observes that man is afflicted with an antisocial side that “constantly threatens to sunder” the society to which man is equally lured. This antisocial tendency toward discord provides a resistance, without which “man would live... in perfect concord, contentment, and mutual love, and all talents would lie eternally dormant in their seed.” Only on account of his antisocial tendencies does man develop the willpower to overcome laziness and hardship. Those tendencies are, however, “in themselves quite unworthy of being loved” (“Idea for a Universal History,” 32).

Anomalous Creatures, or Nothing Is More Natural than a Defect

Although he prizes the freedom of humans, Kant also esteems the creative capacities of nonhuman organisms. While Kant believes that many nonhumans are mere components of a mechanistic nature, some organisms exhibit “natural purposes” through powers of self-organization. Trees, for example, propagate their species, secure their own growth, and pursue self-preservation. Kant is most impressed with the second and third of these powers. The capacity to grow is a demonstration of purposiveness: a tree “processes” matter outside itself to generate nutrition, or a “quality peculiar to the species, a quality that the natural mechanism outside the plant cannot supply” (*CJ*, 250).

Kant is even more intrigued by the capacity of organisms to preserve themselves, which he finds to be “among the most marvelous properties of organized creatures” (*CJ* 250). Organisms are internally complex, well-coordinated systems. For Kant, what distinguishes a tree from a watch is that the former can adapt creatively when its parts are damaged or destroyed. But the organism is not simply preserved as it was. As Kant writes, “If such beings are injured, nature aids itself, and the loss of a part that was needed to sustain adjoining ones is made up by the rest; if birth defects occur, or deformities come about during growth, certain parts, on account of their deficiencies or impediments, form in an entirely new way so as to preserve what is there, and so produce an anomalous creature” (*CJ* 250).

Kant doesn’t pursue this feat of natural creativity, though others have. Nietzsche, for example, describes the will to power as an entity’s capacity for creative alteration when it is not absorbed or destroyed by another force. It is in recognition of the will to power that Nietzsche developed a conception of the world as neither mechanistic nor finalist but

creative.¹⁶ The creativity exhibited in the formation of anomalous creatures also resembles the powers of “teleodynamism.” Drawing upon evolutionary biologist Terrence Deacon, William Connolly has described teleodynamism as an alternative to mechanism and finalism, both of which strip organisms of creativity.¹⁷ Teleodynamism holds that the outcomes of a process are neither predetermined nor reducible to mere chance. Teleodynamic potency is a situated capacity to develop tentative aims on the fly.

This nonhuman creative energy is at odds with Kant’s larger philosophy of a morally ordered world in which natural purposes are designed to support human freedom. In what follows, I flip Kant’s prioritization of human freedom over not-quite-human creativity. Whereas Kant restricted creativity to organisms that exhibited life, I follow the insights of new materialisms to locate creativity in matter as well. I further complicate this minor strain in Kant’s thought by depersonalizing creativity. It is not so much that humans and nonhumans are creative but that they participate collectively in a creativity that runs through them. Finally, I develop an account of time with creativity at its heart to distinguish between impasse and setback. This account of time informs a politics, as described in the previous chapter and further developed in the next, that would cultivate sensitivity to the creative energies sparked in specific collisions and circuits, discern a given period’s stumbling blocks, and strive to nudge something new and more livable into the world.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 549-50.

¹⁷ William E. Connolly, “Freedom, Teleodynamism, Creativity,” *Foucault Studies* No. 17 (2014), 63-5.

Creative Time

A thing is rocked out of slumber by a rain of forces. It is too groggy to process what has just happened. The outside world seeps under its skin. It gradually converts what was alien into what is familiar, finding itself transformed in turn. *Something* begins to pull itself together. When the mist dissipates, a new being appears. Its presence cannot be denied. It nudges other things; they topple over or push back. Disturbances happen. Just a little at first. Then more. They intensify, they gain momentum, they tip something else over. The cosmos shimmers as the ribbon of creativity spirals anew, then and evermore, from the brightest star to the tiniest leaf of grass.

Whitehead and Whitman bear similar accounts of creativity: for Whitehead, it is the cosmos's "creative advance into novelty;"¹⁸ for Whitman, it is the "procreant urge of the world" (*LG* 26). The creativity of the cosmos bends time away from predetermined ends and toward something new.

Before proceeding, I note that my reading of Whitman spans numerous poems and is selective. Whitman may intend his poems to be read this way: "I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought—there to pursue your own flight" (*LG* 480). This "suggestiveness" generates moods and prompts to make "his" poems the conjoint effort of himself and his readers ("you, whoever you are"). It would also be hard to generate an entirely coherent account of Whitman since he is not quite consistent across the many poems in and editions of *Leaves of Grass*. As though anticipating accusations of inconsistency, Whitman writes, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I

¹⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 222. Hereafter cited in text as *PR*.

contain multitudes)” (*LG* 77).

I strive to develop what I admire in Whitman’s writings, which contain much that I find reprehensible: Whitman is not at all shy in celebrating American exceptionalism and manifest destiny; his descriptions of the United States as full of “vast, trackless spaces” that are unused for higher purposes reflect the doctrine of discovery and justify colonial settlement (*LG* 5); his imagery of Native Americans, Asians, and Africans is disparaging, as in his backhanded admiration that locates them behind modernity; and even as he professes the equality of women and men, he reduces a wealth of genders to the manly and the womanly.

When Whitman babbles these offenses, I yearn for the dry, more neutral vocabulary of Whitehead. I do not seek to excuse Whitman but pick up a few currents through his poems that, if developed, might work against his explicit declarations and be used by minoritized groups as lifelines in impasses. For example, despite his verbose declarations of the US as “destined for the leading parts” in the dramas of “History and Humanity,” he did not wish for the US to “become a conqueror Nation” (overlooking, of course, that conquest is at the heart of the US) “or to achieve the glory of mere military, or diplomatic, or commercial superiority” (*LG* 648). He could also see “The perform’d America and Europe grow dim, retiring in shadow behind me, / The unperform’d, more gigantic than ever, advance, advance upon me” (*LG* 411). Unlike other American exceptionalists, Whitman discerns that the supposed heyday of the US would be up. He foresees that people abandoned to the wings of time would appear on the world’s stage and bend the arc of its drama away from a predestined end. This nonteleological notion of time emerges, I will argue, from the creativity that Whitman sees exhibited in the

equality and powers of souls. But first, Whitehead.

Whitehead defines the cosmos through process while insisting that there is nothing other than actual things. As he puts it, “the ultimate metaphysical truth is atomism” (*PR* 35). The problem with which Whitehead deals is: how does a cosmos of atomic things exhibit becoming? How might one account for strange and wonderful flashes of creativity?

A view of the cosmos as static might presume that actual things have an inner essence that either remains unchanged or waits to be realized. It also presumes that actual things reside in “simple location”—that is, in a single space and time. What if the “real internal constitution” were not essential but emergent? What if it were composed of other things and other times? If “actuality is incurably atomic” (*PR* 61), how might they not reside in simple location—or, as Whitman puts it, how am I “not contain’d between my hat and boots” (*LG* 31)? An actual thing would then be, as it is for Whitehead, “an incompleteness in process of production” (*PR* 214-5).

Process involves the mutual constitution of actual things through feeling. “There is nothing in the real world which is merely an inert fact,” Whitehead insists. “Every reality is there for feeling: it promotes feeling; and it is felt” (*PR* 310). Things feel for or “prehend” each other, sometimes as negligible and hence irrelevant, sometimes as relevant and impactful. Process is a set of impacts and a series of adaptations that culminate in a formed thing. Process is concretion; it deposits sediments of a cosmic current through the decisive elimination of indeterminacy, as in Whitman’s belief that in his time “the United States have emerg’d from nebulous vagueness and suspense, to full orbic, (though varied) decision” (*LG* 660). Neither essence nor mere effect, an actual thing

is an achievement of feeling.

Although Whitehead's cosmos is composed of actualities, it also has an important place for what is not physically present. Part of process involves what Whitehead calls "conceptual" prehension, which is a cloudy feeling for something that is beyond available physicalities. Kant's example of a tree's growth nicely illustrates the role of conceptual prehensions. A tree sustains itself by drawing nutrition from sunlight, water, air, and soil. But nutrition is not a given element of any of those things; it has to be produced. So while a tree's physical prehensions involve the gathering of sunlight, water, air, and soil, its conceptual prehensions concern the extraction of nutrition from them. Nutrition is an example of what Whitehead calls an "eternal object." A vague notion that bears a family resemblance to Platonic forms, an eternal object is a pure potentiality "whose conceptual recognition does not involve a necessary reference to any definite actual entities of the temporal world" (*PR* 44). So nutrition is not a thing that can be found in the world; it comes into the world only through specific interactions. Eternal objects "ingress" into actuality due to conceptual prehensions at an early stage of process, as when a tree begins to draw nutrition from an array of sources. Without the conceptual prehension of an eternal object, "the grand patterns pervading the environment are passed on with the inherited modes of adjustment."¹⁹ Tree, sunlight, air, water, and soil would remain just that.

In other words, it is through conceptual activity that actual entities demonstrate powers of self-organization and that novelty emerges. Creativity for Whitehead is nonanthropocentric. The conceptual is not unique to human experience, nor is it defined

¹⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1938), 167. Hereafter cited in text as *MT*.

through consciousness; it is an element of all actualities, however inert or lifeless they may seem to be. What Kant called the “very great originality” of anomalous creatures is exhibited in Whitehead’s cosmology by all things, human or not, living or not (CJ 250). Nor is self-organization peculiar to feats of survival. An actual thing is self-organized insofar as it is not determined by the powers of any other thing. It is also self-organized insofar as that “self” is what emerges at the end of a process rather than remaining the same throughout. A process does not follow mechanical causality insofar as it is not determined by physical causes that are distinct from effects. Moreover, eternal objects play a critical role in processes underway even if they are not actual entities. Mechanism would be hard pressed to explain this strange efficacy of eternal objects and the conceptual activities of actual entities. Finalism is also inappropriate to processes since their results are not given in advance.

The creativity demonstrated in self-organizing processes demands a different account of time. Creativity for Whitehead shows that the past, the present, and the future are not so clearly demarcated. Process weaves them together: the past consists of the antecedents to which a process must conform; the present is marked by self-organized aims that guide a process beyond reproduction of the past; the future throws out lures of potentiality that a process strives to actualize.

“How the past perishes,” Whitehead writes, “is how the future becomes.”²⁰ By “perishing,” Whitehead means the manner in which an actual entity attains “objective immortality,” or a status that denotes the capacity to influence future processes.

Whitehead conceives of the past as both subject and object of a process. It is a subject

²⁰ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 238. Hereafter cited in text as *AI*.

insofar as it affects what could happen. It is an object when it has been adjusted to the aims of a process. The past finds new life as it is carried through a self-organizing process to an indeterminate future.

The future, in turn, is immanent to the present. Whitehead writes that “The future is merely real, without being actual” (*PR* 214). The future is not actual because it has yet to arrive. It is real, however, because the force of the past and the aims of the present lend some shape to what the future could be. The future is not predetermined, however, because “time is cumulative as well as reproductive” (*PR* 238). Multiple futures murmur within the present.

It is on account of creativity that, for Whitehead, “the temporal world is an essential incompleteness.”²¹ Whitehead describes creativity as the process by which “the many become one, and are increased by one” (*PR* 21). The increase by one, in turn, alters the many. The feedback loops between the many and the one spiral onward. The temporality of creativity is not finalist because process is without end; it does not have an implicit aim to one final result. It is not mechanistic either because the outcomes of a process cannot be known in advance, not only due to the shortcomings of human foresight but also because novelty is a real feature of the cosmos. In short, creativity entails that time swerves away from predetermined ends.

I follow this theme in Whitman by elaborating that strange, magnetic force that he most often designates “soul” and sometimes “spirit.” My reading finds Whitman’s understanding of temporality to arise from his articulations of the soul. On rare occasions, time in Whitman follows a strong teleology that echoes Kant’s, as in his late

²¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1926), 90. Hereafter cited in text as *RM*.

poem “Roaming in Thought (After Reading Hegel)”: “Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is Good steadily hastening towards immortality, / And the vast all that is call’d Evil I saw hastening to merge itself and become lost and dead” (*LG* 230). More common is a view of time as creative and nonlinear that emerges from Whitman's notions of the soul, poetics, and America.

I mentioned earlier that Kant postulates a soul to preserve his account of moral reason. Because moral perfection cannot be attained in a human's life span, and because perfection must be inherent to the notion of morality, humans must assume that they have a soul that is immortal (*CPR* 155-7). The Kantian soul is immutable, autonomous from all sensual influences, and the source of a teleology of moral development. In short, it is immaterial, essential, anthropocentric, and moral. It never faces impasses because it can never be transformed, only improved.

Whitman's notion of the soul is quite different, although he too cannot prove its existence. Whitman shares with Whitehead the belief that there is no “getting behind” actual entities to a more fundamental reality: “I accept Reality and dare not question it, / Materialism first and last imbuing” (*LG* 45). So why might Whitman be drawn to the soul? “The soul is also real, it too is positive and direct, / No reasoning, no proof has establish'd it, / Undeniable growth has establish'd it” (*LG* 188). Growth, transition, event, becoming, process cannot be reduced to matter because they are what happen *to* formed matter; they indicate matter in a phase other than full-blown actuality, what Foucault calls an “incorporeal materialism.” Whitman seems to postulate the soul as Kant did, but whereas Kant derives the soul from a supersensible realm of moral reason, Whitman draws the soul from sense experience. And while Kant and Whitman postulate the soul in

relation to growth, the former does so within the confines of a teleology of moral perfection whereas the latter, as we shall see, does so within a time that is defined by creativity that exceeds Kant's coordinates of good and evil.

Furthermore, though Kant reserves the soul for humans, in Whitman's account, the soul does not belong to humans alone. Every entity, according to Whitman, has a soul: "I swear I think now that every thing without exception has an eternal soul! / The trees have, rooted in the ground! The weeds of the sea have! The animals!" (*LG* 369).

Whitman's nonanthropocentric version of the soul extends creativity beyond the human.

For Whitman, soul expresses how matter is not brute, inert, or confined to mechanical laws. In his poems, materialism and spiritualism are indissociable, as exhibited in a meditation on time called "With Antecedents": "As for me, (torn, stormy, amid these vehement days,) / I have the idea of all, and am all and believe in all, / I believe materialism is true and spiritualism is true, I reject no part" (*LG* 202). Why is it in the middle of a poem on time that Whitman professes to hold materialism and spiritualism equally true? Perhaps it is because in turbulent times, when one is unsettled, the concepts of matter and soul become most indistinguishable; materiality is in a phase shift. Impasse may be one such type of times, as its atmosphere is an incorporeal materiality.

Whitman frequently sings of the soul's individuality. He does not mean an atomistic notion of the individual; he insists that "I" is constituted with "you": "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (*LG* 26). I read the individuality of the Whitmanian soul in two ways. First, it invokes a distinctiveness that is relative but real. Echoing Whitehead's understanding of actual entities as composed of prehensions,

Whitman writes, “I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots, / and am stucco’d with quadrupeds and birds all over” (*LG* 52). But I am not reducible to these things, nor to you. Whitman, on my reading, does not develop a robust way to delineate between individualities as do other theorists, such as Deleuze and Guattari.²² He instead discerns individuality as a somewhat distinct character, momentum, or force that cannot be subsumed to laws, norms, or the will of another: “The soul has that measureless pride which revolts from every lesson but its own” (*LG* 316).

And this pride evokes a second meaning of individuality: undefeatability. The soul may be unable to attain its ends at a given moment but nonetheless exhibits an admirable stubbornness:

What do you think is the grandeur of storms and dismemberments and
the deadliest battles and wrecks and the wildest fury of the elements and
the power of the sea and the motion of nature and of the throes of
human desires and dignity and hate and love? It is that something in the
soul which says, Rage on, Whirl on, I tread master here and everywhere,
Master of the spasms of the sky and of the shatter of the sea, Master of
nature and passion and death, And of all terror and all pain. (*LG* 625)²³

The soul endures adversity to carve its own path in the world: “All parts way for the

²² Deleuze and Guattari shift away from “individuality” in their employment of terms like “individuation” and “haecceity,” which may be distinguished not by their properties but by their relative speeds and slownesses of becoming and their situated capacities to affect and to be affected (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987], 253-65).

²³ Whitman's notion of the prideful soul that is shared by humans and nature recalls Nietzsche's notion of the will. See Friedrich Nietzsche, “Will and Wave” in *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 247-8.

progress of souls, / All religion, all solid things, arts, governments” (*LG* 133). Whitman’s notion of pride is not unqualified mastery, however; it is “not inconsistent with obedience, humility, deference, and self-questioning” (*LG* 481). The soul wavers between pride and patience: it strives for its ends, which are not inflexible, while admitting that the circumstances have to be just right for any success to be had.²⁴

In short, the soul, as it emerges through time, exhibits powers of self-organization. Whitehead shares this understanding when he writes that “The soul is nothing else than the succession of my occasions of experience, extending from birth to the present moment” (*MT* 163). For Whitman, though, the soul precedes one’s birth. It is the product of many long histories: of laws, societies, religions, arts, critters, blades of grass, stardust. That product remains unfinished as it strives to connect with other things. It is “ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them, / Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold, / Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul” (*LG* 377). Here, the soul is not laid-back passive. Nor is it active in the sense of requiring the will of a conscious, centered “I.” The soul is impassive, tossing out lines that might pull new worlds into being or a web of things that occasionally amounts to an impasse. Whatever it connects to, the soul is “Ever the dim beginning, / Ever the growth, the rounding of the circle, / Ever the summit and the merge at last, (to surely start again)” (*LG* 7). Transformations of the soul echo the spirals of process described by Whitehead.

Whitman’s writings on time facilitate a better understanding of the relationship between the soul, creativity, and temporality. The past is not over and done with:

²⁴ Whitman’s poem “To a Foil’d European Revolutionaire” describes the unquenchable thirst for liberty and the patient anticipation of revolters.

The past—the infinite greatness of the past!

For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?

(As a projectile form'd, impell'd, passing a certain line, still keeps on,

So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past.)" (*LG* 346)

Marking a temporality that is neither entirely continuous nor discontinuous, the present is an outgrowth of what preceded it. The "greatness" of the past is "infinite" because it continues to play an influential role in processes to come: "This year! Sending itself ahead countless years to come" (*LG* 202).

Although the past, for Whitman, can exercise a strong, stifling hold on the present, it also makes new futures possible. "The past is the push of you, me, all, precisely the same," Whitman suggests, "And what is yet untried and afterward is for you, me, all, precisely the same" (*LG* 69). Although one could read Whitman as suggesting wrongly that the past affects everyone in the same manner, I think his point is that no one can avoid being pushed by the past. And though one might read him as saying that the future is the same for all, his point might be that no one is ever so complete such that there is no "yet untried and afterward"—that is, no future. Perhaps Whitehead formulated such a notion more explicitly than Whitman: "The creativity of the world," Whitehead writes, "is the throbbing emotion of the past hurling itself into a new transcendent fact" (*AI* 177). Whitehead echoes Whitman's image of the past as a projectile that cannot be contained by rigid separations between the past, present, and future. The past launches itself forward creatively.

This ongoingness draws Whitman and Whitehead into an affinity with the notion of immortality. Both discern a strange vitality or vibrancy that is not exhausted by the

transpiration of a happening or by the event of death. What Whitehead calls the “objective immortality” of the past consists of those sediments of processes that may impact other processes in the future. For Whitman as well, the past is immortal in its capacity to affect and shape what succeeds it in novel ways: “Ages and ages returning at intervals, / Undestroy’d, wandering immortal” (*LG* 92). Death is not an end, nor is it a departure for an otherworldly life. It is a transition to another form in this world (*LG* 653). Death marks an ongoing, mutating efficacy that is neither predictable nor determined in advance. According to Whitman, the body “will elude the hands of the corpse-cleaners and pass to fitting spheres, / Carrying what has accrued to it from the moment of birth to the moment of death” (*LG* 22). Those “fitting spheres” might be construed as futures in which the efficacy of a thing will matter differently from the previous segments of its lifetime: “O I see now that life cannot exhibit all to me, as the day cannot, / I see that I am to wait for what will be exhibited by death” (*LG* 379).

The soul is immortal. Whitman imbricates soul and time when he writes:

The soul is of itself,

All verges to it, all has reference to what ensues,

All that a person does, says, thinks, is of consequence,

Not a move can a man or woman make, that affects him or her in a day,
month, or any part of the direct lifetime, or the hour of death

But the same affects him or her onward afterward through the indirect
lifetime. (*LG* 314)

The soul is not bound to the biological timeline of a human. Its immortality follows a temporality of the indirect, which is “always as great and real as the direct” (*LG* 314).

What can be said about a temporality that is real and even great but not direct? The indirect lifetime of the soul does not abide by divisions between life and death, soul and matter, human and nonhuman. It recalls Bergson's notion of duration in that it cannot be parsed into discrete units and arranged in linear fashion. It points to past conditional temporalities, to lively traces of pasts within the present.

The indirect lifetime also involves futures that are folded into the present. Like Whitehead, Whitman understands that what may come to be exerts a palpable force in the present even if it has yet to fully gather itself. Those futures are in some strange way here and now though they have yet to arrive. They may be felt not as actual things but as hazy atmospheres of what could be. "The space ahead as I walk, as I vainly try to pierce it, is full of phantoms, / Unborn deeds, things soon to be, project their shapes around me" (*LG* 411). One cannot discern the future to be, not only due to the limits of one's foresight but also because that future has yet to gather itself. Those bits of futurity in the present that Whitman calls "unseen buds" exhibit both, as Karen Barad might put it, epistemological uncertainty and objective indeterminacy;²⁵ futures are "germinal, exquisite, in delicate lace, microscopic, unborn,... / Urging slowly, surely forward, forming endless, / And waiting ever more, forever more behind" (*LG* 468).

For Whitman, the undetermined nature of the future reflects a relationship between creativity and time that defies a teleology of finalism. Unlike Kant's vision of perpetual peace, Whitman sees the many nations proceeding "toward some long-prepared, most tremendous denouement. Not to conclude the infinite scenes of the race's life and toil and happiness and sorrow, but haply that the boards be cleared from oldest,

²⁵ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 115-8.

worst incumbrances, accumulations, and Man resume the eternal play anew, and under happier, freer auspices” (*LG* 648). Perhaps Whitman exaggerates the world’s movement to “happier” and “freer” conditions in which creativity could express itself. Nonetheless, the important point is that time does not reach an end state. There is no end of history because there is creativity. The soul defies finalist teleologies as it stretches across multiple lifetimes of the direct and of the indirect. Each moment of the soul is overfull with time, of ages past and ages to come: “On every step bunches of ages, and larger bunches between the steps” (*LG* 70). Whitman discerns in the passage to a future “A world primal again, vistas of glory incessant and branching” (*LG* 24).

God or Poet? Divine Beauties, Poetic Powers

In order to support his moral design of the world, Kant must and does postulate an omniscient, omnipotent God. Whitehead and Whitman supply very different notions of God that are incompatible with a teleology of moral perfection. They invoke divinity in their conceptions of creativity and time, which I now explore.

God is of chief importance to Whitehead’s theory of creativity. “Apart from the intervention of God,” Whitehead avers, “there could be nothing new in the world and no order in the world. The course of creation would be a dead level of ineffectiveness, with all balance and intensity progressively excluded by the cross currents of incompatibility” (*PR* 247). Whitehead presumes the world to be incapable of gathering, on its own, its diversity into something new.

It might seem that Whitehead’s God works its powers from a precipice above the messiness of the world. But his God is strange. Unlike Kant’s God, it does not inhabit a

supersensible realm because the world affects it as much as it affects the world; “By feeling and so being felt,” Catherine Keller observes, “the divine invites the becoming of the other; by feeling the becoming of the other, the divine itself becomes.”²⁶ In this regard, God is not so different from other things: “God is an actual entity,” Whitehead writes, “and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space” (*PR* 18). The mutual, ongoing infusion of God and world means that God, like other actual entities, is not static or eternal. Finally, Whitehead’s God does not enjoy special value over other beings. As Whitehead writes, “we find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures” (*PR* 50).

Yet, Whitehead distinguishes God from other actual entities along two lines. First, God in its “primordial nature” is “the principle of concretion; namely, he is that actual entity from which each temporal concrescence receives that initial aim from which its self-causation starts” (*PR* 244). It is God who determines which eternal objects will ingress into actuality and spur the beginnings of process. A little nudge called “God” supplies “an urge towards the future based on an appetite in the present” that leads actual entities to hunger for something more (*PR* 32). Process begins because God invokes a “principle of unrest, involving realization of what is not and may be” (*PR* 32). In other words, God is that dissatisfaction with the present state of things and supplies a propensity, if not a desire, for an alternative future; it is the “eternal urge of desire” (*PR* 344). Without God, there would be no aim, no self-organization, no continuation of process.²⁷

Second, God in its “consequent nature” gathers together the results of various

²⁶ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 198.

²⁷ This notion is contested by other theorists of creativity, including Nietzsche and Deleuze.

processes into harmony. This aspect of God accounts for the “realization of the actual world in the unity of his nature” (*PR* 345). Whitehead supplies two images to capture this dimension. First, it is a “tender care that nothing be lost” (*PR* 346). Although a process perishes, its outcomes are immortal. The consequent nature of God denotes the preservation of the remains of the creative advance. The second image is of an “infinite patience” for the “ultimate unity of the multiplicity of actual fact with the primordial conceptual fact” (*PR* 346). It is God who draws the diverse outcomes of multiple creative processes into a consistency. Patience accounts for a lag of novelty behind creativity, with God closing the gap between the two.

In short, God’s two functions—of concrescence and preservation—form the bookends of processes; in Catherine Keller’s words, “As the consequent nature enfolds all the becomes as its own becoming, so the primordial nature unfolds its possibilities in and as the multiple actualizations of the world.”²⁸ Between God’s functions, entities do their self-organizing work. Having “derive[d] from God its basic conceptual aim,” an actual entity proceeds to sift through “indeterminations awaiting its own decisions” (*PR* 225). God ensures that a process will reach a “satisfaction” that is carried back into the world to accord well with others. The world self-organizes; God harmonizes it.

Importantly, Whitehead’s God is not in the service of morality, as is Kant’s God. Curiously, Whitehead’s and Kant’s Gods are similar in that they are the agents responsible for setting and realizing purposes in the world. For Kant, God is the “moral cause of the world” that allows us to “set ourselves a final purpose in conformity with the moral law” (*CJ* 240); for Whitehead, the consequent nature of God “is the weaving of

²⁸ Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 191.

God's physical feelings upon his primordial concepts" (*PR* 345). But while the originary cause of Kant's God is morality, creativity is that of Whitehead's. The God of Whitehead lends an initial aim to actual entities but ultimately accepts their self-organization into patterns of contrasts.

