Author/s:
Olds, Sally Elizabeth

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Seeking Arrangement: Essays on Work

Sally Elizabeth Olds

Orcid ID: 0000-0001-8911-1281

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Abstract

This thesis is about work and collectivity under post-Fordism. It examines social and artistic forms that loosely organise reproductive labour outside of formal institutions. Polyamorous relationships are conducted on a spectrum from spontaneous to Google-calendared to commune to cult. A secret men's club is comprised of working-class unionists who ban politics from discussion at their meetings. The nightclub is celebrated as a utopian melting pot, but exacerbates as much as alleviates workaday alienation. I explore these sites across five essays; in the sixth and final essay, I turn to the form of the essay itself, arguing that contemporary hybrid nonfiction derives from and expresses its precarised conditions of production in syntax and structure.

If post-Fordism is most readily associated with the collapse of work into leisure, as well as the destruction of workplace- and class-solidarity, the polyamorous relationship, the nightclub, the men's club, and the essay not only take this collapse for granted, but grow from it and reproduce it. They exist in an ambivalent zone of resistance and complicity that runs parallel to, and separate from, organised solidarity. In doing so, they usefully refract contemporary debates around leisure, automation, reproductive labour, and aesthetic production.

The creative component of this thesis is called *Seeking Arrangement: Essays on Work*, and is comprised of the six essays outlined above. The critical section contains an introduction, a literature review, and exegetical statement contextualising my use of the essay form and my research on post-Fordism.

Declaration

This is to certify that:

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards degree of Master of Arts (Research), except where indicated in the preface;

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;

and (iii) the thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Preface

This is to acknowledge that:

(iv) Third party editorial assistance was provided in preparation of this thesis by professional proofreaders, not knowledgeable within the disciplines of this thesis, and in accordance with the School policy.

(vii) That I was a recipient of the Research Training Program Scholarship (Stipend and Fee offset) from 2017-2019.

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This research was conducted on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. It also took place on Gubbi Gubbi land in South East Queensland, and on Jagera and Turrbal land in Meanjin/Brisbane.

Introduction: Critical Component and *Seeking Arrangement: Essays on Work*

The intellectual labour of this thesis was initially prompted by precarious manual labour that facilitated the intellectual labour and pleasure of others; from 2015-2017, I spent the bulk of my time unpacking and repacking boxes of books in an un-airconditioned shed behind a bookstore in Brisbane. This work was once conducted by floor-staff during slow periods, but the shop's expansion necessitated the division of labour and the spatial bifurcation of staff: out-front and out-back. Out back, I worked with one other person, both of us casual employees. I signed for deliveries, unpacked boxes of books, keyed them into the system, printed barcodes, stickered the books, repacked them in their boxes, carted them into the shop, and repeated the cycle. I was a node in a supply chain that went something like: writer—>publisher—>printing factory—>distribution center—>courier—>receivals (me)—>retail—>customer.

Of course, each node has its own chains attached. The printing factory exists because of the production and reproduction of machinery, of paper, of the factory itself. The writer needs money and space to write, a website, a website host, a literary agent, a contract, speaking engagements, a series of promotional videos mandated by the contract, a server, a data center, a few dozen workers tending to the data center. Intellectual labour is always, at least partly, manual labour, and in any case is dependent on the manual labour of others. The system of production far exceeds any individual experience of work, but necessarily tethers the individual within it.

The pragmatic, personal question I began with is also the intellectual, political question of this thesis: how do we, those who have to work to live, live under precarity? And what constitutes this 'we', given that precarity is frequently touted as an agent for the decomposition of class-consciousness and solidarity, and of the conditions and spaces that once made this solidarity possible: the union movement, the physical workplace, the stable job, local production?

Post-Fordism, the focus of this thesis, is often viewed as the underlying cause of this decomposition. An umbrella term for the dominant system of capitalist production in the late twentieth century to the present, it describes a paradigm-shift in labour and production. Most famously, it names the move from the industrialised production of commodities for mass consumption, as in the Fordist factory line, to a smaller-scale production of commodities targeted towards specific groups of consumers (Jessop, 'Thatcherism and Flexibility' 136; Pribac 26). The Fordist work day was characterised by its regularity and consistency, while under post-Fordism labour is, above all, flexible (Jessop, 'Thatcherism and Flexibility' 144). And where Fordism instituted a social contract built on welfare, a family wage, and government regulation, post-Fordism casualises the workforce, cuts benefits like health-care and paid leave, and dissolves the welfare state (Hirsch 31; Pribac 32-33). As a result, post-Fordism is often associated with precarity and the collapse of distinctions between the domestic and public spheres—the leak of work into life, the capture of life by work (Bogost 'Hyperemployment'; Hester 'Technically Female'; Morini 47).

Post-Fordism has obvious repercussions for the composition of social forms and class. In T*he Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), Guy Standing identifies seven groups or classes that replace the old industrial bifurcation of proletariat and bourgeoisie. At the top, there is a small but powerful elite comprised of billionaires who influence policy and global politics (8). Jointly occupying the strata below, the 'salariat' work stable jobs and enjoy paid holidays and pensions, while the 'proficians'—professional technicians—work flexibly, on contracts or as consultants, earning high incomes (8-9). Below, there is a shrinking core of manual workers, akin to the proletariat of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (9). Next is the growing class of the precariat, comprised of everyone from undocumented migrant workers to teenagers in hospitality jobs—those whose insecurity in work extends to all aspects of their life (15).[1] Flanking the precariat are the two final classes: the unemployed, and 'a detached group of socially ill misfits,' whose ranks the precariat is constantly in-danger of joining (9).

The precariat, however, is not yet a class, but a class-in-the-making; its constitutive state of insecurity, as well as the disparate and haphazard jobs that comprise its

[1] More specifically, for Standing, the precariat is defined by: 1) a lack of available employment, 2) a lack of regulations ensuring employment security, for example, protection against unfair dismissal, 3) job insecurity, for example, the elimination of large sectors of employment, plus stagnation at work rather than upward mobility, 4) insecurity at work, including the lack of regulation around working hours, compensation for accidents, and safety protocol, 5) a lack of opportunity to upskill, receive training, and use existing skills at work, 6) income insecurity, including an inadequate minimum wage, and the dismantling of wealth redistribution methods including social security, and 7) a lack of representation in the labour market, for example, through trade unions or the right to strike (Standing, *The Precariat* 12).

experiences of work, impedes its ability to bypass individual alienation and mobilise around a shared project, identity, or workplace (Standing, *The Precariat* 25-26). The precariat is, perhaps, the representative class of neoliberalism. In a 1987 interview with the magazine *Woman's Own*, Margaret Thatcher produced a now-infamous soundbyte that has since become exemplary of neoliberal austerity. Decrying those who rely on welfare instead of working, Thatcher argued:

> They are casting their problems at society. And, you know, there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours. (Thatcher 30-31)

After this interview, the phrase 'there is no such thing as society' circulated rapidly out of context, and was ridiculed by the left and applauded by the right. In 1993, Thatcher clarified her intention: 'My meaning, clear at the time but subsequently distorted beyond recognition, was that society was not an abstraction, separate from the men and women who composed it, but a living structure of individuals, families, neighbours and voluntary associations' (Thatcher qtd. in Steele 85). Thatcher is here drawing on the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, whose unifying idea across many works is that 'the most enduring social institutions are those that are shaped by spontaneous evolution, rather than by intellectual design' (Steele 86).

As if in preemptive response to Thatcher and Hayek, Karl Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*—an unfinished manuscript that was collected and published in 1939, and translated into English in 1973 (Bastani *Verso Blog*)—that capital produces society as an abstraction:

> The abstraction, or idea…is nothing more than the theoretical expression of those material relations which are their lord and master. Relations can be expressed, of course, only in ideas, and thus philosophers have determined the reign of ideas to be the peculiarity of the new age, and have identified the creation of free individuality with the overthrow of this reign. (95)

At first glance, capital seems to free the individual from her social relations, exploding predetermined 'ties of personal dependence' and distinctions of education and blood; in fact, these bonds are merely dissolved into the 'general form' of capitalist production, and rerouted through the wage relation and system of exchange (94). This is not a cause for celebration. Social relations for Marx are determined by the given conditions of production, and appear as objective: a dominating abstraction that exceeds the individual, a sphere too large and diffuse to change—a notion that the ruling class takes every opportunity to nourish (95). In other words, our social relations confront us, in unrecognisable form, as the objective conditions of production, while production confronts us within our social relations.

Further, as Marx writes in *Capital Volume 1* (1867): 'every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction' (711; ch. 23). Marx is here describing the

process by which a portion of all products must be reconverted into the means of production, 'elements of fresh products', if a society is to keep producing (711). Crucially, as capital is a social relation, this process must also *re*produce the 'specifically capitalist relations of production' (1060). The question is more complicated; 'how do we rebuild ties of solidarity under post-Fordism?' becomes 'how do we confront the fact that our social relations are embedded within the structure of capital itself?'

Reproductive labour—work associated with the domestic sphere, with women and racialised workers, such as cleaning and caring labour—is the work that allows for the reproduction of these social relations, the reproduction of capital (Hester 'Technically Female'). This thesis examines sites—the polyamorous relationship, the nightclub, the men's club, the essay—where reproductive labour occurs outside of formal institutions. Here, the lines dividing labour and leisure are unclear: leisure produces value; the secret fraternity makes millions; relationships become business ventures; the essay both educates and entertains. These are sites of spontaneous organisation, of projects that straddle libertarian and socialist ideals, of queer liberation, of almost-solidarity. In each, the individual negotiates their relationship to the collective, and the collective tempers or structures the experience of the individual—the oft-cited appeal of clubbing, for instance, is losing oneself in a crowd—but they remain discrete, temporary, secessionist: private forms of publics. They are precarious forms in more ways than one.

This thesis positions these sites within a wider frame: the possible extinction of the human as part of the ongoing devastation of the environment; the technophilic plutocratic surveillance state working across hardware and software, artificial intelligence, social media, and data-mining; the fast-morphing practices of family-building, sexuality, and the production of gender; Western colonial and imperialist projects of expropriation and expansion.

In the words of Michel Foucault, this thesis is 'a history of the present' (31), an envoy from the middle of the disaster or disasters. Rather than forwarding a single question or argument, it makes a case for holding onto complexity; as a creative writing thesis, it is able to make its case in form as well as content. The form I use—the essay—allows for multiple throughlines, lines of inquiry, themes, questions, and digressions. In fact, the essay almost demands it. As Theodor Adorno writes in the 'The Essay as Form', comparing the essay to a musical score or performance, the essay 'coordinates elements rather than subordinating them' (170).

In doing so, the essay, too, is situated in a tension between the collective and the individual. When Michel de Montaigne began writing his *Essais* in 1570, he wrote to annotate his favourite books—his earliest essays are comprised mostly of quotations—but gradually, his prose becomes continuous and his personality takes over the page (Routh, 'Origins Part I' 31; Hughes 14). The essay is a product of and catalyst for the advent of personality and self-fashioning in the Renaissance. Douglas G. Atkins argues: 'The self-reflexiveness then being invented both called attention to, as it helped

to create, personality' (19). The essay is not an inert record of the advent of the individual subject, but actively contributes to its formation.

In the essay, the process of thinking-through is also the process of writing. As Graham Good notes in *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (1988), the essay is at once a record of the topics under examination, the process of examining them, and reflections on the process of examination—a snapshot of thought in motion (20). As such, the essay as practiced in its Renaissance humanist form records the machinations of the individual essayist, sometimes more a mind than a body, and a self-reflexive one at that. Thus, while the form in many ways encourages complexity, it does so within the parameters of humanism's privileging of the individual subject—a framework that is endemic to the problems outlined above.

Far from rendering it unsuitable for this thesis' aims, these particular traits offer several clear advantages. First, as an individual thinking from a particular time and place, it offers me a framework and tradition to think with and against. Most relevant to this thesis are contemporary forms that attempt to modify, subvert, or experiment with the essay, including autotheory and hybrid nonfiction; can the form be used against itself to forward an essay of working-class solidarity, of post-work idleness, of feminist ethics? To what extent does the form already contain and produce these counter-currents? Second, the essay is a form that has taken on countless guises in its lifespan: as political tract, intimate address, popular entertainment, criticism, review, editorial, news article, academic genre *de rigeur,* philosophical treatise, travelogue, think piece, and more. It is malleable and capacious, primed for responding to the contemporary situation, and a

form on which the contemporary situation is always impressed; it is forged by its subject matter and the material conditions of production. Finally, the essay is itself implicated in the disasters outlined above. Complicit and impure, it is an ideal form for exploring the complicit and impure position of the subject within capitalism, and for analysing the reproduction of capital through forms that seem to resist it.

These two fields of inquiry—post-Fordism and the essay—are the focal points of this thesis. They also form the two parts of my literature review. Part 1 of the review situates this thesis within the history of the essay, both in its early and contemporary iterations. Part 2 turns to post-Fordism in relation to precarity and its articulation by the Italian lineage of thought known as *Autonomia* (Autonomism). The Spanish philosopher, curator, and writer Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (published in Spanish in 2008, and translated into English in 2013) is the hinge between the two sections; a nonfiction, hybrid text, it is an analysis of the production of the gendered, post-Fordist subject.

Though this structure coheres to a form/content division, as the above paragraph begins to make clear the extent to which such a division is possible is not at all self-evident or determined in advance; as this thesis examines social forms, the question of form is inextricable from its contents. As well as explicating key texts in relation to my research questions and arguments, I also offer a short 'Exegetical Statement' after the review, which elaborates how the thesis mobilises the literature, be this in content, form, or both.

This thesis fuses the creative/critical halves standard to the University of Melbourne's creative writing thesis. More accurately, its form was determined by the form of the essay, which does not fuse separate genres, styles, and forms after the fact but results from their original indistinction: upholding a division proved difficult from the start. The convention of the literature review threatens to reproduce these boundaries, positioning the six essays to come as the creative component in opposition to the critical component (the review). In practice, the essays frequently borrow creative techniques from theory, or develop an argument in response to a creative form. Further, many of the essays contain their own literature reviews *in situ*. This, again, necessitates paying close attention to how texts are used within or against their disciplinary bounds, particularly when these divisions fall along lines that post-Fordism itself challenges. If criticality is usually associated with work and creativity with pleasure, what would a post-Fordist genre look like—a creative-nonfiction thesis?

Literature Review

Part 1: Form

In Part 1 of this review, I address the ways in which essayists and theorists of the essay negotiate the complex relationship between production, reproduction, form, and genre in order to contextualise my own use and conception of the essay.

In the first section, I provide an overview of the history of the European essay, paying close attention to how the essay comes to be viewed—through the reproduction of particular ideologies and material circumstances—as a personal, reflective, and idiosyncratic form.

In the second section, I focus on two defining qualities of the essay, or two qualities frequently ascribed to the essay by scholars: the essay as the transcription of a gendered, feminised self, and the essay as a form defined by its responsiveness to its time and place of production.

In the third and final section, I focus on Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie*. I situate *Testo Junkie* as a dissenting heir to the tradition of the European essay; its reconstitution of genre—a mix of memoir, theory, pornography, and more—is pinned to post-Fordism's reconstitution of the gendered body's relationship to the personal and the public, the individual and the universal, and the singular and the collective.

Neither purely passive nor purely active, the essay emerges as a form that both shapes and is shaped by each of these concerns. The production of the essay, and its discursive construction in scholarship on the essay, serves to highlight the political and ideological function of reproduction itself.

History of the European Essay

This section offers an overview of the essay's history. Given the scope of this history, this is necessarily abbreviated; I have selected for inclusion texts that speak particularly to the classed, gendered, and raced politics of essay production. I begin with the essay's origins in France in the sixteenth century, and its development in England in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries through a burgeoning public, intellectual culture. Next, I examine its position as a 'common' or democratic form in the twentieth century before briefly analysing its use in feminist movements in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

Origins of the Essay: Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) is widely acknowledged as the originator of the essay, closely followed by Francis Bacon (1561-1626). A French nobleman and courtier to King Charles IX, Montaigne retired to his family's estate outside of Bordeaux on his thirty-seventh birthday in 1570, though he remained active in public life almost until his death (Spinner 15). His *Essais* were written between 1570 and 1592; he published the first two books in 1580, and a third, as well as significant

revisions to the prior works, in 1588. A third edition was published in 1595 by Marie le Jars de Gournay (1565-1645), Montaigne's close friend and 'adopted daughter', who he charged with collecting his revisions (Spinner 16).

In his widely-cited text *The Observing Self*, Good notes that Montaigne's essays were originally printed without paragraphs, and were divided into chapters that each constituted a single essay (27). In this structure, the book remained the overarching, organising unit: 'With Montaigne, the *essai* is still a sketchy concept, a kind of linking medium between the established forms of the "sentence" or quotation on one side, and the "book" on the other' (27).

Citing Ian Watts' 1957 study *The Rise of the Novel*, Good argues that much discourse on the novel applies to the essay. Watts argues that the novel rejects the classical and medieval age's use of abstractions, classes and universals (Watts 11). Where Medieval scholastic Realists argued for universals as realities, modern realism argued for the existence of particular objects perceived through the senses (11). The modern novel does not mobilise these premises in the same way as philosophy, but uses the 'general temper of realist thought,' its methods, and its questions (12). The novel, and the essay, are informed by and dramatise 'a developing but unplanned aggregate of individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places' (Good 31).[2]

[2] In 'Epic and Novel' (1941), the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin develops a similar schema by which to evaluate the formation of genre. For Bakhtin, the hero of the epic is not an individual but a flattened archetype; all character is 'externalised' through action and dialogue, and the hero does not possess an internal life that complicates his external actions (34). Furthermore, as Watts notes, the success of the epic's treatment was ascertained by its adherence to traditions of

Good notes that Montaigne rejects the confines of classical rhetoric's focus on division and definition, as well as the physical markers of subheadings, introductions, and summaries (30); he wanted 'the matter to make its own divisions' ('On Vanity' 2457). In the original French, *essai* is a verb rather than a noun, meaning 'trial' or 'attempt'—a resolutely non-methodical approach (Kahn 1269).

The *Essais* quickly found a readership and inspired imitators, who named their works according to the convention instituted by Montaigne. In 1597 Bacon, who had read Montaigne in French, published his *Essays*. Initially, it contained only ten essays, but like Montaigne, Bacon continued to revise the existing texts and add new ones, publishing three increasingly longer editions in his lifetime; the 1625 edition, published a year before his death, contained fifty-eight essays in total (Good 43).

Bacon is best known as the progenitor of the empirical method, as a statesman, and as a scientist; he saw his *Essays* initially as a minor work, an outgrowth of his more serious pursuits (Good 45). In Part II of his 1920 article, 'The Origins of the Essay Compared in French and English Literatures', H.V. Routh argues that Bacon's early essays cannot strictly be called essays if measured against Montaigne's, as Bacon's are largely preoccupied with matters of court and conduct (144-145). Good terms Bacon's essays

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the genre—by its replication of a model (13). In contrast, the protagonist of the novel possesses motivations at odds with both the external world and with their own self; the conflict between the two produces the drama of the novel (37). The modern reader also experiences the epic at an irreducible distance, as the genre is set and closed to revision (31), while the novel—and I add to this the essay—is a modern form constituted by and in 'living contact with unfinished, still- evolving contemporary reality', valued for its innovation and variation (7).

an early form of 'self-help' (46), while Routh characterises them as 'the manual of the opportunist' ('Origins Part II' 144). Bacon also continued to use the conventions of classical rhetoric, particularly division, simile, and definition (Good 46), as well as aphorism and epigram (Routh, 'Origins Part II' 144).

Good argues that the most striking difference between Montaigne and Bacon is one of method, finding that while Montaigne records the process of rumination, Bacon tends to record the results (45). By the 1625 edition, however, Bacon's output and method skews closer to Montaigne's: he approaches all subject matter with equal and thoroughgoing skepticism; he continually measures his thoughts and actions against his ideals, and finds himself wanting; and he becomes more introspective, positioning his own thoughts and experiences in relation to the broader topics under examination (Routh, 'Origins Part II' 145).

Influenced more by Montaigne's ruminative and far-ranging style than by Bacon's scientific rigor, the English courtier and member of Parliament Sir William Cornwallis (c. 1576-1614) published two volumes entitled *Essays* in 1600 and 1601 (Spinner 10). In 1603, John Florio (1553–1625) published the first English translation of Montaigne's *Essais* (Good 43). During this period in England, upper-class gentlemen habitually kept 'common-place' books, many of which formed the substance of early collections (Routh, 'Origins Part II' 143). By the early seventeenth century, essay writing became 'a habit, if not a fashion,' and—due to a complicated set of factors, which I will explore in more detail towards the end of this section—England had taken over from France as the primary producer of essayists (Routh, 'Origins Part II' 144).

Framing the Scholarship: Gender, Race, and Class in the Essay

As the literary critic Joel Haefner notes, and as the above outline attests, the essay tends to be viewed as the 'offspring of two fathers' ('Unfathering the Essay' 261). Anthologists and critics reproduce this view, legitimising the exclusion of women essayists from their scholarship by claiming there are none to include (261). Haefner notes that the argument does not hold after 1830, after which essayists such as George Eliot, Margaret Oliphant, Nancy Mitford, and Virginia Woolf gained prominence and acclaim (263).