According to Whitehead, God is "the poet of the world" (*PR* 346). What Whitehead means is not fully clear, though he suggests that God does not create the world but "saves" it with the care and patience described above. Whitehead does not, however, evoke a teleology in which time culminates in the grace and triumph of God. Rather, God saves the world by supplying truth, beauty, and goodness. Whitehead invokes these tropes to resist mechanistic images of the world that strip value and vibrancy from nature. Following the romantic poets, Whitehead suggests that "aesthetic attainment is interwoven in the texture of realization" because all actual entities gather themselves into a consistency that is not predetermined, the result of mere chance, or issued from on high.²⁹

If the aesthetic is not a special realm of (human) experience it is unclear why Whitehead's God must have any privilege with regard to beauty, harmony, and goodness: why must poetic powers be consolidated into one actual entity even as that entity infuses and is infused by all other entities? That is, why have God at all? The answer, it seems, is that a cosmos teeming with discordant actual entities must periodically snap back into a harmonious state. "The universe exhibits a creativity with infinite freedom, and a realm of forms with infinite possibilities," Whitehead writes. But without God, "this creativity and these forms are together impotent to achieve actuality" (*RM* 115). Whitehead's God

²⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1925), 94.

secures a relatively benign view of process by which beauty is ultimately secured.

Although Whitehead may not supply a teleology of morality, he does supply one of beauty: “The teleology of the Universe is directed toward the production of Beauty” (*AI* 265). It is important to note that this teleology is not a finalist one, as the beauty of the cosmos could never be complete; the harmonies that arise “are various, and not of necessity compatible” (*AI* 266). In other words, an element of discord is ever-present in a cosmos with a limited telos.

Yet, perhaps Whitehead’s imagination of time as aimed toward beauty isn’t entirely appropriate for impasses as it underplays other propensities of creativity, such as those described in the next chapter as “negativity.” What if beauty did not belong only to God? What if discord were not the effect of beauty but the result of a propensity of its own? What if, along with the democraticization of creatures, there were a democraticization of the poetic?

“I hear and behold God in every object,” Whitman sings, “yet understand God not in the least” (*LG* 75). It is unclear whether Whitman means that everything bears a divine feel or is veering close to Whitehead’s immanent God. Whitman proffers a sense rather than a concept of God. He thus diverges from Kant’s postulation of a concept of God and Whitehead’s elaboration of God as an actual entity. In Whitman’s world, God is an aura; it is at once intimate and abstract, a bit like the soul. Everything exudes a trace of God, but God is still elusive. Rather than talking about God, he talks about divinity through the poetic; the poet is the “true son of God” (*LG* 349).

What are some aspects of this poetic quality? First, it is a power of foresight that is intuitive but not prophetic. The poet “Sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future

where there are now no solid forms” (*LG* 619). This poetic capacity is sensitive to unseen buds and discerns what is not but could be. The aura of potential futures is sensed by the poet in “real objects today, symptoms of the past and future” (*LG* 634-5). Through an exquisite attunement to matter—perhaps to the soul of matter—poets grasp the limits of the present and vague possibilities for the future. In short, the poetic power of foresight draws a line through matter, affect, and time in the direction of creativity.

Second, the poetic quality instigates a process of striving for another future. “A great poem is no finish to a man or woman,” writes Whitman, “but rather a beginning” (*LG* 634). This poetic capacity disturbs, unsettles, sparks desire. The poetic qualities of foresight and instigation accord with the primordial nature of Whitehead’s God, which generates an appetite that cannot be satisfied within the present and supplies the initial aim of a process of becoming.

Third, the poetic quality shapes a passage into a future from a reanimated past. This poetic quality is a power of self-organization that translates the “objective immortality,” or ongoing efficacy, of an actual thing into a component of a process underway. According to Whitman, “the greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet... He says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you” (*LG* 623). A passage beyond the present does not happen through the past as it was. Neither the life that had been, nor the dead that is, the past is undead, brought by the poet into a new phase of immortality. As noted earlier, Whitman views the past as both constraint and possibility; what matters is not overcoming the past but turning it to a different use, as in Whitman’s exaggerated faith that America “initiates the true use of

precedents” (*LG* 288).

Another aspect of that power is a resuscitation of the past that was not. This is different from the “what has been” of the past; it denotes a past conditional temporality that is composed of longings, propensities, and impacts that could not, at a particular time, be consolidated into an event, a thing, a self, a collective, a world. Whitman’s attention to the past that was not pales in comparison to thinkers like William Connolly in his discussion of the tragic and the “powers of the false,” which I explore in the next chapter. Whitehead too was more attentive when he writes that “A feeling bears on itself the scars of its birth; it recollects as a subjective emotion its struggle for existence; it retains the impress of what it might have been but is not” (*PR* 226-7). The past that happened retains the marks of contingencies that may find new life within an incipient future. Whitehead has a tragic sensibility: “Each tragedy is the disclosure of an ideal:—What might have been, and was not: What can be. The tragedy was not in vain” (*AI* 286). Nonetheless, Whitman is attentive to this aspect of the past even as he bracketed it: “(Have I forgotten any part? Any thing in the past? / Come to me whoever and whatever, till I give you recognition)” (*LG* 202). This statement might be emblematic of the promises of inclusion by liberalist orders that herald a teleology of democraticization but ultimately safeguard majoritarian power. However, this poetic power, as I soon elaborate, is one of responsiveness rather than recognition; through it, the poet may be changed. And it might be through this poetic power that what was “forgotten” may be revived: “If [the greatest poet] breathes into any thing that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe” (*LG* 621). What had once been small and negligible in the past (perhaps due to “negative prehensions” that could exclude but not eliminate) is

summoned with a new force through the poetic power; it may, in the future, attain some solidity.

This poetic power bears a resemblance to the consequent nature of Whitehead's God: the care that nothing be lost. Whitman believes that things do not fall out of time (perhaps on account of the soul's undefeatability). "Nothing is ever really lost, or can be lost, / No birth, identity, form—no object of the world. / Nor life, nor force, nor any visible thing" (*LG* 440). He does not invoke God, however; the past seems to preserve itself, and the poet taps into it as a resource.

Fourth, the poetic is a power of gathering a consistency. The poet is "the arbiter of the diverse," "the equalizer of his age and land," the one who "supplies what wants supplying and checks what wants checking" (*LG* 620). This power is akin to Whitehead's description of the consequent nature of God as the power of beauty. Although it might seem like this power is exercised from on high, Whitman's poet, like Whitehead's God, enters into that consistency as one element amongst others. Whitman emphasizes that the poet must have an exquisite responsiveness to things: "If the Atlantic coast stretch or the Pacific coast stretch, he stretch[es] with them North or South, / ... He liken[s] sides and peaks of mountains, forests coated with northern transparent ice" (*LG* 289). In this way, poets are affected by that to which they would lend consistency. In order to form a consistence of past and future, the poet must become sensitive to the potencies and intransigences of things—not only as they exist in the present moment, but as they might open or close into the future, a future that is not ultimately determined by the poet: "Thou wonder world yet undefined, unform'd, neither do I define thee, / How can I pierce the impenetrable blank of the future?" (*LG* 384). Poets enter into processes as

magnets and catalysts rather than as determining agents.

It is through these powers that the poet can develop a different relationship to the strictures of the present. Rather than beholden to attachments, the poet “shall master all attachment” (*LG* 622). The poet’s relationship with attachment differs from that of the Kantian moralist, who strives to beat down sensual influences through the force of reason. As Whitman writes, “the greatest poet does not moralize or make application of morals... he knows the soul” (*LG* 623). While the moralist views the soul as static and in need of moral cultivation, the poet views the soul as self-organizing and in need of breathing room to work its transformative magic. Perhaps the poet “masters” attachment by not being a master over the soul and by cultivating a keener sensitivity to the powers and propensities of things; as I have argued, anthropocentric notions of a strong, centralized agency are part of what keeps humans under the sway of cruel optimism. The poet facilitates the soul’s growth by gaining the “trust of everything he touches” (*LG* 622). Because it does not follow a teleology, the soul is enriched by the touch of other things. This intimate, affective relationship with a broad array of things sparks a powerful, unshakable urge for other worlds: “Whom [the greatest poet] takes he takes with firm sure grasp into live regions previously unattained” (*LG* 634).

Notably, the poet does not determine the shape of those regions; the poet “leaves room ahead of himself,” as though inciting a process while refraining from determinations of its outcome (*LG* 622). The poet remains “indifferent to which chance happens and which possible contingency of fortune or misfortune” (*LG* 622). One might read this statement as apolitical and too forgiving of what happens, especially when coupled with Whitman’s insistence elsewhere “that all past days were what they must have

been, / And that they could no-how have been better than they were” (*LG* 202). This reading of Whitman is supported by, for example, his mere lamentation of the conquests that enabled the formation of his America. But Whitman elsewhere decries an inattentiveness to the costs of a future that is made present. While celebrating efforts to actualize a future, he also writes “damn that which spends itself with no thought of the stain, pains, dismay, feebleness, it is bequeathing” (*LG* 291).

Poetic indifference might be elucidated through Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, who worries about the inflammation of resentment in the face of time. For Zarathustra, we are thrown into a world that is shaped by pasts over which we have no control. We have to live with the scars of time. “This is what is terrible for my eyes,” Zarathustra divulges, “that I find man in ruins and scattered as over a battlefield or a butcher-field. And when my eyes flee from the now to the past, they always find the same: fragments and limbs and dreadful accidents—but no human beings.”³⁰ The will, so powerful in its strivings, is utterly helpless before this past; it cannot overcome time. “Powerless against what has been done,” Zarathustra laments, “[the will] is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards, and that he cannot break time and time’s covetousness, that is the will’s loneliest melancholy” (139). In the face of time, people fall into despair as the will is felt to be a cruel burden. They try to get rid of the will while searching for agents to blame for their suffering. “This, indeed this alone, is what revenge is: the will’s ill will against time and its ‘it was.’” (140). The corrective, for Zarathustra, is an affirmation of time, an earthy redemption that turns all “it was” into “thus I willed it.” Within redemption lies a bit of poetic indifference that mitigates resentment against time, which

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 138.

is irreversible, outside anyone's control, and impartial to anyone's flourishing.

Read in this vein, Whitman's poetic indifference is not apathy but an affirmation of time and flexibility in the face of futures that do not lead to the good life. Whitman's poet doesn't lay claim to the vicissitudes of time but develops confidence in the face of whatever happens—perhaps because it knows that the powers of the soul are undefeatable and can turn the past to its advantage. Writing of his “old delicious burdens,” Whitman recalls Zarathustra's brand of redemption: “I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them, / I am fill'd with them, and I will fill them in turn” (*LG* 127). So “Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes,” Whitman advises (*LG* 75); perhaps a little bit of poetic indifference is needed to resist a finalist teleology, image of sovereign agency, and anthropocentrism, as well as to acknowledge the creativity of the cosmos into which people can tap to potentially endure hard times and to generate other worlds. This nonchalance is, of course, insufficient to politics but it is vital to the dampening of existential resentment that, as the next chapter argues, becomes a source of violent responses to impasses.

This openness to the future may also be evident in the fact that Whitman seemed to have doubted that anyone could fully exhibit the poetic powers. Writing of the relationship between America and its greatest poet, Whitman maintains that “The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferr'd till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorb'd it” (*LG* 295). This process of mutual absorption might recall Whitehead's description of God and the world as entering into each other's constitution (*PR* 348). For Whitehead, creativity is inexhaustible because God and the world remain slightly ajar, their harmonies never entirely smooth or final. Is the process of mutual absorption

between the Poet and America similar for Whitman?

Whitman elaborates a rather lengthy list of requirements for the poet, of which the following is but a snippet:

Who would be a poet?

Have you studied out the land, its idioms and men?

Have you learn'd the physiology, phrenology, politics, geography, pride,
freedom, friendship of the land? Its substratums and objects?

...

Are you faithful to things? Do you teach what the land and sea, the
bodies of men, womanhood, amateness, heroic angers, teach?

Have you sped through fleeting customs, popularities

...

Can you hold your hand against all seductions, follies, whirls, fierce
contentions? Are you very strong? *Are you really of the whole People?*

...

Are you done with reviews and criticisms of life? animating now to life
itself? (LG 293-4; emphasis mine)

Just who does Whitman think could do all this? This question might not be puzzling for those who, like Kant, could imagine a universal subject grounded in common sense, in which case the poet would be the “I” of reason. It also would not be confusing for those who ascribe to America a root of national identity, like those who hold the will of the “Founding Fathers” to be originary and sacrosanct.

The America inhabited by Whitman is far more complex. “Here is not merely a

nation,” Whitman insists, “but a teeming Nation of nations” (*LG* 288). The grand, sweeping lists of *Leaves of Grass* register America as an abundance of personae, postures, moods, gestures, actions, vegetation, nonhuman animals, landscapes. America “moves in magnificent masses careless of particulars”—not because it has a universal character that makes particulars inconsequential but because no one particular has a strong enough pull to determine on its own the course of the nation (*LG* 289). One might recall Foucault’s famous insistence that there is always resistance where there is power no matter how formidable the latter may be. So too with America: majoritarian groups, while powerful, do not ultimately determine what America is. America is an emergent average that “is ever constructive and ever keeps vista,” a consistency that is provisional and partly open (*LG* 291). Given that America is richly diverse and unfinished in time, it is hard to imagine any single poet being fully absorbed by the “whole People.”

Although no one might prove to be *the* poet, the poetic quality still may be exercised through diverse assemblages in a range of situations. For Whitman, a poet does not have any special claim to poetic powers. “The others are as good as he,” Whitman insists, “only he sees it and they do not” (*LG* 621). The distributed powers of the poetic may be seen, according to Whitman, in “The passionate tenacity of hunters, woodmen, early risers, cultivators of gardens and orchards and fields, the love of healthy women for the manly form, seafaring persons, drivers of horses, the passion for light and the open air” (*LG* 621). Whitman highlights the “residence of the poetic in outdoor people,” perhaps less to identify their special access to the poetic than to emphasize that the poetic is not in the hands of indoor, bookish people alone: “the poetic quality is not marshalled in rhyme or uniformity or abstract addresses to things nor in melancholy complaints or

good precepts” (*LG* 621). According to Whitman, the poetic “is in the soul” (*LG* 621). A juxtaposition of Whitman’s comments on the distributed nature of the soul would see the poetic not as a faculty of only certain humans, nor even belonging to humans alone. The poetic is a quality of the world, an earthy vibrancy, as evident when Whitman addresses the rain: “And who art thou? said I to the soft-falling shower, / Which, strange to tell, gave me an answer, as here translated: / I am the Poem of Earth” (*LG* 444).

Importantly, the poetic is not a form of agency that is centered within a human subject. Whitman describes the poetic as a strange force that works on bodily, affective registers. Through certain practices of the self, a human’s body and body parts might themselves become poetic:

Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people,... read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.” (*LG* 622)

Whitman alludes to the poetic as something in which various entities, human and not, participate. He displaces the will, intentionality, and consciousness from the role of key poetic powers. In doing so, cultivation of the poetic powers enriches us in ways that we cannot fully discern, spreads us into a thousand lines of potential, and leaves us more

open to being surprised by what happens to and through us.

What dangers might emerge when this poetics, or what is in essence what others call “creativity,” is dammed up or denied?

Dead Time

I read Whitehead and Whitman as concerned with issues that are related to impasse (such as the hold of the past), though neither develops a robust notion of the term. Unlike Kant, who works tirelessly to construct a subject, a political order, and a world in which peace could exist without impasses, Whitehead and Whitman are attentive to impasses as problems of temporality. What Whitman calls “accumulations,” or deposits of the past (in the form of social norms, laws, aesthetic forms, and so on), exert a continued hold despite their growing insufficiency to novel times. Life reaches an impasse that seems to be without end. Both Whitehead and Whitman warn that society would atrophy if it tries to stamp out creativity. This concern does not grasp the dire costs of impasses that have been elaborated by scholars such as Berlant and Cvetkovich. Perhaps Whitehead comes close when he notes “the paradox that... [the world] craves for novelty and yet is haunted by terror at the loss of the past, with its familiarities and its loved ones” (*PR* 340). This formulation recalls Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism: both Berlant and Whitehead identify the terror of losing one’s anchors as an impediment to wholeheartedly pursuing a life that is otherwise. What makes Whitehead and Whitman particularly valuable for a theory of impasse is their elaboration of the torsion between the hold of the past and the lure of incipient futures, as well as the stagnancy and atrophy that arise as the present remains stuck. From them, I discern impasse as a problem and a promise for a society that

welcomes creativity.

Whitman is averse to those piled-up pasts that constrain what the present could become. They make up a “stale cadaver that blocks up the passage” (*LG* 131). The cadaver has many parts: literature, art, philosophies, customs, traditions, behaviors, etiquette, bodily comportments, aesthetic tastes, “The accumulated folds, the superstitions, and all the long, tenacious and stifling anti-democratic authorities of the Asiatic and European past” (*LG* 655). That cadaver is preserved through an array of sites and mechanisms, such as laws, schools, periodicals, Congress, theaters, everyday conversation (*LG* 642). People discipline themselves too. They “accept with voracity whatever is presented [to] them,” maintain a constant vigilance for how others behave and act, and end up “doing the most ridiculous things for fear of being called ridiculous,... continually taking off their hats” (*LG* 643). “Not a man,” it seems, “faces round at the rest with terrible negative voice, refusing all terms to be brought off from his own eye-sight, or from the soul that he is, or from friendship, or from the body that he is, or from the soil and sea” (*LG* 642). Until the soul asserts itself, “All waits or goes by default,” and the hold of “old customs and phrases” will continue to inhibit all novelty (*LG* 160).

In a public letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Whitman bemoaned that America was more committed to the past than to its future. Complaining about those whom he characterized as “helpless dandies,” Whitman wrote that “no one [is] behaving, dressing, writing, talking, loving, out of any natural and manly tastes of his own, but each one [is] looking cautiously to see how the rest behave, dress, write, talk, love” (*LG* 643). Those young lads did not exhibit the powers of the soul; they were “dog-like dangles at the

heels of the poets, philosophers, literats, of enemies' lands" (*LG* 643). Whitman alluded to this submissiveness as the reproduction of a stale past; those "dandies" are "all second-hand, or third, fourth, or fifth hand" (*LG* 643). As a result, "Democracy has been so retarded and jeopardized by powerful personalities, that its first instincts are fain to clip, conform, bring in stragglers, and reduce everything to a dead level" (*LG* 481). The past can block creativity; it can be soul-killing.

For Whitman, the problems generated by blockage were merely of refinement, tameness, stagnancy, staleness, and conformity. "Fear grace, elegance, civilization, delicatessen," Whitman advised, "Fear the mellow sweet, the sucking of honey-juice, / Beware the advancing mortal ripening of Nature, / Beware what precedes the decay of the ruggedness of states and men" (*LG* 288). Whitman preferred the wild to the refined, perhaps because the former more closely bears the aura of the soul: "Objects gross and the unseen soul are one" (*LG* 181). Whitman worried that blockage would diminish the creative powers of the soul, the result of which would be a stale society.

Whitman was confident that America would someday bear the wild, manly spirit needed to push through its impasses by turning the past from a constraint into a resource. I say "manly" because Whitman disparaged the "dandies" and largely defined the soul through masculine attributes: "O the joy of a manly self-hood! / To be servile to none, to defer to none, not to any tyrant known or unknown, / To walk with erect carriage, a step springy and elastic, / To look with calm gaze or with a flashing eye, / To speak with a full and sonorous voice out of a broad chest" (*LG* 154). Without sharing this gendered view of the soul, I partly heed Whitman's (exaggerated) faith that the powers of souls could enable people to overcome the hold of today: "The Present holds thee not—for such vast

growth as thine, / For such unparallel'd flight as thine, such brood as thine, / The FUTURE only holds thee and can hold thee" (*LG* 386). When the present is a holding station, as Berlant puts it, then souls have the power to move through impasses and into futures unformed.

Given his unwavering faith in the soul, Whitman did not grasp the severity of impasse and the anxiety that what lies beyond an impasse may be worse than what lies within. His principal concern was that the soul would be tamed and smoothed, not the states of abandonment, bodily attrition, and social death to which the minoritized and abjected are relegated. His belittlement of "dandies" displays a lack of sensitivity to the complexity of attachments, the narrowness of social worlds, and how the experience of impasse shatters the level of confidence that Whitman oozed—all of which suggests a lack of acknowledgment of impasse. I also find Whitman to be overly optimistic, given my doubts above as to whether the poets needed would ever be fully produced. While surely the hold of impasse might be loosened through the development of poetic powers, it would be a mistake to think that a stronger spirit alone could generate movement forward.

Moreover, Whitman's faith in the strength of a manly spirit neglects the powers of things and atmospheres to take hold of humans. In this manner, one wonders whether Whitman retreats, albeit momentarily, from the wonderful, terrible powers of things that he discerned so acutely and expressed throughout his poems. His worry (which is a colonialist fantasy) that America would not grow if the abundance of rich materials gifted by the past went unused presumes that the materials themselves could not inhibit growth that he desired. Whitman's focus on social conventions as a simple problem begs of a

simple solution: if regulations of taste, behavior, bodily comportment, and action were solely responsible for the stultification of growth, then people need only cultivate a little courage to overcome them; that courage is a natural quality of the soul; hence, there are no real impasses, only unprepared spirits. But if the powers of nonhumans play a role in bringing growth to a halt, then all the spiritual muscle in the world would not necessarily throw off the weight of the past. Although in other areas Whitman calls for greater flexibility in the human, in *this* moment his optimism in the powers of the soul veers dangerously close to fantasies of sovereignty. It may not be human mastery, but manly mastery.

Whitehead comes closer to impasse than Whitman by discerning how the creativity of time does not entail a brighter future. Whitman's celebration of the movement of souls does not acknowledge enough the terrible swerves of time: "They go! They go! I know that they go, but I know not where they go, / but I know that they go toward the best—toward something great" (*LG* 133). Although process for Whitehead aims toward richer beauties, it does not always end in something "great" or even benign. In yet another passage that is apropos of impasse, Whitehead writes, "It may be impossible to conceive a reorganization of society adequate for the removal of some admitted evil without destroying the social organization and the civilization which depends on it. An allied plea is that there is no known way of removing the evil without the introduction of worse evils of some type" (*AI* 20). Whitehead grasps how efforts to address impasse may result in the production of greater evils, as when impasses in national identity (as discussed in chapter one in regard to the war on terror) can be met with the intensification of surveillance, detention, torture, and slaughter, as well as with

novel forms of racism, homophobia, and xenophobia.³¹

Like Whitman, Whitehead is concerned with the hold of the past. “Life degenerates,” Whitehead maintains, “when enclosed within the shackles of mere conformation. Vague and disorderly elements of experience are essential for the advance into novelty” (*MT* 74). This “conformation” is not social conformity, as it is in Whitman; it is the reproduction of the past that crowds out novelty in particular sectors of the cosmos. Whitehead locates disorder within the friction between the past and the future: “The objective life of the past and the future in the present is an inevitable element of disturbance” (*AI* 266). When a society strives to minimize disturbances, it seals away alternative futures in an attempt to preserve its inheritance from the past. One might see that an impasse emerges when society strives too hard to eliminate novelty through the taming of disturbances.

A disturbances amplifies into a world-changing force when it issues in what Whitehead calls a “great idea.” A great idea is a low-level restlessness that usually hovers “just below the surface of consciousness” (*AI* 16). It is an idea-imbued affect that is subtle and vague. It is “general” insofar as it embodies a “profound cosmological outlook” that is at odds with that of dominant orders (*AI* 12); in other words, a great idea bears the charge of another world. A great idea reflects creative powers that, if cultivated, may result in the inception of novelty; it is, as Whitehead writes, “like a phantom ocean beating upon the shores of human life... A whole succession of waves are as dreams slowly doing their work of sapping the base of some cliff of habit: But the seventh wave is revolution” (*AI* 19).

³¹ For two exemplary accounts of these intensifications, see Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) and Brian Massumi, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

Although he does not say so, a great idea might be a part of a past conditional temporality when it emerges from what had been diminished though not defeated.

Great ideas glow with potential futures. Whitehead's description of it as dreamlike anticipates José Esteban Muñoz's writings on queerness as utopian, which I explore in the next chapter. A disturbance might be pursued to bring a particular future closer into being; according to Whitehead, "the smouldering unhappiness of mankind" may take up a great idea and "institute a period of rapid change guided by the light of its doctrines" (*AI* 15). Social change is the novelty that results when great ideas and negative affects are wired into a circuit that allows creativity to flow. Society risks its deepest securities through an exquisite sensitivity to the discontent and great ideas of minoritized groups, even when they do not conform to entrenched standards of clarity, persuasiveness, or adoptibility as a full-bodied alternative. "If there is to be progress beyond limited ideals," Whitehead writes, "the course of history by way of escape must venture along the borders of chaos" (*PR* 111). This proximity to creativity risks a fall into what Whitman has called "quicksand years": "Quicksand years that whirl me I know not whither, / Your schemes, politics, fail, lines give way, substances mock and elude me, / Only the theme I sing, the great and strong-possess'd soul, eludes not" (*LG* 376). As the foundations of politics, society, and identity begin to sink, "what at last remains" is the soul—in its undefeatability, its power to gather together its own world that is often minimized under the strictures of "precedents" (*LG* 641). Yet, again, Whitman exhibits a confidence that is not shared by Whitehead.

Like Whitehead, Whitman wishes society to be richly textured. "America is to be kept coarse and broad," he writes. He emphasizes more than Whitehead that the binding

of a social order is better rooted in an affective register; whereas Whitehead prefers philosophical persuasion,³² Whitman proffers “adhesiveness” or “amateness.” The diverse things and times of America do not share a common character. Nor is America held together by force or by social contract: “To hold men together by paper and seal or by compulsion is no account.” Instead, Whitman insists, “That only holds men together which aggregates all in a living principle, as the hold of the limbs of the body or the fibres of plants” (*LG* 291). And it is by poetic powers, according to Whitman, that America can hold together in what he calls a “simple elastic scheme” (*LG* 290). As Whitman writes, “Always America will be agitated and turbulent” (*LG* 645).

Whitehead does not merely acknowledge that impasses are real experiences. More than Whitman, he admits that they might be integral for the enrichment of a social order: “A new actuality may appear in the wrong society, amid which its claims to efficacy act mainly as inhibitions... The novel fact may throw back, inhibit, and delay. But the advance, when it does arrive, will be richer in content, more fully conditioned, and more stable” (*PR* 223). One might consider perverse desires, unruly imaginations, and abjected groups (human and not) as examples of what a society might treat as misfit actualities. Unlike Kant, Whitehead believes that the expression of disturbances ought to be allowed and, at times, encouraged. It would be inaccurate to say that the foundations of a society should be periodically unsettled, for a disturbance is not an aberration or a threat to be

³² Whitehead prefers persuasion to force as a means of addressing social discord. He never denigrates the use of force by those who are socially marginalized, however, calling attention to how the “recourse to force... is a disclosure of the failure of civilization” (*AI*, 83). One might add that the use of force reveals the failure of society to do justice to those forms of politics that do not comport with liberalist, deliberative models and their typically white, masculinist, and westernized frames that prize abstract reason and rational argument over alternative modes of expression. Whitehead's ideas of persuasion and force are peculiar, as he places war, slavery, and governmental compulsion as examples of the latter but commerce as an example of the former. And one might wish to discard Whitehead's understanding of social progress as the “gradual purification of conduct” of force so that persuasion could ultimately triumph (*AI*, 25).

contained. Unrest *is* part of those foundations as a positive, productive feature.³³

Disturbances for Whitehead are unsettling because they are creative. In an impasse, the creative advance begins to take hold again, as felt in rumblings below one's footing in the world.

Whitehead thus would like society to maintain a torsion between harmony and discord, order and freshness. For such a society, he selects the reprehensible name of "civilization," which is based on a distinction between those who seem to be guided by "senseless," "brute necessity" ("forces, floods, barbarians, and mechanical devices") and those who transcend animalistic instincts through intellectual, moral, and aesthetic refinement (*AI* 7; 18; 11). Whitehead's notion of civilization is reminiscent of Western imperialist notions of civilization that have, throughout history, authorized violences against those held to be behind the times. It is, however, more complicated. Whitehead insists that civilization not be shaped by a "restless egotism," which presumes a "central reality" to which all people must comport lest they face destruction (*AI* 285; 288). Whitehead may not tolerate a society that replicates the colonial and imperial violences of civilizational endeavors. Still, it is hard to ignore the terms by which he defines civilization and the exclusions and hierarchies enforced by it.

Without defending those criteria, and ultimately dispensing with the term "civilization" itself, I heed an aspect of Whitehead's civilization that is fruitful for developing the place of creativity in impasse: peace. This is not a Kantian notion of perpetual peace between liberal governments that has, as many have argued, generated

³³ For an elaboration of the productivity of disturbances, see Michael Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Genevieve James and James Nielson (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

much violence and war.³⁴ For Whitehead, the peace that is a condition of civilization is produced through a strange form of “self-control;” it involves an expansive, complicated notion of the self through a “broadening of feeling” (*AI* 285). This aspect of self-control is akin to the transformative effects of sympathy elaborated by Whitman: “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person” (*LG* 58). It is *self-control* because it tries to maintain creativity in a resistance to egotism, as when Whitman writes that the soul “has sympathy as measureless as its pride and the one balances the other and neither can stretch too far while it stretches in company with the other” (*LG* 624). This self-control bears a family resemblance to the positive valences of discipline identified by Kant, Foucault, and Bennett. It also recalls Whitman’s understanding of the poetic power of “mastering” attachment through sensitivity rather than sovereignty. Rather than a mode of self-control that would align its practitioners with social or moral imperatives, it fosters connections and an openness to transformation. Whitehead’s society champions a version of what Connolly has called “an ethos of pluralization;” it actively resists a strong unitary image of identity in its firm commitment to difference that is, difference to come, and processes of differentiation. Without peace, society would lapse into staleness, its life would be drained; as Whitman writes, “whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud” (*LG* 75). Peace carries society into higher orders through the loss of those ideas, values, and customs that had been most prized.

Most importantly, peace entails a tragic sensibility. “The meaning of Peace,”

³⁴ See for example Michael Dillon and Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live* (London: Routledge, 2009); Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

writes Whitehead, “is most clearly understood by considering it in its relation to the tragic issues which are essential in the nature of things. Peace is the understanding of tragedy, and at the same time its preservation” (*AI* 286). A society organized around peace would heed the pasts that couldn’t be and would strive to generate the conditions of their fruition—even if that process entails the modification or loss of its current infrastructure. “Decay, Transition, Loss, Displacement belong to the essence of the Creative Advance;” they are tragic experiences that would have to be admitted by any society that would acknowledge impasse (*AI* 286).

Peace demands an engagement with creative time. In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead writes, overoptimistically, that “It belongs to the goodness of the world, that its settled order should deal tenderly with the faint discordant light of the dawn of another age” (*PR* 339) A page later, he writes that “Each new epoch enters upon its career by waging unrelenting war upon the aesthetic gods of its immediate predecessor” (*PR* 340). In this contrast of tenderness and force, Whitehead portrays the incoming future as a destructive creation that ought to be treated gently by the very order that it may end. That tenderness, for Whitehead, is in the hands of God. For me, it is in the hands of humans and nonhumans alike. Peace might be the result of poetic powers that prepare the conditions for incipient futures to be actualized. Within an impasse, peace is participation in a creativity that consists of little impacts and happenings even as sweeping change may be blocked.

“The essence of life,” according to Whitehead, “is to be found in the frustrations of established order. The universe refuses the deadening influence of complete conformity” (*MT* 87-8). Although the emergence and resolution of impasses might be a

feature of the cosmos, politics entails an exquisite sensitivity to the potentialities and intransigencies afoot as well as an experimental participation with creativity to see if and how alternatives might take hold in the world. Such entails an attunement to the immortality of the past—its clutches and transformative possibilities—and to openings through which whisper so many...

After the Future

Of men or States, few realize how much they live in the future.

—Walt Whitman

The future is a realm [that Native Hawaiians] have inhabited for thousand of years.

—Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada

The latest episode of the illegal occupation of Hawai'i by the United States has pivoted on the assault of Mauna Kea by efforts to construct the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) under a permit approved by the State of Hawai'i's Board of Land and Natural Resources. Although the Hawai'i Supreme Court struck down the legality of the permit on 2 December 2015, the protection of Mauna Kea from TMT is instructive on matters of impasse and temporality.

Also known as Mauna a Wākea, Mauna Kea is the piko that connects Papa and Wākea, Earth Mother and Sky Father, whose union produced the Hawaiian islands. It is both a sacred place and an ancestor to Native Hawaiians. As Kealoha Pisciotto writes,

“Mauna Kea in every respect represents the zenith of the Native Hawaiian people’s ancestral ties to Creation itself.”³⁵ To others, Mauna Kea has long been viewed as a prime spot for astronomical observation; it is located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and boasts a summit that almost reaches 14000 feet above sea level. Thirteen telescopes already exist there, many of them long abandoned to disuse and decay. According to its proponents, TMT would be a game-changer; described as “the most advanced and powerful optical telescope on Earth,” TMT would “enable astronomers to study objects in our own solar system and stars throughout our Milky Way and its neighboring galaxies, and forming galaxies at the very edge of the observable Universe, near the beginning of time.”³⁶

Orbiting Mauna Kea are thus two conflicting narratives, two great ideas, that tie creation and time. One dominant framework of this dispute has employed well-worn colonialist tropes by which Native Hawaiians are cast as wedded to the past for their preservation of what is at once sacred place and kin. Many proponents of TMT subscribe to a teleological notion of time that holds Native Hawaiians to be barriers to scientific progress. They miss the impasse generated by Native Hawaiian protection of Mauna Kea, an impasse that is not merely about the fate of Mauna Kea, not merely about unresolved sovereignty claims of Hawai‘i in the face of a settler United States, but also about colonialist modernities and decolonial futures.

Although, as Whitman says, living in the future may be a puzzle to men and states, it has not been a mystery to Native Hawaiians. In “We Live in the Future. Come Join

³⁵ Kealoha Pisciotta, “Meet the Mauna Kea Hui,” Kahea, 14 August 2011, <http://kahea.org/blog/mk-vignette-kealoha-pisciotta>. Accessed on 10 April 2015.

³⁶ “About TMT,” Thirty Meter Telescope, <http://www.tmt.org/about-tmt>. Accessed on 10 April 2015.

Us,” Kanaka Maoli scholar Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada observes how futures have long been operative in the present for Native Hawaiian life due to ties that are at once ecological and genealogical: “All of our gathering practices and agricultural techniques, the patterned mat of the lo‘i kalo, the breath passing in and out of the loko i‘a, the Kū and Hina of picking plants are predicated on looking ahead. This ensures that the land is productive into the future, that the sea will still be abundant into the future, and that our people will still thrive into the future.”³⁷ These ties are at once about ecology and kinship in ways that confound Western modernist, capitalist, and colonialist parsings of humans and nonhumans and the confinement of intimacies to domestic enclaves. Moreover, they indicate how Native Hawaiians “are operating in geological and genealogical time.” Not in the neoliberal capitalist time of slow death nor in the modernist time of scientific progress. It is not even *only* in the colonialist time of conquest and genocide. To cede too much to these latter temporalities would be to diminish the resilience of Native Hawaiians and to overlook how Native Hawaiian life is vibrant today in other times—times that are already here as folds of futures in the present.

Part of the power and beauty of “We Live in the Future. Come Join Us” lies in its invitational endeavor. Kuwada writes of a vigil atop Mauna Kea that he attended, where he witnessed speeches by Kaho‘okahi Kanuha and Lanakila Mangauil: “I stood at the edge of the torchlight and wept as they spoke, struck by how the depths of their aloha manifested in a fierce love not only for the ‘āina that they were protecting but for those who stood in opposition to them.” Kuwada discerns how Native Hawaiians and their

³⁷ Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada, “We Live in the Future. Come Join Us,” Ke Ka‘upu Hehi ‘Ale, 3 April 2015, <https://hehiale.wordpress.com/2015/04/03/we-live-in-the-future-come-join-us/>. Accessed on 3 April 2015.

allies “are concerned with nothing more than the very future of our world, our islands, and our people.” Kuwada is clearly not speaking about Native Hawaiians and Hawai‘i in isolation from other peoples and the rest of the world; he means a world and people in common.

What might it mean to take up Native Hawaiian invitations to live in the future? What might it mean to see that people who are suffocating today already breathe in the future? What might living in the future entail for those whose longings, desires, and imaginations have been disallowed by the socially authorized good life? For those who have been targeted for harsh discipline and death? For those who live the phantom pains of time?

What might it mean to not only live in the future but to really live futures that have yet to emerge? When those futures are staved off and surrounded by tripwires? How might we come to sense that the overbearing here and now is but a speck of what we live? That we are already living otherwise and in other times, however fleeting and fragile those lives and times may be?

Life at an impasse registers the past in its hold and frailty. It is stuck. And yet, it is already being carried abroad. Nothing guarantees that things will get better; tomorrow could be more constraining, more precarious, more painful than the present. And yet, we might sense in the aura of so many lived futures some relief, motivation, and strength. After all, the creativity at the heart of time denotes the ineradicability of other times and other lives, especially when the powers that be have long projected their world to be the be-all, end-all of things. A mere brush with time may be enough to embolden us to follow vague shapes and thin lifelines out from under the weight of the past. The question then

becomes who we might join and what we might become, even as that process asks of us to risk who we are with, who we are, and, quite oddly, when we are.

July (Chinese juniper)

2011–2014

Two years into her life, July met Chad, who named her after the writer, filmmaker, and performance artist Miranda July. She was the first thing that Chad ever named. July quickly inspired much affection in him through her quiet presence, prickly needles, and strong branches. But she was wary: *How could this bumbling human take care of me? He's a grad student, for heaven's sake.*

July's favorite season was summer. She sleepily greeted each new day by the glorious tints of dawn. She liked to spend her time atop the roof, soaking in an ocean of sunlight, breathing in the humid air, daydreaming amongst the tweets of birds. The occasional thunderstorm exhilarated her.

July faced many dangers: overzealous waterings, invasions of clover, bombs of bird shit. She surpassed them while growing in size and beauty. She also grew in companionship; July learned to trust Chad.

Then winter came. Chinese junipers hibernate cozily as long as the cold remains steady. July went to sleep with confidence in her natural fortifications. December and January passed without incident.

But then the February of 2014 happened. July woke during a few oddly warm days, eager for the sweet air of spring. But February had tricked her. The cold returned and July withdrew into dormancy. The temperature shuttled back and forth wildly into April. July was confused and deprived of rest. The long winter drained her last bits of moisture.

July wanted to live. Even when most of her needles had browned, stiffened, and fallen off, she pushed out the tiniest green buds. They were her last breaths of hope. Chad tried to save them but, in the end, his best efforts were not good enough. July quietly passed in the month of her name.

July's short life is a testament to resilience in the face of transience, to the beauty of vulnerability, to the vibrancy that death does not end but carries to a new form, and to the lesson that, during these times of great ecological fragility, nothing may be more important than a life. July is survived by Chad, who may have lost something of life but has learned something about love.

4. Tragic Affirmations, Queer Trajectories...

Terrified, bewildered, frantic, covered with blood,
quivering all over, Candide said to himself, “If this is
the best of all possible worlds, what are the others
like?”¹

—Voltaire, *Candide*

The heart of a fragile life trembles with dreams of transcendence.

Candide is shrouded by dark affects after he has been slammed by an earthquake, been flogged, seen two companions immolated, witnessed the hanging of his teacher—and then been hit by another earthquake. He feels drawn to worlds that had been previously unimaginable. Nonetheless, he remains committed to a Leibnizian optimism. It takes adventures, mishaps, and a whole lot of suffering for Candide to turn his eyes down to the earth. He cultivates a tiny garden while acknowledging that his is neither the best of all possible worlds nor one of utter misery. He comes to affirm loss and the fragile nature of attachments. Other worlds become palpable in dark affects; affirming them entails following change, even if that change demands loss of the desired good life and does not project a clear destination or even a single direction.

This chapter culls an ethics and a politics from the dark affects of impasses. By “ethics,” I mean practices of self- and world-fashioning that arise between precepts and sensibilities and that, unlike the prescriptions of moral codes, hold a place for sensitive

¹ Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. Lowell Bair (New York, NY: Bantam Classic, 1959), 29.

responses to the particularities of an impasse. “Politics” concerns the unsettlement of systems of power that support dominant regimes of concepts and affects, discipline bodies, and distribute value unevenly across populations. This ethics and politics resist temptations to violently defend a world that is felt to be on the verge of collapse. They seek to foster worlds that are more livable and more wild.

This ethics and politics emerge between, on the one hand, the tragic visions of Friedrich Nietzsche and William Connolly and, on the other hand, the “antisocial turn” in queer theory. How does the tragic compare to queer perspectives that emphasize negativity and utopia? How might such a comparison be valuable to ethics and politics in impasses? I examine the antisocial turn to show how impasses produce an experience of “being queered.” This queerness resonates with the tragic insofar as both find value in nonsovereignty, impermanence, and an openness to loss and unpredictable change. Literature on queerness and the tragic differ on other issues: Nietzsche and Connolly develop the tragic in the direction of joy and the sweetness of life while some forms of queerness (that of Lee Edelman and Heather Love) emphasize woe; while strands of queer negativity resist the positive elaboration of attachments, utopian forms of queerness and the tragic undertake that problematic but important task. I sort through this thicket to develop an ethical and political response to impasses that welcomes the possibility of loss, explores the detours that arise when change is impeded, and fashions attachments that are flexible and transient.

I will use “tragic affirmation” to designate an orientation that dampens existential resentment toward features of life that are intensely felt in impasses: the unavoidability of loss (if you live long enough to have had); the constitutive nature of loss for some in the

face of an unsustaining world; the lack of guaranteed flourishing; limits to human agency; and whispers of pluripotentiality that upset teleological notions of time and their comforts of coherence, continuity, and predicability. By “queer trajectories,” I mean the wayward paths that follow the undoing of lives and worlds in impasses and that do not unfold toward the good life. People stumble, grasp about, and experiment between the potential end of a world and the possibility that new ones may arise. In short, tragic affirmations in an impasse open unto queer trajectories and form an ethics and politics that strive to fashion something from the potentialities that arise when the good life might be lost.

Identity\Difference(/Abjection)

In an impasse, a world disintegrates while another has yet to emerge. Just what do you do when what is dearest to you teeters on the brink of collapse? When what had grounded you is felt to be threatened and there seem to be no other supports to hold you up? What could help you to face that unbearable experience? Willful blindness? Hardened resolve? A scramble to patch things up, no matter what the ugly cost?

The experience of impasse breeds responses of self-harm and other forms of violence. It is, in Lauren Berlant's words, “unbelievable and unbearable, while being borne.”² When impasses are treated as glitches in a predetermined timeline, cruel optimist and dogmatic reactions arise. Berlant describes “cruel optimism” as a relation to fantasies that impede the very flourishing that they promise.³ Struggles to hold onto an

² Lauren Berlant, “On Her Book *Cruel Optimism*,” Rorotoko, 5 June 2012, http://rorotoko.com/interview/20120605_berlant_lauren_on_cruel_optimism/

³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 24-5.

ailing dream incur exhaustion, frustration, and depression.

Impasses also provoke dogmatic reactions to secure a world by containing, disciplining, or eradicating what is thought to be the source of a threat. I draw upon William Connolly's critiques of reactionary dogmatism in his writings on political paradox—a notion that resonates with but does not name an “impasse” at the level of faith, belief, and creed. Connolly locates identity in a paradoxical relationship with difference: while identity requires difference to define itself, efforts to consolidate identity court violence if they cast difference as abject and evil.⁴ In a later writing on the “cul-de-sac” posed by the contemporary condition, Connolly writes that

the planetary fragility of things is increasingly sensed, as many protest against acknowledgment of that very sense to remain loyal to traditions of belonging woven into their bodies, role performances, and institutions. Festering there, such anxieties could morph into concerted experiments to modify established patterns of attachment and belonging. But they can also become transposed into bellicose political movements of denial and deferral, movements joined to virulent attacks on any constituency that challenges the complementary modes of cosmic and civilizational assurance already in place.⁵

In Connolly's subtle formulation, the experience of a cul-de-sac, or what I call an “impasse,” both opens attachments to revision *and* solicits efforts to defend them to the grave. The ethics and politics detailed in this chapter aim for the former because

⁴ William E. Connolly, *Identity \ Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 67. Cited in this chapter hereafter as *ID*.

⁵ William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 172-3. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *FT*.

temptations to violence against others become particularly inflamed in impasses. “When the bottom falls out of your world,” writes Connolly, “you are apt to become flooded with the desire to find parties to accuse of pure evil.”⁶ In an impasse, cruel optimism and dogmatism are violences against oneself and others, especially when disturbances to attachments are located in specific peoples or desires that are cast as evil.

Better to treat disturbances in attachment as an impasse rather than as a setback on the way to better times. Doing so would affirm impasse as a possibility that always dogs attachments. Such a politics might be inspired by Connolly's politics of identity \difference. Unlike individualist and communitarian traditions of liberal political theory that, despite their differences, neglect or dismiss the paradox of identity \difference, Connolly develops a politics that affirms it (*ID*, 64-94). He views identity as problematic but indispensable and affirms the torsion between pluralism and process of pluralization. It initiates a series of ethical practices: experiments that stretch and alter socially defined roles; cultivation of one's historical self into something worthy of affirmation; and a “critical responsiveness” that loosens some entrenched aspects of one's identity, affirms others, and nourishes a generous though agonistic disposition toward others (*ID*, xvi-xiv). Connolly connects these ethical practices with a “politics of becoming,” which welcomes the surprising generation of a new identity, right, or public even as it shakes one's footing in the world (*P*, 121-2). In an impasse, an ethics of self-cultivation and critical responsiveness could combine with a politics of becoming to affirm disturbances in attachments. They work against cruel optimism and dogmatism by presuming that impasses are not just trials and tribulations.

⁶ William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 21. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *P*.

Is Connolly's noble, big-hearted ethics and politics adequate to the experience of impasse? How might role experimentation, self-cultivation, and a politics of becoming relate to the politics of detachment espoused by Berlant? Recall that for Berlant, "The political question is how to understand the difficulty of detaching from lives and worlds that wear out life, rather than sustain it... The hardest acts of changing are acts of breaking, even when desire is on the side of a break: they require being optimistic about loss and about the undoing of an affect world."⁷ Detachment for Berlant entails the loss of anchors but it does not aim for a vacuum; connections and a sense of connectedness remain important for her, both to avoid the slide into cruel optimism and to develop solidarity from within struggles to survive. In an impasse, detachment might be an end alongside self-cultivation and role experimentation, with these three practices informing each other in valuable though not always harmonious ways. People who aim toward detachment would not only acknowledge the contestability of their identity but also aspire to undo their attachments in favor of other worlds, to find possibility in loss.

To better describe the value of pursuing detachment in impasses, I call attention to the political value of generating impasses in dominant systems of power. Such a politics stalls movement forward by defamiliarizing what tends to go without saying and by unsettling habituated sensoria.⁸ It puts severe pressure upon subjects to unlearn attachments to majoritarian orders, composed of fantasies, social relations, modes of

⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 266.

⁸ I hear echoes of Foucault's method of problematization and of Rancière's politics of aesthetics in Berlant's description of impasse as a method that "dedramatiz[es] the performance of critical and political judgment so as to slow down the encounter with the objects of knowledge that are really scenes we can barely get our eyes around... [T]his perspective turns the object *x* into an impasse, a singular place... that can only be approached awkwardly, described around, shifted" (Lauren Berlant, "Starved," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 [2007], 434). These different methods align as an alternative to knee-jerk moral judgments and calls for quick action.

time, constructs of sensibilities, normalized structures of feeling, among many other things.⁹ The generation of impasse adds detachment to the ethical practices described by Connolly.

By example, I gesture to the impasses generated by afro-pessimist, decolonial, and queer criticism. Viewing rubrics of “minoritization” to be inadequate to the experience of black, indigenous, and queer lives, these critiques have long elaborated how abjection is longstanding and pervasive. Whereas minoritization presumes a derivation from majorities along some common standard, abjection is a constitutive exclusion that underpins a system of power. Abjection is what Connolly describes as the “otherness” into which difference is converted under dogmatic identity regimes. Abjection can underlie plays of identity\difference.

Here, abjection is more an aspiration of antiblack, colonialist, and homophobic systems of power than a definitive fact. It does not necessarily imply that dominant systems are so overbearing to be tightly-knit structures of power. Nor does it necessarily suggest that the lives of the abjected are determined by those systems, as though their own efforts to live otherwise were meaningless. Rather, abjection can signal how power views the extermination of some peoples as necessary for its continuation. Here, it also denotes the relative solidity and durability of power that make incidents of violence and destruction, even as they take new forms, sadly not surprising. The framework of abjection leads me to view antiblack racism, settler colonialism, and homophobia as powerful force-fields that persist through long stretches of time and whose loose character is based on the devaluation of black, native, and queer life.

⁹ On the relationship between identity and affect, see José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*,” *Theatre Journal* Vol. 52 (2000), 67-79.

Afro-pessimism describes the abjection of blackness as an issue that cannot be resolved by a politics of identity\difference. According to Frank Wilderson, blackness is not an identity marker of a racial minority. Blackness is distinct because it is “predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation.”¹⁰ Jared Sexton elaborates how this abjection functions as a “political ontology.” An outcome of politics but not reducible to a political status, blackness “functions as if it were a metaphysical property” due to a lifespan that runs from the inception of racial slavery through its afterlife.¹¹ The social life of blackness is social death, such that “black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in.”¹² The abjection of blackness places whiteness and non-black racialized identities on a shared axis of identity. This singular condition is overlooked by the concept of “people of color,” which, although sometimes useful in shifting the politics of identity, can draw non-white racial minorities into “greater alliance with an antiblack civil society and further capitulation to the magnification of state power.”¹³ The afterlife of slavery forecloses humanist appeals just as it “precludes the generation of a proper political demand directed at a definable object or objective.” Blackness, instead, generates what Sexton calls an “abstract political insistence”—abstract, I think, because it does not issue from a position within existing grids of identity and an insistence because it draws attention to abjection as a problem

¹⁰ Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 59.

¹¹ Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer 2010), 37.

¹² Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions* Issue 5 (Fall/Winter 2011), 28.

¹³ Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness,” 48.

that cannot be resolved by the powers that be.¹⁴ By challenging the antiblackness that underlies identity, afro-pessimist critique generates an impasse in antiblack worlds.

Similarly, indigenous scholars describe how efforts to include indigeneity into frameworks of identity further solidify colonial settlement. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, for example, argues that the US legal definition of “native Hawaiian” uses blood quantum to reduce Kanaka Maoli “to a racial minority rather than an indigenous people with national sovereignty claims.”¹⁵ This and other conditional inclusions of indigenous groups by US liberal multiculturalism occlude the state’s colonial underpinnings; as Jodi Byrd argues, a “cacophony of moral claims often coerces struggles for social justice for queers, racial minorities, and immigrants into complicity with settler colonialism.”¹⁶ Exemplifying this point, Scott Morgenson argues that non-Native queer efforts to attain the perks of citizenship often support a white settler project that primitivizes and exploits indigenous sexualities.¹⁷ Even critical race theory, Kauanui argues, can comport with settler logics if it considers whiteness to be solely about privilege than about dispossession and genocide.¹⁸ The tendency of critical race theory to map the politics of race by white supremacy also overlooks how, for instance, Asians are the principal beneficiaries of settler colonialism in Hawai‘i.¹⁹ These criticisms reveal the abjection of indigeneity by

¹⁴ Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness,” 46-7.

¹⁵ J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 10.

¹⁶ Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvii.

¹⁷ Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood*, 10-1.

¹⁹ Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura (eds.), *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai‘i* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008).

settler frameworks of identity in the US. The language of minoritization misses the genocidal bent of settler societies and, at worst, becomes another vector of abjection even when it operates through seemingly beneficial acts like the expansion of rights. Unless decolonization is taken to be a viable future, indigenous lives will be, in Byrd's words, "lamentable but not grievable."²⁰ The fight for decolonization, however impractical it may presently seem, generates an impasse in settler societies, their teleologies of nationhood, and their ongoing genocidal effects.

Antiblackness, coloniality, and homophobia are relatively distinct vectors of power that, at times, overlap, inform, and amplify each other. Kara Keeling examines their imbrications by bringing together Lee Edelman and Frantz Fanon, each of whom depicts a figure (the queer and the black native) that is abjected to secure a (straight, colonial) future. Keeling argues that "present institutions and logics dissemble fear of a black future. From within the logics of reproductive futurity and colonial reality, a black future looks like no future at all."²¹ Against the temporality of a straight, colonial, antiblack world, Keeling holds up "poetry of the future." This poetry generates an affective experience of foreclosed potentiality that "threatens to unsettle, if not destroy, the common senses" that undergird a racist, misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic reality.²² Poetry from the future "interrupts the habitual formation of bodies" and indexes

²⁰ Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, 38.

²¹ Kara Keeling, "Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future," *GLQ* Vol. 15, No. 4 (2009), 578. Keeling explores the poetry of the future that is enacted by M—, an "aggressive" in Daniel Peddle's 2005 documentary *The Aggressives*. "Aggressive" bears a family resemblance to transgender, butch, dyke, and lesbian but emerges specifically between black popular culture and the US prison industry. The film tracks M—'s enlistment in the military and disappearance following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Asking where M— might be would, according to Keeling, comport with the surveillance logics of the prison and military industries that align visibility, discipline, and control. M—'s disappearance, according to Keeling, disrupts the film's expectations of narrative closure and invites us to ask *when* M— is.

²² *Ibid.*, 566-7.

“a time to come in which what today exists potently—even if not (yet) effectively—but escapes us will find its time.”²³ As potency that exerts an effect in the present, poetry from the future resonates with the utopianism that is described below. The insistence of black queer transgender desire may generate an impasse in an antiblack, heteronormative, transphobic, colonial world.

In their different though resonant ways, these afro-pessimist, indigenous, and queer critiques generate impasses in US liberal multiculturalism and in Connolly’s politics of deep pluralism. In the US, blackness, indigeneity, and queerness, on the one hand, resist a politics of recognition and inclusion and, on the other, are inadequately addressed by changes to grids of identity. Afro-pessimist, decolonial, and queer politics do not merely denaturalize a dominant identitarian order; they render palpable the loss of a world that presently seems intractable if not inevitable. They compel majorities and minorities to undo those attachments that are predicated upon abjection. That is why hostility arises. Violent responses do not issue from mere disturbances to identity; they happen because the magnitude of potential loss is felt to be unbearable.