However, recent scholarship proves that women's involvement in the form stretches back to at least the time of Montaigne. In *Of Women and the Essay: An Anthology from 1655 to 2000*, a groundbreaking anthology published in late 2018, Jenny Spinner collects forty-one essays written by women, and cites an additional 200 female essayists writing between 1500 and 2000. Spinner argues that women essayists suffer a double erasure for writing in a historically neglected genre from historically suppressed subject positions (2). The main factors determining women's ability to participate in literary production were wealth, education, and access to a public intellectual life (Spinner 4-7). With the introduction of printing presses to Europe in the late fifteenth century, upper class and bourgeois women could access books at home, which had previously been confined to monastic libraries and castles (Bauschatz 42). However, women's public lives were still largely restricted to pious works, and their educations—even for wealthier women—were limited (Spinner 7).

To develop the *essai* from a literary context that privileged system, order, and classification—and to apply skepticism to all topics, including religion and morality—Montaigne required both internal and external authorisation: the support of family, church, city, and country, as well as the self-authorisation to take 'ownership of [a] textual subjectivity,' (Spinner 4) a self-possession that was difficult and dangerous for women to access (5). Haefner similarly argues that Montaigne, as a jurist, mayor, lawyer, and advisor to the King, internalised the law; the ambivalence and skepticism in his writing mark a complex negotiation of expectation and tradition ('Unfathering' 269).[3]

Furthermore, in early modern France, philosophical, theological, and classical works were largely published in Latin; women, if they were educated, were generally not taught Latin and were missing the shared textual framework that allowed educated men to write within and to this tradition (Spinner 7). Montaigne's essays, particularly his early works, were built around quotations from Latin texts and therefore implicitly excluded women from his reading public (7). At the same time, they were written and published not in Latin but in French, thereby fostering a female readership (7). The *Essais* inaugurate a seemingly masculine, aristocratic tradition and at the same time offer the tools for its democratisation.

If 'the essay has long remained a motherless genre' (Spinner 1), it is not entirely due to the restrictions placed on women in the sixteenth century, or the suppression of their contributions when they did write and publish texts; in fact, many female writers,

[3] See Montaigne's 'On Repentance' for an example of this negotiation (2065-2099).

including essayists, were well-regarded or notorious—and certainly not invisible—in their time (1). Gournay (the daughter of feudal lord Guillaume Le Jars, King Henry III's treasurer) read Montaigne's *Essais* in 1584, and visited Montaigne in Paris, where they became friends (Spinner 7). After his death in 1592, she became the executor of his literary estate, and the 1595 edition of the *Essais* she published included her own preface, which heavily imitated Montaigne's own writing style (Bauschatz 59). After widespread ridicule, she later renounced the preface, stating that she had been temporarily insane; however, she continued to oversee the publication of Montaigne's work while publishing numerous essays and a novel of her own (Spinner 8).

In 1655, Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle (1623-1673), published *The World's Olio*, one of the earliest known essay collections by a woman, which contains over 200 essays. Like Gournay, Cavendish was the daughter of wealthy landed gentry and had access to private tutors, although her education was not given priority (Spinner 10). An eccentric figure, Cavendish drew crowds of curious spectators on her rare public outings, had her plays acted in London, and achieved her avowed desire for fame.[4] As Spinner states in an interview with anthologist Patrick Madden: 'We aren't just digging little-known writers from the pits of obscurity. We're digging well-known writers from pits of obscurity dug by scholars and anthologists' (*Essays Daily*).

This erasure is compounded for Indigenous writers, writers of the African diaspora, and migrant writers. Maria Stewart (1803-1879), a political activist for women's rights and

[4] See Cavendish's essays on fame in *The World's Olio*, and 'To All Noble and Worthy Ladies' in *The Blazing World*.

the abolition of slavery, is thought to be the first African-American woman to give public lectures, and the first to regularly publish essays (Spinner 21). In 1841, Ann Plato (1824-unknown) published *Essays*, the first collection of essays by a female African-American writer (21). Spinner argues that the majority of nineteenth-century essays by African-American women are polemical and political in nature rather than genteel, familiar, or personal; before the nineteenth century, it is difficult to find African-American women essayists at all (21).

However, as this was previously thought to be the case for the majority of white, female essayists, it is likely there are plenty of exceptions to these rules, and more research remains to be done in this area (*Essays Daily*).

Insofar as white female essayists writing before the nineteenth century are recognised in the history of the essay, their legacy is often confined to polemical or political works that made little reference to an 'I' or self behind the text: in treatises on 'the woman question', the abolition of slavery, education, religion, and morality (Spinner 21-22). These are frequently viewed as contiguous to the essay tradition proper, which from the late seventeenth century in England was increasingly defined by its first-person voice, intimate tone, and minor or personal subject matter (Spinner 17). Even so, Spinner's anthology focuses on essays that *do* cohere to this tradition, and, as Spinner notes, many writers, including Cavendish and Gournay, combine personal and public subject matter in their works (8; 11; 22). In the eighteenth century in particular, women were prolific within the genteel and familiar traditions (Spinner 9).

Scholarship on the origin and development of the European essay—almost all of which precedes Spinner's anthology—is thus severely flawed in its reliance on the 'two-father' hypothesis, and by its neglect of essays authored by European women, Indigenous women, and women of the African diaspora. The corrective is not as simple as recovering lost texts that cohere to a tradition inaugurated by Montaigne and Bacon; rather, the canon itself, and the parameters of the essay genre, has been shaped by this neglect. As Spinner writes, 'in different ages, the essay itself, but especially the essay as accessed by women, flourished under guises...relegated to sidebar status: letters, travel sketches, and newspaper and magazine columns, among them' (3). The well-theorised malleability and capaciousness of the genre—which I explore in the 'Qualities' section of this review—is raced, gendered, and classed, its borders open for the contributions of (in particular) wealthy English men, and closed to the contributions of non-white, non-wealthy, and non-male writers (Spinner 3). In this way, the genre is depoliticised, and a political work by a woman of colour is thus less likely to be called an essay.

The concept of a dualistic origin—the Montaigne-Bacon nexus—produces 'myths of fathering and genesis' that can also obscure the historical and material conditions of the essay's production, as well as its constitution from heterogeneous sources (Haefner, 'Democracy' 128). Charles E. Whitmore traces the essay's development from adjacent forms such as the letter and the treatise in a useful historical survey from 1921 ('The Field of the Essay' 554). In 'Unfathering the Essay' Haefner expounds the influence of the Latin epistolary tradition on Montaigne, particularly Seneca's *Epistles* (c. 65 AD) and Cicero's (c. 68 to 44 BC) *Letters to Atticus* (268), while James Sutherland, in

English Literature of the Late Seventeenth Century (1969), tracks the essay as a literary bifurcation from the more utilitarian periodicals and newspapers also developing during the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century (230-243). However, while these are indispensable historical resources, they are compromised by the problems identified above: they recognise the form when authored by men, but neglect similar contributions from women.[5]

When conceptualised as the product of two fathers, the essay genre also becomes patrimony: property passed down along a patrilineal line, in this case confined to an aristocratic framework (Haefner, 'Unfathering' 259). The English essayist David Abercromby claimed in *A Discourse of Wit* (1686) that his chief reason for writing was 'to furnish the Virtuosi with matters fit for ingenious conversation' (in Sutherland 229). Routh claims that the French Renaissance salon partook in 'an age of wit, which had learnt from Balzac to value its conversation as the chief civilising force of society' ('Origins Part I' 37). Sutherland writes that the 'familiar essay' of England in the late eighteenth century was 'personal, idiosyncratic, rambling, reminiscent,' and its authors were often well-off, retired gentleman reflecting on their youth (227).

For Good, access to leisure produces the genteel, familiar, and personal essay traditions: 'the ideal essayist should be *disinterested*, his outlook uncolored by any particular trade or profession. This does not conflict with the essayists's own

[5] Sutherland does, however, acknowledge the varied uses of the term in the seventeenth century (229), nodding to a single woman-authored text, Mary Astell's 1696 *Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (227).

fascination with particularities, as it is precisely his *general* interest that leads him to observe them' (10). Leisure in this tradition is usually figured as male—'a state of splendid isolation predicated on the exploitation of women and other social classes' (Haefner, 'Unfathering' 263). However, this downplays the intersection of class with gendered access to the form, as the only women initially able to write and publish essays were those in similar material positions to Montaigne and Bacon (Good 11).

Patrimony functions not just to consolidate the essay as patriarchal property; it also reinforces nationalist tropes, particularly a simplistic division between French and English traditions: 'the Montaigne-Bacon dichotomy reconstitutes the Anglo-American and Gallic confrontation,' as Haefner writes (259). To give one example of this attitude, in 1881 Leslie Stephen—writer, editor, and father of Virginia Woolf—characterised the difference between French and English essays with a series of dichotomies: the French coin 'jewellery in words,' while the English language and intellect is too blunt for such ornaments; the French sensibility is developed in 'rapid conversation,' while the English is developed in the pulpit; the French essay can be epigrammatic, while the English essay tends to an easier and more continuous flow of prose ('The Essayists' 286).

However, there is some truth to this division, and historical reasons why such a division occurred: the rise of salons in France meant the essay's development departed to England; to access the salon in the late seventeenth century, one had to conform to its values, whereas in England a large reading public was developing due in part to the rapid development of the press ('Origins Part I' 35; Sutherland 243). Nevertheless,

newspapers and periodicals were frequently suppressed and banned in England between 1660-1690 due to the Licencing Act, which required every publisher to obtain an official licence in order to guard against the distribution of treasonous material (Sutherland 234). After the Licencing Act was allowed to lapse in 1695, there was a continual and rapid development of journalism and periodicals in England (Sutherland 234-243).

Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Essays: Periodicals, Papers, and Circulation

The eighteenth century was a turning point for the essay (Spinner 11). Prior to this, essays were collected in volumes; now, they appeared in newspapers and magazines, as travel writing, and in letter form (Spinner 12). Collections of letters were particularly popular with women writers, as pushing the limits of propriety was more acceptable in a form intended to be private (Spinner 12). In the eighteenth century, the growth of a large middle-class, due partly to England's status as the centre of industrial development, produced a new audience for the essay and the newspaper; the paper, writes Routh, was an approachable form of edification: 'the one literary recreation which the average person could enjoy without sacrificing his ordinary self' ('Origins Part II' 149).

In 1709 Joseph Addison founded *The Tatler*, which ran for two years and was the first known periodical to use journalistic personae. These personae appeared as authors of the text or as narrators and characters within it: invented figures who recounted news and opinion in particular voices and from particular perspectives (Sutherland 229). Good and Sutherland both view the periodical's character sketch—a sketch of a human

type, for example, Sir Richard de Coverley, a fictional contributor to *The Spectator* representing the character of a landed country gentleman—as a form of the essay (Good 12; Sutherland 229). Addison terminated *The Tatler* in 1711 to found *The Spectator* with Richard Steele, which ran from 1711-1712, and was revived by Addison for six months in 1714. Both papers were immensely influential, and helped stoke a vibrant intellectual scene in London's clubs and coffeehouses, where the papers were available for patrons to read (Spinner 16; Routh, 'Origins Part II' 149).

Women adopted personae and fictional elements like the character sketch to create the objective distance then favoured in Anglophone intellectual life, claiming authority through an adopted male gender (Spinner 13). However, neither Good nor Sutherland mention this tradition, overlooking Elizabeth Haywood's *The Female Spectator*, which was founded in 1744, and modeled on Addison and Steele's paper (Spinner 14). Spinner claims that *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* influenced many writers, who emulated not just its styles and attitudes in general but in particular towards women, with many essays on 'the woman question' (14). Stephen corroborates this view, arguing that *The Spectator's* female-heavy readership helped set the tone of the essay; it became a tool for the education of women, its moralising, sermon-like tone evolved around this task, and its numerous imitators reproduced this style in their own work (287).

By 1800, there were over 2500 periodicals in print in England alone (Sutherland 235). Stephen argues in 'The Essayists' that the changing readership and growing population of London, as well as the increasing circulation of periodicals, altered the character of

the essay (291). He links this change directly to the changing social composition of the gentlemen's club and coffeehouse. A gentleman would once attend his club, settle into an intimate conversation with one or two trusted friends, and spend the evening in a slow 'thaw under the influence of his bottle and his pipe of tobacco,' perhaps jotting down these speculations to publish later; now, Stephen writes, club and coffeehouse conviviality had 'dissolved into fragments' (291). The essayist could no longer write for his small circle of interlocutors—he no longer knew most of his audience at all—and instead changed his tone in an attempt to 'catch the ear of that vague and capricious personage, the general reader' (291). As a result, the essay becomes generic, and despite the essayist's anxious deployment of the latest trend, 'somehow their disquisitions seem to be wanting in individual flavour' (297).

Twentieth-Century Essays: 'The Common Reader'

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, there were many women writing in the genteel essay tradition, including Agnes Repplier, Vernon Lee, Elisabeth Woodbridge Morris, Alice Meynell, and Katherine Fullerton Gerould (Spinner 24). Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was a crucial figure in the shift from the genteel to modernist tradition, anticipating the more forthright language and looser structures of the contemporary essay (Spinner 26). Likewise, *The New Yorker*—founded in 1925 by Harold Ross and Jane Grant—was foundational to the tone of the modern essay; in particular, in E.B White's contributions, the nineteenth-century familiar essay encounters the modern world, with White using a warm, humorous tone to recount personal experiences of larger significance (Spinner 28).

Woolf's essays are collected across two works, *The Common Reader Volume I* (first published in 1925) and *Volume II* (1932), most of which were first written for magazines and papers, such as the *Times Literary Supplement*. The title is a reference to Samuel Johnson's 'Life of Gray' (1781), in which he celebrates the 'common reader'—one who reads voraciously, though not professionally as a critic or scholar does—as the final arbiter of a book's worth (Woolf 1). However, Woolf, who referenced her father's work frequently in her own criticism, might also have been alluding to and mounting a defence of Stephen's 'general reader'. The traits of the common reader, Elizabeth C. Madison notes, emerge as the traits of the essayist (62). The common reader, like the essayist, seeks pleasure, rather than education, and may in fact be patchily educated; he is opportunistic, creating theories or portraits out of whatever comes to hand; he is 'hasty, inaccurate, and superficial,' yet his efforts yield more than the sum of their parts, which are 'insignificant in themselves, yet contribute to so mighty a result' (Woolf 1-2).

Striking a balance between immediacy and timelessness, a balance she views as one of the essay's hallmarks, Woolf's 'The Modern Essay' (*The Common Reader Volume I*) is at once a timely review of Ernest Rhys' five volume anthology, *The Modern English Essay* (1923), and a timeless gloss on the defining qualities of the essay. Above all, Woolf argues that 'the principle which controls [the essay] is simply that it should give pleasure' (211). Indeed, the loftiest ideals or educations 'must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture' (212). The essay form for Woolf sides with entertainment over education, and the essay here

grows from leisure and invites the reader—through the leisurely practice of reading—to share in the experience.

However, Woolf, like Stephen, notes a shift in styles due to historical circumstances ('The Modern Essay' 215). In the early twentieth century, the essay's place of production as well as its reception moves 'from the drawing-room to the Albert Hall' (220). Her father's generation, the Victorians:

> Wrote at greater length than is now usual, and they wrote for a public which had not only time to sit down to its magazine seriously, but a high, if peculiarly Victorian, standard of culture by which to judge it. It was worth while to speak out upon serious matters in an essay; and there was nothing absurd in writing as well as one possibly could when, in a month or two, the same public which had welcomed the essay in a magazine would carefully read it once more in a book. (215-216)

Now, Woolf asserts, in the early twentieth century, essayists write short essays weekly and daily 'for busy people catching trains in the morning or for tired people coming home in the evening' (219). The quality suffers, and the essayist 'instinctively draw[s] out of harm's way anything precious that might be damaged by contact with the public, or anything sharp that might irritate its skin' (219).

For both Stephen and Woolf, this decline in quality is related to its transfer from the private to public domain. In an argument akin to Walter Benjamin's thesis in 'The

Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), the text loses its aura through its reproducibility and circulation outside the context of its inception—in the certainty of 'contact with the public' (Woolf 219). Further, though the common reader is not necessarily an aristocrat, they are implicitly middle-class, with access to education and a modest collection of books (Woolf 1). For Woolf, when the reader becomes the worker—busy, tired, and constantly in motion—the demand for regular entertainment in increasing quantities rapidly dilutes its quality, and the essay loses the intimacy of conversation and conviviality.

Twentieth-Century Essays: A Democratic Form

In her essay on Montaigne in *The Common Reader*, Woolf champions the essay as a democratic and accessible form—a departure from her more ambivalent position in 'The Modern Essay'. Appraising the qualities of Montaigne's *Essais*, she writes that 'it appears, then, that we are to aim at a democratic simplicity. We may enjoy our room in the tower, with the painted walls and the commodious bookcases, but down in the garden there is a man digging…' ('Montaigne' 62). In this account, the essay corrects for the excesses of both leisure and work, though here, perhaps tellingly, it polices the man at leisure rather than the man at work. It is also a restless form, encouraging the essayist to move from the tower to the garden, a movement that precludes the writer becoming complacent in their social position, their perspective on their surrounds, and their self-perception.

In the early twentieth century, the essay became increasingly bound to democracy, and democracy's apparently equalising impetus: the essay as a form is open to all,

accessible, reasonable, and a measure of intellectual freedom and debate. Ned Stuckey-French characterises the essayist in the early twentieth century as middle-brow, centrist, and even-tempered (105), and columnists as agents bridging the distance between high-brow culture, particularly modernism, and the genteel or familiar essay (108).

This conception of the essay as democratic was compounded by its introduction as the primary educational tool of Anglophone classrooms in the early twentieth century (Haefner, 'Unfathering' 262). In 'Democracy, Pedagogy, and the Personal Essay' (1992), Haefner argues that the promotion of the pedagogical essay in the 1980s is undergirded by the ideology of individualism that informs the project of liberal democracy (127). This ideology positions the essay as a genre free of ideology, as classless and egalitarian (Haefner, 'Democracy' 128). In this way, the essay's constitution from social, collective, and material sources—as well as its dialogic relationship to readership and reception—is obscured, and the ideology of individual exceptionalism is reproduced through the educational system (135). As Lynn Bloom writes in 'The Essay Canon' (1999), students of the essay will be 'inspired to understand and appreciate the ideals of a free society, a liberal education—truth, justice, the spirit of inquiry' (423-4).

Among others, Haefner is responding to Good's *The Observing Self.* Good writes that 'the essay is neither an elite form nor a mass form, and when it treats those forms it is generally critical of both. It is a democratic form, open to anyone who can see clearly and think independently. As such, it is vital to our educational, cultural, and political

health' (130). That is, because of its necessarily partial perspective, the essay tempers any latent or overt totalising tendencies of dogma or ideology in order to celebrate the minor and the individual (Good 25). Haefner notes that to cast the essay in these terms is to introduce a 'pathology of the essay': there are correct uses of the form and incorrect uses, whose repercussions play out in the exclusion of women and people of colour from the genre ('Democracy' 130).

However, read in the context of his other treatments of the topic throughout *The Observing Self*, Good ultimately advocates for the essay not an individualistic form, but as a 'universal particular' (8). In fact, Good argues, precisely because the essay is the product of specific experiences, practices, and ideas, it cannot be fully absorbed into or read as a 'collective enterprise', and this—far from limiting the essay's relevance—is what grants it a collective or universal relevance (9). Though every individual is different, they all have in common this experience of difference: 'The essayist is representatively unrepresentative, typical of how we experience ourselves as untypical' (9).

In a 2008 essay on the personal essay, Scott Russell Sanders similarly argues that personal experience is of broader import, writing that 'I choose to write about my experience...because it seems to me a door through which others might pass' ('The Singular First Person' 8). A similar conceptual project underpins Preciado's *Testo Junkie.* However, where Sanders seeks points of identification for readers, Preciado complicates the terms on which this identification depends. Referring to his text as a 'body-essay', a 'somato-political fiction', a 'self-theory', and 'not a memoir' (11), he

claims that the most intimate details of a life are impersonal: he is interested in his emotions only insofar as 'they are traversed by what isn't mine' (11-12).

Late Twentieth-Century and Early Twenty-First Century Essays: The Personal-is-Political Essay, The Revolutionary Essay, and the Online Essay

For essayist Ellena Savage (2017), the personal essay—an umbrella term that includes the lyric essay, the familiar essay, and the periodical essay—is a form that mediates between the personal and the political, the situated and the universal ('The Emancipatory Personal Essay?' 3). In the latter half of the twentieth century, it was an ideal form for the feminist, queer, and Black liberation movements, which sought—among myriad other goals—to politicise oppressed subject positions (3). Indeed, its popularity grew partly from feminist consciousness raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s, which attempted to position individual women's experiences of oppression within a shared narrative—a fraught process that sometimes reproduced the conditions it attempted to critique (3-4).

The practice of autobiographical feminist writing as an emancipatory tool arose partly from such groups, and is laden with similar complexities (4). For Savage, it continues today in the 'subject position-oriented' personal essay, often published online—Savage uses the 2015 viral essay 'On Falling In and Out of Love With My Dad' by Natasha Rose Chenier as an example (6). This form of essay writes from and seeks recognition for a point of identification, often an identity position (3). Through its marketing and consumption, the essay functions as a kind of vanishing mediator, producing a mutual and momentary recognition for writer and audience (2). As such, it functions within a

liberal democratic politics of representation, ascribing political value to the act of gaining recognition for an identity that is given in advance, thereby naturalising the context in which this subject position arises, 'presum[ing] the unity of pre-existing cultural forms' (7).