Can the impasses generated by afro-pessimist, decolonial, and queer politics be adequately addressed when subjects only denaturalize their identities, experiment with roles, and tend generously though agonistically to difference? These practices might indeed loosen a majoritarian world enough for other worlds to gain some traction, but they do not foreground enough what might need to be lost when tackling the abjection that arises from antiblack racism, settler colonialism, and homophobia. On this point, critical responsiveness needs to be amplified. In Connolly’s rendition, critical

²³ Ibid., 567.

responsiveness asks that we “absorb a degree of self-suffering to come to terms with an unfamiliar call to change what you already are” (*FT*, 135). Impasses exact more than a degree of self-suffering. They deliver an experience that is felt to be unbearable, for at stake are not only aspects of lives or institutions but entire worlds.²⁴ Countering the bionecropolitics of abjection calls for change so widespread that it borders on the impractical, the unimaginable, the utopian, if not the impossible. It requires detachment and loss.

Connolly might affirm the value of detachment while suggesting that pursuits of it ought to be taken in piecemeal fashion. He advocates processes of “experimental defamiliarization” that loosen and revise lodged aspects of one’s identity (*ID*, 8-9). Certainly, no one and no world could change overnight, especially where longstanding, important attachments are concerned. And, as Connolly points out, striving for detachment too quickly without positive alternatives in place could instill a passive nihilism that inflames tendencies to violence; this, in fact, is the danger of impasse, in

²⁴ Connolly is attentive to the pervasiveness of shifts that occur in the midst of becomings. In an earlier work, he writes, “Critical responsiveness to the claims of difference often calls forth a partial and comparative denaturalization of the respondents themselves; it thereby opens up other possible lines of mobility in what the respondents are. These effects are possible because every effective movement of difference modifies the institutional constellation of identities through which it has been differentiated. And if these changes are to be consolidated, a corollary set of changes will be required in such institutions as family life, marriage law, military rules, church membership, tax practices, medical benefits, and curriculum organization” (William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* [Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999], 63). Later, Connolly elaborates that critical responsiveness also demands work on affective, sensorial, and conceptual registers as well (Connolly, *Pluralism*, 126-7). My question, then, is whether the sweeping nature of these changes better approximates loss rather than modifications.

which attachments are falling apart.²⁵ Yet Connolly's politics here seems to presume that people either have attachments or alternatives in place, which overlooks how abjected subjects haven't enjoyed either in a robust way. And while I share Connolly's reservations over the capacity to "imagine constructively beyond an interim horizon" in a world of becoming, perhaps there is value to taking more imaginative leaps in impasses, especially where the present has been so damaging to select populations for so long.²⁶ The need to be cautious and careful hits a deep skepticism regarding the capacity of what Connolly calls "interim agendas" to adequately address abjection. Tensions between interim and utopian endeavors, between avoiding passive nihilism and pushing for an end to the violences of abjection—these tensions are part of the impasses in worlds largely organized by antiblack racism, settler colonialism, and homophobia. They are not adequately addressed by any prescribed course of action, drives to effect change at breakneck speed, expansions of liberal multiculturalism, or periodic turns of the axes of identity through a process of pluralization.

The sense of urgency in addressing abjection may be illustrated through Edelman's project on queer negativity. Edelman argues that society aims to protect the figure of the Child, which emblemizes lost wholeness and future promise. Under this

²⁵ William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 63 (cited hereafter in this chapter as *WB*). Connolly writes of the importance but insufficiency of negative critique, which must be supplemented with the positive cultivation of attachments to the world. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*, warn against the dangers of deterritorializing or destratifying too quickly. They observe how people implode ("you will be killed, plunged into a black hole, or even dragged toward catastrophe") or become swept up in a fascist line of uncontrollable destruction rather than a line of experimental creation (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi [Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987], 161; 229-31).

²⁶ William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 94. Although this remark occurs in a discussion of the possibility of eco-egalitarian capitalism, it is part of a larger critique of predictive and imaginative capacities in a world of becoming, whereby unpredictable events issue in surprise and alter the coordinates of political imaginations and actions.

fantasy of “reproductive futurism,” a straight world persists by abjecting the queerness that threatens the Child. Edelman suggests that queers might, rather than normalizing themselves (which Edelman insists only passes the burden of abjection to others²⁷), accede to the place of negativity, the smudge that marks the inability of society to unambiguously consolidate itself. The embrace of negativity might unleash world-destroying energies. I hear in Edelman’s call for a stop to the future a fierce and admirable drive to counter homophobic violence, which is merely displaced by changes in identity with the rise of homonormativity.²⁸

Many aspects of Edelman’s account of queer negativity contribute to the ethics and politics I seek in *impasse* even as it is in need of modification. I clarify those modifications later; here, I identify what I find to be valuable in Edelman’s notion of queerness. Edelman delivers a fiery criticism of queer politics that are comfortable with an increasingly normalized state and its attendant dangers. His antisocial notion of queerness opens “an impasse in the passage to the future” by unsettling the regime of straight time that organizes a heteronormative society (*NF*, 33). His separation of the ethical from reproductive futurism is important as humans rework ethics in the face of the Anthropocene; in the face of human species extinction, ethics is under increasing pressure

²⁷ “Those of us inhabiting the place of the queer may be able to cast off that queerness and enter the properly political sphere, but only by shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else” (Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004], 27. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *NF*).

²⁸ “The political regime of futurism, unable to escape what it abjects, negates it as the negation of meaning, of the Child, and of the future the Child portends. Attempting to evade the insistent Real always surging in its blood, it lovingly rocks the cradle of life to the drumbeat of the endless blows it aims at *sinthomosexuals*. Somewhere, someone else will be savagely beaten and left to die—sacrificed to a future whose beat goes on, like a pulse or a heart—and another corpse will be left like a mangled scarecrow to frighten the birds who are gathering now, who are beating their wings, and who, like the drive, keep on coming” (*NF*, 153-4).

to rethink the centrality of the human and its survival.²⁹ Finally, Edelman's work strangely resonates with that of Connolly despite vast differences between them, including an ontology of lack versus one of abundance. I see Edelman and Connolly agreeing that identity reflects the management of difference by power, that a social order is consolidated through violence and abjection, that a wild energy (the death drive in Edelman's account or pluripotentialities in Connolly's) informs ethical and political activity, and that efforts to build a world remain dogged by disturbances that are either constant or periodic.

Altogether, these points raise the question of "what survives" the encounter with the negativity of queerness, with the unbearable blow to a world.³⁰ The force of negativity is unbearable because it, accordingly to Edelman, "cannot be borne by the subjects we think we are. We build our worlds in the face of it so as to keep ourselves from facing it."³¹ Although worlds are not built solely as barricades against the unbearable, Edelman rightly calls attention to the violences that arise in efforts to ward off the unbearable. To quell those violences, we might ask: If we do not scramble to protect our anchors at all costs, what might we do? What sorts of ethical and political practices could mitigate temptations to violence and build worlds without guarantees of the good life?

²⁹ One might think of Roy Scranton's call for humans to learn to die as a civilization in the face of the Anthropocene. See "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene," *The New York Times*, 10 November 2013, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/>

³⁰ Lee Edelman, "Against Survival: Queerness in a Time That's Out of Joint," *Shakespeare Quarterly* Vol. 62, No. 2 (Summer 2011), 148-61; Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, "What Survives" in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 35-61.

³¹ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 121-2.

Queer or Be Queered

Connolly holds ethics and identity to be in a paradoxical relationship: “To be ethical is often to put parts of your entrenched identity at risk, but to place too much at risk at one time would be to lose the ground from which ethical action proceeds” (*ID*, xix). I agree that ethical activity involves risking parts of one’s identity, yet I think the relationship between the ethical and identity needs to be rethought in light of impasse. For if Connolly is right, then those with little stake in available identities would lack the ground for ethical action. Connolly also tethers ethics too tightly to action at the expense of other states of being, such as the impassivity that I described in chapter two. Finally, impasse shows that the loss of the “ground” of ethical action can be a plus, as ethics could be remade anew in light of shifts in the world. Connolly does, in later works, discuss a form of ethics that may be more adequate to impasses; it involves the exploration of role experiments and the intensification of democratic activism to meet novel shifts between neoliberalization, bellicose religious movements, climate change, and species extinctions (*FT*, 11). Nonetheless, I want to relocate the starting point of ethics from identity roles and action to dark affects—those that exert a force without having a clear form, that can tug us toward loss without alternative attachments in place. How might ethics in impasses entail a greater sensitivity to disturbances, incipiences, desires, and longings? How might impasses compel ethics to have a more intimate relationship with loss?

Following Connolly while reworking the connection between identity and ethics, José Muñoz describes “disidentification” as a practice that neither identifies with available social roles nor assumes an oppositional stance. According to Muñoz, disidentification uses the blood and bones of majoritarian worlds as “raw material for representing a

disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”³² Notably, this ethics does not start from identity; it is a minor ethics since it originates in the friction between systems of power and minoritized lives.

Disidentification is a partly critical, partly creative practice of self-fashioning that recalls Foucault’s notion of the care of the self. Following George Yúdice’s criticism of Foucault for deriving the care of the self from the practices of social elites (Greek freemen and modernist art), Muñoz elaborates how queer Latino/a disidentifications concern how to survive and thrive in the face of abjection (*D*, 145-6). Disidentification is a process by which subjects queer the objects, images, and media of a dominant culture to refashion themselves and to endure a world that is hostile and deadly to them. What Eve Sedgwick writes of “reparative reading” is apropos of disidentification: “What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”³³

Because it aims beyond a present that is captive to the tyranny of pragmatic purposes, disidentification has utopian ambitions.³⁴ For Muñoz, queerness is utopian because it “is essentially about a rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (*CU*, 1). Although Muñoz may appear to parse the present and future and to invest potentiality solely in the latter, he

³² José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *D*.

³³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 150-1.

³⁴ *D*, 25; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 169. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *CU*.

notes that the future is folded into the present. Queerness draws upon those pockets of potential to push beyond what Muñoz calls the “impasses” of an LGBT politics that is largely content with the legalization of same-sex marriage, which principally benefits gay and lesbian subjects who have economic and racial capital while abjecting queers of color who don’t make the homonormative cut (*CU*, 19-21).³⁵ The utopianism of queerness aspires for a world in which sexuality is not an identity and intimacy isn’t validated by the state based on how well it comports with aspects of heteronormativity: the couple-form, domesticity, longevity, and sentimentality. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe a similar utopianism when they write that “heterosexuality involves so many practices that are not sex that a world in which this hegemonic cluster would not be dominant is, at this point, unimaginable. We are trying to bring that world into being.”³⁶

Muñoz’s queer utopianism and Edelman’s queer negativity are often seen as polarized ends of debates within queer theory around the so-called “antisocial turn,” which is named primarily after Leo Bersani’s and Edelman’s respective projects.³⁷ This debate has elaborated relationships between queerness and the social, negativity, antinormativity, the past, futurity, utopia, paranoia, and reparativity. Bersani’s and Edelman’s antisocial projects are often characterized as “antirelational,” but that overlooks how Bersani seeks an antiassimilationist, “anticommunal mode of connectedness.”³⁸ That characterization also misses remarks by Edelman that might

³⁵ See also J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), 95-129; Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1999), 81-147.

³⁶ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, No. 2 (Winter 1998), 557.

³⁷ See Roberto L. Cesario, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* Vol. 121, No. 3 (2006), 819-28.

³⁸ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 10.

surprise those who are familiar with his work. For example, preceding his famous litany of “fucks” in *No Future* is an assertion that queers must “insist on our equal right to the social order’s prerogative” and “avow our capacity to promote that order’s coherence and integrity” (*NF*, 29).³⁹ And it might seem odd that a diehard cheerleader of the death drive would say “I too cast my vote for flourishing.”⁴⁰ In what sense, then, might queerness register as antisocial, and how might antisociality and negativity fare with utopia and futurity as coordinates for ethics in impasse? To what extent are negativity and utopia so opposed and how might drawing them together be ethically and politically productive for impasse?

Although he values Bersani’s and Edelman’s theories for their criticism of the normalization of gay and lesbian studies, Muñoz is wary of romanticizations of queer negativity. In Muñoz’s eyes, Edelman isolates queerness from intersectional particulars and denies *all* investment in futurity to the result of an elevated white-gay-middle-classness. This is partly because, as Jack Halberstam observes, Edelman’s archive consists of only of gay men at the expense of “dyke anger, anticolonial despair, racial rage, counter-hegemonic violence, punk pugilism.”⁴¹ It is also unclear why Edelman believes

³⁹ The litany: “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital *ls* and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”

⁴⁰ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 11.

⁴¹ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 110. Halberstam notes that a different archive of antisociality might include “Valerie Solanas, Jamaica Kincaid, Patricia Highsmith, Wallace and Gromit, Johnny Rotten, Nicole Eiseman, Eileen Myles, June Jordan, Linda Besemer, Hothead Paisan, *Finding Nemo*, Lesbians on Ecstasy, Deborah Cass, SpongeBob, Shulamith Firestone, Marga Gomez, Toni Morrison, and Patti Smith” (*ibid.*, 109). In a footnote, Edelman does acknowledge that “The overwhelming presence of male *sinthomosexuals* in culture representation reflects, no doubt, a gender bias that continues to view women as ‘naturally’ bound more closely to sociality, reproduction, and domesticating emotion” (*NF*, 165 n. 10). It is unclear, however, why Edelman elects to side with representability when the *sinthomosexual* is supposed to defy representation. And his choice to not take up female or trans *sinthomosexuals* does not dissipate Halberstam’s compelling push for a more expansive, more complicated, less gay-male-centered archive of queer antisociality.

the queer “in particular” to be “stigmatized as threatening an end to the future itself” when similar figures of abjection have been figured as doing the same, such as the terrorist, the native, and the negro (*NF*, 113).⁴²

Muñoz instead unhinges futurity from white straight time to seek futures in which queers of color can survive and thrive (*CU*, 95-6). For queerness to explore this potential of futurity, it must resist a “binary logic of opposition,” which Muñoz believes the antisocial queer theorists to follow (*CU*, 13). But this resistance is precisely how Edelman describes queer negativity: “Where the political interventions of identitarian minorities... may properly take shape as oppositional... queer theory’s opposition is precisely to any such logic of opposition” (*NF*, 24). Simple opposition to reproductive futurism would situate queerness in a political field that is largely shaped by abjection. For Edelman, queer negativity instead signals the inability of a social order to unambiguously consolidate itself. For me, it is a point where utopian futures become possible, where the paradox of identity\difference plays out, where impasses open.

I note this oversight by Muñoz to elaborate a greater role for queer negativity in considerations of futurity in impasses. I agree with Muñoz that queerness must not be defined by the here and now; it is partly about futurity, partly about what is “no-longer-conscious.” Following Ernst Bloch, Muñoz’s notion of utopia is concrete because it is connected to historical struggles against dominant orders of the present. In Bloch’s thought, “a turn to the no-longer-conscious enabled a critical hermeneutics attuned to

⁴² Viewing queerness as *the* threat to reproductive futurism overlooks anxieties around miscegenation and the threat it was held to pose to the future through heterosexual reproduction. Edelman’s Lacanian account of the social and the death drive, while productively suggestive, needs to be adjusted to account for historical arrangements of power. Chandan Reddy makes a similar argument with “racial aliens, alien citizens, black citizens, tribal citizens, the undocumented” in mind (*Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011], 175-8).

comprehending the not-yet-here” (*CU*, 12). Recalling Deleuzean notions of virtuality, Muñoz describes the no-longer-conscious as potentialities that crackle within the present. The past plays a role in generating queer futures.

But Muñoz sometimes bends the past too easily toward the important task of imagining queer futures. His grammar wavers between figuring the past being lively in itself and turning it into a resource that is mined for disidentification with pragmatic LGBT politics: “It is important to call upon the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things” (*CU*, 27-8). I am more intrigued by Muñoz’s description of the past as animate in itself, which suggests that the past can and does resist efforts to tame it. The past provides friction, and I turn to Heather Love to develop the place of queer negativity in this notion.

Love’s version of queer negativity shifts from the psychoanalytic to the historical in a maneuver that loosens the structural hold of homophobia and allows pockets of potentiality to have real efficacy. Like Muñoz, Love describes how queer turns to the past undercut brands of LGBT politics that value positive affects at the expense of negative ones. A turn backward attends to shame in its own life rather than as a state to be overcome by gay pride, as has been prevalent in gay and lesbian circles post-Stonewall.⁴³ Those who turn to the past might, however, find the past turning from them (*FB*, 43). Love thus ascribes value but not utility in turns toward the past and, in doing so, describes the past in its negativity. “We have to risk the turn backward,” Love writes, “even if it means opening ourselves to social and psychic realities we would rather forget” (*FB*, 29).

⁴³ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 28. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *FB*.

The past is less a resource to be animated toward specific ends but an animate force in itself, a wildness that can undo us. It can cloud our visions of the future. And because it does not bend to our will, the past in its liveliness marks limits to human agency. In short, one risks being carried into an impasse by turning to the past.

This queerness is not about the intentional deployment of the past to queer a political present (though when it is, its results are never predetermined or predictable). It resonates with recent work in queer theory which have emphasized queerness less as an identity or an activity but as an experience or ontology. This brand of negativity does not follow an oppositional logic; it is at once destructive and potentially productive, though not immediately so. Berlant, Bersani, Edelman, Halberstam, Jasbir Puar, and Mel Chen have, in very different ways and in vastly different contexts, gestured toward a queer experience that is different from the important activity of queering: *being queered*, nonsovereign, failing, shattered, unmoored, undone.⁴⁴ Not quite disidentification *with*, as in Muñoz's account, but disidentification *from*. Disintegration. Queerness concerns the insinuation of dark, undead pasts into our lives, especially when we seek to heal, recover, or head toward a bright future.

The experience of being queered registers, in Love's words, "the gap between aspiration and the actual" in the aura of pasts that never were—that is, of desires, tendencies, and incipiences that were not actualized in a past moment due to dominant

⁴⁴ Mel Chen describes the relationship between toxicity and queerness as one of unworlding: "[Toxic affect] is already here, it is not a matter of queer political agency so much as a queered political state of the present" (Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012], 220; Jasbir Puar argues that a shift from intersectionality to assemblage theory is compelled by a queerness that moves through affects, textures, and matter: "There is no entity, no identity, no queer subject or subject to queer, rather queerness coming forth at us from all directions, screaming its defiance" (Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007], 211).

arrangements of power (*FB*, 4). Traces of the past can be brought to new life in another time. Love's description of the negativity of queerness resonates with what Connolly, following Deleuze, calls the "powers of the false." The false, according to Connolly, is more than an untruth; it is an incipient pluripotentiality that "falls below clean recollection because it was not consolidated enough at its inception to assume the shape of a conscious image. It carries power if at a later date it becomes a trigger below or on the edge of sensory awareness that makes a difference to thought and action" (*WB*, 117). While sharing Muñoz's attention to the potentiality of the no-longer-conscious past, Connolly heeds the past in itself—which may never have been conscious—like Bergson and Deleuze did before him. This notion of the past includes the latent though potential efficacy of nonhumans and humans alike, which I elaborated in previous chapters. And unlike Love, who describes queerness purely as negativity, Connolly highlights the positive capacity of the false to generate new thoughts, identities, or attachments.

Queerness can sometimes be generative in this manner, but not always. The pluripotential power of queerness, of the false, can also issue in negative energies that can open impasses by unmaking lives and worlds. Nonetheless, I find that the negativity of queerness can be strangely utopian; it carries the aura of what Peter Coviello calls "broken-off, uncreated futures, futures that would not come to be."⁴⁵ Those futures need not have been consciously or clearly envisioned; as I will elaborate below, their early beginnings lie in dark affects. Those affects might sometimes push queerness into more habitable futures, as Muñoz believes. They might sometimes issue in a novel identity or public, as Connolly believes. Or they might forestall such futures, even as they mark tiny

⁴⁵ Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013), 20.

differences from what has been.

Queer trajectories emerge in an impasse's disjunctures between dark affects and inhabitable worlds, between negativity and utopia, between pluripotential pasts and incipient futures. If queer negativity sparks with powers of the false, then it does not arise only in a human subject's textual encounters, as Love's readings go. Queer trajectories arise in dark atmospheres of ordinary life.⁴⁶ Queerness circulates at the fringe of consciousness, buzzing with undead pasts and occasionally flashing up in the simplest of happenings.⁴⁷ Entire landscapes can be queer; we become queered as we saunter through them, being pulled awry and apart, merging with things that begin to float. Queer negativity rises up in dark atmospheres, throwing itself together out of lodged potentials and jagged textures.

Queer trajectories reshape ethics in impasses. They are composed of a broad array of propensities and energies that includes more than jouissance and the social order's death drive. As a result, an ethics that follows queer trajectories is more open to futurity than Edelman is while nonetheless sharing his critique of reproductive futurism. It also departs from Edelman's reduction of politics to signification in order to cultivate better sensitivity to circuits between vibrant matter, cultural meaning, social relations, and political practices. It allows for more positive elaborations of what flourishing might look like in the face of the unbearable.

⁴⁶ This argument is a couplet of chapter two and José Muñoz's reading of Ana Mendieta's *siluetas*. Composed of markings and indentations in the earth, the *siluetas* create a locus of encounter with historical violences and lived struggles. See José Esteban Muñoz, "Vitalism's After-Burn: The Sense of Ana Mendieta," *Women & Performance* Vol. 21, No. 2 (July 2011), 191-8.

⁴⁷ Like tripping. Connolly writes: "Consider when Proust's narrator slips on a couple of uneven stones and is hurtled back to another moment when a similar thing had happened, barely perceptible at the time under the pressure of another course of action. Now those two moments enter into a new pattern of resonance, opening up a possibility of feeling, thought, or action unavailable until that moment" (*WB*, 116-7).

What might ethics in impasses involve when informed by queer trajectories? First, it is a queer inhumanist ethics that does not begin with action per se, at least not that of an intentional, conscious human subject.⁴⁸ Queer trajectories do not begin and end with the human; their ethics arises through affects that undo lives and worlds. Second, this ethics is not tethered to supposedly universal principles nor does it barrel forward to a predefined good life. It values impassivity, a watching and waiting for what might emerge; it follows wayward, wild movements that spring from impacts suffered, impulses, and gut feelings. As such, this ethics is not about restoring a self or collective and making it last, though the impasses faced by abjected peoples may call for greater persistence and resilience. It aims to accept, perhaps begrudgingly though without existential resentment, the *possible* loss of attachments even though things might remain the same after all. An ethics inflected by queer trajectories cultivates an openness to becoming, to becoming undone, to striving to end one timeline even if another is not clearly available, to allowing the intensities of impasse to work their magic before seeking a foothold in an emergent world. In short, this ethics mitigates temptations to violence by resisting calls to control, sovereignty, or mastery and by welcoming the potential end of a world.

Queerly Tragic, Tragically Queer

Is it enough for politics in impasses to merely follow queer trajectories? Might queerness contribute more to politics in impasses than blows to the pressure points of attachments? What is entailed by affirming queerness in relation to futures that could be—whether they are futures that we want, whether they are futures that change what we want?

⁴⁸ See the “Queer Inhumanisms” issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, No. 2-3 (June 2015), edited by Mel Y. Chen and Dana Luciano.

By advocating a politics with elements of affirmation, I depart from queer theorists who view the affirmative per se as foolishly utopian, or conservative, or oppressively normative, or uncritically optimistic. Edelman is one of them. Love is another. She criticizes the “affirmative turn” in queer studies for attempting to secure “a more stable and positive identity in the present” by immunizing queers from the bad affects of the past (*FB*, 34). That effort, she continues, blots out shame, loneliness, and melancholy by the radiance of gay pride that lights the way for a politics of visibility and inclusion. By doing so, the affirmative endeavors of gays and lesbians values positive over negative affects, prop up fantasies of sovereignty, lay out a path of progress, and fold into liberal multiculturalism.

Love might be amenable to a notion of affirmation that, in Connolly’s words, “problematize[s] the present by recourse to the past without promising a perfect time in the past to return to” (*ID*, 182). Connolly recalls Love’s turn backwards to the past while elaborating that a genealogical element makes the contingency of identity worthy of affirmation (*ID*, 183). This form of genealogy differs from the one that is criticized by Love for “looking for high points of pride, gender flexibility, and resistance” (*FB*, 127). On my reading, the problem lies not with affirmation itself but what is affirmed, the manner in which affirmation proceeds, and the openness that it has to negativity. And, as Connolly emphasizes, dismissing affirmation entirely may be politically dangerous; it generates a passive nihilism that inflames existential resentment.

To elaborate a tragic form of affirmation, I first turn to Nietzsche via Sara Ahmed. Like Love, Ahmed criticizes the amalgamation of positive affects, activity, and ethics into a teleology of happiness that, among other things, dismisses negative affects

and overlooks how seemingly passive subjects are buzzing with creativity. Nietzsche and Deleuze are the primary culprits of what she calls the “affirmative turn.” Ahmed believes that Nietzsche problematically divides the happy and the unhappy by activity and passivity and by affirmation and negation. Insofar as the happy, noble, self-affirming ones are “well-bred,” Nietzsche’s notion of happiness is based on “the exclusion of the empirical and the contingent.”⁴⁹ What results is a “fantasy of self-control” that leads one to secure positive feelings, good encounters, and affirmative activity alone, all of which are held to be ethical goods.⁵⁰

Ahmed’s important critique of the promise of happiness—its normative framework, its teleological temporality, its lines of difference by race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation—is more applicable to cultural regimes of positive thinking⁵¹ than to Nietzsche’s tragic notion of joy. Ahmed neglects the place of suffering, impermanence, and the tragic in Nietzsche’s accounts of joy, nobility, and affirmation. Moreover, Ahmed folds her critique of joy into a larger critique of the “promise of happiness” and thus misses how joy and happiness produce different effects.⁵²

I read Nietzsche as concerned with impasse though he does not use the term. He addresses the loss or insufficiency of God, truth, morality, human nature, and politics as anchors for living. He writes much of struggles to thrive in the face of impermanence, suffering, and mortality. A number of Nietzsche’s aphorisms dramatize impasse, such as

⁴⁹ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 207.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁵¹ Barbara Ehrenreich makes mincemeat of US cultures of positive thinking in *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America* (New York, NY: Picador, 2009).

⁵² Ahmed does note that joy and happiness emerge from different genealogies but ultimately believes that they produce similar effects insofar as thinkers like Deleuze, Brian Massumi, and Rosi Braidotti enshrine joy as the goal for which we should aim (*The Promise of Happiness*, 214).

his famous aphorism on the death of God, which includes thick descriptions of existential free-fall, rituals of coping, and inventions of new values to come.⁵³ Or take his aphorism on the double-bind of habits, those attachments that initially promise eternal satisfaction but eventually dissolve, soliciting both nausea and gratitude.⁵⁴ Or those aphorisms in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* on the redemption of broken lives in the face of the irreversibility of time,⁵⁵ on the dark period between the destruction of old tablets of morality and filling out new ones,⁵⁶ or the many moments in which Zarathustra is shocked into solitude, meditation, and reverie. Nietzsche provides conceptual, ethical, and political resources for tending to impasse even if he largely steered clear of politics. I turn to his writings on joy and the tragic to elaborate a political engagement with impasse.

For Nietzsche, the most cherished sources of joy can be shattered when others are unavailable. The suffering induced by impermanence generates a horrifying thought: our flourishing is contingent rather than guaranteed; it is not in the soft hands of a god, a natural purpose, or fate. Not even all the muscle and smarts of the world can save us from

⁵³ “What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?...

“How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1974], 181). Cited hereafter in this chapter as *GS*.