Not all personal essays are subject position-oriented, however. She also identifies the 'dialectical personal essay'—exemplary of which is Hilton Als' 'Tristes Tropiques' (7). This form negotiates the terrain between writer and audience, the subject and its construction, ideology and its reproduction (7), and has 'a dynamic or novel understanding of the cultural precepts it negotiates' (10).[6]

Though Savage does not examine these, there are also other historical contexts that have produced other practices of essaying. In 'Tellin' It Straight: Self-Presentation within Indigenous Women's Life-Writings' (2000), Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues: 'Unlike most white women's autobiographies, [Indigenous women's] narratives express collective relations…[even] transcending several generations' (16). Subject to intense surveillance, policing, and management, Indigenous women have an acute knowledge of the ways in which racialised subjectivity is constructed and naturalised (14). In a settler-colonial context, this is further entrenched by the dissonance between white cultures and Indigenous cultures, a dissonance Indigenous people negotiate daily; their life writings are part of and reflect this negotiation (23-24).

[6] I would also add Preciado's *Testo Junkie* to this category for its analysis of the construction of subjectivity. See the final section, 'Precarity and the Essay', in Part 1 of this review.

In the feminist movement in North America in the 1960s and 1970s, many Marxist-feminist and socialist-feminist organisations attempted dialectical analyses of women's material positions. I turn to the contents of these analyses in 'Part 2: Post-Fordism redux'; here, I will briefly outline their form, production, and circulation. In their introduction to *Women, Class, and the Feminist Imagination: A Socialist-Feminist Reader* (1990), Ilene J. Philipson and Karen V. Hansen credit a grass-roots network of publications with galvanising the women's movements and associated organisations (10). They argue: 'what allowed socialist-feminist ideas to spread across the country as they did was an underground circulation of papers, articles, and pamphlets that were mimeographed or printed at the authors' expense, or as a project of a socialist-feminist group or organisation' (10).[7]

Before the 1970s, there were very few women-authored Marxist texts that analysed capitalism in relation to the subjugation of women (10). In the 1970s, when a Marxist-feminist or socialist-feminist text appeared in a journal, it was rapidly circulated, critiqued, discussed, reprinted, and distributed overseas (10). The Marxist-Feminist Group, which formed in 1973, held workshops, retreats, and conferences to discuss this growing body of literature, operating as a network connecting thousands of women, through which ideas, essays, and papers could circulate (11). Many now-classic feminist texts, including Gayle Rubin's essay 'The

[7] For a historical account of the role of journals, pamphlets, and newspapers in earlier North American worker-led uprisings, including the Haymarket bombings, see Bryan D. Palmer's 'Nights of the Bomb Throwers: The Dangerous Classes Become Dangerous' in *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression (From Medieval to Modern)*, particularly pages 237-251.

Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex' (1975) and Heidi Hartmann's essay 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a more Progressive Union' (1979) began life as pamphlets distributed and critiqued by hundreds before their formal publication (12).

An analysis of the role of the Internet—as an unprecedented medium of scale and speed for the publication and circulation of essays—is beyond the scope of this literature review; I extrapolate the effects of the internet on the essay in the final work in this thesis, 'The Beautiful Piece', and therefore leave it aside here. It is worth noting, however, that the first known online literary magazine, *Swift Current*, founded in Toronto in 1984, conceived of its function in terms similar to the essay in its bourgeois, democratic, and personal forms (Karl E. Jirgens 'A Quick Note'). As Jirgens argues, *Swift Current* bypassed the structures of the publishing industry and connected writers to a global community: 'The instantaneous pan-global linkage of thought serves to create a kind of plastic collective consciousness' ('A Quick Note'). Provided they had already published at least one book—a restriction that hints at the partial nature of its democratic reform—anyone could upload their work directly to *Swift Current*'s database. Each user could choose from this database and curate their own archive, effectively creating as many magazines as there were users (Jirgens). *Swift Current* was also a social tool, offering email, forums for collaborative projects and group discussions, and the ability to comment on other users' work (Jirgens), prefiguring the function of both contemporary online literary magazines and curatorial, social, and user-driven platforms like *Tumblr*, *Pinterest*, and *Medium*. Online, perhaps, the essay

itself becomes a platform: a terrain mediating the relationship of the individual to the social.

Qualities of the Essay: Personality and Femininity, Receptivity

In this section, I will briefly examine two categories under which scholarship on the essay's qualities can be grouped. One field of criticism claims that the essay is an extension, performance, or transcription of the essayist's personality— a personality often coded as female. The second field views the essay as a receptive form, imprinted by historical circumstances and ideologies: a receptive, responsive form.

Personality & Femininity

The manifold histories of the essay have made it difficult for scholars to consistently define the form. In fact, the essay has so consistently eluded definition that its undefinability has become one of its defining traits, and the difficulty of defining it a point of consensus between many schools of thought. The Hungarian philosopher and critic Georg Lukács writes that, in its drift away from criticism, the essay 'has become too rich and independent for dedicated service, yet...too intellectual and too multiform to acquire form out of its own self' ('A Letter to Leo Popper' 31). Spinner argues that this definitional problem has contributed to the difficulty of recovering women's essays, which have been excluded according to shifting criteria from major essay anthologies throughout history (3). Good, describing Montaigne's essaying, refers to the essay as a paradoxical 'informal form' (33).

In response to the essay's variety—the many guises it takes on through history, as well as its digressive form—critics have often argued that the form is given coherence by an external force; if the essay is paratactic in each iteration and as a genre, the answer must lie in a hypotactic agent.[8] Most frequently, this agent has been viewed as the essayist. In this section, I explore the construction and the gendering of this persona; in the final section of this review I examine how Preciado both models and challenges the implicit gendering of the form.

In 'The Field of the Essay' (1921), Charles E. Whitmore argues that the form is defined by the tone or attitude of the essay, not by its subject matter. In fact, the range of the essay results from critics labelling anything that possesses this tone an essay: 'This tone…may appear in such different shapes as a letter, a *Spectator* paper…and it is therefore not surprising that the field to which the term "essay" is applied should be

[8] I use the terms parataxis and hypotaxis to describe fragmentation and synthesis, respectively. My use of the terms is informed by the debate on 'The New Sentence' in the 1970s and 1980s. Ron Silliman's definitional essay, 'The New Sentence' (1987), argued that Bay Area poets, particularly Bob Perelman, were using sentences in a new way: as paratactic units of meaning, self-contained fragments that related to other fragments through polysemy, contiguity, and association, rather than logical continuity (Silliman, 'The New Sentence' 239). Notably, the essay is often described as a similarly associative form that privileges internal resonance over logical structure. See 'Culture: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1991) for Frederic Jameson's analysis of the New Sentence as a postmodern and ultimately capitalist form. For Bob Perelman's response to Jameson, see 'Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice' (1993). For a summary of the debate, see Paweł Kaczmarski's 'The New Sentence: June Jordan and the Politics of Parataxis' (2018). For a contextual discussion of parataxis, see Adorno's 'Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry' (1964).

broad and indeterminate' (557).[9] The 'essay-quality' (557) for Whitmore consists in treating a trivial matter with the reverence or attention usually reserved for topics of universal importance (558). Ultimately, it is the treatment of the matter that defines the tone; therefore, 'the unifying personality of the essayist' knits together a text or an author's corpus, no matter how varied or fragmentary (563). There is not even one particular attitude or tone that defines the 'essay-quality': what defines it, in the end, is that the expression of ideas is individual and unique to each essayist.

Many critics have reached a similar conclusion to Whitmore. H.V Routh argues that the essay's true object is 'not the object seen, but the author's eyes, and the angle from which he gazes' ('Origins Part I' 32). Douglas G. Atkins argues that 'the essay's truth must come to reside in…the person of the essayist' ('The Advent of Personality' 27), and Good writes that the 'unsorted' nature of the essay means it can be find coherence only in the self, and that '[t]he order is "as it occurred to me", not "as it usually occurs"' (8).

The persona of the essayist is often explicitly or implicitly gendered, and despite the erasure of female essayists from the canon, the essayist is not usually figured as solely masculine. Indeed, the essayist is often read as feminine and the form as feminising. On the essay's constitution from books and quotations, William H. Gass writes in 'Emerson and the Essay' (1984):

[9] As noted above, Spinner finds in this argument evidence for the exclusion of women from the essay's history: 'if scholars have been quick to label as essays even marginally essayistic writings, there is no reason why the marginally essayistic or just plain marginal writings of women would not be/are not a part of the essay's story…' (5).

> The essayist is in a feminine mood at first, receptive to and fertilised by texts, hungry to quote, eager to reproduce; and often, before the essay itself is well underway in the reader's eye, its father will be briefly introduced, a little like the way a woman introduces her fiance to her friends, confident and proud of the good impression he will make. (26)

Notably, there is a moment of renunciation; the essayist only begins in a 'feminine mood,' which is then supplanted by the father of the text, who is also akin to her fiance. Gass perhaps lifts this argument and arc from one of Montaigne's earliest essays, 'On Idleness,' which is structured roughly in two parts. The first part (the 'feminine mood') is an analogy bolstered by quotations, in which Montaigne writes that the unoccupied mind is akin to both fallow land and the female body (200). Though both can produce weeds or 'shapeless lumps of flesh', respectively, they require 'seed' from another source to put them to work in their proper roles (200). Likewise, the mind will 'rush wildly to and fro' unless curbed by 'some definite subject' (200-201). In the second half, the father/fiance arrives in the form of the 'I'; Montaigne steps in and makes clear the relevance of the analogy and quotations to his own experiences. He had hoped, he writes, that retirement would allow his mind to settle, but instead his thoughts have broken free like a 'runaway horse' (202). He decides to record them to study them at leisure and, ultimately, discipline his mind into better habits: 'to make it ashamed of itself' (203).

Good notes that a shift occurs here from '"the mind's need to fix on an object" to "the interest of recording the mind's unfixed movement"' (Good 33). Though the record turns out to be precisely the object needed to occupy Montaigne's mind, maintaining the record necessitates allowing his thoughts to continue to rove. The attempted renunciation of non-productivity fails, and is oddly productive. To cast it in Marxist terms, the essay perverts or reroutes the reproductive labour of knowledge-transmission based in classical and medieval rhetoric. In this acceptance of the mind's uncontrolled nature, the essay's lot is cast with the feminised, the monstrous, the wild, and the abortive, though it remains ashamed of its deformity (Good 33).

Notably, this mimics what Serge Hughes, in his 1970 introduction to the *Essential Montaigne*, views as the arc of Montaigne's *ouvre*. He argues that, originally, Montaigne's essays were dominated by quotations from poetry and allusions to the classics, and:

> Not very distinguishable in form or content from similar "meditations" of the day—meditations that Erasmus and Italian humanists had made famous. But as Montaigne's personality became more sure of itself, more robust, the essays acquired a physiognomy of their own. They began to touch on all subjects, from countless points of view. (14)

In other words, Montaigne's early essays are clairvoyant miniatures, modelling his future trajectory. In developing his own personality on the page, he moves from replication to creation, from uncertain 'apprentice' to master craftsman (Hughes 14).

However, the source of his creativity and personality is precisely this undisciplined, feminised state. In Montaigne's work, as in later essayists' use of the form, femininity is both embraced and renounced.

This unresolved tension arises from the ways in which essayists simultaneously deny and expropriate femininity. Spinner writes: 'while it may be considered feminine to look inward, it is men, at least historically, who have been sanctioned to translate that vision into text—though they risk emasculating themselves in the process' (5). There is a complicated exchange at play: the woman unable to access public life writes political and polemical texts, while the man of the courts plumbs his innermost depths. However, the rewards for doing each are unevenly weighted: 'once [the] private sphere became public through the public, textual space of the essay, women long associated with the private sphere found themselves outsiders once again' (Spinner 9).

Rachel Blau DuPlessis complicates the equation of the essay with femininity in her 1996 article 'f-Words: An Essay on the Essay' by insisting it remain coupled with a feminist, materialist politics (34). Nevertheless, she argues that the essay claims a feminised space through its 'distrust of system, its playful skepticism about generalisation. And interest in the small, the odd, the quirky, the by-the-side, the thing changeable, the viewer changeable too…' (34). Cynthia Ozick, in her essay on the essay, 'She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body,' (1998) similarly conflates the essay with the persona of the essayist and with traits often ascribed to femininity. Mirroring Woolf's own conclusion in 'The Modern Essay' that 'a good essay…must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out' (222), Ozick

concludes that ‘whatever her story, she is the protagonist, the secret self's personification. When we knock on her door, she opens to us…Above all, she is not a hidden principle or a thesis or a construct: she is there, a living voice. She takes us in’ (*The Atlantic Online*). Instead of a ‘thesis’ or ‘construct’, the essay uses its feminine wiles, even a kind of soft power, to seduce the reader into agreement:

> A genuine essay is not a doctrinaire tract or a propaganda effort or a broadside... The essay is not meant for the barricades; it is a stroll through someone's mazy mind... At the end of the day the essay turns out to be a force for agreement. It co-opts agreement; it courts agreement; it seduces agreement. (Ozick, *The Atlantic Online*)

Given that many proto-feminists and abolitionists wrote dogmatic texts, including systematic analyses, DuPlessis’ and Ozick’s accounts, though rhetorically provocative, are not entirely accurate. Further, given that many essays intervene in debates or topics of tremendous importance, DuPlessis’ and Ozick’s argument can apply only to a particular subset of familiar and personal essays. Ozick does mention political texts written by men—‘heroic landmark writings’ by Emile Zola, Thomas Paine, and George Orwell—but partitions these from ‘genuine essays’ (*The Atlantic Online*). However, she fails to account for the ways in which her category of ‘genuine essays’—personal, seductive, idiosyncratic, and feminine—is determined precisely by the exclusion of impersonal or political essays authored by women.

Responsiveness and Receptivity

In 'The Modern Essay', Woolf writes: 'As the conditions change so the essayist, most sensitive of all plants…adapts himself' (216). Where the previous sections of this review focused on the essay's conditions of production in the particular—for example, by examining its development in the English press—this section explores the essay's sensitivity to its conditions of production in general. The essay, I argue, is a peculiarly lucid example—an intensification or dramatisation—of the construction of genre through the dialogic relationship of text to context.

This dramatisation of receptivity is visible in the essay's treatment of its topics, often impressed on the essayist and reader with an intensity or enthusiasm seemingly at odds with the scale of the event—for instance, the essay's preoccupation with matters such as 'the turtles in Mr. Sweeting's shop window' (Woolf, 'The Modern Essay' 2). It is also visible in the essay's tendency to reflect on its own construction during its construction, especially but not exclusively in essays on the essay (Atkins 19). However, it can perhaps be illustrated most clearly by the convention of titling essays with prepositions. The lion's share of Montaigne's essays are titled with an 'On' preceding the subject matter at hand: 'On Friendship', 'On Cannibalism', 'On Idleness'.[10] The writer Hillaire Belloc slyly alludes to this convention in the titles of his books; he has several collections that use 'On' as the preposition to a noun or verb: *On Nothing* (1908), *On Everything* (1909), *On Anything* (1910), *On Something* (1910)—a

[10] This convention is drawn from the classical authors Montaigne admired, for instance Cicero's 'On Divination' (45 BC) and 'On Fate' (45 BC); by using this tradition to depart from tradition, Montaigne highlights, intentionally or not, the modern and untested nature of the essay.

later work, published in 1923, is simply called *On* (Stuckey-French 105). Similarly, Lukács claims that, even without a preposition, 'the title of every essay is preceded in invisible letters, by the words "Thoughts occasioned by…"' ('A Letter to Leo Popper' 31). The essay is prompted into existence, both on the level of the genre itself and in each of its iterations.

In *Genre* (2006), John Frow forwards what could be called a Marxist-performative view of genre—genre as inscribed and re-inscribed rather than prior to or outside the text. He argues for genre as a '*relationship* between textual structures and the *situations* that occasion them,' (13) stating that 'genres have no essence: they have historically changing use values' (134). Genre is a performance without origin; the parameters of the essay-genre are created anew with each essay, and contribute to the idea or ideal of the essay. For Frow, all iterations of a genre are in dialogue with the genre they help to create.

Frow derives this view in part from Bakhtin's argument that all literary texts are 'dialogic' and 'heteroglossic': a relational 'zone of contact' with other genres, forms, and discourse, and with open-ended, living reality (Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel' 6-7). Valentin Vološinov, a contemporary and collaborator of Bakhtin's, places similar emphasis on dialogism, arguing that genres are closely tied to the classed social situations in which utterances occur (Frow 30; Vološinov 40-41). Meaning cannot be derived from a word alone, nor inheres in the speaker or listener, but in the interplay of the three; the word is a conduit for meaning produced by interaction, and meaning is 'an electric spark that occurs only when two different terminals are hooked together'

(102-103). In an argument that preempts the deconstructive tenet of difference within identity, Vološinov argues that every word contains 'a counter word' that partially preempts its own response (102). Therefore, even if the utterance remains unanswered or alone, it is diaologically structured by social relations (102). In a society defined by class divisions, language is riven by its myriad uses among different classes: 'each word...is a little arena for the clash of and crisscrossing of differently orientated social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual is a product of the living interaction of social forces,' (41) and words themselves are 'novel' and 'novelised'.

Jacques Derrida similarly argues for instability and impurity as the precondition of genre in his 1980 text 'The Law of Genre'. To invoke genre at all, Derrida observes, is to invoke law and prohibition based on the purity of naturalised categories (56). If one were to transgress the law and mix genres, this would merely confirm the 'essential purity of their identity' as previously contained entities (57). Yet genre is never pure. It is contaminated both by repetition, which necessarily introduces difference into the same (57-8), and by the very principle of classification that attempts to preclude contamination (64).[11] This is because the concept of genre cannot be classified by or within the system it describes (65). For example, the genre-marker 'essay' designates an essay as such—implicitly through paratextual and intra-textual traits or cues, and explicitly by naming a text an essay—but does not exemplify or share in the characteristics of the essay genre. It is excluded from the set that it attempts to enclose, thereby leaving the set open (65). The law of genre is, in fact, 'the law of abounding, of

[11] Notably, Derrida describes this process of contamination as abortive (58).

excess, the law of participation without membership' (63). In repetition, one reinscribes this excess even while reproducing the enclosures of genre, constructing both the law of genre and its transgression.

This thesis conceives of genre as a field that contains its own counter-genres: as a 'living interaction of social forces' (Vološinov 41). Like the meaning of a word, genre is constituted within a tissue of genres, what Haefner calls 'intergenreality': the enfolding of socially-constituted discourse and codes, of calls and responses, into texts ('Unfathering' 265). The substance of the essay is, perhaps, its receptivity—itself a feminised trait long associated with passivity and formlessness.

Precarity and the Essay: Autotheory in the Twenty-First Century

The perception of the essay as a 'formless form,' created by and displaying a feminised and atomised subjectivity that reproduces the status quo within a liberal democratic framework, warrants an analysis of the essay's relationship to post-Fordism, which is often theorised in strikingly similar terms. Further, feminist, queer, trans, and critical race interventions into discourses of post-Fordism mirror many of the debates that contest this definition of the essay. In this section, I consider the relationship of post-Fordism and precarity to genre and the essay. I do so by engaging closely with Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie*, both for its own analysis of post-Fordism and its use of genre, and for the scholarship it has generated on these topics.

At the beginning of *Testo Junkie*, Preciado announces that the text is not a memoir. In fact, he writes, it is 'a body essay. Fiction, actually...a somato-political fiction, a theory of the self, or self-theory' (11). He continues: 'I'm not interested in my emotions insomuch as their being mine, belonging only, uniquely, to me. I'm not interested in their individual aspects, only in how they are traversed by what isn't mine' (11-12). *Testo Junkie* is structured as a chapter-by-chapter oscillation between a theory-infused first-person narrative of Preciado's gender-hacking—his use of testosterone without sanction from an institution or practitioner—and an embodied theorisation of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century capitalist production. Over the course of his analysis, he argues that the contemporary Western subject is a byproduct of this system; accordingly, he uses a first-person narrative voice only in order to empty the 'I' of personal content.

Preciado extends Michel Foucault's notions of biopower and biopolitics to analyse what he argues are newer forces of discipline and control: predominantly pornography, media, sex, and pharmaceuticals, especially hormones used in birth control and gender-affirmation practices. Concomitantly, Preciado reprises Autonomist theories of post-Fordism—which I will explicate more fully in Part 2 of this review—to read these bio-technologies not as simply isolated developments, but as elements in a system of production he calls the 'pharmacopornographic era' (23). In this system, he argues, forms of miniaturised control are not intended to discipline subjects into producing objects but are engaged in the production of excitable subjects (205-208). Subjectivity is a platform for conducting excitement, and excitement the most efficient means of generating value (208).

Testo Junkie has proved immensely influential in the decade since its publication, generating scholarship in varied fields. In nonfiction literary and theoretical writings, Preciado has inspired, directly or indirectly, many imitators; the term 'autotheory' originates from *Testo Junkie* (Nelson 'Riding the Blinds'; Preciado 347) and was popularised by Maggie Nelson's 2015 text *The Argonauts*. Notably, when Preciado uses 'autotheory' for the first time, it is in the context of a discussion of snuff films; geopolitics as a pornographic spectacle of death, recorded and distributed in the global archive of the internet (346-7). The philosophy of such modernity 'can only be autotheory, autoexperimentation, auto-techno-penetration, pornology' (347).

This is an ambivalent coinage, and it bears little relation to its use now as a relatively stable genre-marker for nonfiction texts that use the self as material for constructing and testing theory; Preciado's term 'self-theory' might be closer to this use (11). 'Autotheory' as Preciado uses it conveys both agency and control, or a control disguised as agency: the DIY subject's self-experimentation is enabled by the hormones and technology of the pharmacoponographic, military-industrial complex. It also elides the division between theory and practice; autotheory's metonyms here are 'autoexperimentation', 'auto-techno-penetration', and 'pornology,' nouns which also convey action (11). As an analysis of complicity, agency, and the conditions of political action, this thesis models its own project partly on Preciado's.

Preciado's articulation of gender has attracted most interest and scholarship; I leave this field aside except where it interacts with my own research. Another large field of

scholarship is interested in the possibilities and limits of Preciado's biohacking and his wider political project; I will briefly explore this scholarship as it frequently centres on a critique of individualism also relevant to the essay genre. Almost no scholarship has focused exclusively on genre in *Testo Junkie*; when genre is discussed at all, it is usually only in passing, or in the article's opening summary of the text. At the time of writing, I am aware of only two exceptions: Douglas J. Millar's 2015 essay 'Grins Without Cats', and Sophie A. Jones' 2018 article 'The Biodrag of Genre in Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie*'. The latter is the only scholarly, peer-reviewed article to focus extensively on Preciado's use of genre in *Testo Junkie*.

Of the field of scholarship interested in *Testo Junkie*'s politics, Helen Hester's 'Synthetic Genders and the Limits of Micropolitics' (2015) critiques *Testo Junkie*'s politics, arguing that it forwards a romanticised individualism. Hyper-aware of the expropriation of gendered material and affect by the pharmacopornographic industry, Preciado's analysis is so totalising that it precludes any resistance, favouring a micropolitics of individual bodily autonomy instead of a collective or scalable politics ('Synthetic Genders').

Benjamin Noys in 'Intoxication and Acceleration' critiques *Testo Junkie* for what he reads as an accelerationist, defeatist tendency of regarding the self as a platform (195). Throughout his text, Preciado stages the absorption of the self into flows and networks, which are positioned against an older, more rigid framework of capture and control (196). Noys argues that this opposition reiterates the conception of neoliberalism as fluid, and organised forms like unions, state welfare, and collective political projects as

inflexible and outmoded (199). Here, an aestheticised dissolution of the self participates in and endorses neoliberalism's dissolution of the collective.

Elizabeth Stephens' 2010 article, 'The Pharmacopornographic Subject: Beatrice [sic] Preciado's *Testo Junkie*: Sexe, Drogue et Biopolitique', notes that French scholars have critiqued the text on the grounds of a perceived neoliberal individualism endemic to American queer theory (2). Stephens finds, however, that Preciado's practice of individual body modification is problematised by precisely this conception of the subject as a convergence of impersonal forces (5-6). Though Preciado may not promote or propose a communitarian politics, his core thesis—that subjectivity is a platform produced by and for the production of value in the form of embodied, material affect—is enough to problematise any reading of his politics as overly personal.

Against Hester and Noys, Millar reads *Testo Junkie* as a work of 'gonzo-theory', arguing that its political value is as much in its form and style as in its content (109). It cannot be read and judged as a theoretical text, even an experimental one, that prescribes a particular politics or a collective form known in advance (the union, the state). Rather, it is creative work, a performance, 'that offers and gathers materials for living…an aesthetic object around which a potential community might gather' (109). That is, it performs the task of coalition-building that Hester and Noys admonish it for precluding—not in theory but as praxis. This is in line with Preciado's own use of the term 'autotheory', which is not a genre but an activity, a practice of experimentation on the self (Preciado 347). Further, this praxis is enabled by the circulation of the text and his ideas, which produces binding affects like excitement, pleasure, and frustration, as

well as surplus value that accrues to Preciado and the owners of publishing houses, presses, and web servers—to any platform that hosts this circulation. The formation of a 'potential community' is complicit with capital, with the forces that limit and dissolve community.

In contrast to Millar, Jones argues that *Testo Junkie*'s form has a depoliticising effect ('The Biodrag of Genre' 10). Jones reads Preciado's use of genre as akin to drag; *Testo Junkie* wears the genres of pornography, elegy, and grand narrative across chapters that oscillate between theory and memoir (4). Jones argues that this performance allows Preciado to quarantine particular sets of questions and problematics within the genre or section it uses to pose them (10). For instance, Preciado's examination of the history of colonial violence embedded in the Pill—its testing on poor Puerto Rican communities—in the grand narrative chapters fails to inform his own use of hormones in the autobiographical chapters (5). Further, the pornographic sections reiterate the racist and sexist codes these chapters critique, while the manifesto that comes towards the end of *Testo Junkie* (Chapter 10, 'Pornpower') brackets these racialised histories in favour of a deracinated futurity (10). This tessellation of forms allows Preciado to sidestep the repercussions of his own analyses (10).

Jones argues that Preciado's use of genres betrays a 'drag' within the performance. Here, Jones combines Freeman's notion of a 'temporal drag,' the past persisting in visions of a future valorised by the assumptions of linearity in performativity, with Theodore Martin's notion of the 'historical drag of genre' (Jones 2): the accretion and persistence of expectations that comprise a genre over time, even in its newness (Martin

6). Preciado's theorisation of the malleability of bio-codes occur within the oddly retrogressive performances of porn, elegy, and grand narrative, of which his figuration of racialised subjectivities as a 'drag' on the proper revolution is but one symptom (Jones 5).

In an interview with Ricky Tucker, Preciado speaks of the body as 'a living political archive' connected to the history of design, technology, the city, agriculture—in other words, the planet—and problematises the notion that he uncritically endorses a trans-futurism: 'when I add a few molecules of testosterone, in a huge living archive, well that's just a minor detail' (*The Paris Review*). Further, to mount her argument, Jones has to do precisely what she accuses *Testo Junkie* of doing: shoring up genre- and chapter-boundaries. In a performative maneuver of her own, Jones produces the effects she claims to observe, and in doing so invokes the law of genre. I argue instead that these divisions might themselves be read as performances that parody attempts to contain ideas, styles, histories, and questions within anything as flimsy as chapters, or, indeed, to position them as 'belonging' to one genre or chapter. Preciado, who was a friend and mentee of Derrida, knows well the counter-currents and contamination at the heart of the genres he is using.

Jones' argument is nevertheless useful for her synthesis of Freeman and Martin's notions of drag. This can help elucidate *Testo Junkie*'s position within the history of the essay. Indeed, the limitations of his politics might fruitfully be read as the limitations of the essay in its canonical iteration. If the essay has always required education, material security, physical mobility, and leisure, Preciado's text fits squarely within the English

and French traditions of essay-writing. It combines traditions typified in the literature by Montaigne and Bacon, which are enacted in *Testo Junkie*'s use of political economy, philosophy, and memoir. The bifurcation of theory/memoir that Jones identifies loosely coheres to the registers of Baconian analyses and Montaigneian musings, respectively: a rigorous historicising and a relentlessly searching tone. Further, as an auto-experiment, 'a gonzo-theory,' Preciado's text is an attempt, a verb, an *essaying* in the original meaning of the genre-marker. Indeed, Montaigne's and Preciado's projects are both partly inspired by the desire to carry on a conversation with and pay tribute to a dead friend: for Montaigne, the judge and writer Étienne de La Boétie (Frame v), and for Preciado, the novelist Guillaume Dustan (*Testo Junkie* 16).

While it is necessary to historicise *Testo Junkie*'s use of the essay, to position it as a faithful reproduction of the genre would be to fall prey, as Jones does, to reductive boundary-work. Preciado remakes the essay as he practices it. For example, Stephen Greer reads Preciado's conceptualisation of gender as a 'drift' akin to a Situationist dérive (2019), while the 'formless form' of the essay has frequently been likened to the leisurely pace of a walk.[12] Some of *Testo Junkie*'s most vivid scenes are of Preciado walking through various city-scapes, observing his navigation of space as a gendered

[12] In 'On Practice' Montaigne writes that to *essai* is 'to follow so roaming a course as that of our mind's' (1014), while Ernest Rhys characterises essayists as 'dilute lyricists, engaged in pursuing a rhythm too subtle for verse' (in Whitmore, 563). William Carlos Williams, in 'An Essay on Virginia' (1925), calls the essay 'pure motion' (320), and Kenneth Burke, in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), writes that the essayistic treatise is a kind of 'Hamletic soliloquy, its rhythm slowed down to a snail's pace, or perhaps to an irregular jog' (138).

and re-gendering body (for example, see pages 55-57). He takes a drag king workshop and describes the results:

> Walking around, getting a coffee, going down to the subway, hailing a taxi, sitting on a bench, smoking a cigarette leaning against a school wall . . . A new cartography of the city takes shape; for the first time you can enjoy the pleasure of the public space of the male flâneur, nonexistent for a body culturally encoded as female until that moment. (373)

Spinner writes that 'the ability to maneuver about a public space is essential for the essayist, even as the essay is marked by so much internal wandering' (15). Preciado's gender drift is mirrored in his physical navigation of space as he re-negotiates the city and his apartment. After taking his first dose of testosterone, he writes: 'I need to breathe the air of the city, to leave the space of domesticity, to walk outside where I feel at home' (57). Preciado's body-essay is a cartography of post-Fordism's reconstitution of the public and private spheres in relation to gender. The test subject's feminised body is reformed not only by the addition of testosterone but also by post-Fordism; what is most private and personal, the body's hormones and molecules, are manufactured and distributed within an impersonal global system—the 'outside' becomes 'home'. That this cartography of post-Fordism occurs in *Testo Junkie*'s content is clear; that it also occurs in the text's form—for instance, when Preciado weaves the time-line of his birth and childhood into the time-line of post-Fordism (23)—is less obvious, and has not yet attracted scholarship. Indeed, there is no extant scholarly work on the essay and post-Fordism in relation to *Testo Junkie*.

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The scholarship surveyed in Part 1 of this review leads to a conception of the essay as a form that shapes and is shaped by the gendered, racialised writing body as it navigates changing relationships to leisure, education, and individuality. It is therefore an ideal form for exploring production, work, and collectivity. Arguably, it *is* a form of reproduction, even of reproductive labour. To recognise it as such is to denaturalise its relationships to gender, race, and class, revealing their co-constitution as historically-contingent forms. As *Testo Junkie* demonstrates, doing so reconnects the essay to its oft-buried lineage of feminist and queer praxis, experiment, dissent, and activism.

Part 2: Content

In Part 2 of this review, I turn explicitly to production and work. Paolo Virno and Preciado are my focal points here, and I position them as the centres around which scholarship on post-Fordism is clustered. This reflects their importance to scholarship on Marxism and post-Fordism, and also to my thesis; Virno's concept of 'virtuoso labour' and Preciado's reprisal of this as 'pornified labour' inform the essays that follow in implicit and explicit ways, which I chart in the Exegetical Statement.

In the first section, I briefly introduce and contextualise the concept of post-Fordism. In the second section, I turn to *Autonomia* as a key lens through which to examine the effects of post-Fordism on production, labour, and subjectivity through Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (first given as a series of lectures in 2001, and published in English in 2004).

In the third section, I review the field of labour-studies. Labour is a contested site of analysis, and much of the relevant literature attempts to highlight or correct perceived deficiencies—for example, in scholarship that overlooks its gendered or racialised aspect—in orthodox Marxist uses of the term; inevitably, this generates further scholarship as correctives to these correctives.

Finally, in the fourth section, I supplement my analysis of *Testo Junkie*'s form with an explication of its contents, focusing on how it modifies key concepts in labour-studies and in *Grammar* to construct an 'alternative history' of post-Fordism (Jones 4).

Post-Fordism: Context and Definitions

Fordism refers to the system of production pioneered by Henry Ford in his automobile factories in the 1920s and 1930s, which reached its zenith in the 1940s and 1950s in America (Amin 9). This system is first and foremost an industrial regime of labour, in which workers' productivity is scientifically and centrally managed in service of the mass production of standardised commodities (Jessop, 'Thatcherism and Flexibility' 136; Pribac 26). It is facilitated by the mechanisation of labour, the conveyor belt, the assembly line, and the deskilling of workers, who perform single, modular tasks repetitively, synced to the rhythm of the production line, rather than producing individual commodities from start to finish (Jessop, 'Thatcherism and Flexibility' 136; Pribac 26; Aglietta 244-246).

Secondly, Fordism creates consumers for the commodities it produces through several mechanisms: by offering a family wage, by ensuring growth in productivity to meet the demand, by pinning wages to retail prices and worker productivity (Pribac 26), and by investing capital in improving production (Jessop 136). Thirdly, Fordism functions as a system of economic regulation, in which trade unions, employees, factory owners, capital, and the State, negotiate and control wages, retail prices, and the distribution of wealth through taxation (Pribac 26; Jessop 136). Finally, it is a social paradigm built on the nuclear family as a nexus of reproduction (through unwaged caring and reproductive labour), production (the male breadwinner's employment outside the

home), and the consumption of standardised goods and services (Pribac 26; Jessop 137).

Pribac notes that post-Fordism is sometimes used interchangeably with the concepts of 'globalisation', 'post-modernity', 'post-industrial society' and 'information society', but that it functions as an umbrella term incorporating these epochs and tendencies (33-34). There is a consensus in the scholarship that the erosion of Fordism and the advent of post-Fordism began in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Aglietta 253-272; Pribac 33; Amin 1).

There are multiple readings of the cause of this shift. Amin identifies three main theoretical positions: The first is the regulation approach, which argues that capitalism's tendency to crisis is counterbalanced by its tendency to coalesce around norms and institutions. The shift in the 1970s is the result of a crisis in social relations of production, including worker revolt, globalisation, and more specialised patterns of consumption (Amin 10; Nielsen 24). The second, a neo-Schumpeterian approach, argues that there are 'long waves', approximately fifty years long, of particular techno-economic paradigms (Amin 12-13). The transition from one wave to another is marked by a leap in industrial productivity that institutes a new standard, to which all production must adapt (12). Post-Fordism is considered as the fifth long wave, a paradigm of information-technologies, underpinned by micro-electronics (Elam 45). The final approach divides production regimes into flexible-specialisation (craft production) and mass production (Amin 14). As in the neo-Schumpeterian perspective, dominant new technologies become the standard, catalysing a widespread transition

from one to the other (Elam 5). Fordism is a regime of mass production enforced by Keynesian policies; post-Fordism is a regime of flexible-specialisation caused by the crisis of Fordism: economic stagnation, and the demand for non-standard goods, flexible work practices, and the rise of information technologies (Amin 15).[13]

The underlying tendencies that define the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism include: the advent of neoliberalism, accelerated by the governments of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the UK (Harvey 5); financialisation, for example, General Motors, one of the exemplary companies of Fordist manufacturing in the mid-twentieth century, now exists largely as a financial institution (Harvey 135); and flexible labour and non-standardised production and consumption (Jessop, 'Thatcherism and Flexibility' 144). It is also characterised by the shift towards global market economy and away from nationally-circumscribed production, which curtails the generalised wealth of Fordism; this leads to greater competition and polarised wealth distribution, especially with the erosion of the welfare state and tax regulations (Pribac 31; Jessop, 'Thatcherism and Flexibility' 145; Jessop, 'Post-Fordism and the State' 264). Under post-Fordism, differently skilled workers producing commodities receive different wages, consolidating the market for commodities stratified by price (Jessop, 'Thatcherism and Flexibility' 144-5). There is a proliferation of new forms of work, including casualisation, zero-hour contracts, and short-term roles (Standing, *The Precariat* 36-38).

[13] For a more expansive discussion of flexible-specialisation, see Elam, pages 50-56, in 'Puzzling out the Post-Fordist Debate'.

As Standing notes in *The Precariat*, globalisation, competition, flexible labour, and the elimination of—admittedly inequitably distributed—social insurance and stability in the workforce leads to a diffuse, international community of disconnected workers (23). He warns that the precariat, if it remains an inchoate class, will be easily swayed by populist and extremist politics, and seduced into identitarian categories premised on an imagined threat from racialised others (25). In the following sections, I survey more fully the effects of post-Fordism on social forms. In the next section, however, I contextualise the historical origins of *Autonomia*—a political movement whose theoretical interventions offer arguably the most thorough analysis of post-Fordism to date.

Autonomia: *A Grammar of the Multitude*'s Virtuoso Labour and General Intellect

Historical Context of Autonomia

A form of production arising during the mid-twentieth century, much of the relevant literature on post-Fordism was written between the 1970s and the present. One of the foundational fields within this area is *Autonomia* or Autonomism, an Italian Marxist system of thought that emerged from the workerist, or *operaismo*, communism of the 1960s, a politics developed by and for the working class in response to the rapid industrialisation of production in Italy following World War II (Tronti, 'Workerism and Politics' 186; Tronti, 'Our Operaismo' 127; Wright 6-9).

The revolutionary subject of *operaismo* was not the 'proletariat' of Marx and Engels; it was the factory worker, who at this time had more in common with the Fordist conditions of General Motors workers' in Detroit than with their nineteenth-century counterparts ('Our Operaismo' 126). As Sylvère Lotringer notes in his introduction to *Grammar*, *operaists* were among the first to notice the changing compositions of class in the late 1950s and 1960s, and to question work as a central category; rather than pushing for reform through union bureaucracy or arguing for the dignity of the worker, they pushed to eliminate work as much as possible (7-9). Factory workers could band together and easily strike or take control of the means of production: 'By making itself autonomous, labour-power, as an internal part of capital, variable capital as distinct from constant capital, evaded its function as productive labour' (Tronti, 'Workerism and Politics' 187).

Operaismo was not a homogenous movement, but a collection of groups, publications, intellectuals, revolutionaries, and workers. It becomes clear when reading histories and accounts of both *operaismo* and *Autonomia* that journals and other publications played an integral role in their formation and spread. In 1961, Raniero Panzieri founded *Quaderni Rossi* (*Red Notebooks*), along with Mario Tronti, Romano Alquati, and others (Tronti 'Our Operaismo' 124). In 1963, Tronti broke away from *Quaderni Rossi* over disagreements regarding Panzieri's use of sociology (Tronti 124)—an attempt to study directly the emerging conditions of production after a series of union defeats, which he believed were caused by a failure to comprehend conditions on the ground (Wright 33). From 1963-1967, Tronti edited *Classe Operaia* (Tronti 124). In 1969, *Potere Operaio*

(*Worker's Power*) was founded by another faction of workerists, including Antonio Negri, Mario Tronti, and Franco Piperno (Lotringer 10).

By 1973, growing political divisions in *Potere Operaio* led to its collapse in 'all but name' (Wright 151). For the next several years, members from *Potere Operaio* began to identify themselves with *Autonomia* a loose but growing coalition of students, the unemployed, workers, and feminists—including Piperno, Negri, Tronti, Oreste Scalzone, Paolo Virno, Silvia Federici, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa (Lotringer 10).[14] The split was not decisive, and cannot be partitioned neatly; like *operaismo*, *Autonomia* contained heterogeneous aims and movements.

A decisive moment, however, came in 1975 when Negri published his pamphlet *Proletari e Stato* (*Proletarians and State*; Wright 162). This garnered widespread criticism on its release; at a time when the gains made in factories were being dismantled by management and by unions themselves, it was seen to ignore mass factory workers in favour of a new 'social worker' and 'social factory' (Wright 169; 'Our Operaismo' 138). This marked a shift from viewing the working class as an ontological identity around which to organise to viewing it as a vector of various social

[14] Others from *Potere Operaio* formed the Red Brigade, a terrorist group respsonible for the kidnapping and murder of former Prime Minister and Christian Democrat leader Aldo Moro in 1978 (Lotringer 10). Members of *Autonomia* were blamed indiscriminately for Red Brigade's violence, and thousands were imprisoned without trial; Virno spent two years in jail (Lottringer 11; Wright 174), Negri was sentenced to thirty years, though managed to serve reduced time intermittently, and Piperno and Scalzone went into exile (Lotringer 10).

investments (Berardi ‘What is the Meaning of Autonomy Today?’). Negri saw the ‘social factory’ as the outcome of collapsing distinctions between production and reproduction—as located both within and outside of the workplace, incorporating struggles such as the women’s, unemployed, and gay and lesbian movements (Wright 165).

In other words, the movement began to cohere around a theoretical position more closely aligned to social reproduction. For Negri, this was a newly concrete way of conceptualising the worker along different subjectivities, and conceiving of a unified struggle against the state and capital; for his critics, it was devoid of ‘specific and contradictory discriminants within it, leaving only their common attribute as embodiments of abstract labour’ (Wright 174). As Sergio Bologna argued in 1976:

> At its most coherent, the revolutionary left has said that the destruction of the worker as labour-power was a good thing that could only aid the recruitment and selection of the vanguard…[But] the political composition of the class has changed substantially in the factories, and certainly not in the direction indicated by Negri. Not only that: what has taken place is the opposite of the greater unity of which he talks. Rather, a deeper division has occurred: not between factory and society, but within the factory itself, between the working-class right and left. In sum there has been a reassertion of reformist hegemony over the factories, one that is brutal and relentless in its efforts to dismember the class left and expel it from the factory. (qtd. in Wright 170)

Here, Bologna argues that the theoretical destruction of the worker as labour-power aids capital in dividing workers, rather than uniting them across differences. In 1981 Negri broke with the dominant Autonomist group in North-Eastern Italy, accusing them of a similar charge, namely holding an abstract concept of the worker that was 'if not anachronistic, at the very least partial and corporative' (Negri qtd. in Wright 174).