⁵⁴ “I always believe that here is something that will give me lasting satisfaction... And now it nourishes me at noon and in the evening and spreads a deep contentment all around itself and deep into me so that I desire nothing else... But one day its time is up; the good thing parts from me, not as something that has come to nauseate me but peacefully and sated with me as I am with it... Even then something new is waiting at the door...” (*GS*, 236-7.)

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Redemption” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 1995), 137-42. Cited hereafter in this chapter as *TSZ*.

⁵⁶ “On Old and New Tablets” in *TSZ*, 196.

the terror of time. Sooner or later we will face the unbearable, and for what? The answer would make even the mightiest of us tremble...

How, then, to cultivate joy? Zarathustra struggles before eventually proclaiming: “The world is deep. / Deeper than day had been aware. / Deep is its woe; / Joy—deeper yet than agony: / Woe implores: Go! / But all joy wants eternity— / Wants deep, wants deep eternity” (*TSZ*, 324). Although suffering and those who are hellbent on holding others responsible for their woes are belched up by the world, Zarathustra realizes that the world itself doesn’t deserve to be denigrated.⁵⁷ The world is deep. It is rich. It secretes all sorts of ugly, lovely things that it later consumes as nutrition for the production of something worthy of love. This process, by which the world becomes something else, continues without end. Zarathustra, as does Whitehead, Whitman, and Connolly, professes a “world of becoming” that periodically throws itself into new configurations.⁵⁸ A range of affects flows from this condition: woe, which invokes the desire for change; joy, in moments that desire eternity. For Zarathustra, joy bespeaks an attachment to this world:

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, 'You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!' then you wanted *all* back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored—oh, then you *loved* the world. (*TSZ*, 323)

Joy arises because of all that preceded it—all suffering, all weakness. Even existential

⁵⁷ “There is much filth in the world; that much is true. But that does not make the world itself a filthy monster” (*TSZ*, 205).

⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1968), 549-550; *WB*.

resentment is part of the world that is affirmed in joy. Because all things, according to Zarathustra, are so connected that a moment of joy could not occur otherwise, anyone who would affirm joy must affirm a world that also issues in woe, suffering, and existential resentment—even if these are not worthy of affirmation. Zarathustra’s notion of affirmation does not locate joy in any particular source; joy lies in intensity, ephemerality, and contingency.

This form of affirmation includes the possibility of oneself being dismantled and changed. Joy shapes an affirmative orientation that operates even when feelings are bad. Connolly builds an ethics and politics from connections between the sweetness of life and tragic possibility that he, following Deleuze, calls “belief in this world.”⁵⁹ According to Connolly, people no longer sense belonging to be automatic or secure. Akin to what I call “attachment,” “belonging” entails “the feeling of comfort that comes with the image of a close, layered fit between self and world and between collectivity and world.”⁶⁰ Belonging also involves what Deleuze calls a “sensory-motor schema” that allows action and reaction to flow smoothly. When belonging is jeopardized, people find their sensorium upset, teeter on the edge of despair, and feel the rising tide of *ressentiment*. The potential loss of belief in this world is an impasse matter that is productively addressed by, in Connolly’s words, “translat[ing] the fantasy of either automatically belonging to the world or exerting consummate mastery over it into existential belief in a world replete with powers of

⁵⁹ Deleuze develops this idea in light of the desolation of European landscapes in World War II. Neo-realist films depicted ruptures in sensory-motor schema through pure optical and sound situations in which characters, no longer able to act and react, become seers. The task of restoring belief in this world was, according to Deleuze, taken up by Carl Theodore Dreyer, Roberto Rossellini, and Jean-Luc Godard. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

⁶⁰ William E. Connolly, “Freedom, Teleodynamism, Creativity,” *Foucault Studies* No. 17 (April 2014), 72.

metamorphosis and uncanny shocks that periodically jolt us from stupor.”⁶¹ In other words, belief in this world acknowledges impasse to be an inevitable feature of life in a world of becoming. Cultivation of belief in this world involves the development of a tragic vision.

According to Connolly, humans guided by a tragic vision strive to attune to forces beyond their control and understanding, to the vicissitudes of time that periodically issue surprising events, and to the development of attachments that are vitalizing yet flexible and open to abandonment.⁶² It recalls what Ahmed calls a “politics of the hap,” which affords greater latitude to chance happenings that pull subjects into queer trajectories and make possible alternative worlds.⁶³ More than a politics of the hap, a tragic vision affirms the real creativity of a world of becoming by acknowledging the powers and propensities of nonhumans. In short, a tragic vision disputes providence, human sovereignty, and teleological models of time while striving to positively cultivate joy and flourishing from amidst rather than at the expense of woe and suffering.

A tragic vision mitigates temptations to violence in response to the experience of impasses. (1) It affirms that humans act without sovereignty as the world rolls on despite our wishes that it stay, as it braces itself despite our wishes that it change. (2) It affirms suffering as an unavoidable feature of human life rather than as the result of subjects who can be punished as responsible agents. (3) It affirms nonetheless that we aren’t condemned

⁶¹ Ibid., 73.

⁶² “You approach a tragic vision if you doubt the providential image of time, reject the compensatory idea that humans can master all the forces that impinge upon life, strive to cultivate wisdom about a world that is neither designed for our benefit nor plastic enough to be putty in our hands, and cultivate temporal sensitivity to how this or that concatenation of events could issue in the worst” (Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, 121).

⁶³ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 223.

to misery and despair. (4) It encourages positive attachments to the world from joy, however momentary and fleeting it may be. In these ways, a tragic vision centers joy as an important resource for a politics that would dampen the cruel optimisms and dogmatisms that arise due to existential resentment in the face of impasse.

(5) A politics informed by a tragic vision engages the paradox of identity \difference by affirming the fragmentation and incompleteness of identity rather than denigrating them as the effects of disturbances that ought to be contained. Love and Muñoz provide resonant accounts of how that paradox might be engaged. While acknowledging the importance of anti-identitarian work in queer theory, Love notes that identity itself can be queered: “negative or ambivalent identifications with the past can serve to disrupt the present” (*FB*, 45). Love ends up criticizing the “affirmative bias” of identity, not identity itself. But affirmation, as described above, need not have a stabilizing effect. Nietzsche, Zarathustra, and Connolly provide alternatives. Muñoz provides another when he writes that “identity practices such as queerness and hybridity are... spaces of productivity where identity’s fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated” (*D*, 79). While recalling the paradox of difference at the heart of identity, Muñoz emphasizes that identity can be transformed into a political space by minoritarian subjects. And while echoing Love’s account of queerness and contestation, Muñoz more positively describes how minoritarian practices of disidentification orbit identity even as its subjects become undone. In this manner, identity is neither fixed nor dispensable. Identities can be cultivated but never finalized. They may attain a dominant character but never one that is fully smoothed and shined. A tragic politics holds the jagged, conflictual nature of identity as worthy of affirmation. And it posits that affirmation of those

fractures do not suture up identity but carry it on queer trajectories.

(6) A politics guided by a tragic vision keeps futurity open. Futures loom in the present impasse. The impermanence of attachments means that life is periodically drawn into real impasses and not just minor setbacks. Like Muñoz's utopian orientation, this tragic vision strives to push toward an open future beyond the constraints of pragmatic endeavors. It dissents from Edelman's call for an end to the future as such and heeds instead Love's vision of "a future apart from the reproductive imperative, optimism, and the promise of redemption" (*FB*, 147). Love observes that the lure of the future is troubling but finds it to be important nonetheless (*FB*, 162). A queer politics seeks to neither brighten the future nor abandon it to darkness; it strives "to make a future backward enough that even the most reluctant among us might want to live there" (*FB*, 163). The affirmative practices generated by a tragic vision respond to Love's invitation to imagine a backwards future, which carries a small utopian wish. A tragic vision understands that such a task originates in impasses, wherein futures rise up like smoke from the embers of a dying present. A tragic vision finds such possibility in a world of becoming, a cosmos of multiple actants, human and not, that pull us into queer trajectories. It keeps the future open by rendering it backwards—that is, by twisting it away from any settled notion of the good life.

Queerness and the tragic both affirm the value of periodically becoming undone, of developing a sensitivity to queer trajectories, of reckoning with a lack of sovereignty, and of finding ways to survive and thrive in a world that don't guarantee one's flourishing. Some strands of queerness, however, compel a politics of tragic affirmation to allow a broader role for woe in impasses. Whereas Connolly advises the cultivation of

attachments from the sweetness of life from within the tragic possibilities of a world of becoming, queerness delivers an experience of becoming undone through dark affects.

The dangers of woe are many. Nietzsche and Connolly are rightly concerned that woe might furnish existential resentment; it leads one into “otherworldly” fantasies that denigrate this world, concoct a salvational God, and target others as responsible for one’s suffering. Reminiscent of these concerns, Berlant criticizes the genre of sentimentality for generating fantasies of a life without suffering.⁶⁴ She describes the appropriation of these fantasies, which originated in the politics of racial, sexual, and gender minorities, by Reaganite conservatives who exaggerated disturbances to their privilege as social and existential suffering to be alleviated through the heteronormalization and privatization of politics.⁶⁵ Differences aside, Nietzsche, Connolly, and Berlant remain wary of the political capital of pain, suffering, and woe, which can disconnect politics from down-to-earth struggles and take a violent turn.

On my reading, Nietzsche, Connolly, and Berlant issue hesitations but not dismissals. Nietzsche observes that suffering can be “the sign of a crucial and most essential growth, of the transition to new conditions of existence.”⁶⁶ More than a sign, however, dark affects might motivate political action. As Connolly notes, “resentment is often a needed impetus to action, even if it carries the danger of becoming transfigured into *ressentiment*. It is existential resentment we worry about most, the kind that is apparent today in practices of capitalist greed, religious exclusivity, media bellicosity, authoritarian

⁶⁴ Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, Politics” in *Cultural Studies & Political Theory*, ed. Jodi Dean (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 42-62.

⁶⁵ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 2.

⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 69.

strategies, sexual narrowness, and military aggression” (*WB*, 66). Finally, Berlant also finds some political potential in sentimentality. She admits that sentimental works of art bear witness to another world that is presently unlivable but nonetheless accessible as a feeling.⁶⁷

The problem is not dark affects themselves but where they might land. The political question is how the possibilities for other worlds that are found in woe, pain, resentment, and other dark affects might be pursued without furnishing dogmatism or cruel optimism.

Dark affects in an impasse express utopian longings that could lead politics to detachment from a world. I read woe as potentially utopian because, according to Zarathustra, woe wants the moment to end, wants the here and now to pass; it was in pain that Candide’s Leibnizian view of the world fell into crisis and in which other worlds and other futures became palpable. If the present feels like a step on a fated path, then woe opens futures that are not predetermined.

The political import of this point becomes evident in a turn to Berlant’s comments on the relationship between history, affect, and politics. Berlant implies that dark affects flag something wrong in a world. When guided by a historical sensibility, one might find in dark affects the motivation for political rather than personal change.⁶⁸ “History hurts,” Berlant writes, “but not only. It also engenders optimism in response to the oppressive

⁶⁷ “For many people, sentimentality and the fantasy of a better proximate world so close that one can experience it affectively without being able to live it objectively produces art that does, that transports people somewhere into a *situation* for a minute” (Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 31).

⁶⁸ “To think of the world as organized around the impersonality of structures and practices that conventionalize desire, intimacy, and even one’s own personhood was to realize how unavoidable the experience of being personal, of having personality, is. Out of this happy thought came an orientation toward fidelity to inclinations of all sorts, including those intellectual and political” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 125).

presence of what dominates or is taken for granted.”⁶⁹ History reveals that dominant orders of power are neither natural nor unavoidable—a powerful lesson, especially when other worlds fail to gain traction and a dominant one appears to be set in stone. In the face of long-standing systems of power, dark affects bloom through tiny disturbances, unhinged moments, wayward experiences, perverse desires, wild imaginations, radical politics. They unfold queer trajectories, away from the world that is and toward worlds that could be.

Berlant describes the political importance of tarrying with queer trajectories: “Political emotions are responses to prospects for change: fidelity to those responses is optimistic, even if the affects are dark.”⁷⁰ This echo of Nietzsche’s existential affirmation of becoming resounds on a political register. What one could call Berlant’s tragic sensibility is an understanding of political fidelities to dark affects rather than solely to joy or the sweetness of life. This sensibility might be sensed further when Berlant flags the risks of “having to survive, once again, disappointment or depression, the protracted sense that nothing will change and that no-one, especially oneself, is teachable after all.”⁷¹ In an impasse, to be teachable is to allow oneself to be queered, to be hit by the unbearable and ferried away or disintegrated, to resist the urge to readily gather oneself and one’s world back together, especially when it demands trouncing lives and happenings that seem awry in order to protect the good life.

Impasse poses a tough question: how might one live and live on when the very sources and possibilities of attachments to this world are threatened, inhibited, seem to be

⁶⁹ Ibid., 121.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁷¹ Ibid., 121-2.

mere fantasy, or turn out to exact dire costs from us and from others? This is the question of cruel optimism which asks, as Berlant phrases it, “To what life, after all, is one recommitting, once the thing that stood in for a life worth attaching to no longer obtains?”⁷² Impasse surely does not threaten all our attachments at once, not all attachments are equally valuable or grounding, and the unbearable does not destroy us when it threatens our anchors. I am also not saying that the minoritized, the abjected, or those who are otherwise caught up in exhaustion, decay, ordinary suffering, and everyday aggression do not have attachments to this world or reasons to persist; as Sexton notes, black exhaustion does not foreclose “the labor of critical reflection, the hope of organized political action, or, for that matter, the enjoyment of a vibrant and sustaining cultural life.”⁷³ For abjected groups, the question of persistence has been of the utmost importance.⁷⁴ My point is that the sweetness of life, joy, and belief in this world are imperiled in impasses and no longer anchor politics as they might in other predicaments. It is also that the possibilities of political change may be felt more acutely in dark affects, which are no less worthy of affirmation even if joy seems far removed, even if change is not guaranteed to come, even if change might amount to worlds that are more constraining, more coercive, more deadly. Such an orientation is, of course, insufficient. It nonetheless remains invaluable as part of a broader array of politics within impasse.

Impasse compels a politics of tragic affirmation to draw greater sustenance from dark affects. This politics does not rely on sweetness to compensate for suffering, as

⁷² Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 38.

⁷³ Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness,” 45.

⁷⁴ Berlant notes the importance of persistence in José Esteban Muñoz's thought in “On Persistence,” *Social Text* Vol. 32, No. 4 (Winter 2014), 33-7.

Nietzsche seems to wish for when writing that the Dionysian element in the tragic means “Saying yes to life, *even* in its strangest and hardest problems,”⁷⁵ or as Connolly seems to do when he writes “*Even* a contingent identity is worth living. *Even* a life that ends in oblivion is sweet. *Even* suffering, up to some undefinable point, is worth the living that brings it” (*ID*, 171; emphasis mine).⁷⁶ While I appreciate Nietzsche’s and Connolly’s efforts to mitigate the reduction of lives to misery, those “evens” leave me pause. They parse positive and negative affect, such that problems, contingency, oblivion, and suffering are viewed as apart from and antithetical to joy and life. Following Ahmed, Ann Cvetkovich, Jack Halberstam, and other feminist and queer scholars working around the rubric of “Public Feelings,” I suspend prioritizations of positive affects over negative ones so to explore the ethical and political possibilities that arise within the darkness of impasse.⁷⁷ As Ahmed writes, “We might need to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them but to learn by [sic] how we are affected by what comes near, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as an ethical resource.”⁷⁸ Ahmed describes how the ethical does not need to be tethered to a notion of identity or action, as Connolly puts it. Nor does it issue from joy. Instead, this side of ethics involves the suspension of activity in favor of a sharper attunement to what undoes us in impasse.

⁷⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Duncan Large (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80; emphasis mine.

⁷⁶ Connolly, of course, does not mean belief in this world to excuse suffering under regimes of power (*WB*, 66). My hesitation lies whether attachments to the sweetness of life and belief in this world *too easily* brush aside woe, agony, and suffering.

⁷⁷ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

⁷⁸ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 216.

Furthermore, the notion of affirmation that Zarathustra locates in redemption is insensitive to political abjection. While suspicious of outsourcing redemption to a God who would reward those who suffer in this life, Zarathustra maintains that redemption is important because it prevents humans from slipping into nihilism and succumbing to *ressentiment*. This earthy redemption confronts the inability of the will to either undo the vicissitudes of time or to overcome the condition of living in a world that one neither created nor can act sovereignly within. “Powerless against what has been done,” Zarathustra speaks, “he is an angry spectator of all that is past” (*TSZ*, 139). Here, Zarathustra resonates with Love regarding an image of the past that escapes human control. While Love acknowledges the negative force of the past, Zarathustra strives to channel it through creative acts; one might, according to Zarathustra aspire to “redeem those who lived in the past and to create all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’” (*TSZ*, 139). Zarathustra does not mean that one should take responsibility for one’s lot; rather, he means that working upon oneself and one’s world is an integral component of affirmation even if the outcomes of doing so may not be controlled or even anticipated. This noble form of redemption affirms the irreversibility of time and the lack of sovereign agency while also affirming that differences can be made. Oriented thus, one strives to become worthy to time. Without redemption, time would be experienced as “the greatest weight” (*GS*, 273-4).

While important for a politics of tragic affirmation in impasses, this form of redemption might cede too much to what appears to be fated at the present moment. Zarathustra’s framework runs the risk of presenting the abjected as “powerless,” “angry spectators” because the past is held to be settled. Although I agree with Zarathustra that

affirming this world as complex and susceptible to change may quell the flames of *ressentiment*, my stomach turns at the broad scope of his understanding of redemption.

The line between affirming this world and affirming the powers that be in it is quite thin where the weight of the past is held to be fated, as though systems of power have been successfully consolidated. It is worth sharpening this subtle line to modify affirmation in light of impasse. Can we acknowledge the powerful force of dominant regimes *and* their incompleteness, which attests to both their inability to become an airtight structure and to the potency of alternatives that are already available? Can we be creative and redemptive without having to affirm the past as over and done with?

Riffing on Zarathustra, one might shift from affirming the “it was” to affirming “it could have been otherwise.” By this, I do not mean that the past is merely what anyone says it is. This affirmation acknowledges the past that happened and that amounted to longstanding systems of abjection while raising the volume of the powers of the false. In short, this tragic affirmation tends to the pasts *that were not*. These pasts are the strange temporalities that lie between the pasts that did happen and the lives and worlds that could not be at a given moment. They bear the potentialities sparked of friction between different pasts. A version of the pasts that were not is found in Peter Coviello’s work on mid- to late-nineteenth century American writers who explored “the experience of sexuality as something in the crosshairs of a number of forms of knowledge and regulation but not yet wholly captivated or made coordinate by them.”⁷⁹ Writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson sensed the imminent solidification of publicly policed sexual identity (which would emerge around the Oscar

⁷⁹ Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties*, 7.

Wilde trials) and expressed pluripotential longings, desires, and intimacies that to us are early, to them were untimely. Coviello finds, in words apt for the politics of impasse that I'm developing,

a yearning without a viable path toward its own fulfillment; a politics not resigned but forestalled; an unwillingness to cede to the terms of a given social world, even in the absence of usable alternatives to it; or a multiply-inflected cathexis of the bare possibility of an arrived future that might, if not redeem, at least alter the intractable terms of the present tense.⁸⁰

A tragic affirmation that follows the pluripotentiality of the past might be seen as hopelessly utopian. Precisely! It is hopeless because it finds hope to cede too much to dominant systems of power and their temporalities, which project the past as settled and the future as determined. It is utopian insofar as it rejects that temporality in favor of the potency that arises between undead pasts and incipient futures. This tragic affirmation emerges where the untimely and the utopian meet. It explores the pluripotentialities that linger in an impasse as the ghosts of pasts that could not have been, of futures unrealized, of potencies that are alive and yet cannot quite be lived.

This tragic affirmation would, furthermore, draw upon a different image of time than the one posited by Zarathustra. The inability to undo time presumes that an event has lapsed into the past and attained the status of "fate." But politics in impasses does not only have to face the immovable weight of the past. It also faces a backwards, pluripotent past that continues to shape-shift through its ongoing life. In short, this tragic affirmation concerns not events but impasses.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 20-1.

Queerness draws the tragic into a political register that affirms the pluripotentiality of an undead past to contest dominant systems of power. From this position, Nietzsche's notion of joy seems to be caught up in an all-or-nothing bind: "If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things."⁸¹ Are individual self-sufficiency or a tightly-knit whole the only options? Writing against individualism and holism, Connolly opts for a "connectionism" that he derives from William James. In James's pluriverse, things are neither self-contained nor mere parts of a larger whole. It is full of "connections [that] are typically loose, incomplete, and themselves susceptible to potential change... The connections are punctuated by 'litter' circulating in, between, and around them" (*WB*, 35). This connectionism accounts for a world of becoming while avoiding the holistic eternality that is posited by Nietzsche in his later works.⁸² It allows Connolly to develop a notion of affirmation that does not affirm those systems of power that "make people suffer too much" (*WB*, 66). In this light, tragic affirmation does not affirm this world simply because it can issue in joy or only to mitigate existential resentment. It casts a critical eye on attachments to this world to gauge whether and how they bear the ghosts

⁸¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 532.

⁸² Further developing his earlier insights into the eternal return, Nietzsche writes that the world might be parsed into a "calculable number of combinations" that would be realized and repeated eternally if time were infinite "If the world may be thought of as a certain definite quantity of force and as a certain definite number of centers of force... it follows that, in the great dice game of existence, it must pass through a calculable number of combinations. In infinite time, every possible combination would at some time or another be realized; more: it would be realized an infinite number of times. And since between very combination and its next recurrence all other possible combinations would have to take place, and each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the same series, a circular movement of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated: the world as a circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game *ad infinitum*" (*Will to Power*, 549). It is worth noting that Nietzsche writes conjecturally here. Rather than long cycles of time, "eternal return" could designate instead the periodic recurrence of intensive moments, of bifurcations in time, that issue in novelty. I would prefer to read Nietzsche this way, as does Connolly (*WB*, 110-1; *FT*, 217 n. 3) and Gilles Deleuze (*Difference & Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton [New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994], 298-9).

of abjection. It also strives to become willing to be pulled into impasses and changed by them, even as the experience of impasse threatens what matters.

In short, the tragic affirmation that I support is queered. It does not find joy to be “deeper” than woe. It does not only use attachments to the sweetness of life as the resource for politics in the impasse. Instead, it risks a lot, perhaps too much at times. It affirms what is unknown and indeterminate. What troubles confidence and optimism. What dispels fantasies of sovereignty. It affirms what, *because* of these dark aspects, can deliver a utopian sense if not a belief in worlds that are palpable even if they are unimaginable.

You’re Gonna Carry that Weight...

The uncertainties and indeterminacies of impasse entail that queerness and the tragic are not so tightly woven to form a straightforward program of ethical and political activity. First, the negativity of queerness is insufficient to detachment in impasses and does not in itself resist temptations to violence. The experiences of becoming undone can provoke violent reactions. Queerness must be connected to a tragic affirmation that resists holding others responsible for one’s suffering even as systems of power must continue to be challenged.

Second, the negativity of queerness does not in itself engage the positive task of cultivating new attachments. Restricting queerness to an ethics of inhabiting negativity, as Edelman’s, is too risky at a time when, as Connolly puts it, the conservative right in the US pursues an aggressive neoliberal agenda by depicting politics to be a lost cause (*FT*, 192). I also agree with Muñoz that there is an urgent need to pursue habitable futures for

queerness, blackness, indigeneity, the crossings between, and much more besides. Queer negativity splinters open a timeline that seems fated but does not in itself seek a fleshed-out future. At some undefined point, queer negativity needs to be connected with activities like self-cultivation, role experimentation, and world-making, utopian disidentifications. Reworked through queer negativity, these affirmative political practices are not socially conservative. They cultivate the utopian longings of dark affects into a breathing space for refiguring living.

Finally, queerness needs tragic affirmation because one might not be successful in detaching from or dismantling dominant systems of power. Attachments carry the weight of time. If the past accumulates and doesn't bend to our will, we may never lose attachments which have been constitutive for us and our worlds. Attachments have formed out of our control and cannot be willfully unmade. We may only ever adjust them, recalibrate them, disidentify with them to an unknown extent so that their hold is diminished as they nonetheless continue to hum in the background of our lives.⁸³

If we are unable to leave attachments behind, then we are unable to leave impasses behind. I question Berlant's suggestion that we know later that a situation was an impasse since it presumes that we can know when we've moved beyond an impasse.⁸⁴ But impasses can return in newer forms when you think they're over. Their arrival raises questions that hadn't been considered, induces new affects and relations, changes one's attachments along the way. Or maybe they had been lurking about all along. Perhaps

⁸³ Ahmed asks "How do we know whether we are holding on to something that has gone, or letting go of something that is present?" (*The Promise of Happiness*, 189).

⁸⁴ "An impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the lag one hopes to have been experiencing all along (otherwise it's the end), it marks a delay. Because you can only know later that this was an impasse" (Berlant, "Starved," 434).

impasses are undead, and nothing can ensure that what haunts us and tears us apart will stay entombed once the waters calm down.⁸⁵

Attempts to resolve these questions philosophically render one insensate to the potentialities of specific impasses. It might, as Nietzsche says, disable participation in this world by elevating one to a merely spectatorial position (*GS*, 241-2). Impasses deny such a position by unsettling our confidence in what we know and how. From within an impasse, something new might emerge. Or business might roll on as usual.

Ethics and politics should keep queerness and the tragic in torsion and be adjusted to the potentialities of the different moments of impasses. We strive to avoid barricading ourselves against the force of negativity and barreling forward toward a predetermined end. We cultivate openness to loss even if what comes may leave us lost. We strive to find in dark affects resources, tools, and lifelines that are so many alternatives however frail they may be. We strive for worlds that are unimaginable though real—even if those worlds turn out to be ones that we cannot control, that do not facilitate our access to the good life, and that do not erase the possibility that someday, when we least expect it, we will be undone, again and again, as an impasse returns, if it ever left at all...

⁸⁵ Along these lines, “impasse” bears a family resemblance to what Connolly describes as a “rift in being.” Reading Zarathustra’s aphorism “On the Vision and the Riddle,” Connolly describes intensive moments caught up between the irreversibility of the past and the openness of the future. “This disjunctive conjunction of chance and fate,” Connolly writes, “is the rift in being” (William E. Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality* [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002], 123).

Sometimes you manage to gather enough of a self to stumble through the day. The charade convinces other people and sometimes it even convinces you. You've moved on. You've grown. You're okay.

But then *it* happens. It rises in the wake of just about anything, such as a scent or an aimless walk. A time of year. A swarm of things nameable and not.

From the ashes of torched dreams rises the past with a terrible force. It sprouts new tendrils. Grabs what it encounters. Feeds upon their life and shape-shifts. You get dragged into its powerful hold, a hold that could have been there all along.

You're supported only by your bed. Your will is a puddle on the floor. Everything feels so still, every surface so slippery. It's raining. Thousands of painful memories plink all around. It's dim, and then it's dark.

Weeks pass. Then months. Years. The outbreaks are rare but they recur. They puncture gains made. Turn your strengths against you. Make you distrust yourself and your world.

Once again you are caught up in the hard labor of letting go. But someday the realization may hit: it was never here. And now the illusion that it had been is gone too...

Afterthought

An afterthought is a little something that steps on the scene belatedly. It is an addition born of a pause in which intensities work their quiet magic. A deepening of that happy, awkward space between ending, shifting, stumbling, bumbling. An offshoot of the past that reaches toward new destinies. A time for pause and flight.