Virno assesses the project of Autonomism in the final page of *Grammar.* He writes: 'the social struggles of the 1960's and 1970's expressed non-socialist demands, indeed anti-socialist demands' (111). This movement can be characterised as a 'defeated revolution' whose demands were integrated into the emerging paradigm of post-Fordism (111), which has lead to a paradoxical 'communism of capitalism' (110). Communist demands for the abolition of the state as a coercive force have come nightmarishly true in the uncoupling of industry from government regulation, while the shrinking of socially necessary labour time has not reduced work but lead to overwork for those employed, or the same amount of work split across several casual jobs (110). At the same time, the valorisation of individuality has lead not to a respect for difference but a proliferation of hierarchies (110-11). Indeed, Wright labels Negri's strand of *Autonomia*, with its focus on sexual, reproductive, and familial liberation, as 'libertarian' (153).

General Intellect and Virtuoso Labour

Despite Virno's ambivalence regarding the political outcomes of *Autonomia*, his concepts of the 'general intellect' and 'virtuoso labour', elaborated in *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (2004), are indebted to

this formative intellectual milieu. The concept of the 'multitude' is drawn from Negri and Michael Hardt's *Empire* (2000), and is used to describe a formation similar to the 'social factory'. In an interview with Nicholas Brown and Irme Szeman in 2005, Hardt and Negri state: 'The multitude is the always open relationship that the singularities set in motion' (378). It is a form of sociality that does not result in unity but in the production of differences—a universal comprised of particulars that continually unsettle the very possibility of universality (378).

These terms echo Woolf, Spellmeyer, Good, and Bloom's conceptions of the essay as a democratic project, as well as its use in progressive social movements of the 1970s; as in the essay, the associations and affinities of the multitude are not subordinated to an overarching order or structure but continually trouble its boundaries (378-379). Further, in both the essay and the multitude there is a shift in focus from processes that result in a product—Bacon's result-oriented experiments, of which the essay is the record—to the process itself, as in Montaigne's open-ended explorations. As this section will demonstrate, Virno's concepts of 'general intellect' and 'virtuoso labour' similarly privilege process over production; Virno, however, uses these terms critically to describe the dominant ideologies and practices of labour under post-Fordism.

The 'general intellect' is drawn from Marx's 'Fragment on Machines', a section contained in 'Notebook VI', in 'The Chapter on Capital' in the *Grundrisse*. For Marx, the machine is 'fixed capital': objectified human knowledge and expertise that coordinates and striates human relationships and communication, absorbing them into its production processes. The worker, meanwhile, is a 'mere living accessory of this

machinery' (Marx, 'Notebook VI' 615). It is this assemblage of machine, labour, knowledge, and social-relations that comprises the 'general intellect'. An impersonal, pre-individual register, the general intellect is the basis of social cooperation (*Grammar* 64). Virno frames it as the 'intellect in general': 'the faculty and the power to think, rather than the works produced by thought' ('On General Intellect' *Libcom.org*). It is the 'script' that the speaker performs, but one without predetermined or bounded content. It describes the potential for speaking: 'pure and simple dynamis' (*Grammar* 65-6).

Rather than the production of commodities, Virno argues, it is this potentiality that increasingly defines labour and production. The potential for communication, in fact, defines the post-Fordist labourer *par excellence*: the virtuoso. The centrality of labour as a category of analysis derives from Marx's labour theory of value, which—in extreme brief—holds that value is created through labour. A commodity's value is determined by the amount of labour socially necessary to create it. Because the commodity is always sold at a profit, there is a margin of value that flows to the owner of the means of production, the capitalist, and away from the worker; it is this margin that Marx names 'surplus value'.[15]

Virno also draws the concept of virtuoso labour from Marx, defining it as 'an activity which finds its own fulfillment...in itself, without objectifying itself into an end product' (*Grammar* 52). Marx uses the example of the singer. Writing before

[15] For a clear explanation of surplus value, see Ernest Mandel's introduction to *Capital Vol. 1*, 46-54; see also *Capital Vol. 1* Chapters 9, 11, and 12.

technology for recording and mass-distributing performances was available, Marx argues that, in a performance, the virtuoso does not produce a commodity extrinsic to the performance; the value of the performance is the process, rather than a product ('Results of the Immediate Process of Production', 1048; *Grammar* 53). Virtuoso labour such as the singer's is paradigmatic of what Marx calls unproductive labour: labour that does not produce commodities. Productive labour, on the other hand, is only that labour which results in a commodity that can be exchanged to extract surplus-value.[16] Crucially, the unproductive character of virtuoso labour is inextricable from its performative, communicative, public dimension (*Grammar* 63).

For Marx, virtuoso labour is the exception opposed to the rule of waged, productive labour (Virno 55). Now, as Virno argues, the distinction between productive and unproductive labour can no longer be sustained. Productive labour is increasingly assuming the character of a virtuosic performance (58). That is, labour is no longer

[16] For Marx, the '*worker* who performs *productive work* is *productive* , and the *work* he performs is *productive* if it directly creates *surplus value*, i.e. if it *valorises* capital' (*Capital Vol. 1* 1039; Appendix: Productive and Unproductive Labour'). *Capital Vol. 1* begins with Marx explicating the process of commodity exchange, which he figures as C-M-C (a commodity is exchanged for money, which is exchanged for a commodity). After this process, it remains unclear precisely how commodity exchange produces surplus value: in C-M-C it is as though two commodities have simply been swapped, which cannot produce any surplus value. He eventually arrives at the general formula for capital: M-C-M+, in which money is exchanged for a commodity, which is then exchanged for money at a profit. Because, for Marx, the value of a commodity is determined by the labour it takes to produce, he argues that exploitation is inherent to capital. The accumulation of surplus value is the fundamental driver of capital; therefore, it must constantly find ways to extract more value (in the form of labour) from the worker—Marx even refers to the 'rate of surplus value' as the 'rate of exploitation' (*Capital Vol. 1* 582; ch. 15).

defined by the production of objects within a bounded workplace—a forseeable, repetitive, circumscribed process—but by traits previously localised to unproductive labour: a performance in public, communicative, open-ended, ongoing. In other words, labour produces not just objects but subjects who are in a constant state of response (88). Contingency replaces stability; continuity replaces repetition. Labour becomes praxis, a relational-linguistic game of cooperation, co-opted by capital at the level of pure potentiality in order to innovate and improve production itself: production as the production of production.

Social effects of post-Fordism

If the proletariat was the subject of Fordism, as Standing argues, its post-Fordist counterpart is the precariat (*The Precariat* 25). In *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (2015), political theorist Isabell Lorey argues that the post-Fordist subject is governed by precarity: 'Precarisation' is the art of managing the subject's precariousness—the daily existential vulnerability of being in the world—through precarity: the unequal distribution of precariousness in economic, social, and political terms (11; 27). Because in post-Fordism governance is internalised and individualised—a biopolitical self-surveilling, self-managing state—any experience of structural precarity automatically becomes an experience of socio-ontological precariousness (19). For instance, losing one's job or being served with Robodebt is a confrontation with one's own existential vulnerability; this vulnerability is leveraged by the disciplinary system of precarisation, which asks its subject not just to comply but to manage their own compliance and disobedience (33).

Virtuoso labour is therefore the kind of unending, precarious labour that is standard under neoliberalism, that responds to the dictates of precarisation by putting the whole self on display, using every facet of affect and information: 'As all the experiences of individuals tend to become part of the production process, self-realisation takes place as a performance in public' (Lorey 73). Lorey agrees with Virno that, in post-Fordism, the Aristotelian categories of political action, intellect, and labour homogenise.[17] The intellect, once solitary, furnishes the conditions for production; labour, once bounded by the production of objects, now adopts the traits of political action and becomes an unending performance in public (73).

Where Negri in the 1970s viewed the 'social worker' as a newly galvanising force for solidarity, Virno argues that the form of post-Fordist subjectivity precludes collective identification. As Virno argues in the first half of *Grammar*, the uncanny combines fear and anguish, and this combination is the substance of post-Fordist subjectivity (Virno 31-35). Fear has a particular object to which it responds. In this way, it is public and draws on consensual reality within a given community (32). Anguish, on the other hand, is individual and isolating, without a fixed object (32). It is a shadowing of the subject by possibilities, which by necessity must remain indeterminate, immaterial. Responding to this situation is part of the post-Fordist subject's training in

[17] Aristotle partitioned society into three categories: labour (*poesis*, the production of new objects), the intellect (the solitary, inconspicuous work of the individual thinker), and political action (*praxis*, the art of dealing with the possible and contingent, exposing oneself to others, an intervention in social relations). Of the three, only praxis has a public dimension (*Grammar* 50).

responsiveness: it must be open and permanently mutable (Rebentisch 6; Virno, *Grammar* 33).

In other words, the subject's haunting by possibilities is the condition of being in precarity. The uncanny/*unheimlich* is its home/*heim*, and '[t]here is nothing more shared and more common... more public than the feeling of "not feeling at home"' (Rebentisch 6; Virno, *Grammar* 34). Thus, as in Lorey's articulation of precariousness as socio-ontological *and* structural (19), an isolating anguish is the socio-ontological condition of workers living under precarity, a bond that impedes solidarity even as it imposes the same conditions of responsiveness and availability on all. As Standing writes in *The Precariat*: 'There is a danger of feeling a sense of constant engagement but of being isolated amidst a lonely crowd' (21).

Post-Fordism redux: Reproductive Labour, Gender, Race

The concept of 'reproductive labour' has been both a galvanising and controversial force for Marxism and for Marxist and socialist feminists. In this section, I trace the feminist legacy of *operaismo* and Autonomism through the concept of reproductive labour. I leave aside the extensive literature on affective labour, immaterial labour, and emotional labour—though much of what follows intersects these concepts—to focus on reproduction for its centrality to Marxist, socialist-feminist, and Marxist-feminist thought.

In the first section, I briefly define the term and outline its significance to feminist activists and theorists associated with *operaismo* and *Autonomia*. In the second section, I give an overview of the concept of 'feminised labour' and its oft-cited shortcomings as a descriptive category. In the third section, I turn to literature on 'racialised labour' and summarise its critiques of both 'feminised' and 'reproductive' labour. These debates offer important context to the concepts of 'virtuoso labour' and the 'general intellect,' as well as to Preciado's own interventions in the fields of labour and gender studies.

Reproductive Labour

As Silvia Federici notes in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004), reproductive labour is generally the labour historically delegated to women—that which enables the reproduction of capitalist relations of production through means such as childbearing, housework, conjugal duties, and care work (84). It is a complicated and many-sided concept, intended to sit between Marx's notions of productive and unproductive labour. On the one hand, productive labour for Marx produces value through the exploitation of labour-power to produce commodities, whose value is realised in exchange.[18] On the other hand, unproductive labour—as in Marx's version of the virtuoso—cannot produce surplus value (*Capital Vol. 1* 1039; 'Appendix: Productive and Unproductive Labour'). Reproductive labour has most often been viewed as unproductive, as economically valueless, since the advent of capitalism in early modern Europe (*Caliban* 84).

[18] For a clear explanation of this process, see 'Section III' of 'Results of the Immediate Production Process' in the 'Appendix' to *Capital Vol. 1*, 1060-1062.

As noted in in the first half of this review, during the 1970s, there was a proliferation of feminist and consciousness raising groups forming after women's experiences of sexism in the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s; these tended to fall into factions more narrowly focused on gendered oppression, and factions that saw gendered oppression as symptomatic of systemic oppression under capitalism (Philipson and Hansen 7-10). In Italy during the 1960s and 1970s, groups formed out of similar frustrations with the left, including with *operaismo* and *Autonomia* (Weeks 120). As in the *operaismo* and Autonomist movements, Marxist- and socialist-feminist organisations were prolific publishers and distributors of books, pamphlets, journals, and newsletters (Philipson and Hansen 10).

In 1972, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, Selma James, and Brigitte Galtier formed the International Wages for Housework Campaign (Philipson and Hansen 15). The Campaign aimed to redress the reliance of a male industrial workforce on the unwaged and unrecognised domestic labour of women, and to forward practical strategies for doing so (15). One of the earliest and most influential theorisations of reproductive labour was by Dalla Costa in a 1972 pamphlet called 'Women and the Subversion of the Community'. Drawing on *operaismo* ideologies, it argued that women must resist both their integration into a capitalist workforce *and* resist exploitative domestic labour; neither could solve the problem of the other (Philipson and Hansen 15).

In 1975, Federici published *Wages Against Housework*, an eight-page polemical text positioning the struggle for wages as integral to building class consciousness and power. A wage recognises work as productive labour in the Marxist sense: 'To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital' (Federici 5). This is the first step in struggling *against* work; typically divided along gendered lines, the family as currently organised fractures class consciousness (4-5). By removing these divisions, remunerating domestic work will strengthen the unity and power of the working class (5).

In the same year, Linda Phelps published 'Patriarchy and Capitalism' in the feminist journal *Quest*, which outlined the tenets of what became known as 'dual systems theory' (Philipson and Hansen 17-18). Phelps argued for socialism and feminism to be held in tension, neither subsuming the other (38). Dual systems theory holds that capitalism and patriarchy are mutually reinforcing systems of control: capitalism formalises the patriarchal division of spheres to its advantage for the production and reproduction of capitalist social relations (37). This reprises Shulamith Firestone's argument in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). Firestone argues that the biological nuclear family is at the root of the 'sex class system': the division of women and men into classes akin to the proletariat and bourgeoisie (10). To abolish gender and class oppression, care must be severed from blood obligations (185-186), labour reorganised outside of the filial grid of gendered exploitation (206-210), and men, women, and children paid a 'guaranteed annual income' (211).

From this perspective, Virno's argument that virtuoso labour signifies the blurring of productive and unproductive labour is clearly influenced not just by his formative experiences in *operaismo* and *Autonomism*, but by the legacy of social-reproduction theory. This theory had noted from the 1970s onwards that women's work has always existed in this ambiguous zone, mediating between Marx's more rigid demarcations. As Philipson and Hanson note, however, social-reproduction feminism also contributed to reifying the hypothesis of separate spheres for men (public, economic, productive) and women (private, domestic, and reproductive), though even at the time this did not hold true in practice, with women entering the workforce in large numbers (19). The focus on the gendered division of labour risks reproducing the division between waged, productive workers, and unwaged reproductive workers that the very concept of 'reproductive labour' is intended to dismantle.

Feminisation of Labour

The term 'feminisation of labour' is another term for the process by which productive labour adopts the character and exhibits the traits of reproductive labour. Donna Haraway's seminal 1985 text 'A Cyborg Manifesto' describes the 'homework economy' as 'feminised': the integration of factory, home, and market into a global economy built on militarised-technology, with work increasingly decentralised and workers controlled by the new technologies they help to build (166-7). This renders white, unionised males newly vulnerable to the unemployment or underemployment that black men have long faced (168); white women to the exploitation black women have faced as workers; girls and women in the Global South newly exploitable by burgeoning industry (167); and it burdens caregivers with extra waged and unwaged

roles (168). Feminisation here marks 'the paradoxical intensification and erosion of gender itself' (167); gendered labour increases for racialised, working class, and poor women, even as the integration of more women into work erodes traditional gender roles.

In his 1988 article 'Global Feminisation through Flexible Labour', Guy Standing popularised the term 'feminisation' in labour studies and economics, intending to denote the widespread entrance of women into the global labour force, and the spread of flexible, insecure work after a decade of labour-law deregulation (1077). 'Feminisation' occurred in response to a host of conditions that echo the hallmarks of post-Fordism: a shift to a minimalist rather than redistributive welfare state, the deregulation and financialisation of global trade and lending policies, a 'technological stalemate' in which labour became cheaper than advances in production, and a rise in unemployment, which in turn put more pressure on the welfare state ('Global Feminisation' 1077-8). In 1999, Standing clarified that the term 'feminisation' was intended to convey a 'sense of irony that, after generations of efforts to integrate women into regular wage labour as equals,' the integration of women coincided with the generalising of patterns and types of work associated with women's work ('A Theme Revisited' 583).

This clarification reflects the growing body of Marxist-feminist literature that critiques the concept of feminised labour. Cristina Morini uses the term to describe both a quantitative shift—the greater participation of women in the workforce globally—and a qualitative one: the nature of work and the traits demanded of the worker ('The

Feminisation of Labour' 41). Morini uses 'feminised' not to essentialise qualities such as care to womanhood, but—in a similar maneuver to the Deleuzian concept of 'becoming-woman'—to emphasise the de-individuation of all subjectivities under capital, even as it inflates differences (43). In her 2010 book *One-Dimensional Woman*, Nina Power notes that discourses of 'feminisation' are often double-edged, at once describing the spread of precarity from women's work to all work, and assigning blame: that the entry of women into the labour force cost male workers adequate, stable jobs (20). Preciado argues: 'Nothing allows us to claim that the new post-Fordist model of work is more "feminine" than the industrial model was. Is it possible that women didn't work as slaves in the cotton fields?' (*Testo Junkie* 289).

Against feminised labour, Power has offered 'the labourisation of women' to describe how post-Fordism capitalises on women's exploitability as waged labourers as well as domestic workers (20), while Helen Hester favours 'degendered' labour ('Technically Female'). The terminology of degendering labour challenges the naturalisation of care work to femininity ('Technically Female'; Preciado 289). It implies that overwork, precarity, and the extraction of unpaid labour reflect, in Katy Waldman's words, a 'levelling of the playing field' rather than a trespass on a once protected terrain (Waldman 'Will Smartphones Kill Femininity?'; Hester 'Technically Female').

Racialised Labour

In *Talkin' Up to The White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (2000), Aileen Moreton-Robinson traces the homogenising force of Marxist-feminist and socialist-feminist analyes of labour, arguing that it erases Indigneous women as a

category of worker, fails to analyse racialised differences between women, and does not account for the construction of whiteness and for white feminism's race blindness (36-43). She also uses archival material, particularly life-writing, to recreate the conditions of labour Indigenous women faced in colonial Australia.[19]

Many other scholars have noted that the concepts of feminised, gendered, and reproductive labour frequently erase the racialised character and histories of work (hooks 35; Glenn, 'From Servitude to Service Work' 3-5; Collins 12; Duffy 313-14). As with reproductive labour, this work has often been defined as unproductive in capitalist economies, and subject to a double erasure: both at the time of its undertaking and in subsequent Anglo-centric feminist and other scholarship. As a result, the specific conditions black, migrant, and Indigenous people experienced and continue to experience as workers, as slaves, and indentured labourers has often been neglected (Curthoys 2; Bonacich et al 342).[20]

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[19] See Chapter One of *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, 'Tellin' It Straight: Self-Presentation within Indigenous Women's Life Writings' (1-31); see also, 'Late Twentieth-Century and Early Twenty-First Century Essays' in Part 1 of this review.

[20] It is worth nothing that Marx's concept of primitive accumulation gives an account of colonisation. Primitive accumulation is 'the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production' (*Capital* 875). For instance, when formerly common land is enclosed for private gain, its occupants can no longer survive on their own terms and are forced to sell their labour on the terms of the capitalist within a market (876). The process of accumulation most often occurs by force. Invasion, slavery, and genocide are exemplary measures of seizing the means of production, and extracting and protecting the resources necessary for the production of value and profit (915)—as Marx states: 'capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (926). For Marx's discussions of colonisation in *Capital Vol. 1*, see Part 8, especially Chapter 33. For his brief mentions of colonisation in Australia, see pages 932, 934, and 940.

It is therefore necessary to account for what Evelyn Nakano Glenn has called 'racialised gendered labour' ('Who Cares?' 6), and what many others have referred to simply as racialised labour. In 'The Racialisation of Global Labour', Bonacich, Alimahomed, and Wilson argue that 'racialisation' occurs with the advent of modern European colonisation (343). Racialised identity and racism does not derive solely from colonisation, but is used to create a subclass of workers who cannot access welfare, a family wage, unionisation, or the basic rights of citizens (346). Anabil Quijano has written on the 'coloniality of power'—undervalued, domestic labour that is not explicitly racialised, but which is distributed largely to migrants and sustained by a system whose labour practices are rooted in colonialism (539; see also Gutierrez-Rodriguez 49). Saidya Hartman writes of slavery in the United States as a regime of 'sexualised reproduction,' in which 'slavery conscripted the womb, deciding the fate of the unborn and reproducing slave property,' rendering metaphors of the maternal incommensurate with notions of the domestic, private sphere (169).

Other theorists have sought to redress the notion that Indigenous women's labour was economically unproductive. In the 2012 anthology *Indigenous Women and Work: From Labour to Activism*, edited by Carol Williams, Tracey Banivanua Mar analyses the history of indentured Pacific Islander labour on Queensland sugarcane plantations. Mar argues that 'indenture was legally structured to make work all-consuming in its transformation of individuals...into units of labour' ('The Contours of Agency' 85). Mar notes that between 1868 and 1906, over 63,000 people were taken from or left the western Pacific Islands to work in Queensland's sugar industry; the ready-supply of

workers allowed Queensland to compete internationally with other sugar-producers, whose costs were also low due to slave labour (74). In the same anthology, Lynette Russell argues that Aboriginal Tasmanian women's labour in catching and processing seals for oil and fur was essential for the development of Australia's maritime industry (70). This allowed the isolated colony—as well as Indigenous women, who on at least one instance traveled with trade ships to conduct work overseas—to participate in international trade (67).