Writing this dissertation has been frustrating. It has proceeded through fits and starts, mad outbursts and many, many pauses. After bolting through a paragraph or agonizing over a phrase, I often found myself silent and stunned, unable to pull together a thought. My mind drifted amongst all sorts of half-formed feelings and inconsequentialities. Details wouldn't latch on. Time evaporated. The room felt so still. I forced myself to dwell in those moments, to allow them to unwind their quiet life and to maybe—hopefully—teach me something. They would derail a day, a week. Meanwhile, anxiety thickened amongst the urgency of finishing and a sad job market. The piles of books and articles grew overwhelming, too much. My capacity to juggle so many things without enough hands was tested. I felt bad. Sometimes those feelings summoned an ecology of memories. Old wounds reopened. Were they ever closed? Had I ever been over them, only to find myself relapsing now? Or had those impasses ensnared me all these years?

Can the dark, strange, sometimes wonderful experience of impasses be adequately addressed through the usual tools of political inquiry, such as argumentation, justification, and prescription? The difficulties of developing a concept of impasse from within one are many: it is uncertain whether one is at an impasse at all; what the situation will have become remains to be seen; one's usual means of understanding the world are troubled

and hence unreliable. These difficulties may be virtues for political inquiry, though theorists who are committed to a clear, well-argued image of the world would disagree. Although no one has yet determined what political inquiry could do, the discipline of political theory sanctions certain methods and objects of knowledge at the expense of others. It often develops concepts that would be merely applied to situations. It tends to privilege rigorous argumentation, deploy prescriptions, and remain overly enamored of clarity. Becomings are evacuated in favor of snapshots that are made to fit disciplinary frames and to respect coveted jargon of big systems and big -isms. The traffic in disciplinary knowledge doesn't begin to approach worlds as live wires of forces that electrify life or shock it into suspense. In this mode, political inquiry is outpaced by the world it describes and tries to intervene in.

I have had to improvise ways of remaining faithful to the experiences of impasse while working around the genres of political theory and the dissertation form. Because impasses are dense with uncertainty and indeterminacy, they, in Berlant's words, "can only be approached awkwardly, described around, shifted."¹ To write impasse is to sustain a bit of its awkwardness and messiness.

This afterthought performs a political theory of impasse by taking up an impasse between settlement and decolonization in Hawai'i. Rather than focusing on the well-documented historical details of coloniality, it expresses one way in which settler colonialism manages to persist despite federal acknowledgement of the illegality of the overthrow, evidence of the continued legal existence of the Kingdom of Hawai'i, and the

¹ Lauren Berlant, "Starved," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007), 435.

vibrancy of Native Hawaiian sovereignty movements.² I find that persistence to be due to affective attachments to Hawai'i as home. Most critical scholarship on Asian settler colonialism in Hawai'i demonstrates that imaginations of local Asian identity are framed by a fantasy of multicultural, liberal democracy that obscures and continues the dispossession of Native Hawaiians. These criticisms employ the important practice of demystification, or of the unveiling of Hawai'i as a settler colony, which could facilitate the decolonization of settler subjectivities when the proper affective sensibility is in place.³ Without that sensibility, however, local Asians may continue to embrace settler life. Here, I seek to align critique and affect in the service of decolonization.

The use of "Asian settler colonialism" has been criticized for dividing settlers and

² In 1893, a group of white businessmen with the help of the United States Military forced Queen Lili'uokalani to surrender her throne. An investigation by Congressman James Blount and confirmed by then-President Grover Cleveland concluded that the overthrow was illegal. Nonetheless, an oligarchy of white plantation owners ruled Hawai'i until it was annexed by the US in 1898 despite widespread opposition by Native Hawaiians. In 1959, Hawai'i became the fiftieth state through a ballot that erased independence as an option by restricting voter choice to remaining a territory or becoming a state. On the one hundredth anniversary of the overthrow, the US Congress acknowledged that Native Hawaiians never relinquished their claims to sovereignty. The so-called "Apology Resolution" has not, however, amounted to any substantive legal claims to 1.8 million acres of ceded lands. Meanwhile, what few institutions there are to protect Native interests have been susceptible to legal attacks on the grounds that Native Hawaiians are a race rather than a nation. At the same time, efforts for Native sovereignty have pursued many avenues, from federal recognition to international law.

For a sample of readings that trace these dynamics, see Jodi A. Byrd, "Satisfied with Stones: Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization and the Discourses of Resistance" in *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 147-83; Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, Ikaika Hussey, and Erin Kahunawaika'ala Wright (eds.), *A Nation Rising: Hawaiian Movements for Life, Land, and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "Diasporic Deracinations and 'Off-Island' Hawaiians," *The Contemporary Pacific* Vol. 19, No. 1 (2007), 137-60, and *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

³ I am inspired by Jane Bennett, who writes that "There will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement or extension of rights without human dispositions, moods, and cultural ensembles hospitable to these effects" (*Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010], xii).

Native Hawaiians in ways that run counter to political progress.⁴ The term also seems to presume that all Asians, regardless of ethnicity, are equally implicated in and benefiting from settler colonialism. While acknowledging these points, I use “Asian settler colonialism” because it rightly emphasizes that Native Hawaiians are not a racial minority that seek civil rights but a nation with unique claims to land and sovereignty—claims that are not shared by Asians in Hawai‘i regardless of differences in socioeconomic and political status. The term also emphasizes that while Native Hawaiians can be local, non-Natives who subscribe to local identity cannot claim indigeneity. Finally, I deploy the term as an exercise in self-critique: as a person of Okinawan and Japanese descent, I am one of the principal beneficiaries of dispossession. Other Asian settler scholars have performed similar self-critiques. I join them while foregrounding affect, attachment, and materiality as productive inroads into Asian settler colonialism and decolonization.

I adopt myself as a case study for a brief autoethnographic exploration of the complicated relationships between settler attachments to home and the afterlife of dispossession as found in homelessness. My autoethnography refracts Asian settler colonialism through my own impasse in my attachment to Hawai‘i as home, which became apparent only *after* I moved to Baltimore—after growing up and living in O‘ahu for twenty-five years. This attachment spans from Hawai‘i to the East Coast of the United States. Its temporality is strange, as it is twisted with reanimated pasts and incipient futures. I compose scenes of ordinary life to “forge a link between self and world, the

⁴ For an overview of and a sharp rejoinder to criticisms of the term “Asian Settler Colonialism,” see Dean Itsuji Saranillio, “Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters: A Thought Piece on Critiques, Debates, and Indigenous Difference,” *Settler Colonial Studies* Vol. 3, Nos. 3-4 (2013), 280-94

abstract and the concrete, the massive and minute, the fuzzy or smudged yet precise.”⁵ In this way, the social, the economic, and the political are registered in ordinary life as forces, textures, rhythms, viscosities, flows, ruts. Ordinary life is both dense and unfinished, full of patternings that take hold and live wires that lead elsewhere.⁶ Attachments to home that underlie Asian settler colonialism ball up, gather momentum, and fall flat in the affective interstices of ordinary life in Hawai‘i and abroad. Asian settler colonialism is at an impasse that calls for the recalibration of the genres of political theory. This afterthought responds to this political and theoretical predicament.

Writing Affect

How might one write from attachments that are foreclosed or in crisis? From atmospheres that are dark and brimming with becomings that recompose the senses? From within times that are strange, haunting, and magical? How to write about something that is enigmatic and that changes, however slightly, during and through the process of writing?

These questions can be situated within broader problems that dog scholarship on affect. What Brian Massumi has called the “autonomy” of affect has generated much suspicion and criticism.⁷ As Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg put it, scholarship that treats affect as transpersonal, preconscious, and asignifying is often demeaned as “chasing tiny firefly intensities that flicker faintly in the night, registering those resonances that vibrate, subtle to seismic, under the flat wash of broad daylight, dramatizing (indeed,

⁵ Kathleen Stewart, “An Autoethnography of What Happens.” in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, eds. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013), 667.

⁶ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁷ For an especially vicious critique, see Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring 2011), 434-472.

for the unconvinced, over-dramatizing) what so often passes beneath mention.”⁸ I find that exercise to be alluring and important, though others certainly do not. The latter assert models of clear and sharp criticism instead of turning observation to what is sensed vaguely, extending inquiry beyond what *they feel* to be empirically or textually secure, situating the value and scope of clarity and hard-edged arguments, and fashioning forms of writing that are at times less self-assured, more tentative, and more experimental, that take loose ends as sometimes virtuous, and that inspire readers to follow their own lines of thought rather than kneel before an author, archive, or discipline. The latter aesthetic is purposed by Seigworth and Gregg’s beautiful and compelling rejoinder, which connects curiosity to a poetics of investigation.

The affects of impasse may inspire more evocative, tentative forms of writing. The task is not to explain impasses from a safe distance (as though such could be done!). It is to write in the midst of forces, propensities, and becomings that impact a writer and unfurl a barrage of wild styles. It is to get stuck and stay stuck. It is to heed the potentiality of the moment even if it feels bad. It pursues a form of critique that “burrow[s] into the generativity of what takes form, hits the senses, shimmers.”⁹ Theory becomes dislodged from prior disciplinary commitments as it is pulled by nascent forms.¹⁰ It emerges in a hazy sentience that lies not in brains but in the midst of things.

Many of the authors gathered in this dissertation have fashioned writerly styles from sensitivity to affects murmuring in the world. Even the academics don’t only argue.

⁸ Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

⁹ Kathleen Stewart, “Afterword: Worlding Refrains” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, 339.

¹⁰ Kathleen Stewart, “Weak Theory in an Unfinished World,” *Journal of Folklore Research* Vol. 45, No. 1 (2008), 72.

They generate an atmospherics. They give expression to affects that pool together as a place or a moment, ball up into worlds, or disperse into latency. The open consistency of ordinary life becomes an inspiration and an energy to be transmitted. Their different projects cull a poetics of attunement from the worlds through which they move.

For example, Lauren Berlant and Jane Bennett cultivate more expressive forms of writing that, across their differences, appeal to the auditory and the sonorous. Seigworth, with his ever keen ear, picks up on how Berlant's writings hum with "extra-human, extra-ordinary belongings and un-belongings together (as extruded through the resonating background of a shared 'something else': traffic, treading water, heaven, bees, labor, desire, electric wires)." ¹¹ A hum is the ambience of friction between materialities that are at once abstract and concrete. On my reading, Berlant does not *describe* the hum of impasse; rather, impasse expresses itself in Berlant's writings as a hum.

This hum sounds like the nonhuman vitality to which Bennett would like us to be attuned. Bennett enlists hearing and sounding, to which I add listening. ¹² Bennett confesses that *Vibrant Matter* replies not only to other books but also "to a call from matter that had organized into things." ¹³ The noise of things does not communicate a message; it buzzes, murmurs. One might hear this sound and ignore it. Or one might listen to it,

¹¹ Gregory J. Seigworth, "Reading Lauren Berlant Writing," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* Vol. 9, No. 4 (December 2012), 348.

¹² Although Bennett does not privilege the auditory as the primary sensorial channel for receiving vibrant matter, sonorous images crackle throughout her writings, occasionally becoming a topic of discussion. See the chapters "Ethical Energetics" and "Attachments and Refrains" in *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 131-74.

¹³ Jane Bennett, "Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency," in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Brooklyn, New York: punctum books, 2012), 238.

sauntering over along a path shaped by vague, alluring noise.¹⁴ Listening is an impassivity, a mode of attunement that hovers between activity and passivity and that leaves humans suspended in the hum of diverse materialities. It registers more than a call to utility, understanding, or action.¹⁵ It spreads out the senses, opening one to disturbances from without and tremors from within.¹⁶

What kind of writing styles might induce listening? Bennett invokes what an interviewer calls a “conversational tone” that, in Bennett’s own words, “invite[s] readers into a collective project” of living experimentally with vibrant matter.¹⁷ This invitational endeavor compels the use of arguments that are rendered simply so as to feel strangely familiar.¹⁸ Bennett also seeks to affect readers on a sub-evaluative register—in “a tingle of skin, a frown of face, a restlessness of the gaze, a vague or unnameable mood.”¹⁹ This

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, for one, distinguishes hearing and listening, noting that the latter involves “straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible” (*Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell [New York: Fordham University Press, 2007], 6). While I appreciate Nancy’s casting of listening as a mode of attending to the elusive, my vital materialist sensibilities consider listening to be more a matter of noise than of meaning, even if the latter is, to Nancy, less about semiotics than an infinitely displaced sense.

¹⁵ Following Henri Bergson, Bennett notes that perception tends to screen materiality for a handle to action: “Sensory attention is continually directed pragmatically toward the potential *utility* of external bodies, rather than toward their noninstrumentalizable aspects or thing-powers” (“Powers of the Hoard,” 263).

¹⁶ Bennett suggests that there may be an ethical value in listening to “subintentional forces within the self (e.g., side perceptions, wayward thoughts, the voice of ‘stress,’ the urge to play or to categorize)” (*The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 155). The ethical practice of listening may attune one to “multiple sites and degrees of micro- and macro-agency” swirling in and about humans, lateralizing their sensibilities along the lines of a material vitality (*ibid.*). I discuss Bennett’s account of distributive agency below.

¹⁷ Jane Bennett and Klaus K. Loenhart, “Vibrant Matter, Zero Landscape: An Interview with Jane Bennett,” *Eurozine*, 19 October 2011, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2011-10-19-loenhart-en.html>. Accessed on 19 October 2011.

¹⁸ Bennett and Loenhart, “Vibrant Matter, Zero Landscape.” Bennett also notes the familiarity of vital materialism in a variant sensibility that had enlivened “childhood experiences in a world populated by animate things rather than passive object” (*VM*, vii.)

¹⁹ Bennett and Loenhart, “Vibrant Matter, Zero Landscape.” These affective reverberations could of course be the expression of evaluation on a non-cognitive register; my point is that they do not need to be evocative of judgment.

inductive approach supports and enriches the invitational one, as when a compelling idea begins to bolt through the bloodstream. To this end, Bennett channels the “material force of words-sounds” to make her arguments more alluring and effective, but not only; she also aims to “tun[e] the human body,” to cultivate its susceptibility to “the frequencies of the material agencies inside and around it.”²⁰ For this task, Bennett raises the volume on the sonority of words and writes in a merry-go-round manner: “I will turn the figures of ‘life’ and ‘matter’ around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange, in something like the way a common word when repeated can become a foreign, nonsense sound” (*VM*, vii). Familiar, yet estranging: Bennett’s writings crackle with nonhuman shocks to the human. They channel a nimbus of affects wherein distinctions between human and nonhuman, life and death, momentum and inertia grow hazy, drawing us to listen closely to the hums of ordinary life.

More poetic, evocative forms of writing have affected me. They have inclined me to seek and develop a keener attunement to the dark experiences of impasse to better channel their intensities in writing. Before pursuing one form through autoethnography, I detail the conceptual and political contours of an impasse in settler Hawai‘i. I begin with an incorporation of new materialisms into Asian American studies and then engage criticisms of local identity in Hawai‘i.

A Machinic Geography of Asian Settler Colonialism

Kandice Chuh observes that Asian American studies, since its origins in 1960s and 1970s activism, has tended to equate justice with the attainment of subjectivity. This is

²⁰ Bennett, “Powers of the Hoard,” 242.

understandable, Chuh continues, because citizenship in the United States has been predicated upon the exclusion of Asian Americans from national identity. The field, however, needs to refigure its “desire for subjectivity” into a “critique of subjectification” due to ongoing racism under liberal multiculturalism, the globalization of capital, and the rise of postcolonial criticisms.²¹ This deconstructive approach would treat “Asian American” as a “subjectless discourse” and inflect the pursuit of justice away from both the closure of Asian American identity and the mere inclusion of Asian Americans into prevailing modes of subjectivity in the US.

Chuh inspires my approach to local Asian identity as a placeholder for singular lives and worlds. To better grasp the complexities of that identity, I depart from Chuh’s focus on discourse. Although deconstruction helpfully flags the inability of a local Asian identity to unambiguously cohere, a new materialist approach better tracks the emergence and composition of local Asian and the attachments that bind it to the colony.

I follow the materialist insights gleaned by Rachel Lee from posthumanisms and science and technology studies.²² Observing that Asian American artists frequently turn their attention to bodies and body parts, Lee advises the expansion of Asian Americanist inquiry beyond textuality and suspicions of the biological. Asian Americanists have understandably recoiled against the biological for its racist valences. But what if Asian American studies were to give greater attention to racialized bodies in their parts and

²¹ Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 151.

²² Rachel C. Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014).

connections with other bodies, some of which are not human?²³ Could different notions of the biological and of the material help to develop a more robust antiracist and decolonial politics?

New materialisms help to address these questions and enrich critiques of Asian settler colonialism. Across their variations, new materialisms consider the affectivity of the biological but also dispute disciplinary separations of biology and geology by arguing that agency, vibrancy, and liveliness do not abide by conceptual divisions between life and matter, between human and nonhuman.²⁴ My reasons for adopting a new materialist approach to Asian settler colonialism are many. For one, it unsettles the Western modernist parsing of life and matter that has sustained imperial, colonial, and racist powers by abjecting indigenous cosmologies and animisms as primitive, merely cultural, or pure superstition.

Furthermore, claims to agency that elide the agency of other entities can be biopolitically dangerous. Mel Chen points out connections between animateness and biopower: “When animacy hierarchies are implicated... we can say that an everyday

²³ Karen Cardozo and Banu Subramanian investigate this issue in “Assembling Asian/American Naturecultures: Orientalism and Invited Invasions,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* Vol. 16, No. 1 (2013), 1-23.

²⁴ Works that have shaped my thoughts here include: Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); William E. Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); William E. Connolly, “The ‘New Materialisms’ and the Fragility of Things,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 41, No. 3 (2013), 399-412; Diana Coole, “Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 41, No. 3 (2013), 451-69; Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2006); Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (eds.), *Making the Geologic Now: Responding to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life* (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2013); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Jasbir K. Puar, “‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *philoSOPHIA* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2012), 49-66; Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

biopolitics takes place, a biopolitics that perpetually resituates, recombines, and rearticulates the matter of life—and potentially its very own ecologies—in the particularized bodies of its animals, objects, humans.”²⁵ Such hierarchies have played out in Hawai‘i where efforts to secure the survival and flourishing of Asian settlers have erased the agency of Native Hawaiians who are dehumanized. They reveal a commitment to the oftentimes deadly distinction between life and non-life. A ligament of what Giorgio Agamben has identified as the power of sovereignty is wielded by Asian immigrants, settlers, and even activists when they affirm their lives and agency at the expense of Natives.²⁶ This problem is particularly pressing in settler Hawai‘i where the biopolitics of dispossession marks Native Hawaiians for states of inertia, helplessness, and of living death. Celebrations of local Asian agency for securing upward mobility, civic equity, and political representation have had the racist effect of casting Native Hawaiians as failed agents who cannot overcome poor health, incarceration, houselessness, and high mortality rates.²⁷ This effect is exacerbated by colonialist beliefs that indigenous peoples remain wedded to a backwards past, that they lack the agency to pull themselves into the modern present, and that settlement is here to stay as Hawai‘i’s future despite the resilience of Native sovereignty movements. As Mimi Thi Nguyen writes in another context, “Imperialist discourse framed coterminous territories and peoples as

²⁵ Chen, *Animacies*, 84-5.

²⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²⁷ Haunani-Kay Trask writes “‘Immigrants’ who have struggled so hard and for so long deserve political and economic superiority. By comparison, indigenous Hawaiians aren’t in power because they haven’t worked (or paid their dues) to achieve supremacy. In more obviously racist terms, Hawaiians deserve their fate” (“Settlers of Color and ‘Immigrant’ Hegemony: ‘Locals’ in Hawai‘i” in *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai‘i*, eds. Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura [Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008], 48-9).

primitive and anachronistic, or in other words, intransigent, or impassive, to forward movement or progress; such discourse encloses racial, colonial others as on the outside through instrumental uses of time.”²⁸ In short, biopower at the hinge between neoliberal capitalism and settler colonialism is predicated upon distributions of agency, liveliness, and inertia. Because new materialisms counter the biopolitics of hard-lined distinctions between life and its others (death, matter, inertia, inability), they are a pivotal resource for a decolonial politics in Hawai‘i.

Finally, new materialisms may better account for the persistence of Asian settler colonialism and the possibilities for decolonization than do available criticisms that target local Asian identity. The exposure of local identity as a settler ideology is but one beginning of an understanding of how Asian settlers remain bound to coloniality. A new materialism of local Asianness locates the effects of representation, identity, and ideology within a broader terrain of bodies and forces, not all of which are human and none of which are determined by social, cultural, and economic practices.²⁹ I refract local Asian identity into a placeholder for worlds of Asian settler colonialism that stretch across divides of nature and culture, of matter and meaning, of privilege and diminishment, and of domination and resistance. I find Asian settler colonialism where it usually isn’t found: in waves, sunsets, clouds, rocks, gestures, cardboard boxes, a donut, and on the streets of Baltimore. In short, I track Asian settler colonialism as a “machinic geography of race.”

²⁸ Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 16.

²⁹ Jasbir Puar provides a new materialism of race in “‘The Turban is Not a Hat’: Queer Diaspora and Practices of Profiling” in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 166-202.

Arun Saldanha uses that term to move beyond the sociolinguistic focus and dialectical framework of anti-essentialist critiques of racism such as that of Paul Gilroy. For Saldanha, race is neither biologically deterministic nor merely discursively constituted; it is the contingent, emergent effect of “genetic endowments, environmental conditions, exercise, hormones, diet, disease, aging, etc.”³⁰ Furthermore, the effects of race depend on the assemblages, ecologies, or geographies of which it is a part. Following the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Saldanha employs “machinic” to denote how race: (1) consists of parts, connections, and flows; (2) gains a consistency across components and becomings; and (3) produces effects that no single component could do alone.³¹

As a machinic geography of race, Asian settler colonialism is composed of many bodies (human, nonhuman, social, cultural, political). The maintenance of Asian settler colonialism is not due to the discipline and destruction of Native Hawaiians alone. Asian settler colonialism gathers itself through an expanse of things into a consistency and absorbs disturbances as nutrition. It traffics in thick congestions and smooth flows. It resists concentrated attacks on local identity by shape-shifting as it extends its many tentacles through each settler. It takes root through innumerable, singular attachments between settlers and Hawai‘i.

³⁰ Arun Saldanha, “Re-ontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* Vol. 24 (2006), 12.

³¹ Arun Saldanha, *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 186.

Local Asian identity in Hawai'i has changed over time.³² Today, it holds racial overtones and is defined more by cultural markers than by citizenship and politics. "Local" indexes an appreciation of nature, a laid-back attitude, a sense of cultural diversity, a taste for local foods, and an understanding of pidgin (which is incorrectly referred to as "Hawai'i Creole English"). This understanding of local is tied to Hawai'i's plantation past. White plantation owners segregated Asian laborers by ethnicity to quell rebellion within an exploitative, racist environment. They failed. Cross-ethnic, cross-cultural alliances developed and "local" Asians would replace whites as the new ruling class in the 1950s.

This narrative of local identity sits comfortably with US ideologies of capitalism and multicultural liberalism. Narratives of the political and socioeconomic ascendance of Asians with statehood compose a local version of American Dreams of upward mobility, civic progress, and melting pot harmony.³³ These narratives have been put in the service by the US in pursuit of its colonial and imperial endeavors. During the Cold War, the perceived cultural and racial diversity of Hawai'i had been mobilized as evidence of American exceptionalism to justify the imperial reach of the US.³⁴ Flash-forward to the

³² It originated in newspaper coverage of the 1931 Massie case, in which five young men (two Native Hawaiian, two Japanese, one Chinese-Hawaiian) stood trial for the kidnap and rape of Thalia Massie, a white woman and spouse of a Navy lieutenant. There, "local" marked Hawai'i as the place of birth and of upbringing of the accused in opposition to the foreign, white status of their US military accusers. In the 1970s, "local" became the banner under which working-class Asians and Native Hawaiians organized against development projects that would principally benefit haoles (whites) from the US mainland, Japanese investors, tourists, and members of the US military. Native Hawaiians, in the midst of a national renaissance, probed the limits of "local" alliances as they doubted the capacity of the civil rights conferred by a settler state to fairly adjudicate questions of land and of sovereignty. Asian settlers claimed local identity to distinguish themselves from haoles while erasing the importance of Native genealogical connections to Hawai'i.

³³ Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony," 47.

³⁴ Dean Itsuji Saranillio, "Colliding Histories: Hawai'i Statehood at the intersection of Asians 'Ineligible to Citizenship' and Hawaiians 'Unfit for Self-Government,'" *Journal of Asian American Studies* Vol. 13, No. 3 (October 2010), 289-90.

1990s and 2000s, when the principle of racial equality has been mobilized to chip away at what few institutional recourses Native Hawaiians have. Seeking to institute “colorblindness,” legal challenges have been launched, at times successfully, that cast Native Hawaiians as a privileged race rather than as a sovereign nation.³⁵ Supposedly a bulwark against majoritarian power, civil rights have been an instrument for non-Native locals to continue the colonial project instituted by whites.

Locals support ideologies of US multicultural liberalism even as they distance themselves from the United States while reaping the benefits of dispossession. Asian settlers in Hawai‘i disaffiliate with the United States by self-identifying as “local” rather than as “Asian American.”³⁶ By doing so, they perform a twisted version of Chuh’s suggestion that “Asian Americanists conceptually disown ‘America,’ the ideal, to further the work of creating home as a space relieved of states of domination.”³⁷ These disarticulations depend upon a modicum of privilege that, in Hawai‘i, stem from US governmentality and jurisprudence, neoliberal capitalism, tourism, and militarism.³⁸

³⁵ Bianca K. Isaki, “Colorblind Colonialism in the ‘50th State of America” in *Deleuze and Race*, eds. Arun Saldanha and Jason M. Adams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 113-28; J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, “Colonialism in Equality: Hawaiian Sovereignty and the Question of US Civil Rights,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol. 107, No. 4 (2008), 635-50, and “Precarious Positions: Native Hawaiians and US Federal Recognition,” *The Contemporary Pacific* Vol. 17, No. 1, 1-27; Judy Rohrer, “Attacking Trust: Hawai‘i as a Crossroads and Kamehameha Schools in the Crosshairs,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 62, No. 3 (2010), 437-55 and “Got Race?” The Production of Haole and the Distortion of Indigeneity in the *Rice Decision*,” *The Contemporary Pacific* Vol. 18, No. 1 (2006), 1-31

³⁶ Oftentimes, this is done by invoking a notion of the “aloha spirit” that has been shaped historically by Christian theology, commodification by the tourist industry, and state ideology. Some locals even claim that they are “Hawaiian at heart” in an appropriation of Hawaiianness as a thin cultural identity to which Native genealogical ties to the land are inconsequential. See Keiko Ohnuma, “‘Aloha Spirit’ and the Cultural Politics of Sentiment as National Belonging,” *The Contemporary Pacific* Vol. 20, No. 2 (2008), 365-94; Lisa Kahaleole Hall, “‘Hawaiian at Heart’ and Other Fictions,” *The Contemporary Pacific* Vol. 17, No. 2 (2005), 404-13.

³⁷ Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 124.