In Moreton-Robinson's, Mar's, and Russell's accounts, it is clear that women from the Pacific Islands and Indigenous women were not only domestic workers, contributing to the economy indirectly through reproductive labour in white households; they were also productive workers in the classical Marxist sense, producing surplus value for capital, and for the colonial Australian economy. Scholarship that overlooks non-white labour history is therefore inadequate to account for changes in global systems of production. The long histories of female slave labour troubles the notion that boundaries between the private and public spheres, leisure and work, collapsed only with the advent of post-Fordism. The idea that women's labour occurs largely in the domestic sphere is impossible to square with the history of expropriation, slavery, indentured labour, and domestic work in Australia and globally.

Rather than 'an analysis of the dissolution of boundaries between productive and reproductive labour', Shiloh Whitney calls for 'more finely grained distinctions' (642). She proposes the concept of 'byproductive labour' to describe the ways in which racialised and gendered subjects are expected not only to produce affects but to

'metabolise' unwanted affects such as anxiety, fear, stress, and anger (638). Indeed, in its intersection with racialised and gendered labour, the affective economy produces 'form[s] of subjectivity that may be used as a disposal ground for unwanted affects' (654). Susanne Schultz argues that reproductive labour is a useful category, but only insofar as it is structured along the categories of race, class, and gender, and is attentive to subtleties and distinctions within an international framework; post-Fordism, Fordism, and industrialised labour, too, are unevenly distributed systems (82).

Autonomia and Post-Fordism redux: Testo Junkie's 'General Sex', 'Pornified', 'Pharmacopornographic', and 'Übermaterial Labour'

Comparatively little attention has been paid to *Testo Junkie*'s engagement with Virno's thought and with Autonomism more broadly; as with Preciado's use of genre, his revision of post-Fordism is often relegated to contextualising detail for his insights on gender, embodiment, and technology. However, this fails to consider the extent to which Preciado's intervention in these fields is enabled by his elaboration of key concepts from Autonomist thought.

Though Virno obliquely touches on the recruitment of the body into the labour process, Preciado argues that he neglects the advent of the embodied technosemiotic system of sex, gender, and desire in post-Fordism. As with racialised labour, this is not only a political or ethical corrective—highlighting who does the labour—but a conceptual

one. By neglecting the body, Autonomism has missed a fundamental component of contemporary work and production:

> Virno prefers to call immaterial work "linguistic," whereas Hardt and Negri, opting for the Foucauldian adjective, describe it as "biopolitical," thus emphasizing the relationship of such immaterial production to the body. But this body itself seems desexualised. None of them mention the effects on their philosopher's cocks of a dose of Viagra accompanied by the right image. None dare call a spade a spade: the crux of work has become sexual, spermatic, masturbatory, toxicological… (293)

Rather than immaterial, affective, feminised, or virtuoso, Preciado argues that labour is 'übermaterial': 'pornified'. The 'pornification of labour' describes 'the capture of sex and sexuality by economy' (274). Labour is defined by its capacity to activate the cycle of 'excitation-frustration-excitation' by which porn, organs, pills, images, chemical compounds, money—anything involved in this 'embodied technosemiotic system'—circulate (275). These items operate as prosthetics to our subjectivity; they produce us as subjects at the level of genetics, hormones, and tissue—matter—as well as through communication, language, and knowledge (275).

'Pornified labour' is a reframing and updating of virtuoso labour. For Preciado, it is the prototype of all labour. Virtuoso labour is defined by its performative, ongoing dimension; pornified labour is defined by the 'excitation-frustration-excitation' loop, which is necessarily and always unfulfilled and ongoing. In other words, like virtuoso

labour, pornified labour is the production of production, and 'the object of work is not to satisfy but to excite' (274). The precondition for value-production is the 'pleasure' of the multitude rather than a 'grammar'; instead of a 'general intellect' there is 'general sex' (309).

But Preciado does more than re-christen Virno's insights. His innovation is that he uses Virno's thought to extend a definition of post-Fordism that repoliticises the concept of potential. For Preciado, the potential to experience affect or sensation matters as much as the affect itself; post-Fordism is not simply the collapse of labour into pleasure, but the potential to experience at all. The materialism of the subject, then, as a body capable of feeling and experiencing, is a site of übermaterial labour—a prerequisite for the production of value.

Exegetical Statement

This section is intended as a bridge between the critical and creative sections of this thesis, and offers an overview of the ways in which *Seeking Arrangement* utilises the above research. Here, I briefly explicate each essay's indebtedness to particular texts and concepts, as well as their use of and position within the essay genre. In true essayist form, I did not write *Seeking Arrangement* according to a criteria of the essay fixed in advance by the research outlined in my literature review. However, I often found, during or after the writing process, that I had been unwittingly working within particular traditions or using particular techniques drawn from these traditions. Again, this raises questions about the mechanisms by which form is transmitted—its reproduction across contexts even without the deliberate collusion of its producers.

The first piece in this thesis, 'A Manifesto for Post-Work Polyamory', functions as both an introduction to *Seeking Arrangement* and to the second essay, 'Fully Automated Luxury Polyamory'. It draws on post-work politics, *operaist* and Autonomist struggles against work, and Marxist-feminist debates over reproductive labour. It attempts to both repoliticise polyamory and to imbue post-work politics with insights from social-reproduction feminism. My use of the manifesto refers to the milieu from which its contents were partly drawn: 1970s Marxist-feminist organisations, their practices of pamphleteering, and their commitment to writing within—and using writing to promote—a collectivist politics. I view the manifesto as an intensification of the essay's immediacy, as well as its conflicting demands for endurance—a form that risks obsolescence in its time or anachronism in the future.

‘Fully Automated Luxury Polyamory’ is indebted to Preciado’s use of genre in *Testo Junkie*; it situates a personal narrative of doomed polyamory within a broader political context, mixing memoir, theory, and history. I examine histories of socialist-feminist experiments in communal living, feminist architecture, and collectivised domestic work, experiments that functioned as practical applications of the Marxist- and socialist-feminist theories I traced in the review. It also goes back further, to Marxist, Fourierist, and utopian communes of the nineteenth century in both North America and Australia. Throughout, I ask what an expanded conception of polyamory might look like, one rooted in solidarity and collectivism rather than libertarian ideals of self-realisation. I examine how—through its reproduction in science, culture, online, and in practice—the latter version of polyamory came to dominate the former.

The third essay, ‘In Defense of Partying’, draws on the tradition, popular in essays of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, of apologias for minor or trivial subjects. It is a short memoir, intended almost as an interlude in the collection, and could also be categorised as a character sketch or portrait. It functions to introduce the themes of clubbing, excitement, and the gendered body in public space, as well as the character of Nic.

The fourth essay, ‘Aimless Individuality Persists’, is a review of Anne Imhof’s performance piece ‘Faust’ at the Venice Biennale (2017). It could be categorised as autotheory, viewing the self in an impersonal light, or as an extended review, again weighing the timeliness of the review form against the more timeless qualities of the

memoir. It examines *Faust*'s use of club aesthetics, an element that remained unacknowledged in the reviews and press surrounding it at the time. In 'Aimless', I read the act of clubbing, long figured as an excess to capital, as fully compatible with the pace and demands of precarious labour. I draw particularly on Virno's concepts of virtuoso labour and Preciado's pornified labour.

'Funny Games' is about the Melbourne chapter of a fraternity called The Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes. The history of the club intersects with the history of the essay in unexpected ways—for instance, Victorian-era clubhouse conviviality characterises both the familiar essay and the fraternity. This history troubles the genre-markers of essay and fiction, multiplying unlikely origin stories for the club and breeding conspiracy about its real function: was it an early form of unionisation for workers, a Satanic cult, or something in between? This piece is grounded in extensive historical research and interviewing, and is influenced in tone, form, and method by David Foster-Wallace's experiential journalism, for instance, in 'Shipping Out' and 'Consider the Lobster'.

The sixth and final essay is an essay on the essay. 'The Beautiful Piece' analyses the extent to which literary form is determined by its conditions of production under post-Fordism. It draws extensively on the scholarship outlined in both parts of the literature review, as well as further research into online literary economies and twenty-first century nonfiction. I use Eve Kosofksy Sedgewick's 'Paranoid Reading', Felix Bernstein's 'The Irreproachable Essay', Sianne Ngai's work on zaniness in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, and Virno's concept of virtuoso labour to argue for the

contemporary hybrid essay as a precarious form. This trend has it roots in the genre's early shame of deformity; the hybrid personal essay heightens the dialogic construction of genre to paranoia as it preempts and defends itself against criticism, real and imagined.

Seeking Arrangement: Essays on Work

Creative Component

Sally Elizabeth Olds

A Manifesto for Post-Work Polyamory

1. Polyamory and post-work politics have a shared history. At this precise moment, their joint future is up for grabs. This manifesto is not an attempt to marry polyamory and post-work, Platonic halves re-fused, or to coax offspring from such a pairing in the manner of a young couple imagining their child as a neat amalgam of their best traits (my eyes, your skin). If anything, this is an attempt to sift through a messy and ongoing separation, which is always a way of lingering in attachment. Their joint past is steeped in intentional communities and labour unions; sexual liberation and sexual abuse; judgy self-help books and spirited Bolshevik pamphlets; micro-computing and neo-Paganism; artificial wombs and fear of automation; charismatic patriarchs and communal child-rearing.

2. Polyamory is the practice of maintaining several romantic or intimate relationships with the full knowledge and consent of all parties. According to who you talk to, it is both a relationship style and an orientation, both something you do and something you are. It tends to be defined by ongoing emotional commitments rather than sex or one-off encounters. It is relationships, of any kind, with the ceiling removed.

3. Post-work politics describes a cluster of tactics for ending humankind's dependence on waged labour for survival. Its ultimate goal is not to improve

working conditions or advocate for better pay; it wants to end the regime in which labour is subordinated to the reproduction of the capitalist order. It is explicitly anti-capitalist, and advocates for a post-work society only insofar as it brings us closer to a post-capitalist one. It involves action—automating as much labour as possible, the reduction of the working week, a Universal Basic Income to replace the lost wage—and ideology: an anti-work ethic, and the creation of a left hegemony equal to tackling the global scale of capital.

4. Polyamory must not legitimise itself at the expense of a radical politics. Defending itself from all sides—right-wing Christian condemnation, legal impositions, smug millennial taunts, left social conservatism—polyamory often tries to banalify itself. Its legitimacy will come by putting itself on the map of a future world, not by meekly asking for territory in this one.

5. Post-work politics must not radicalise itself by re-domesticating relationships. The unequal division of labour in theorising childrearing, kinship, sex, and care work foists a kind of intellectual hyperemployment on those who cover these bases on top of, as a necessary part of, thinking through post-work. Its relevance will come by recognising its deeply feminist stakes, not by disavowing its feminist commitments and forebears.

6. Polyamory teaches us how to organise reproductive, household, and emotional labour; post-work thinkers have not yet sufficiently theorised social reproduction, especially the gendering and racialisation of care work. Post-work

politics teaches us how to reorder working weeks, repurpose labour-saving technologies for fairer ends, and how to leverage anti-work towards anti-capitalism; polyamory is often guilty of quietly acquiescing to the techno-capitalist status quo.

7. Relationships are hard work. Post-work polyamory does not want to make them any easier; it wants to make them everyone's problem. Relationships are only a private or inconsequential affair if you ignore the following and more: the policing of low-income families, Indigenous families, black families, and migrant families by work and welfare programs; the theft of Aboriginal children by Australian government agencies and churches; the blossoming of a domestic economy premised on replacing unpaid gendered labour in the home with outsourced, precarious labour (uberEATS, Airtasker); pornography; the global surrogacy and reproductive industries; the ideological and techno-pharmaceutical manufacture of heterosexuality and the gender binary; the Freedman's Bureau and its enforced marriages for former slaves; Viagra and the Pill; Barack Obama's multi-million dollar initiatives to promote the nuclear family through programs such as the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse; the family sedan; the same-sex marriage plebiscite; the smart-home collecting data on a no-longer private sphere; *The Bachelor*.

8. Post-work polyamory is not nostalgic for the Fordist family wage, in which stable employment tied people to stable, and often oppressive, relationships. It is not nostalgic for comprehensive welfare, a consistently corrupt surveillance

system. Nor does it simply want to replace the family wage or welfare with a UBI, leaving recipients confined to their existing social and economic standing. Post-work is a politics of tessellation: the careful arrangement of concepts and tactics in a complementary whole.

9. Down with hippie capitalism. Both post-work politics and polyamory must decamp from Silicon Valley (down with Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, Brock Pierce, John McAfee). The future of work and relationships cannot be ceded to neo-Randian capitalists or libertarians or transhumanists—or, most often, an unholy combination of the three. Post-work polyamory must cherish and privilege its connection to witchcraft, cyberfeminism, ectogenetics, cybernetic socialism, manifesto-writing, utopian world-building, communal living, gay activism, queer safe-sex practices, anti-capitalist unions, organising workplaces, painstaking planning, acting out with purpose.

10. Down with hippie colonial capitalism. Post-work polyamory must not simply be a gentrification of relationships, pushing out low-income earners and First Nations people in the way of Google and Facebook on the lands of the Ohlone in Northern California. It must recognise the imposition of hetero-patriarchal nuclear family values by settler-colonisers on First Nations people, and take to heart the work of contemporary scholars mapping decolonial poly practices.

11. Down with hippie financial capitalism. Post-work polyamory must not decamp from Silicon Valley only to advance on new frontiers. Under the guise of

rebuilding or fixing, the rich buy up land or move their empires offshore to avoid regulations and taxes. Billions of dollars flow from plutocrats in China, America, and Australia through Vanuatu, Puerto Rico, and Bermuda, returning—by circuitous means—to their sources, and bypassing the poor entirely.

12. The home must cease to be source material for the efficient exploitation of workers. The contemporary office with compensations in the form of massages, snacks, and puppies delivered in Ubers is a cynical refraction of the domestic, not only of its leisure-technologies but of the women and hired help who administer them. Leisure time, not just waged work, must be planned for and politicised in anti-capitalist speculations.

13. Post-work polyamory is a politics of architecture. It must extrapolate on feminist experiments in household design, remaking beds, baths, floors, and walls to reduce housework and maintenance, improve accessibility, and open unthought possibilities for co-habitation. It is not about preserving unconditional private space as a respite from increasingly conditional public space. Nor is it about destroying respite for individuals, couples, or families. Public space itself must be a respite, not a waiting room for the private sphere.

14. Because it cuts across all other structural constraints, time is one of the largest obstacles to practicing polyamory. The best promise offered by post-work politics is the liberation of time from waged labour. In order to change the base

that fosters white, economic privilege in poly communities, polyamory must ally itself with left, post-work commitments.

15. The feminist push towards acknowledging emotional, care, and sexual labour is welcome but insufficient; when did ‘exposure’ ever pay the bills? The next step is remuneration. So-called ‘Venmo-feminism’ formalises the transactional nature of relationships, making it clear that emotional, care, and sex work are forms of work, not expressions of natural feminine tendencies. But this, too, is not enough. ‘Emotional labour’ has become a catchall condemnation for everything from exploitation at work to, at its most extreme, giving a friend support. If anything can be labour, ‘labour’ becomes an ahistorical category that transcends specific economic formations. And if labour becomes a private negotiation between individuals—*not my problem*—then the conditions for class-based solidarity are destroyed. Class is an outcome of a system of production, of a system of labour under capitalism, not a possession or an identity. Class is when work is everyone’s problem.

16. The reorganisation of labour is the reorganisation of relationships; the reorganisation of relationships is the reorganisation of labour. But reorganising labour may simply be a means of striking an agreement between the collective and capital—a privatisation of collectivity, a strategic widening of the unit of privatisation. The poly unit, or any unit, becomes a more efficient means of accumulation precisely when it becomes a more efficient means of reproducing labour-power. The more streamlined one’s reproductive labour, the more time

one can sell, the harder one can work within this time, the more surplus-value produced for capital. Post-work polyamory is an attempt to check this tendency by building anti-capitalist strategies into the ongoing practice of equitably distributing labour within relationships—that is to say, within an ever-growing collective.

Fully Automated Luxury Polyamory

1.

I am writing this on an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship. I am sitting in the brown-wood office I share with four other postgraduate students, staring at the detritus of academia: a stack of back-issues of the faculty journal; 1 bottle of Bacardi Gold, 1 bottle of Cointreau, 1 bottle of Smirnoff, 8 shot glasses, 9 plastic cups (no one knows where this stash came from or how old it is); 11 dusty boxes of teabags, mostly expired; a statuette of a man in a crown; an orange plastic bucket with a Jack-O-Lantern's face; 1 can of air freshener; 2 dead modems; 1 live mouse.

I am doing a research Masters, which has no tuition fees. I receive $515.85 every week in exchange for...what, exactly? Showing up? The presumption that I will publish and provide the university with more citations, possibly acclaim? For giving the university an opportunity to support the universal right to education? I wonder what surplus I will produce in my time here.

So far I've been treating the scholarship more like a universal basic income than a wage in exchange for a product. I've been finishing projects I started during the three years between undergrad and postgrad in which I held down casual jobs. I've been taking long lunches with friends who are likewise studying, or underemployed, or jobless, or

sex workers, or sessional academics, or dole bludgers. Since I started in February I've been suspended in the loophole between the job market and unemployment that is tertiary education. It will end when I graduate. Then maybe more study, a PhD, a relocation to claim more funding, another loophole.

I am single partly in order to pursue more funding. There was no money where my ex and I lived; no money in a relationship disinclined to do monogamy by correspondence. The other option was polyamory, but we had already tried and it didn't work out. Does this mean I am pursuing funding in order to avoid being polyamorous?

I am pursuing funding partly in order to do the intellectual labour that will help make a post-work future possible in order to avoid the staggering exertions of holding down a poly set-up while also holding down an array of casual and precarious jobs. I am performing the intellectual labour of thinking through a post-work future partly in order to gain funding.

Like many funded students and artists, I am already living in a post-work future. I am pursuing funding in order to theorise the conditions that might extend this from a temporary state of grace to a permanent one.

2.

In its loosest definition, what I call post-work polyamory is a relationship premised on and committed to anti-capitalism. It is, or would be, a romantic, caring, and/or sexual

relationship between any number of people working against privatising and unequally distributing care, resources, property, love, sex, intimacy, and work within a couple or other closed unit. It would be a form against the nuclear family as an atomised site of consumption and production. It does not see the couple form as inherently damaging, but as a symptom of mononormativity: a state in which everything in society is calibrated for monogamous pair. Its post-work ambitions are exactly what they sound like. PWP does not just want to redistribute labour but, where possible, abolish the need to work within exploited waged (and unwaged) relations in order to survive.

These ambitions are nothing new, but polyamory today bears little resemblance to such a form. Researching polyamory—and I mean polyamory, not related forms like relationship anarchy or open relationships—is a frustrating experience of capture within the very definitions I want to escape: poly as a 1990s/2000s urban North American spin on the 1970s version of free love, an orientation or practice for individuals, couples, and small groups, devoid of politics beyond its opposition to the monogamous status quo. PWP has to invent its own predecessors, to arrange histories that don't quite belong to it in a shape that seems, in retrospect, to lead to something that could be called post-work polyamory.

A brief and partial timeline:

In 1843, several families from New York City band together to form the North American Phalanx, a community built on French socialist philosopher Charles Fourier's principle of the *phalanstère*: a group of people who live and hold property

together. They buy land in New Jersey and live in two existing houses while building long halls where each family has a parlour and two bedrooms. They also build livestock-holdings, gardens, a school, an artificial pond, a restaurant, guest houses, and a daycare centre. The restaurant—initially a 'common table' that provided food for all with a uniform menu—serves meals that can be individually selected and paid for. All workers are paid a wage according to a complex system determined by the ease and appeal of the work (lowest pay for light and rewarding labour, highest for labour deemed undesirable or most taxing); there is no distinction in pay according to gender. Domestic work is taken care of by groups whose jobs rotate and who tackle everything from entertainment to agriculture.

Also in 1843, a twenty-five-year-old Karl Marx and a twenty-nine-year-old Jenny Von Westphalen, newly married, move to the Saint-Germain district of Paris. They are joining the philosopher Arnold Ruge in a Fourierist urban commune. They move in with two other couples and occupy two floors of an apartment at 23 rue Vaneau. Each couple has their own quarters, but share a kitchen and dining room; the women do the domestic work, though divide it evenly amongst themselves. Within two weeks, due to personality clashes, the Marxes move into their own apartment a few doors down.

In 1847, the Oneida Community establishes a 200-member home in New York State. The founder, John Humphrey Noyes, who has visited and drawn inspiration from the North American Phalanx, promotes 'complex marriage' wherein non-exclusive sexual relationships are formed on the basis of attraction and desire. Like many other religious communes, Oneida believes that dissolving the ties of the nuclear family will allow for

greater attachment to a shared faith. They believe that Jesus has already returned, and that they are helping to build Heaven on Earth. The community also practices a form of eugenics, with prospective parents pleading their case to a committee tasked with selecting good matches based on the spiritual and moral qualities of the parties involved.

In 1868, fed-up American housewife Melusina Fay Peirce develops the concept of co-operative housekeeping in *The Revolution*, the official publication of the National Woman Suffrage Association. In co-operative housekeeping, a group of women band together to purchase a building in which to manufacture all household goods, which are then distributed to households for cash on delivery, meaning effectively that their husbands—the only members of the family working and bringing in money—pay their wives for their work. In cities, 'every tenth block would contain the kitchen and laundry and clothing house' and individual houses would be built without. Peirce's plans are motivated by a desire to increase the standing of women in the family and in society. And, though she writes that former servants and employees would work side-by-side, this is more to increase the efficiency of the household than to abolish class divisions—the co-ops would dispense with the need for what she saw as idle and costly domestic help. Her ideas are taken up in later decades by housing reformists in New York, who build apartment blocks and tenement houses with common spaces and facilities.