³⁸ On the links between militarism, tourism, and imperialism, see Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez, *Securing Paradise: Tourism and Militarism in Hawai‘i and the Philippines* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

Contrary to Chuh's politics, however, local Asians maintain home as settlement rather than as a critical desire for a decolonial otherwise. Local identity, as Bianca Isaki writes, "remains a widespread and usual way of cohering communities around a tacit agreement about the kind of 'home' that Hawai'i should be."³⁹ According to Jonathan Okamura, local identity carries "a commitment to maintaining control of Hawaii's political and economic future from outside forces of change such as foreign investment, tourism development, and in-migration from the continental United States, and immigration from Asian and the Pacific."⁴⁰ In these turf battles, Asian settlers use local identity to oppose certain intrusions while conveniently excusing their own: a history of migration and settlement that would lead Asians to outnumber Native Hawaiians; complicity in altering ecosystems through plantationization, urbanization, and gentrification; participation in a sprawling tourist industry; the militarization of the islands; and the paternalistic management of 1.8 million acres of ceded lands by Asian and haole agents of the state. In short, local identity is a hinge that protects a Hawai'i made for settlers and not for Natives. Local Asians, in the words of Haunani-Kay Trask, "claim Hawai'i as their own, denying indigenous history, their long collaboration in our continued dispossession, and the benefits therefrom."⁴¹

Criticisms of local identity like Trask's have been pitched within the terms of ideology, misrecognition, or miseducation and have posited the exposure of colonial power as political salves. Trask attributes the power of settler rule to "the resilience of

³⁹ Bianca K. Isaki, "HB 645, Settler Sexuality, and the Politics of Local Asian Domesticity in Hawai'i," *Settler Colonial Studies* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2011), 86.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Okamura, *Ethnicity and Inequality in Hawai'i* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 117.

⁴¹ Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony," 46.

settler ideology.”⁴² Eiko Kosasa suggests that the “nation of immigrants” ideology to which Japanese settlers in Hawai‘i subscribe “is so powerful that most settlers are unable or unwilling to recognize any notions of evidence that counter it.”⁴³ Dean Saranillio argues that Filipino settlers strive to redress their lack of socioeconomic and political privilege by identifying with the US “within the context of colonial miseducation.”⁴⁴ Candace Fujikane writes that “The violence of American colonialism is ideologically transformed into ‘democracy,’ masking the realities of a settler colony that continues to deny Native peoples their rights to their lands and resources.”⁴⁵ Karen Kosasa echoes this point and proposes “colonial exposure” as a counter-politics that “reveal[s] the hidden presence of colonialism in all areas of settler life.”⁴⁶ According to these critiques, local Asians are uneducated, ignorant, or willfully blind to the workings of settler ideology. Demystification uncovers colonial power, demonstrates how narratives of local Asian success are vectors of settlement, and educates settlers on histories that have been distorted or buried.

Setting the record straight is undeniably important, especially because coloniality in Hawai‘i has relied on a select archive. Many historians of Hawai‘i have propagated a colonialist myth that Native Hawaiians passively submitted to, and thus welcomed, colonization. Kanaka Maoli scholar Noenoe Silva has dispelled this myth by producing a

⁴² Ibid., 48.

⁴³ Eiko Kosasa, “Ideological Images: US Nationalism in Japanese Settler Photographs,” in *Asian Settler Colonialism*, 212.

⁴⁴ Dean Itsuji Saranillio, “Colonial Amnesia: Rethinking Filipino ‘American’ Settler Empowerment in the US Colony of Hawai‘i,” in *Asian Settler Colonialism*, 257.

⁴⁵ Candace Fujikane, “Introduction: Asian Settler Colonialism in the US Colony of Hawai‘i,” in *Asian Settler Colonialism*, 3.

⁴⁶ Karen K. Kosasa, “Sites of Erasure: The Representation of Settler Culture in Hawai‘i,” in *Asian Settler Colonialism*, 196, 207.

counter-history from newspapers written in Hawaiian. She argues that “historiography is one of the most powerful discourses that justifies the continued occupation of Hawai‘i by the United States today.”⁴⁷ But what if Asian settler colonialism is rooted in a register that remains undisturbed by critiques of ideology, identity, and representation?

Important as these critiques may be, they remain pitched at the level of representation and ideology. Their approaches have been complicated and enriched by scholarship on affect that shows how power operates through feelings, intensities, and impacts. There have been a few works on affect and settler colonialism in Hawai‘i. Keiko Ohnuma observes that settler belonging to Hawai‘i is predicated upon feeling in her examination of “aloha spirit” as a disciplinary mechanism. “Aloha” serves to relieve Asian settlers from the traumas incurred by the coerced renunciation of their homelands and by pressures to prove their worth to white American elites. The performance of aloha spirit serves to displace the costs of dispossession with good feelings. Nonetheless, Ohnuma primarily approaches “aloha” as a matter of representation, ideology, and mystified power. “The signification of aloha eludes us,” Ohnuma writes, “because it has served to obscure a history of traumatic meanings, all carrying political investments that remain hidden.”⁴⁸ Her subtle analysis is ultimately less about how settler colonialism operates through psychic and affective registers than in how it foment an empty process of meaning-making. Accordingly, Ohnuma holds out hope for more “rageful truth-telling.”⁴⁹

Bianca Isaki has developed the most sophisticated account of the affective dimensions of Asian settler colonialism. “Feelings function as placeholders,” she writes,

⁴⁷ Silva, *Aloha Betrayed*, 9.

⁴⁸ Ohnuma, 366.

⁴⁹ Ibid. Here, Ohnuma is borrowing the words of Lauren Berlant.

“holding a present colonial order in place.”⁵⁰ Isaki traces settler affect through family, law, community, reproductivity, and domesticity. Her understanding of sensation is important but I find it *at times* too closely tethered to systems of meaning-making. For Isaki, sensation is “the naming of a sense as a feeling, the insertion of that name into systems of social intelligibility, and then the matching of meaning with a truth claim.”⁵¹ But affect does not always circuit through sociolinguistic systems of meaning and, as I show below, settler attachments do not always nestle into positional enclaves or normative sites such as sexuality, family, and domesticity.⁵² Those sites are but shorthand for a complex array of bodies, forces, and happenings.

My own approach to the relationship between affect and settler colonialism focuses on attachments to Hawai‘i as home that are composed of an array of materialities, not all of which are human. I refigure local identity into a placeholder for settler attachments that play out in multiple, not always coherent ways.⁵³ Attachments throw themselves together from an expanse of materialities in a process that is elusive and

⁵⁰ This comment pertains specifically to the settler work of contrition in light of the 1993 congressional Apology Resolution but describes her analyses of Asian settler colonialism more generally. Bianca K. Isaki, “Re-archiving Asian Settler Colonialism in a Time of Hawaiian Decolonization, or, Two Walks along Kamehameha Highway” in *Transnational Crossroads: Remapping the Americas and the Pacific*, eds. Camilla Fojas and Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 270.

⁵¹ Ibid., 280.

⁵² Brian Massumi has famously argued that affect *eludes* systems of social meaning. See “The Autonomy of Affect” in *Parables for the Virtual*, 23-45.

⁵³ I am not opposing identity (meaning) to attachment (affect). I am deeply indebted to José Esteban Muñoz's account of group consolidation less through identity as such but through performances of affect, such that *latinidad*, recast as “identity-in-difference, is a matter of “feeling brown” and a “brown sense of the world (see “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*,” *Theatre Journal* Vol. 52 [2000], 67-79; “Vitalism's after-burn: The Sense of Ana Mendieta,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* Vol. 21, No. 2 [2011], 191-8). Muñoz's performative and affective account resonates with the new materialist approach to race and ethnicity, with the caveats that: my emphases lie less with performativity in public and aesthetic spaces than with the self-organizing emergence of attachments in ordinary life, as elaborated below; and that Muñoz is primarily interested with the phenomenological and sociolinguistic aspects of affect as emotions than in materialist processes of emergence that do not always cross into consciousness and social meaning.

ongoing. They are shaped by diverse historical trajectories, synchronic connections, and future aspirations, as well as in the scrambling of these times. They are singular. There are indeed overlaps, but to mistake them for a structure of Asian settler colonialism is to presume that other strands of attachment are less important when in fact they may be defining. While available critiques of local identity have been astute at discerning patterns of settler ideology, they may leave untouched the firmest roots of settler attachment. One cannot presume that settler attachments share a few characteristics that, if identified, would light the way to decolonization.

If Asian settler colonialism is sustained through attachments to it, and attachments are composed partly by nonhumans, then nonhumans contribute to the shape, persistence, and trajectories of the settler colony—not only because they are enlisted by local Asians in the service of settler projects but because they have powers and propensities of their own. Furthermore, if the effects of nonhumans elude complete human understanding and control, then Asian settler colonialism is not always what, where, or even when we think it is. Engagements with Asian settler colonialism are always haunted by an element of surprise at what Asian settler colonialism involves, what it will have become, and what it can do. And this means that Asian settler colonialism cannot be undone by the sharpest of understandings, the clearest of intentions, and the strongest of willpowers on their own.

How, then, might one account for Asian settler colonialism through the messiness and complexity of attachments? How might decolonial politics be reconstructed? How might one write from within this impasse?

Political Autoethnography

One way to appreciate impasse is to shift political theory into a compositional mode. “Rather than rush to incorporate the thing coming into form into a representational order of political or moral significance,” writes Stewart, “compositional theory tries to register the tactility and significance of the process of coming into form itself.”⁵⁴ Less definitional than generative, a compositional theory of impasse fashions a critical poetics to register worlds that are stuck or leaking from all sides. Rather than a discussion at a remove, it is partly the effect of an impasse that has come to express itself through writing. Claims to knowledge become unsettled as the writing fills with mixed feelings, staccato, stumbling times, fragments, bursts of loquaciousness, loose ends, dead ends, uncertainties, stickinesses. The value of a compositional theory of impasse lies not in truths told and hard-edged justifications. Nor does it seek alignment with available models of political thought. What matters is the wiggle room opened. The affects induced. The attunements solicited. The styles of approach inspired. In short, a compositional theory of impasse blurs politics and theory, description and intervention, criticism and creation.

Autoethnography is one version of compositional theory. According to Stewart, “Autoethnography is one route into a broader-ranging, more supple exploration of what happens to people, how force hits bodies, how sensibilities circulate and become, perhaps delicately or ephemerally, collective.”⁵⁵ Autoethnography is less representational than exemplary. Through the singularities of a life, it refracts an emergent situation that does not align with grand ideas and expansive explanations; as João Biehl insists, the rich

⁵⁴ Kathleen Stewart, “Tactile Compositions” in *Objects and Materials: A Routledge Companion*, eds. Penny Harvey, Elearnor Conlin Casella, Gillian Evans, Hannah Knox, Christine McLean, Elizabeth B. Silva, Nicholas Thoburn, and Kath Woodward (London: Routledge, 2013), 119.

⁵⁵ Stewart, “An Autoethnography of What Happens,” 661.

textures of ethnography should not be dulled down to evidence that substantiates the claims of other disciplines.⁵⁶ Autoethnography focuses not on seemingly fixed and final forms but on bundles of intensities, becomings, and the squiggly lines of a life unfolding. It strives to register emergence, intensification, and dissolution. It allows the rough edges and fuzziness of ordinary life to find expression in writing.⁵⁷

Stewart writes that autoethnography “might skid over the surface of a thing throwing itself together or take pains at a slow description that pauses on each element. It might spread itself across a scene, sampling everything, or hone in on a single strand to follow it as it moves, maybe document how it pulls into alignment with other strands or falls out of sync, becoming an anomaly or a problem.”⁵⁸ Autoethnography develops a close, painstaking attention to details, knitting them into the patchwork of a life lived. Or it glides across the surface of details in pursuit of the abstractions that reverberate through them.

For an autoethnographic political theorist, an abstraction might be the afterimage of shifts in intensity rather than a transcendental ideal. It is composed of impacts and avoidances that are real but not consolidated as a formed thing. Autoethnography might shift abstractions in political theory from identifiable forms and functions to forces that are vague but palpable. As abstractions, preformed concepts carry the possibilities and limits of their emergence and thus remain insensate to shifts underway. Autoethnography recharges concepts by plugging them back into the intensities of ordinary life. In this mode, concepts are abstractions that shape-shift through encounters with difference.

⁵⁶ João Biehl, “Ethnography in the Way of Theory,” *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 28, No. 4 (2013), 573-597.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 575.

⁵⁸ Stewart, “Tactile Compositions,” 121.

Their liveliness is energized, not dampened, through displacements and transits.

Autoethnography returns a political theorist to the messy milieu that it might otherwise try to rise above. The political theorist “spread[s] out into the lateral spaces often drowned out by the demands of argument and of interlocutors who want ‘ways out’”; the theorist searches for ways of attuning to clusters of forces.⁵⁹ Its senses grows intuitive, hypervigilant. The theorist feels pulled by things that might be political precisely because they *don’t* readily seem to be. Rather than rolling over those things or pigeonholing them into preexisting narratives, the theorist might tend curiously and patiently to all sorts of ephemera, atmospheres, half-formed tracks, and tiny thoughts. It strives to register the political in details and abstractions, across bodies and forces. Only after gathering a broad range of convergences and displacements can an autoethnographer begin to write political theory. In other words, political theory begins to write itself long before a theorist picks up a pen.

Through a short autoethnography, I join other Asian settler scholars of Hawai‘i who reflect on their settler status. Peggy Choy and Candace Fujikane, for example, write about their shift from lauding the achievements of local Asians to joining Native Hawaiians as allies.⁶⁰ Their narratives, however, do not linger within the space of attachments to home. Dean Saranillio comes closer to doing so. Seeking to understand his “family’s positionality as settlers,” Saranillio traces his family’s history across generations to chart an “Asian settler genealogy of both resistance to and collusion with US systems

⁵⁹ Berlant, “Starved,” 435.

⁶⁰ Candace Fujikane, “Foregrounding Native Nationalisms: A Critique of Antinationalist Sentiment in Asian American Studies” in *Asian American Studies after Critical Mass*, ed. Kent A. Ono (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 90-1; Peggy Choy, “Anatomy of a Dancer: Place, Lineage, and Liberation” in *Asian Settler Colonialism*, 279-93.

of violence.”⁶¹ His endeavor to “give a human element” to complex settler lives resonates with my call below to treat settler attachments critically but generously, though I hesitate to adopt a humanist frame due to its biopolitical risks and neglect of the agentic effects of nonhumans. There are other important differences in our approaches as well. My autoethnography does not plot my family in regard to settler colonialism. It is less about positionality than about what keeps local Asianness bound to coloniality. Specifically, it registers textures, affects, and becomings of a machinic geography of Asian settler colonialism that elude analyses of positionality: what room on a grid of intersectional identities might there be for sparkling waters, haunting gestures, and shooting stars?⁶² My autoethnography zooms in on some of the things and encounters that make up my attachments to Hawai‘i. It shifts historical focus from a genealogy of Asian migrants and settlers to the ongoing unfolding of a life across select moments; it shifts from histories of migration and labor to deep histories of the Earth that are palpable in mountains, oceans, clouds.

Finally, my autoethnography does not mean to just report my life. It tries to open the singular unto the general, my attachments to home unto Asian settler colonialism. It strives to be a means by which, in Berlant’s words, “the singular becomes delaminated from its location in someone’s story or some locale’s irreducible local history and circulated as evidence of something shared.”⁶³ My autoethnography expresses how Asian settler attachments to home could be imbued with ambivalence by encounters with its colonialist effects. Those encounters are not restricted to my “irreducible local history”

⁶¹ Saranillio, “Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters,” 290, 291.

⁶² For a critique of positionality along these lines, see Puar, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’.”

⁶³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 12.

but that attest to the affective conditions of settler colonialism and of decolonization as “something shared”—even if what is shared is not a tangible thing but a fuzzy contact point.

PLACE

Place presents in singular but not accidental things.

The timeless granite, the Dunkin’ Donuts sign, a common hand gesture, the biting air in January. It’s two-dimensional and it’s three. All talk and icon and then the taste of a Macintosh apple. Less a structure than a prism, less a grammar than a collective search engine, it’s like scratching on a chalkboard already overcrowded with lines and erasures. And that means it has a body.⁶⁴

—Kathleen Stewart

Hawai‘i is not merely a geopolitical entity or a culturally exotified imaginary. It is a place, a regionality, a lived abstraction that flashes up from site to site, encounter to encounter.⁶⁵

It depends on what elements throw themselves together, how, and when. The patterns

⁶⁴ Kathleen Stewart, “More from *The Hundreds*,” Tag, <http://cargocollective.com/tagyoureit/3-SHEEN-STEWARD-DOLACK>. Accessed on 15 March 2015.

⁶⁵ “Regionality” is the term given by Stewart to places that attain a consistency by pulling together various bits of matter: “This place hangs together as a thing, then—a recognizable entity with qualities, lived modalities, and a history of its social production and uses—not because its elements are coherent imprints or effects of something else but because they have qualities and affects. They shift or roll. They can accrue, sediment, unfold, wear out, or go flat. There are stake sin the elements of a place as living forms that generate a zone of connectivity not because of what they are but literally because of what they do, the machinery they provide” (Stewart, “Regionality,” *The Geographical Review* Vol. 103, No. 2 [2013], 279).

and viscosities that emerge. The lines of flight that shoot off or get blocked.

Autoethnography registers Hawai'i as a swarm of forces coming to form or dispersing.

Place stretches across borderlines. You carry it wherever you go. Or, it carries itself into another form through you. It latches onto the skin. Burrows into the viscera. Spikes up in moments of pause and surprise. Moments like getting lost in a new city.

“Displacement, and singular forms of getting lost, are bubble worlds that reinvent the self-in-place by testing its limits. There is a habit of setting out alone, without a map. A venturing into a world that remains palpably unpredictable and seductive beyond the carefully cordoned zones of familiarity.”⁶⁶

Baltimore is new. I wander along roads and alleys and find myself lost. I plot myself in relation to a road or two that forms the brittle backbone of my slack sense of direction. Bearings eventually emerge. The grid helps. So does the sequencing of streets. Okay this is 21st, so 22nd is next, then... My inner compass begins to align with that of maps: east of Charles Street, south of North Avenue...

I realize that these metrics hadn't informed my sense of direction back in Honolulu. There were mountains. There was the ocean. Mauka and moana compose a local poetics of direction that does not abide by a mapping of north-south-east-west. So many roads there don't follow a grid anyway. They wind and roll with the shape of the island volcano called “O'ahu.” In comparison, this part of Baltimore feels so flat. The difference is not merely conceptual; it is the friction between hard-won habits and the grit of remove. *Honolulu doesn't work in Baltimore*. Displacement provokes the coordination of different strategies of navigating complex ecologies—a mix of the urban, the geological,

⁶⁶ Stewart, “Regionality,” 276.

the oceanic, the... It requires calibration to time. Honolulu is bus schedules, midday sunniness bookended by passing showers, standstill traffic that is worse than that of Los Angeles, the dwindling of restaurant options past 9pm. Baltimore is, among other things, drastic shifts in season: sore throats and pollen-filled sneezes, cranked-up heat and sticky humidity, sidewalks smuged by leaves after storms, ice-slicked paths that jar confident strides.

A sense of direction is a complex mapping of place that throws itself together from materialities, rhythms, and repetitions—all paved over histories that brood quietly in the lived present. Place is a palimpsest of lives and worlds strewn across scales of visibility, erasure, and duration that engender habits and break them apart.

HOME

Home is where home is not. It registers the friction between places. It is a lure and a longing that emerges partly through a remove. It magnetizes desired returns and dreaded departures. Or dreaded returns and desired departures. It's an attachment, after all, not necessarily a sense of belonging. It tugs at the heart through all sorts of ambivalences.

Displacement can register the plenitude of things that make up home. Colors matter. Shades and tones matter. Climate matters. The Earth's cycle matters. So does the tilt of the planet. Timing too.

I arrive in Honolulu on an early December afternoon. The range of vibrant greens and blues strikes my eyes, accustomed as they've become to the grays and whites and browns of Baltimore winters. Later that day I walk to the park, sit on a bench by the playpen, take off my shoes and socks. It takes a few moments to realize how strange it's

become to sit outside. My feet sink into the cool, prickly grass. Mānoa Valley is alive. The air is full of birdsongs myriad, the guttural cries of mynah birds especially distinct since they've been etched into my chest. Gray clouds brew over the northern mountain but elsewhere the sky is all shiny and blue. You can be dry in one part of the valley while horizontal sheets of rain drench another. When the wind blows, you can hear all the leaves of the valley rise up like waves of the ocean. Midnight walks brim with cricket chirps, the rare car sailing down the dark street, a dog or two being walked, the crinkling of the stream that winds through the valley, the three sets of traffic lights that cycle through green-yellow-red for no one, clear skies filled with stars and constellations and the high-hanging moon, the two or three houseless people asleep on the bus benches outside of Starbucks, the quiet solitude that spills into a sense of oneness with the world.

Home is a psychic, social, cultural, and political construct, but not only. It is the shorthand given to an array of materialities that throw themselves together into a complex attachment. Home is a contraction of details and abstractions. It is grass. It is sun. It is clouds, leaves, mountains, water, birdsongs, open spaces—all linked by an invisible thread that runs from the vast cosmos to hidden depths of the heart.⁶⁷ It is a force-field that accrues more than we could ever know and patterns them in ways to which we have yet to catch up. The unfinishedness of home shape-shifts through transits and ventures through other places and other times.

Home is when home is not. It comes long formed but remains partly open. It is belated, a feedback loop, a layer that recomposes the lifelines to which it is added. It is the

⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write that “A fiber stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from molecules to particles, and so on to the imperceptible. Every fiber is a Universe fiber” (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987], 249).

palpable distance between the present moment and a no-longer. Or maybe a never-had. Home is an affective fact, a hollow that magnetizes worldings of potential and threat.⁶⁸ The strange temporality of home expresses itself through wayward longings and so many unanticipated phantom pains.

I take a walk in the morning. Another in the afternoon. One more at sundown. Then it's time to leave. I breeze through airport security to much displeasure—I could've had more time amongst the twitterings of birds, the soft air, the ducks the sail down the stream, the strangers who walk so leisurely because they have tomorrow. Minutes have become precious though just days earlier they dissolved without a care. I drag myself toward the gate. The walkway is outside. I dawdle to savor the island air even though it's full of exhaust from the airport shuttles. There are no stars.

I board the plane and take my seat. An itch has grown over the years. It makes me want to leap up, to grab my things, to dash past the stares and glares and out the door with a crazed grin and the glow of achievement. Then would cascade all the daydreams of more time: absorbing the sun and the wind in the park, meandering through the night, stuffing my face with the food only found here, wasting more time with friends because that's what we do so well. Yes, I just have to deplane, hop on the #19 bus, transfer to the #5, cross the street, and then I'm—

“The cabin door is now closed. Please turn off all major electronic devices.”

Just like that, the urge vanishes. Until it returns next time, pulling me even closer to the edge of my seat.

⁶⁸ Brian Massumi, “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 52-70.

HOMELESSNESS

On a resplendent day, I head to Kaka‘ako Waterfront Park, a place that evokes home. It’s clear and sunny here even as clouds brood over the mountains to the north. The hills of the park are so green and rolling that you’d never know they were built on a landfill. People talk story in truck beds as remote control cars zoom about the parking lot. The palm trees are curved by the trade winds that carry the salt of the sea. A promenade of smooth bricks rolls out along the ocean. Fishermen rest their poles in the cracks of the large rocks that make up the shore and gaze out at the shimmering waters. Children run about as their parents and uncles and aunts soak in the day. A cruise ship sails at sunset. The couples getting their wedding photos taken savor the golden aura around all things. The sea swallows the sun and then the light. The park empties. The night is quiet, save for the brushing of waves against the large rocks and the hum of the occasional airplane overhead.

The park evokes many memories. Gliding down the grassy hills on cardboard boxes as a kid. The rainy day when sea and sky merged in the hidden horizon. The night when my camera was stolen. The picnic before I moved to Baltimore, when a friend tagged a pole with our names. Roaming the hills and listening to the waves with a close friend on the first day of her first trip to Hawai‘i. The clouds ablaze with pink at sundown. All the summer nights bursting with shooting stars. Gazing up in wonder or slowly falling asleep, lulled by the gentle breeze flowing through the palm trees.

At some point in time, tents began to appear on the sidewalks leading to the park. Just a few dots at first. Then lines. The tent cities seemed to have grown each time I returned from Baltimore, until they were gone. Razed by cops on orders of the city to

keep paradise pretty for business and tourists. As Kaka‘ako gentrifies with shiny new high rises, the homeless have received increasing hostility from the public and politicians. Vitriol fills the comments section of *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* articles on houselessness. The law forbids sitting or lying on sidewalks in Waikīkī. Its draconian reach has recently expanded to other areas of the island. Many bus stop benches have been updated with metal partitions to prevent people from lying down. A local representative takes his sledgehammer to shopping carts of the houseless; the public cheers. The homeless in Honolulu increasingly become choice targets of violence in the night. Meanwhile, the state neglects hundreds or thousands of homeless Native Hawaiians on the Wai‘anae Coast.

Memories of the homeless unfold. The times when I, as a kid, thought that the other families on the beaches of Wai‘anae were just camping too. Or, years earlier, when I watched a man sift through a dumpster while I ate a donut that tasted like dirt. There’s the slow gait of the weighty woman who lugs her shopping cart down King Street. The flipping-up of a half-open hand of the woman who talked to ghosts. The tuxedoed man who has walked through the valley for decades. The thud in my stomach when I saw that the man to whom I offered apples had no teeth. The man on the bridge into Waikīkī who was a statue with a hand held out. He became animated with my approach and asked if I had any change to spare. I gave him my leftover pizza and left, unable to give him the

change that he *didn't* ask for.⁶⁹

What would be required for that change to happen? What kind of losses would need to be incurred? Would my attachments to home be spared? What new form might they take? Home meets homelessness. It becomes weighty, more a question mark than a confirmation. Ethical and political issues loom up and haunt it with the cold breath of possible loss.

IMPASSE

Red-eye flight, before take-off. The cabin is warm. The air is fuzzy. The white noise of the engine is soothing. I drift, drift to sleep.

Sounds of soda cans snapping open snap me awake. They snap on. The cabin acoustics amplify their aggression. I try to return to sleep. Turns out that the time between boarding and the beverage service makes for the perfect power nap. Great. And there's coughing all around. There's a baby wailing (there always is). There's the person behind me who knees my chair once, twice. Who pulls my chair down with all their weight to hoist themselves up. Thanks. I sigh.

A hand full of irritation turns on the light. Flips through the airline magazine and rips out the page of sudoku puzzles. They don't help. Reading doesn't help. Restlessness grows. No room. The cabin is cramped, not only with people but with worlds.

⁶⁹ Not all of these people are Native Hawaiian though many are. Homelessness in Hawai'i is not reducible to dispossession, but the two are largely related. Laura E. Lyons convincingly links the two by identifying that the houseless are disproportionately Native Hawaiian ("From Indigenous to Indigent: Homelessness and Settler Colonialism in Hawai'i" in *Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity and Culture*, eds. Fiona Bateman and Lionel Pilkington [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011], 140-52). Importantly, Lyons observes that a biopolitics of cultural memory divides the houseless into those who are worthy of state protection and those who are unworthy and left to die. Because the line is defined by the esteemed place of agricultural labor in Hawai'i's historical imaginary, the condition of valuable houseless life is tied to dispossession and settlement. One might say that Native homelessness is partly the product of Asian settler colonialism.

An airplane ride can be mired in stuckness. Or it can brim with still lifes.

No thoughts come in the dark. Then they do. They phase in and out of consciousness.⁷⁰ They wander. They don't amount to anything at first. Then they do. They shuffle through lists of what needs to get done. The errands. The chores. All the reading and writing. The labor of reacclimating to a partly alienating place.

I then puzzle over missing a home that is a thicket of memories and yearnings—more of an affective atmosphere than a solid, polished thing. Over what the carbon footprint of a feeling might be. Over the comforts of being a racial majority in Honolulu. They had become apparent only after I moved to Baltimore, where I feel unwelcome often enough. Like the time when the white middle-aged stranger thought it was good form to open conversation with “Are you Indian or white?” and proceeded to detail his yearly summer trips to India. Or when the two white men addressed me sharply through some made-up Asian dialectic on an empty street late at night. Or when the drunk white guy screamed “brief coat wearing fag!” before rushing in my direction. And then, there's all the *gawking*. The streets are full of stares that just won't go away whether or not I return eye contact. I wonder what it means when a sense of home is built on stolen lands, built on houselessness. That returning home is returning to the scene of a crime. How to live in a home filled with the air of dispossession and ghosts of the unmourned.

Decolonial Mood Work

Decolonial strategies might seek to rewire the affective relays of settler colonialism. As

⁷⁰ For Deleuze, thought flits about the penumbras of consciousness. It is the product of encounters rather than the voluntary effort of brains. As a result, they arise as question marks rather than as what is already known. See Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, 139.

Isaki writes, “decolonization involves a shift in sensation... The idea is that undoing (not just historicizing) affective, corporeal, felt dimensions of attachments that keep us engrossed in broken political systems, like a US-occupied Hawai‘i, might allow us to remake those attachments.”⁷¹ While Isaki follows attachments to home that have formed largely within Hawai‘i, I have expanded Hawai‘i beyond its geographical specificity to track home through displacements and transits. And while Isaki advises that home be undone, maybe it just needs to be decolonized. An attachment to Hawai‘i could be one of the main relays for settler subjects to support decolonization. It is for me. Neither of these approaches is superior to the other. Their contrasts attest to the complexity of attachments to home, elicit greater attentiveness to the singularity of settler subjectivities, and urge that efforts toward decolonization be subtle rather than sweeping.

One avenue of affective decolonization is mood work. Jennifer Carlson and Kathleen Stewart write that “the challenge of writing mood while intentionally attending to mood work lies in constantly attuning to the force of things, events, bodies and situations, their social physics.”⁷² For them, mood is not about nameable emotions but the vibrancy of materialities in self-organizing scenes of ordinary life. Mood work does not filter experience to fit disciplinary molds. Instead, it is the difficult, uncomfortable, painstaking effort of keying to what converges but remains ungathered. It strives to register impacts and happenings that are barely graspable but forceful.

The autoethnographic writing of impasses can be a form of mood work that uses the self to register the breakdown of worlds. While mood work is usually the labor of

⁷¹ Isaki, “Re-archiving Asian Settler Colonialism in a Time of Hawaiian Decolonization, or, Two Walks along Kamehameha Highway,” 281.

⁷² Jennifer D. Carlson and Kathleen Stewart, “The Legibilities of Mood Work,” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* Vol. 82 (2014), 133.

becoming sentient to something throwing itself together, the mood work of impasses follows the fading of sentience. It might be the leaping into expressivity of a cluster of fragilities, resiliences, blockages, and tiny openings. It registers encounters with what is enigmatic yet captivating, the gestures that haunt one's memory, the ambivalence that snakes through attachments, the murk of threat and promise, the jumpiness and agitation of bodies, all the outbreaks of the nerves, the scrambles to patch things up and the leaps of faith into something half-formed, the bouts of nostalgia for better, safer times which may never have been, the daydreams and nightmares that seep into one's anxious waking hours.

Mood work is an avenue through which decolonization of settler attachments to home adds an aesthetic component to its historicist, legalist, activist, and academic dimensions. It could heed the "politics of aesthetics" elaborated by Jacques Rancière to reorganize "partitions of the sensible" that underlie a settler order: "Politics breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the 'natural' order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific 'bodies', that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying."⁷³ A decolonial politics of aesthetics unsettles the seeming naturalness of a settler colony by rewiring its sensory underpinnings in home. This politics shares with ideological critique a commitment to denaturalization but it does not seek to illuminate some truth that would compel a specific course of action. Instead, it strives to generate new ways of affectively processing home when settler rule no longer appears natural, when home is no longer felt to be walled off from coloniality, when

⁷³ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010), 139.

indigenous lives are no longer relegated to the past, and when indigenous voices are heard by settlers as political speech rather than as mere noise.

By inserting dissensus into the sensorium of settler worlds, a decolonial politics of aesthetics generates ambivalence in settler experiences of home. Of course, settler attachments to home might be riddled with ambivalences such as domestic violence, socioeconomic precarities, and other forces that have already made home a site of stress, anxiety, and strife. The ambivalence generated by a decolonial politics of aesthetics is specific: that home is built upon dispossession. Decolonial mood work strives to turn home into an impasse in Asian settler colonialism. Impasses in Asian settler colonialism are felt viscerally when home is figured as, in Berlant's words, "a singular place that's a cluster of noncoherent but proximate attachments that can only be approached awkwardly, described around, shifted."⁷⁴ Decolonial politics might generate impasses partly through better education and sharper legal claims, partly by imbuing settler attachments with ambivalence.

Part of that ambivalence emerges when settler attachments to home are keyed to dispossession. "Perhaps it is time to abandon the notion that home is where we do *not* become embroiled in the ugliness of Empire," writes Seri Luangphinit, "where we can lead self-indulgent lives, where we can be guaranteed the kind of inclusion we 'hanker' after."⁷⁵ Settler homes cannot be maintained as a private, domestic, sentimentalist enclave that is parsed from a constellation of effects that arise from dispossession, such as homelessness, disproportionate imprisonment, and a diaspora in which more Native

⁷⁴ Berlant, "Starved," 434.

⁷⁵ Seri Luangphinit, "Homeward Bound: Settler Aesthetics in Hawaii's Literature," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 48, No. 1 (Spring 2006), 76.

Hawaiians live outside of Hawai'i than within. Local Asians will have to grapple affectively with unresolved questions of coloniality, during the time of settlement and beyond.

When turned into an impasse, home becomes susceptible to divesting from a settler regime and moving toward solidarity with Native Hawaiians. A decolonial politics might connect this impasse to broader ones in US and local narratives of multicultural liberalism. By generating ambivalence in attachments to home that have been partly tied to multicultural liberalism, optimism in the settler state to remedy colonial histories is troubled. Settlers then might be pushed beyond the political registers of voting and of civil rights to join Native Hawaiians in an effort to, as J. Kēhaulani Kauanui suggests, compel the US to: honor all treaties with indigenous nations; return stolen national parks; confer federal recognition on all nations that seek it; and to restore federal acknowledgment to tribes whose status had been terminated. Surely other ends may be pursued too. Kauanui notes that “the United States will not take action on any of these at this particular moment in time because the US state would collapse. This is a crisis that is inherent to the US nation-state.”⁷⁶

Imaginations of such a decolonized future are valuable precisely because they seem impossible. Impasses involve brushes with the impossible, which is often really a name for a change so sweeping that it is sensed to be unbearable. Recall that, according to Lee Edelman, “The unbearable names what cannot be borne by the subjects we think we are. We build our worlds in the face of it so as to keep ourselves from facing it, as if we implicitly understood that the unbearable as such can have no face and works to deprive

⁷⁶ Kauanui, “Colonialism in Equality,” 648.

us of ours.”⁷⁷ A decolonized future is felt to be unbearable for local Asians who have tried to ward it off by fortifying their attachments to home, clinging to local identity, and reproducing settler ideology. It threatens to disassemble the attachments that Asians have to a colonized Hawai‘i. It threatens home.

While the unbearable force of decolonized futures might provoke defenses of the colony, it might also lead settlers to strive for the decolonization of their attachments and to help build a world in which Native Hawaiian life may thrive. For this end, decolonial politics would need to cultivate sensibilities that make Asians more amenable to prospects of decolonized futures.⁷⁸

As they pursue both disruptive and generative aims, decolonial engagements will have to navigate the torsions of criticism and generosity. Settler attachments are both problematic and important: problematic, because they help to sustain the colony; important, especially for the historically minoritized, because they provide a sense of self and world. Decolonial politics might strive to better acknowledge how settler attachments can remain strong even when evidence of their damage has been effectively relayed and understood.

Pausing the jump to judgment enables decolonial politics to better sift through the intricacies of attachments and becomes better poised to modify the affective ligaments of settlement. Because Asian settler colonialism is the emergent effect of a preponderance of things, its points of instability are diverse and many. No one knows in advance which

⁷⁷ Lee Edelman, “It Isn’t Over” in Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 121-2.

⁷⁸ Jane Bennett has written about arts of the self as positive micropolitical practices. See *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 131-158 and *Thoreau’s Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 16-46.

pressure points might lead the colony to topple. Decolonial efforts fall short if they posit Asian settler colonialism to be a solid thing rather than an amorphous monster. They should not only marshal a critical mass against overlaps in attachments that are approximated as local ideology. They might also prioritize difference over identity and instigate proactive reformations of local Asian attachments and affects across multiple sites, linking the half-felt threads of coloniality to the very heart of settler homes. The complexity and singularity of settler attachments to home requires that decolonial politics develop a greater sensitivity to affect. This process strives to pull settler attachments from the orbit of settler regimes. It also seeks to address Asian settler colonialism in its tentacular forms by viewing the countless sources of attachment to Hawai'i as resources that may be drawn into support for decolonization.

Because decolonial mood work is complicated, slow, and tedious, and because of the urgency needed to dismantle systems of dispossession that, as I write, continue to diminish the lives of Native Hawaiians, I understand the urge to fall back on blanket criticisms that are direct and hard-hitting. The challenge for decolonization, then, is to be critical yet generous, to be agonistic yet respectful, to accelerate confrontation on some fronts while slowing down where attachments may be reworked, and to apply firm pressure without crushing settlers who might, as a result, recoil violently and cling to the colony more strongly. In short, the challenge is not to destroy Asian settler attachments to home but to decolonize them.

Finally, the aesthetic components of decolonial efforts may rework the biopolitics of Asian settler colonialism. The unbearability of a decolonized future involves a world in which indigenous life will be valued by settlers. As Jodi Byrd forcefully argues, “the most

we can say, given the lack of possibility of an Indian future anteriority in which Indians will have been decolonized, is that Indians are lamentable, but not grievable.”⁷⁹ Byrd draws upon Judith Butler’s arguments concerning grievability while dropping their emphasis on reworking the sensoria that connect personal and political life.⁸⁰ Decolonial mood work brings the senses back into reworking the biopolitics of settler colonialism. The grievability of Native Hawaiian life, I argue, is predicated upon the prehension of decolonial futures as real, desirable possibilities even if what those futures look like remains unclear. Decolonial mood work rewires colonialist sensoria by which grievability is afforded to settlers but denied to Natives based on notions of having a life via having a home.

Tangent | Decolonial Hordes and the Then and There of Indigenous Futurity

Just as nonhumans can glue together the colony, so too can they become powerful agents of decolonization. Humans have to do their part, but to think that we can do it alone is to overlook how nonhumans solicit attachments to home that may play an important role in efforts for decolonization. After they became apparent, my attachments to Hawai‘i nudged me into learning more about Hawai‘i’s historical and political context. When coupled with academic and communal circles invested in social justice, those attachments drew me into feeling my place in the colony differently. This shift did not happen on account of me being a self-enclosed human who forms intentions independently and implements them irresistibly (I’m not). As someone who grew up eschewing local identity,

⁷⁹ Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, 38.

⁸⁰ See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

who dreamt often of leaving Hawai'i, and who felt prepared to forget it after finally moving, *I am surprised to be writing this*. Attachments developed while I lived unbeknownst to me, not only due to the limits of my (human) perception but also due to the subtle, sly workings of nonhumans. Those attachments continued to develop as my sensorium was rewired by life in Baltimore. Attachments to Hawai'i as home may be a prime resource that generates strong commitments to decolonization, as Native Hawaiians so fiercely demonstrate. The nonhumans that shape attachments are thus vital to decolonial efforts.

“Can attempts to rethink the boundary between human and nonhuman others,” ask Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller and Noenoe Silva, “allow indigenous theory to assert itself as an alternative form of governance?”⁸¹ Settler governance in Hawai'i typically locates Native Hawaiians and nonhuman animals beyond law through feats of sovereignty that have, among other things, sanctioned the mass killing of sharks in the aftermath of attacks and managed ecosystems through selective appropriations of Hawaiian cultural values. Goldberg-Hiller and Silva navigate Hawaiian cosmologies and Western posthumanisms to highlight the connections, interactions, and metamorphoses across the human/animal boundary that underpins the Hawai'i state.⁸² In the cosmology of the Kumulipo, for example, “humans are part of a vast family that includes celestial bodies, plants, animals, landforms, and deities. Sentient beings that interact with humans include

⁸¹ Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller and Noenoe K. Silva, “Sharks and Pigs: Animating Hawaiian Sovereignty against the Anthropological Machine,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol. 110, No. 2 (2011), 434.

⁸² This method, I think, might alleviate concerns raised by Jodi Byrd regarding the place of recent turns to ontology in the academy. Byrd has criticized object-oriented ontologies that allow an “anarchy of objects” to play out in an ontological “wilderness” that erases indigeneity. When asked whether she might be open to object-oriented ontologies and new materialisms were they to be revised in light of indigenous cosmologies, Byrd responded by saying that the process by which we arrive at claims matters and that she accordingly worries that indigeneity will mainly be put in the service of Western claims. Jodi A. Byrd, “Beasts of America: Sovereignty and the Anarchy of Objects,” talk given at ASE Commons at the University of Southern California, 5 November 2014.

pigs, sharks, stones, and forests.”⁸³ Some of these beings, moreover, are not confined to one “species;” they are *kino lau*, or of many bodies, whose shape-shifting confounds the settler state. The political import of interspecies, metamorphic powers is elucidated by “The ways that sharks and pigs (and monk seals) reterritorialize Hawai‘i across contested legal boundaries and thus expand the places where cultural resources are preserved and the ways in which family and community can come to see themselves preserved in ‘aumākua and friendship with a monk seal.”⁸⁴ They conclude that *kino lau* might supply an avenue “for Hawaiians to own and reconstruct... yet to be imagined worlds again.”⁸⁵

What one might call the “then and there of indigenous futurity” emerges through the interactions and becomings of humans and nonhumans.⁸⁶ Asian settler colonialism is sustained by partitions of sensibility that: apportion space and time by settler modernity; register certain affects but not others; accord value to certain bodies but not others; receive indigenous peoples as racial minorities rather than as a vibrant nation; discredit the agency and value of an array of nonhumans. Those partitions might be decolonized by nonhumans, despite Rancière’s restriction of political activity to humans.⁸⁷ Efforts toward decolonization would be enriched by expanding attention beyond what seems to

⁸³ Goldberg-Hiller and Silva., 436.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 443.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 444.

⁸⁶ I am riffing on Muñoz’s felicitous phrasing (see *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* [New York: New York University Press, 2007]). While Muñoz argues that queerness is only futurity, I am not suggesting that indigeneity be defined as such. Rather, I point to the utopian aspect of indigenous imaginations of other worlds that could be pressed into this one. Furthermore, relating indigeneity to futurity is an important political maneuver in light of Western efforts to lock up Natives in the past. Finally, futurity for Native Hawaiians has been constitutive. Because they have relied upon the land and the sea for their survival, Bryan Kuwada eloquently and forcefully observes that “The future is a realm we have inhabited for thousands of years” (“We Live in the Future. Come Join Us,” *Ke Ka‘upu Hehi ‘Ale*, 3 April 2015, <https://hehiale.wordpress.com/2015/04/03/we-live-in-the-future-come-join-us/>. Accessed on 3 April 2015).

⁸⁷ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 216.

immediately bear upon settler coloniality, such as local identity, settler ideologies of Asian success, and optimism in liberal multiculturalism and civil rights. They might hone greater sensitivity to the powerful workings of nonhumans—how they solicit attachments, how they generate modes of care and concern, and how they might prove fatal for a settler state whose biopolitical commitments to colonialist distributions of animatedness leave it insensate to the hordes of humans, rocks, pigs, and deities that are banging at the door of the colony with indigenous futures whose force, when unleashed, might be nothing short of unbearable.

Messy Theory, Wild Thoughts

I have not been trying to establish what autoethnography as political theory should be or how it should be conducted. Less a direct critique than a creative detour, my autoethnography performs a different style of political inquiry. Through it, I have invited reflection upon the genres of political theory while modestly expanding their range.

Impasse has led me to be unfaithful to the disciplinary edge of political theory. For Rancière, a discipline is not only a body of knowledge about approved objects and certified methods. It is a war-like campaign that delimits what is thinkable by correlating bodily states with enforced regimes of perception and meaning. Against this “pacifying operation,” Rancière proffers “indisciplinary thought.”⁸⁸ Rather than a true knowledge that must be saved from power-induced ignorance, indisciplinary thought ignores established thinking to facilitate what Foucault calls an “insurrection of subjugated

⁸⁸ Jacques Rancière, “Thinking between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge” (trans. Jon Roffe), *Parrhesia* 1 (2006), 9.

knowledges.”⁸⁹ For Rancière, the interdisciplinary thinker seeks to restore the intensities of “words and discourses which freely circulate, without master, and which divert bodies from their destinations.”⁹⁰ Interdisciplinary thought recalls Rancière’s broader work on the politics of aesthetics when it disorganizes power-induced relations between social positions, sense experience, and thought. Interdisciplinary political inquiry does not seek certification from the idols of political thought, nor does it only critique the conditions of disciplinary knowledge; it reworks disciplinary relationships between thought, sensibility, and power. It makes a mess of things.

Striving to register messiness within academic work, Katrin Pahl wonders what forms of thought might emerge when one “abandon[s] the will to know and to offer a clear picture and an intelligible articulation.”⁹¹ I have been trying to express the messiness of impasse not only by mucking up thought but also style. I have been trying to register impasse through gestures, allusions, and ellipses, through the pacing of sentences and paragraphs, through discussion of a sprawl things, sometimes in too terse a phrase. The loose ends invite moments of reverie. Repetition with variation fills these pages; a thought that takes off in one direction returns later with unfinished business, expressing the haunted timelines and indirection of dark atmospheres. My hope was to fashion a messy concept of impasse whose charge could be felt. This endeavor involved allowing atmospheric darkness to cloud these pages. Shifting narrativity away from mastery. Channeling swarms of affect, haunted timelines, becomings that unfold darkly, feelings of

⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 7.

⁹⁰ Rancière, “Thinking between Disciplines,” 9.

⁹¹ Katrin Pahl, “What a Mess,” *MLN* 130, no. 3 (2015), 528-9.

threat and promise, moments of stuckness and surge.

The point has not been to rid of argumentation, evaluation, and prescription but to diminish their sway over the conduct and genre of political theory and inquiry. Berlant suggests that we might “dedramatiz[e] the performance of critical and political judgment so as to slow down the encounter with objects of knowledge that are really scenes we can barely get our eyes around.”⁹² Stewart also aspires to “slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us.”⁹³

I also wish to pause the reach to the conventional tools of political theory—not to retire them but to fashion a sensibility that is more generous to the life of impasse. The form of inquiry that follows tracks power through the canals and dead ends of ordinary life. It detects patterns and viscosities while cultivating greater sensitivity to emergence, incipience, becoming, dispersion. These impasse matters are registered through the weight and the frailty of a lingering past, as well as in the ghosts of other times. Life is stuck. But it is also moving, however faintly, toward something else, toward futures that are pressing upon the present. It lives futures not in any safe and sure way, but in hauntings and reveries.

Impasses lead political inquiry away from demystification and toward intuition—toward feeling about for the rhythms, textures, and aura of power. Intuition is helpful since power is not always what it seems—not only because it conceals itself but because it

⁹² Berlant, “Starved,” 434.

⁹³ Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 4.

is changing, sometimes more rapidly than others. Stewart writes that “Politics starts in the animated inhabitation of things, not way downstream in the various dream boats and horror shows that get moving.”⁹⁴ The political takes form through a process of accumulation that is not at all smooth. At each step of the way, power is susceptible to being thrown off course. In an impasse, one might intuit how power is reorganizing to maintain itself. In addition to responding to the powers that be, they might anticipate the accretion and dispersal of power. In short, intuition can be a political sensibility that is keyed to the metamorphosis of power.

Political intuition is a sensibility of watching and waiting to see how the political might arise (or not). Intuition is crucial because one cannot know in advance what shape the political might take. The well-worn axes of the political are but a few starting points in a vast nebula of forces. Political intuition is an alertness to all sorts of shimmers, even those that seem to have nothing political about them. It insists that embodied, situated knowledge matters, especially in a largely disembodied discipline. It tends more generously to ordinary life by dwelling in and dilating on the many forces (some human, others not) that typically pass for big systems (such as settler colonialism, racism, orientalism, homophobia, urbanization, privatization). Political engagement might view those systems as patterns and viscosities while cultivating greater sensitivity to emergence, incipience, becoming, dispersion. A broader grasp of the intricacies of the political might follow. When informed by intuition, political theory registers the materialities, happenings, and affects through which the political *might* emerge.

⁹⁴ Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 15-6.

It might seem as though this exquisite, capacious attention bears a family resemblance to the frenetic searches conducted under demystification. I am not advocating a hermeneutics of suspicion that seeks power under every rock or intensity. Instead, I am pursuing a sensibility that is more patient, more curious, more open to surprise. Inquiry into an impasse becomes voracious, tentative, speculative. A political theorist tends to fragilities and resiliences in an impasse without hope for some underlying truth or structure of power that would ground a clear path of action. Political claims become more modest, unable to wield disciplinary knowledge as blunt weapons in turf battles. Forms of writing emerge that are more expressive than representational.

These ends are served well by the experimental quality of ethnography. Michael D. Jackson writes that “Ethnography forces the life of the mind from contemplation to experimentation.” It cultivates a “practical and social involvement” in the lifeworlds of others by following “a method of displacing ourselves from our customary habitus.”⁹⁵ Autoethnography might take oneself as other in experiments to refashion the gaps between a life lived and lives that could be. While autoethnography proceeds through an “I,” autoethnography of an impasse takes place when that “I” is falling apart. Its self is less a clear mirror than cracked glass. The effort is to bring analysis and activity into closer relation through experiments within an impasse unfolding.

Autoethnography can be an experimental shift from concept application to concept creation. Received knowledge and normalized senses put us on cruise control through ordinary life. Every now and then, however, something enigmatic comes our way. It stops us. Forces us to think. But as we puzzle over an impact that is at once vague and

⁹⁵ Michael D. Jackson, “Where Thought Belongs: An Anthropological Critique of the Project of Philosophy,” *Anthropological Theory* Vol. 9, No. 3 (2009), 241.

compelling, things roll on. We scramble to catch up to what outpaces us. Stories proliferate. They grasp about a moment, thing, or atmosphere. They land in thickets of ineloquence and pause. Or they shoot off on garrulous lines of flight. They become nostalgic, whimsical. Dreamy. Received concepts grow so stale in the air of densely haunted moments and vibrant landscapes. Faithful recounting of what's happening matters less than expression that is rinding up around something enigmatic and spellbinding. Whatever concepts that are then fashioned bear the vibrancy of encounters. For Gilles Deleuze, concepts are neither dead tools of analysis nor mere records of lived experience. They are contact zones of expression between detail and abstraction. They disorganize humans because they bear the charge of an encounter. "Concepts are indeed things," Deleuze says, "but things in their free and wild state beyond anthropological predicates."⁹⁶

The idea of concepts as wild things is befitting of impasses. Jack Halberstam has elaborated the wild as a potentiality that jostles us out of social, cultural, political, and conceptual slumber. The wild festers within the here and now. Its energy is restless, its intrusions are relentless, its trajectories are rife with swerves, and its capacity to surprise is inexhaustible.⁹⁷ I think impasses arise when people and power attempt to barricade themselves from the wild. Still, people cannot deny feeling *something* unsettling. The wild is a thought-imbued affect that has a wide range, from the faint sense that something is

⁹⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xx-i.

⁹⁷ See Jack Halberstam, "Charming for the Revolution: A Gaga Manifesto," *e-flux* 44 (April 2013); "Go Gaga: Anarchy, Chaos, and the Wild," *Social Text* 31, No. 3 (Fall 2013), 123-34; "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons," in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013), 5-12; "Wildness, Loss, Death," *Social Text* 32, No. 4 (Winter 2014), 137-48.

afoot to thicker states like unease, anxiety, worry, and misery, but also allure, exhilaration, and wonder.

I do not wish to disregard political theory but to intensify its wildness. Political inquiry into impasses might register the wildness that sizzles therein. It might evoke the atmosphere of struggles between the wild and the walls. Wind itself around the loopiness of time. Arrange a montage of ethnographic fragments and reflections whose charge lies between each section as much as within and that infuses theory with tactility and vitality.⁹⁸ Fashion concepts that are themselves wild—that upturn landscapes of affect, freed from the slaughterhouse of disciplines.

And how might guidance by this mode of theory alter politics of impasses? Political engagements might treat attachments critically but generously while striving to refashion them or inflect them in other directions. While responding to the powers that be, they anticipate the accretion of power through creative activity.⁹⁹ Engagements with impasse are not primarily about historicizing a stuck present but about exploring what futures could be—sometimes with the aim of fostering more open conditions for living, other times with a patience to see what might emerge of its own accord, other times to preempt the arrival of more nefarious futures.

Intuition forms only one component of a politics of impasses. An impasse is rife with tensions between, on the one hand, the need for greater sensitivity to potential shifts afoot and an openness to what futures might emerge and, on the other hand, need for

⁹⁸ Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* exemplifies this method.

⁹⁹ A genealogy of affirmative political stances runs through Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, Connolly, and Bennett. Brian Massumi is one of the latest to affirm the virtual field of emergence as a critical site of politics for the left given its engagement by neoconservatives and neoliberals. See “After the Long Past: A Retrospective Introduction to the History of the Present” in *Ontopower* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

more, intensified political activity across selves and collectives. As William Connolly puts it, “we must simultaneously slow down at key points and moments as we enhance sensitivity to the course of things outside our habitual modes of perception, expectation, and security and speed up a series of changes in contemporary role definitions, identities, faiths, public ethos, state priorities, and economic practices.”¹⁰⁰ These divergent needs do not sit comfortably together even as they are vital to each other. The torsion between intuition, experimentation, and openness has to be calibrated moment to moment in impasse.

Are You Still There?

Living otherwise within impasse requires more than a critique of what has inhibited desires, longings, and imaginations from taking root. It works through a keener sensitivity to alternatives that whisper today, experiments to push them into greater life, and an openness to how we will be changed, quite jarringly, by futures that never quite match our dreams of them. We imperil the lives that we are living. We risk losing something intimate of ourselves and our worlds. But we may be on the way to something too—even though that something might turn out to be nothing, to be bad business as usual, or to be a world that we never knew we needed so much but that we somehow, strangely, already have...

¹⁰⁰ William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 10-1.

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Close the door
and blow out
the candles.

Feel the walls fall
as you fade
into darkness.

It may get cold
but know that you are not

alone.

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Vita

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