In 1853, sixty-five years post-invasion, Johann Frederick Krumnow establishes Herrnhut, the first known commune in the land around Port Phillip Bay, in what is now

called Melbourne. Krumnow was a Prussian-born teacher and cobbler who emigrated to Australia in 1839 as a member of August Kavel's congregation; Kavel would go on to found the first Lutheran church in Australia, and Krumnow hoped to become a Lutheran preacher. But on the journey across, his conduct with young girls was deemed 'unsatisfactory', and he was barred from further involvement with the church. He moves to the Melbourne suburb of Collingwood in 1851, where he begins to amass followers; in 1852, Krumnow and about 40 people move to a plot of land in Western Victoria, where they build several stone dwellings and a stone church, keep sheep and cows, and practice fervent prayer.

In 1872, an article appears in a Melbourne newspaper called the Advocate:

> A SPINSTER Land Association is the latest idea out. "Such an institution is," says
>
> > Eucalyptus, in the Border Watch, "established at a place called Binnum Binnum. Many rumours are afloat as to the principles of this Amazonian confederation, some maintaining that they have founded the society on pure Amazonian or Quaker principles..

William Metcalf, expert on Australian communes, writes that 'Amazonian' was a euphemism for what might now be called a lesbian-separatist commune; spinster, of course, refers to an unwed woman and carries the same connotations as 'Amazonian'. Beyond this article and a few-line commentary from Metcalf, nothing else is known about this endeavour.

About ten years after Herrnhut is established, it splinters from within. Krumnow has bought the land with communal money but put his name on the deed; when he refuses to change it, several members abandon the group. In 1880, Krumnow dies, leaving the Herrnhut community heavily in debt. It continues under new leadership, dissipating slowly, until 1897. It remains Australia's longest-running commune.

In 1880, back in New York State, Oneida begin manufacturing silverware and tableware, transferring their holdings to a joint-stock company called Oneida Community Limited. During both world wars in the early 20th century, Oneida thrives by manufacturing tableware for the military and products for use on the battlefield: rifle sights, parachute releases, hand grenades, shells, guns, bayonets, aircraft fuel tanks, and chemical bombs.

In 1888, the Melbourne Anarchist Club opens Australia's first urban commune, 'Co-operative Home', at 47 Victoria Avenue in Albert Park, Melbourne. It folds after one year.

In the early 1900s, technology that was once built into houses, apartments, and hotels—stoves, ducted vacuum units, complicated refrigeration systems—begin to be redeveloped as portable commodities for individual use. This process is facilitated by advances in motorisation and by government policies that promote the construction of millions of single-family homes, empty boxes that have to be filled with amenities from scratch. Alongside industrialists like Henry Ford, the home economist Christine

Frederick and the engineer and designer Lillian Gilbreth—whose many innovations include refrigerator-door shelves and light switches on walls—advocate for women as suburban housekeepers, contributing to the economy by consuming while their husbands produce.

In the early 1950s, the US pharmaceutical industry begins testing its products in Puerto Rico, including early prototypes of contraceptive pills. The US government builds apartment blocks and cheap family homes for the locals, feeding occupants into factory-work and women into clinical-trials; the new suburbs are a holding-pen for test-subjects, allowing the Americans to go door-to-door distributing samples and collecting results. (By now it should be clear that these are ambivalent forebears at best, at worst—morally bankrupt, Satanic, depraved).

In 1968 in Los Angeles, Charles Manson and his Family—a collection of runaway teen girls, drop-outs, and acid casualties—move to Spahn Ranch, a sprawling, ex-movie set. At the Ranch, the Family take LSD, give horseback tours to the public, and plan for 'Helter Skelter', a race-war Manson claims will exterminate the white race. In July and August of 1969, the family commit nine murders in total—most famously, of the Hollywood actress Sharon Tate.

In 1970, Shulamith Firestone publishes *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. She is twenty-five at the time of publication, the child of Orthodox Jewish Canadians, a former student of painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and an activist in the black power and women's movements. In *Dialectic*, she dreams of

a polymorphously perverse society where gender disappears; she argues that marriage feeds off sex work, not vice versa; that biology is as mutable as ideas (‘pregnancy is barbaric’, she writes, better outsourced to artificial wombs). Her argument is simple: the biological nuclear family must be abolished. She suggests, in its place, an arrangement called ‘households’: groups of seven to ten people—two-thirds adults, one-third children—living together for a self-determined amount of time, with domestic work and child care distributed equally. She argues that with ‘the wise use of machines, people could be freed from toil, work divorced from wages and redefined’. To supplement this ‘cybernation’, and to ensure women and children’s freedom from men, every member would receive a guaranteed basic income.

Around the same time Firestone is writing *Dialectic*, the Kerista Commune of Haight Ashbury is beginning to crystallise from a series of loose, hedonistic experiments into an organised urban commune. Its genesis is earlier, in the late 1950s, when an ex-Air Force officer named John Presmont begins to hear voices telling him he will found the next great religion. In 1971 Kerista begins proper, when a core contingent relocates from Greenwich Village to Haight-Ashbury. During the 1970s its numbers fluctuate, with a temporary high of thirty members in 1978 living across half a dozen flats.

In 1848, Jane Sophia Appleton publishes *Vision of Bangor in the Twentieth Century*, a speculative novel imagining Bangor, Appleton’s hometown, in 1978. The narrator explains the society, which is built on Fourierist principles, to a time-traveler from the Victorian era:

> Just think of the absurdity of one hundred housekeepers, every Saturday morning, striving to enlighten one hundred girls in the process of making pies for one hundred little ovens! (Some of these remain to this day, to the great glee of antiquarians.) What fatigue! What vexation! Why, ten of our cooks, in the turning of a few cranks, and an hour or so of placing materials, produce enough pies to supply the whole of this city…

In 1979, after five years of revisions, the final version of the Utopian Social Contract of Kerista Village is introduced. This is a charter of 26 Standards for living in the Village. It is unclear who exactly is involved in the drafting process, though the Contract itself answers, or displaces, this question by defining Kerista as a participatory democracy. The first Standard is an intention to a lifetime involvement with the Village; the second is 'Orthodox Polyfidelity'. Kerista is comprised of kinship groups called Best Friend Identity Clusters (B-FIC) of up to nine men and nine women. The members are polyfidelitous to their B-FIC; they do not have sexual contact outside of their cluster, use a rotational sleeping roster to strengthen one-on-one ties equilaterally, collectively manage finances, and care for any children communally. On joining Kerista, new members enter into discussions with a potential B-FIC; if all members agree, they are accepted. If not, they remain unattached while seeking a more suitable cluster.

In 1986, a woman named Sun joins the commune, bringing with her a Macintosh computer. Kerista uses it to draw up sleeping schedules, perhaps forging the (now iron) link between scheduling technologies and poly-management. In the late 1980s, Kerista opens a Mac rental store called Utopian Technology. Soon after, Apple grants Kerista a

dealer's licence, and the business is incorporated in the names of four women as Abacus Inc. This is a flex of proto-Lean-In business nous; as the only women-run licensed Apple resellers at the time, they win contracts with companies who want to look progressive. Kerista's current-day website describes Abacus as a 'moderately successful microcomputer reseller'. An article in *Wired* from 2002 states that at its height Abacus employed 125 people and generated $35 million in sales. (It is unclear whether or not this profit was subject to the charter determining collective finance.)

Despite the success of the business, in archived emails and accounts of this time, there are veiled references to trouble brewing, hints that Brother Jud acts above the Standards while imposing them on others, rumours of bullying and coercion—a sick woman is denied her request for treatment, Abacus employees are forced to work 12 hour days. In 1991, the commune expels Jud, and in the same year, the tech market is flooded with computers, causing prices to plummet and leaving Abacus with a cache of useless stock. The commune disbands, and in 1992 Abacus merges with the IT consultancy company Ciber. Kerista's main legacy is the term 'compersion', a word coined with a Ouija Board after two members realised there were no existing terms for their positive feelings about sharing partners. Compersion is the opposite of jealousy—happiness for your partner's romantic success—and is still a buzzword in poly communities today.

Some 70 kilometers from Haight-Ashbury, members of the neo-Pagan religious group the Church of All Worlds are conducting their own experiments in communal living. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart—Neopagan community leader, witch, and priestess of the Church of All Worlds—lives on a ranch

in Mendocino County with her husband Oberon and close to one hundred other families. There is a free-flow of sex and love throughout the commune, and Morning Glory and Oberon have many lovers, both casual and long-term. In a 1990 article, Morning Glory terms their relationship style as 'poly-amorous', minting centuries of diverse, culturally-specific practices into a currency that will circulate primarily in the white liberal Anglosphere.

In 1992, the Australian chapter of the Church of all Worlds is founded by Fiona Judge and Anthorr Nomchong, and legally incorporated in November that year. It is still active, headquartered just outside of Brisbane, Queensland, though polyamory is now less central to its belief system. As their website tactfully puts it, today 'we each make our own choices regarding our relationships and relations with others'.

In 1997, Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy, two Californians active in the kink scene, co-author *The Ethical Slut*, opening the floodgates for a whole subgenre of self-help: poly how-to manuals. *The Ethical Slut* contains a loose history of poly and some anti-capitalist speculation on poly's possibilities, which, in the subsequent texts it inspires, will be written out in favour of hard-headed pragmatism. It remains one of the definitive guides to ethical non-monogamy. (Kim Tallbear, a theorist who writes on indigeneity and polyamory, points out that 'ethical non-monogamy' implies monogamy is ethical in the first place).

Also in 1997, Greg Araki releases trash teen film *Nowhere*, which features a bisexual polyamorous trio. Mel, the point in the open V (an arrangement where one person has

two partners, but those partners aren't dating), consoles her doubting lover with as good a definition of polyamory as any: 'You know that I firmly believe that human beings are built for sex and for love. And that we should dole out as much of both as possible ... And just because I make it with other guys and girls, it has no effect whatsoever on my feelings for you.'

In the same year, Chris Kraus publishes *I Love Dick*. The protagonist, Chris, shoehorns an evening of flirtation into a kind of unrequited poly set-up; she has the knowledge and uneasy consent from her husband but no reciprocity from Dick.

In 2006, 'polyamory, -ous, and -ist' are added to the Oxford English Dictionary, with Morning Glory credited for the term.

In 2009, age nineteen, I move from a small town named Maryborough in Queensland to Brisbane, where I meet my first poly people. B is six or seven years older than me, a philosophy student who shows up to parties in a dressing gown and who has waist-length, religious-seeming hair. When I meet her she is dating several people including L, another philosophy student, a casualty of Stanley's box wine and the French cinema class we all take. L wears only black, has yellow fingers from rolling cigarettes, and is dating both a literature student and the literature students' right-wing politics professor.

In 2014, poly-partners Franklin Veaux and Eve Rickert publish *More Than Two*. In opposition to gentler texts like *The Ethical Slut*, *More Than Two* targets

mono-normativity in any of its forms, arguing that non-monogamous relationships can only be truly ethical if non-hierarchical: if partner A is equal to partner B is equal to partner C.

In 2015, news emerges of 'The Fabulus of Unicorns', a London-based polyamorous group (cult?) whose members identify as unicorns. Unicorns are a kind of short circuit in poly's history. In the 1980s, Morning Glory and Oberon 'discovered' unicorns by surgically manipulating the horn buds of baby goats to grow from the center of their heads. In contemporary poly-speak, unicorn refers to the rare and highly-sought supplement to a poly couple: someone (usually a woman) who wants to have sex with or date both partners.

In 2015, unaware of any of the history that precedes this decision, I open my relationship with J. We grapple both with the hundred petty indignities it invites into our lives (suddenly, his phone has a password) and with a monstrous hitherto unrevealed capacity for insecurity, jealousy, and emotional miserliness, all concealed beneath the immaculate *trompe l'oeil* of our Tinder profiles.

In 2016, Emily Witt publishes *Future Sex*, a narrative non-fiction book about the intersection of technology and sex. The chapter on polyamory follows three ambitious young Californians as they experiment with group sex and non-monogamy, take trips to Burning Man, and clock in 60 hour weeks at Google.

In 2017, I move to Melbourne without J and, in the rarefied circles of the queer youngish inner-North, everyone's relationships are poly, open, or, at least, caveated.

3.

In the popular imagination, polyamory never really loses its roots. Its public image is inextricable from the specific strain of geek culture that Oberon, Morning Glory, and Brother Jud helped inaugurate. Now, on OKCupid profiles and in Tinder bios, 'queer, geeky, poly, kinky' appear together so often they are practically idiomatic. This iteration of poly is stubbornly alien to both the *nouvelle vague* image of non-monogamy—*Jules et Jim* by Truffaut—and the Hollywood version forwarded by films like *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and *The Dreamers*. It has an embarrassingly utopic bent borne of science-fiction and fantasy (the Church of All Worlds is based on a religion from Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*), though somewhat deflated by the terrestrial pragmatism of scheduling and painstaking communication.

Polyamory's lamentable sensibility stems from its exclusivity—ironically, an exclusivity that no-one particularly wants to join. It's not for nothing that poly's avatar is a white neckbeard huffing crumbs across his keyboard as he posts on r/relationships. Polyamory, as one common critique goes, is made possible by a life of relative structural ease. You need the time and energy to do it; you need support systems, which usually form within progressive urban centers; you need access to contraception and healthcare; you need a decent paying job, or a financial safety net, to facilitate all of the above.

Note here that I'm talking about polyamory, not related forms—among them, relationship anarchy and what Angela Willey, a scholar of non/monogamies, calls 'dyke ethics'—that attempt to divest from both monogamy *and* polyamory. Polyamory is thought of as a practice, sometimes an orientation, and, increasingly, an identity and a subculture. A one-off kiss with someone other than your partner but with your partner's consent does not make you polyamorous; the scaffolding that allows the kiss to happen, on the other hand, gestures toward a polyamorous ethos. Promiscuous coupled queers, especially gay men, are rarely seen as polyamorous and are perhaps less likely to identify as such; non-monogamy from gay men is viewed as natural, or at least natural to gay culture, dispensing the need for a separate moniker. As a growing number of commentators remark, many of whom don't want their own nuanced forms of non-monogamy tarred with the same brush, polyamory is more and more taking on an identity of its own.

There are four main negative responses to polyamory from monogamous-leaning people:

1. Ridicule and hilarity. An emphasis on its geekiness. This is often performed by otherwise progressive young lefties who give themselves a free pass to make fun of, or dismiss, poly. See: *Vice* magazine. See: conflation of aesthetic and moral objections. See: Twitter.

2. The ‘objective interest’ response. See: endless online articles about ‘what is polyamory?’ , features on polyamorous individuals, couples, and groups. See also: Tilda Swinton.
3. Suspicion and hostility: thinly-veiled take-downs framed as ‘investigations’ into polyamorous lifestyles. See: ‘polyamory wouldn’t work for me’; ‘polyamory doesn’t work’; ‘I’d like to be poly but I’m too jealous’. See also: legitimate critiques of uneven power dynamics within poly communities and relationships. See also: section 6.
4. Absolute outrage. Moral panic. Decline-of-Western-civilisation discourse.

In response to these, polyamorists are tasked with defending their relationships; in interviews and essays, poly people emphasise the bigness of their love, the richness of connections, their personal growth. There’s always a question about jealousy to which the poly person submits the standard response: ‘Of course I still get jealous. But when I do I work through it.’

Whatever the angle, polyamory is rarely discussed beyond the confines of empowerment for individuals, couples, and—at most—small units. As long as polyamory remains sequestered in hero’s journey narratives of personal triumphs over jealousy, insecurity, and possessiveness, over the limitations of monogamy to sexual and emotional freedom—as long as this remains the end-point of the poly unit—its political potential remains obscured. As long as poly is only ever discussed according to whether or not it ‘works’—when its end-goal becomes the cohesiveness and harmony of the unit, when it is constantly asked to defend itself—it is framed as an

aberration, requiring polyamorists to spruik its benefits, reiterating the narrative of triumphs over jealousy, insecurity, possessiveness. And as long as polyamory is subject to an overemphasis on its unorthodox sexual customs, polyamorists will define polyamory not only in opposition to monogamy but to promiscuity, polygamy, infidelity, free love, and swinging: a sanitised, secular, moral, and implicitly-hetero form of love—emphasis on the love, which is used to sell a suspicious mainstream on all manner of forms (gay marriage being the most obvious example). Within this closed loop, the highest achievement for poly is banality.

Polyamory becomes what Angela Willey calls a 'minoritising discourse'. This is a kind of ecological approach to relationship forms that does not seek to displace monogamy but to position polyamory as something that can flourish harmlessly alongside it. (Again, this argument plays out in marriage debates: *if you don't like gay marriage, don't get gay-married*.) Of course, as things stand, this means that monogamy remains at the centre, polyamory at the margins—in a structurally monogamous society, the forms will never have true equality. You can see how this plays out in an influential study of 'monogamous' prairie voles. Led by neurobiologist Dr Larry Young in the early 2010s, the study claimed to have isolated hormones and even a gene determining the tendency towards commitment-phobia (vasopressin and RS3 334, a section of the gene coding for vasopressin receptors, if you wanted to know). The study and the hyperbolic media coverage it generated framed non-monogamy as a pathology to be fixed with scientific intervention—for example, straying partners could take oxytocin, the so-called bonding hormone, in pill form.

The counter-strategy, a 'universal' approach, might read the above results and reverse the terms; if there *is* such a thing as a cheating gene, perhaps non-monogamy is natural and monogamy the aberration. Universalists could cite the percentage of non-monogamous species in the animal kingdom ('only about 3-5% of mammal species mate for life'), or conjure primitivist tropes of polymorphous perversity before European invasion, or reference broken homes, or Ashley Madison, or the divorce rate—is anyone *actually* monogamous?

In both approaches, it becomes a matter of bringing human nature and social structures into harmony. Non-monogamy can be fixed or prohibited in order to meet the ideal of a monogamous society. For polyamorists, society can be overhauled to match the non-monogamous reality we already live but strenuously deny. In each case, the apparent naturalness of a tendency, whether it's towards monogamy or non-monogamy, remains unquestioned.

4.

A friend goes to a poly meet-up.

'What was it like?' I ask.

'It was like standing in a room of people I wanted nothing to do with.'

J and I try for a hierarchical poly. We are each other's primaries. We will devote most time and energy to each other. Our set-up will act to preserve the relationship; we don't want to let desire for others get in the way or shorten what will be, we are sure, the

longest relationship of our lives. Other people will be secondary to this (we get this terminology—'primary', 'secondary'—from 2008's *Opening Up* by Tristan Taormino, a guide for couples transitioning to non-monogamy). Weekends are ours, as are family events. We introduce subtle distinctions. Neither of us will have veto power over the other's potential partners or hook-ups, but we expect that we will each act carefully, taking into account the other's feelings before leaping into something new. By the time we would even get into a situation where we had to make such a choice, we would already know the other's feelings because of our comprehensive practice of communication. No conflict could arise that had not already been scheduled—preemptively, in the normal run of business—for discussion and resolution.

We open up on a Monday. J has a date on Wednesday. They start seeing each other immediately. We had not discussed this. She is known to me; our friendship groups have recently begun to merge. Her name is L. She is like a beautiful troll: short and broad-faced, she walks with a rolling stomp. In conversation, she listens so hard she pouts, and nods in a way that looks as though she is ducking. She has pore-less, tanned skin, honey-brown hair, big cheekbones. Her face has nominated her lips to be its envoy; they lead into the world even ahead of her nose. When she laughs or smiles, dimples drill into her cheeks.

On Thursday night, I go to J's house wearing the sloppiest clothes I can find. I think: I am going to be the ugliest bitch you've ever seen. I am going to be the anti-L. I am wearing a long skirt with holes that a rat chewed in it and an enormous black t-shirt

with a picture of Shania Twain on the front. He doesn't even notice. He kisses me with lust.

Two months in, we have a meeting on the grass outside the State Library. L wants to see J more. J is stuck, having to placate both of us; he does want to see L more, of course, but our relationship needs four nights a week (that's what we decided on at the start: four nights). She has to believe him; the inequity in time doesn't mean an inequity of affection. We can only appeal to tradition: the vintage of our relationship, its pre-existing needs. L decides to end things with J.

I take a walk by the river, eat an apple, go into the library to pee, browse the shelves, waiting for J to call. He doesn't. I walk back to our spot. J is there alone.

'What happened?' I ask.

'We decided not to end it.'

Pretty soon after, they are in love. He picks me up from the movies to tell me. I haven't been expecting to see him—he had gone over to L's deal with a crisis. I watch my friends walk back into the cinema to see the next movie. Facing me from the driver's seat, he takes both of my hands and tells me. I notice that his hair is damp, that he smells like soap.

'Did you fuck?' I ask, 'then come straight here to tell me?'

He is stung. It's New Years Day and buses are down. A tiny part of me realises I need him for a ride.

I realise too late that what I actually want, had wanted all along, is not polyamory but an open relationship: something opportunistic and frivolous and anonymous. J had wanted polyamory, had been doing polyamory, and was, annoyingly, within the letter of our agreement. I cry for days.

My best friend, E, is calm, smoking a cigarette on the verandah. She ashes into a pot plant and dog-ears her book before turning to advise me.

'It makes sense they're in love. Why wouldn't they be? That's normal. What's weird is the way they turned it into an event. Coming to see you? Why bother? It's juvenile.'

I can see her critique of the situation tugging at the edge of her dislike for J.

'It makes sense you're upset. You've been socialised to see other women as the end of the world. He can't understand that.'

I feel a kind of pleasurable intensity I have never felt before, or, the pleasurable intensity makes me feel something I have never felt before, which I take to be heartbreak. To hurt them back, I regard their love with the icy skepticism of a philosopher working out logical proofs. I send extremely formal text messages. I tell them I don't believe they are in love. I try to convince them of it. (Now, more than three years later, I don't believe in love at all, at least not the kind that announces itself as an event, an unknowable mystery. Saying 'I love you' or 'I'm in love with you' is like throwing a ball at someone's back and yelling 'catch!')

Franklin Veaux and Eve Rickert, the now-ex couple polyamorous couple-authors of *More Than Two*, who I hate for their probably-correct hardline attitude and not a little in bad-faith for their embodiment of every humiliating poly stereotype, calls this event—the person who walks into a rule-bound poly set-up and disrupts its operation—the 'game changer'. Hopefully, they advise, it will catalyse the dissolution of the hierarchy, which is often an attempt to control the secondary's relationship with a primary partner and is therefore inherently unethical. And if the pre-existing partners can let go of the hierarchy, their relationship will benefit too. No longer making decisions out of fear—of being replaced, of losing a unique connection—they will experience a more authentic form of love.

The experts often treat poly as a process of purification. But as you strip back a relationship, the love that supposedly underpins it can become ever more elusive, more obviously bound up in pragmatic considerations—time, circumstances, rituals—and the relationship can begin to resemble related forms that we don't necessarily associate with love: friendship, dating, casual sexual arrangements, even a collegial project. Love does not pre-exist the forms into which it is cast; the form itself changes the love. Polyamory is the practice of learning that love doesn't exist *qua* love; it dissolves its own premise and, at the same time, reifies the pursuit of love.

Far from purifying our love, the division of our relationship into component parts has allowed a ruthless logic of quantification to flourish. I can now calculate precisely the amount of jealousy it is reasonable to feel. I am like one of Kafka's bureaucrats, rational to an irrational system, fastidious within its absurdities.

5.

Before we open our relationship, we play at live-in monogamy. J has a wealthy co-worker, a tall man in colourful socks and soft leather shoes. He and his wife and child are visiting the States. He needs housesitters to feed the cats and to keep them from going outside. We agree to spend a month there.

The house is a tall Queenslander on a leafy street in West End. The house has been raised and stands higher than its neighbours; inside, I never lose the sense of being ungrounded, held aloft. It takes three keys to enter through the front: one for the verandah door, one for the wooden front door, one for the mesh security door behind it. Inside, there is a bookshelf stuffed with NPR-issue novels, framed promo posters for *This American Life*, Aesop soap dispensers, a real Eames chair, a marble kitchen countertop with $100 on it for 'supplies', which we immediately spend on pizza. The grass in the backyard is not the kind you can sit on. The cleaner, J's coworker informs us, will continue to come weekly while they are away.

During our first days alone in the house, we try to relax and enjoy our sudden windfall. But the house, so lively during our visit—the toddler shooting wheeled toys across the floor, J's coworker demonstrating the clarity of his speaker system's bass, his wife polishing wine glasses—settles around us. We spread out as much as possible and still occupy only a tiny amount of space, our belongings—my books, J's music stuff—pathetically scattered across the vast upcycled dining table. The house is

outfitted like a spaceship, fully organised with supplies for the nuclear unit, synced to their devices and rhythms—it seems to know we are imposters and refuses to calibrate.

In the cupboard there is a maroon mug with a portrait of Trotsky on it. I take to drinking my morning coffee from it on the top floor's back balcony. We are sleeping and bathing on the bottom floor of the house, the granny flat, but we spend most of our time up here. My own share house has a tiny, fully enclosed verandah, an iron cage stuffed with plants and water-warped chairs, and the rest of the house is, in any case, half-outside, wind slicing through floor boards and walls of windows, doors always open, walk down steps onto grass. Getting to the backyard from this house requires dedication: making sure the front entrances are locked, going down to the first floor (there is no access to the backyard from the second floor or from the front, except through a locked gate), sliding open heavy doors with complicated latching systems, sliding them shut to keep the cats in without locking yourself out.

I'm drinking coffee from the Trotsky mug and reading. J is vacuuming the floor naked—we've spilled oats. This house doesn't feel like a domestic sphere, warm and restorative. Not that feelings on this matter matter. So, a calculation: the kitchen and all of its appliances cost, what? Twenty grand? Thirty? Forty? We are living the paid-invoice of a gift registry. We are living Lillian Gilbreth's kitchen work triangle, her now-ubiquitous design of kitchens arranging stove, fridge, and sink at harmonious distances, points on a triangle, to cut down on wasted steps (the kitchen as an open V). We are living the success of Christine Frederick's vision for a Taylorist home economics. We are living thousands of tiny innovations whose sources I don't

know—the insinkerator, the pantry light, the soft-close drawer runner—all of which have been patented, manufactured, shipped, bought, sold, bought, assembled, installed, and can be replaced by new versions of the same products. We are living an automation of labour that somehow still creates enough labour to employ a weekly cleaner, who is from Malaysia, and a woman. It is not so much a site of leisure as the hypothesis of future leisure. Leisure is whatever is necessary to restore the worker to the full capacity required by their work. For J's coworker, the house is wanton with its offerings; whatever it unleashes will be reabsorbed into the production process. For us, menially employed, it withdraws, meting out only necessities. (We go the whole month without finding the air-conditioning control panel).

Even so: the dryer, the cleaner, the dishwasher, the water pressure in the shower, the ice-maker in the front-panel of the fridge, the tubs of pre-made muesli. We are sodden with latent productivity. We don't know what to do with ourselves. We are both working a few days a week and trying to write and make music. We are both working a few days a week and not managing to write or make music. We start having fights. A possum strolls through an open window and won't leave for hours. The cats escape to the garage and won't come up, streaking through towers of wine cartons, headbutting the small diamonds of night air in the lattice. Our friends come over for dinner and we finally figure out how to play our own music on their system. They leave and I'm the one to clear the plates, stack the dishwasher, wipe the table, J staring dead-eyed into Ableton. When, at the end of the month, we return to our separate houses, we decide to open up.

6.

If monogamy, especially in wedlock, was once the most efficient means of accumulating capital, it does not necessarily follow that polyamory is anti-capitalist. Here's one story, or perhaps the same story told otherwise: smug poly units as mini-corporations, privatised, mobile stores of human capital. With one or two breadwinners and 2.5 kids, accumulation is capped, dispersed, rerouted. With several breadwinners, the poly unit presents a marked economic advantage. Given extra-attention, parental love and financial support X 2 or 3, the children of poly-units get ahead at school and university, growing up to enter their own strategic alliances, alloys of love and money: no need to choose between material and emotional wealth when you can have partners providing both. The nuclear family transmits wealth generationally, depositing centuries of accreted fortune in the laps of its heirs. In the poly unit, the accumulation of wealth and privilege need not take centuries; it can happen in a single generation.

Polyamorous parents have an edge in the workplace; their relationships and family units have enough flexibility to take brutal hours and overwork in their stride. One parent might travel for work; the other might care for the child; the other might hold down a hospo job. There's no need to advocate for parental leave, or for the state to provide it, if there are two other parents able to pick up the slack.

In this story, artificial or ectogenetic reproduction—synthetic wombs capable of bringing an embryo to full term—is developed, trialled with genetic material stolen

from prisoners and refugees. Corporations rush to patent the technology. This enacts a mass redundancy on the 'world's back womb', the surrogate mothers largely situated in the Global South, who previously carried children for Western parents unable or disinclined to do so themselves. The poly unit prefers the 'clean' gestation of an artificial womb rather than the polluting effects of another's body. This way, they avoid the risks of embodied gestation, including the power it affords the surrogate (or member of their unit) over the product of their labour—by threatening to keep the child, to 'strike' by threatening to abort, or to refuse abortion at the paying parent's demand.

The death of the 'natural instinct' for childbirth constitutes a new market. At first, as in surrogacy, only the wealthy or those willing to accrue huge debt can afford it. The poor undergo the retrogressive version of conception and pregnancy by trial-and-error, while for the rich it's business as usual until the baby is ready. Where biological pregnancy at least presents a hiccup in the function of the labour market, artificial reproduction offers unhindered exploitation of subjects whose fertility might otherwise have rendered them unreliable or unavailable as waged workers. This results in a larger reserve of labour power, increasing competition for jobs, and decreasing workers' ability to bargain for better pay and conditions. We see a return of the wet nurse—poor, single parents whose physical pregnancies disrupt their flexibility as workers and their earning potential, and whose breast milk is liquid capital so long as the nouveau Earth-mother wants to invest.

As for the child, it is subject to the ego-investments of multiple parents rather than one or two. Perhaps it has been designed as the return on these investments, spawned from multiple adult cells like Dolly the sheep, a limited liability arrangement where each parent's financial outlay is reflected in their precise share in the gene pool—daddy's eyes because he paid a premium—and their precise share of the risk. From the start, the child is adept at moving between commitments. They no longer sell their labour but mine their human capital; in the same way that TV coached a generation of children for sedentary office jobs as adults, the child is prepped for a flexible work-life, the two words—work and life—colliding once and for all (it doesn't make sense to speak of balance when there are no longer two extremes).

'Feminisation' is not just a term for what happens to work under precarity; it now describes a physical process. In the West, falling sperm count due to massive environmental upheaval, smoking, stress, plastics, hormones in the waterways—no-one knows exactly why yet, and so hard is it to believe, even the most dispassionate articles have the tenor of conspiracy about them—creates a scarcity that compounds privilege. As sperm banks begin to empty, the cost of buying sperm skyrockets. Polyamory, or some form of non-monogamy, becomes a necessity; coupled monogamous heterosexuality is a nostalgic indulgence.

In fact, human extinction, which has long been associated with queerness as a stopper to childbearing, sometimes claimed by queers as an affirmative nihilism, is now a problem for the straight population, for everyone. Humans' interest in having sex at all declines—report after report claims that millenials are having less sex than their

parent's generation, the percentage of *sōshoku-kei danshi* (herbivore men, a Japanese coinage for the growing population of young men without much interest in sex), 'soy boys', Reddit-coined insult, is levelled at effete men. Meanwhile, though the population begins to fall in the Anglophone West, sparking nationalist panic over white extinction, it's not enough to slow species extinctions, climate change, heat death, the end of the world as we know it.

Heterosexuality is forced to navigate the same channels of IVF, surrogacy, and artificial insemination that were previously relegated to the pathologised: same-sex partners, trans people, the hysterectomied, single would-be parents, all those unable to reproduce 'naturally'. Polyamory is not just a romantic or sexual proclivity, and not just a private alliance, but the dissemination of reproductive labour into a technocapitalist infrastructure (IVF, surrogacy, artificial insemination, and ectogenesis being forms of polyamory, after all).

Incels, 'involuntarily celibate', imagine a surplus of sex expropriated and denied them, a withheld wage they are owed by women. Much like precarity, involuntary celibacy has been viewed as a feminising force. I'm not couching this in Marxist terms incidentally. This link between sex and economics informs the incel community who, as Angela Nagle argues, appropriate a traditionally left language of proletariat revolution, perhaps best illustrated by the economist Robin Hansen's sympathetic reading of Elliot Rodger's motivation for killing seven people, and attempting to kill many more, at Isla Vista California in 2014:

> One might plausibly argue that those with much less access to sex suffer to a similar degree as those with low income, and might similarly hope to gain from organizing around this identity, to lobby for redistribution along this axis and to at least implicitly threaten violence if their demands are not met.

If it doesn't already, it will soon make sense to speak of a left polyamory and a right polyamory. A movement whose prime insult is 'cuck' obviously still wants women's fidelity to one male partner, obviously still believes in property and masculinity—masculinity as the ability to acquire and keep property, property as the safeguard of masculinity. Still, there are surely polyamorists who identify as alt-right or conservative, and there are uneasy resonances between the communities, just as there are alt-right personalities like Blaire White and Milo Yiannopoulos whose transness and queerness, respectively, do not impede their conservativism. Right polyamory materialises in the form of communes whose male leaders have unhindered access to sex with women, with whoever they want. This would not be a right recuperation of a left practice, but a continuation of the persistent thread of violence in polyamorous and communal histories.

The left vs right distinction might be misleading. Above all else, polyamory is libertarian, its most egregious values concealed by an apolitical shell, a project of love that appears to transcend the petty divisions of politics. Not coincidentally, this is how some of the world's most rapacious billionaires and entrepreneurs talk, in starry-eyed truisms piped straight from the commune to the boardroom or the bar or, indeed, the commune—boardrooms being anathema to most libertarians. Brock Pierce, former

child-actor turned cryptocurrency-pioneer, is known for his eccentric persona: he wears cowboy hats and blasts trance music from a portable speaker as he walks around, his own personal soundtrack. His current project is to transform Puerto Rico into a base-camp for blockchain entrepreneurs and start-ups, which he frames as a way to rebuild an economy and infrastructure ravaged by national debt and Hurricane Maria.

'We're here in service,' he says in an interview with Neil Strauss, author of pick-up manual/memoir *The Game*, 'and we serve through gifting. We're here to take our skills—our superpowers—and figure out how to help Puerto Rico, the Earth and the people'.

He has already convinced hundreds of crypto-evangelists to join him on the island.

Pierce got married at Burning Man to Crystal Rose, CEO of Sensay, which has just released a blockchain-based messaging platform. Together, the pair have a company called Unicorn Ventures—a riff on the finance term 'unicorn', a startup valued at $1 billion or more, named for its rarity—which invests in promising tech initiatives. 'It's fun being the wife of a unicorn', Rose tweeted on a technicolour photo of the wedding party advancing across a bleached sand dune. The pair both have unicorn emojis in their Twitter names. Their wedding was, of course, unicorn themed.

Pierce and Rose's vows were committed to a smart-contract stored in the blockchain, meaning that their vows are immutable and verified by the network without State or legal interference; in their case, the marriage is automatically scheduled for renewal every year, at which time the couple can renegotiate the terms. The smart-contract

marriage was pioneered by a Singaporean couple, Gaurang Torvekar and Sayalee Kaluskar, who uploaded their prenup to the Ethereum blockchain. It included stipulations for weekly date-nights, and jokey codes-of-conduct, for example, that Kaluskar must watch The Walking Dead after Torvekar finishes watching Seinfeld—an eternal, untamperable memory enlisted to legislate the fleeting and fallible.

Polyamorists have been quick to apply blockchain's decentralised system to polyamory's decentralised system. Here's Meow-Ludo Disco Gamma Meow-Meow, the Sydney-based biohacker most famous for implanting the chip of his Opal Card under the skin of his hand, in an interview with Michael Garfield (the podcast is Future Fossils, episode 35, and the following starts at 9: 51):

> Meow-Ludo: I might have told you before, Nicola and I are thinking of getting married by encoding our vows as a smart contract, or more importantly, like a decentralised autonomous organisation [laughter]…Nicola and I are in a poly relationship, so in a poly relationship, obviously assets can't be divided according to a civil union. So in that case, well, fuck, you have to reinvent the whole thing, so I'm like, well, fucken crypto's a good way of going about it… when you're in a poly relationship, you have to fucken do ad hoc, also pro-rata, fucken super measurements as time goes on…how do we fucken divvy up the super so that everyone is treated fairly in the relationship?
>
> Michael Garfield: It's funny though, 'cause marriage was not originally devised for treating people fairly. And in its current implementations, it's definitely

> not…I think that's again another instance that blockchain applications are wise to try and replace. So at least you've got, ok, this is very clear. The thing about decentralising everything and putting the responsibility back on individuals to consent, and that agreement—like, how insanely tricky it is to even have a poly relationship…When you get together in college, opening that kind of stuff up is like changing the charter of your company, or something? It's like kicking out the CEO and replacing them with a chimpanzee in a suit…
>
> Meow-Ludo: I think about it like this: you kick out the CEO and you replace it with a board of directors. But even that decision is a big one, right, cause who's on the board, what power do they have… When we bring on people, it's almost like a business relationship. You've learned from past mistakes, you know who you want on, how much power you want them to have, and how that gets vested over time.

Notice the language: the economist defends an incel-shooter using Marxist terminology, and the utopian polyamorists talk libertarian shop.

In this future, polyamory emerges as a reaction to human-induced-climate-induced extinction but remains coupled with all the accelerating networks of exploitation, extraction, and imperialism that got us here in the first place. In this future, which looks much like the present, polyamory is a stop-gap solution for individuals and small groups, for consolidating resources: a wall of care or necessity erected against a punishing outside.

7.

I am newly terrified by the threat of sexual stagnation. If J and I don't have sex, it must be because he's already had it, too much of it. Polyamory makes obvious the sexual entitlement that passes generally unremarked in monogamous sexual relationships and had passed unremarked in ours. This does not mean that we are less possessive, and it doesn't translate into action or change; it just means that now we talk about it. In the guise of 'communication', we worry over each new issue until it becomes so big it necessitates even more 'communication'. 'Communication' is addictive, and our addiction to it holds open the relationship months after it should have closed.

We are not having enough sex. From Emma Goldman to Shulamith Firestone to *The Ethical Slut*, sexual freedom, particularly for women and queers, has been part of non-monogamy's promise, loosing people from the proprietary bonds that govern monogamy. Non-monogamy, in turn, is difficult to imagine without queerness or forms of sex associated with queerness: cruising, group sex, public sex, extra-marital sex, promiscuity. (Polyamory skews so close to queerness that I know at least a few straight poly people who call themselves queer).

We are having very little sex. Michel Foucault cautioned against viewing sex acts as the sole locus of transgression. There might be more transgression in fidelity, affection, and care between a community of gay men than in the canonical image of two men circling each other in a dark street. Queer relationships make forms where there are

very available, at least in 1981 when Foucault gave the interview where these ideas appear ('Friendship as a Way of Life' in *Gai pied*). He might think differently now that same-sex marriage is legal in France, and Australia, too, or he might see this as even more reason to emphasise non-sexual, uncoupled queer relationality. To be queer, he thought, is to create a way of life rather than to discover one's sexuality or to identify with the traits (whatever they are) of queerness. This is perhaps what Foucault means when he speaks of a 'homosexual ascesis', or when he claims that the 'development toward which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship.'

How do you measure monogamy without sex? Sex is the fulcrum of monogamy: take it away and, conceptually, monogamy falls apart. When Angela Willey sits in on Dr Young's lab studies of voles, she finds that their definition of monogamy depends entirely on sex. First, the lab team place a male and female vole—categories that are necessarily reductive, given voles' complicated sex chromosome system and indistinguishable external genitalia—together in captivity for 18 hours to allow them to mate. Next, they place an unfamiliar female in the cage; the two females are then tied to opposite walls, and the male vole is free to move between them as he wishes. This part is filmed, and later analysed by the lab team. If he spends more time with the 'partner' vole, he is judged to be monogamous. If he spends more time with the introduced female, he is judged as non-monogamous, treated with a drug, usually oxytocin, and put through the test again.

In the 18 hours prior to the partner test, the monogamous voles are presumed to have bonded by mating. But this part is not filmed. As Willey discovers, this is because it is

not essential for the voles to have mated to form bonds—cohabitation can trigger the same release of oxytocin—and so it's not essential to know what happened in these initial hours. For a similar reasons, same-sex relations aren't tested for. Theoretically, two female voles could pair bond, but it is impossible for two females to have sex, if sex is vaginal stimulation by a penis. And it is important for there to be a sexual component to the relationship because sex, not the voles' social habitats, allows the results to translate from vole to human; as one researcher puts it, 'if there's no mating involved then the link to human biology becomes difficult to understand. Are they friends? Are they partners?' Willey argues that under the conditions of the test, the same confusion in categories applies to male-female bonds—how do we know if they are 'coupled', or 'just friends'?

What the study actually tests for is social monogamy—pair bonding, with or without sex—or simply sociality vs asociality. But sex is reinscribed in the study every step of the way. To enable the translation of results, humans are presumed to be already sexual beings. The pair-bond is presumed to be sexual in order to produce something comparable to human monogamy, which can then be studied as though it pre-exists the terms of the study: sex is heterosexual, hetero-sex makes it monogamy, and sexual dimorphism makes it hetero-sex. The chain continues: sexual dimorphism has long been associated with racist tropes of the primitive vs. the civilised, propagated by 19th century sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing; the more visually different men and women—women with less hair, men with greater bulk—the more evolved they were imagined to be.

Willey does not argue for polyamory over monogamy. Like Foucault, she looks to friendship, or what she calls a 'dyke ethics' to seek forms that decenter sex as their organising principle. Dyke relationships—if you've been in one or seen the memes, you'll know—often exist within complicated networks of exes, friends, exes-as-friends, ambiguous sexual friendships, non-sexual partnerships, non-penetrative sexual experiences, surrogates, adoption, and sperm donorship, all of which resist categorisation as *either* sexual love *or* nonsexual love. They are ways of life rather than ways of having sex.

Reproduction and sex for reproduction is so fundamental to conceptions of the human that removing it opens fecund possibilities. Audre Lorde calls for a harnessing of 'the erotic', a category that exceeds sexuality and becomes a kind of polymorphous perversity extended into the world beyond the human. This is grounded in the personal quotidian; for Lorde, building a bookcase, making love to a woman, and writing a poem are all experiences of the erotic. Donna Haraway sloganeers sexual reproduction's obsolescence—'Make Kin Not Babies'—and imagines a form of society in which communities make collective decisions about when to have human babies, produced between no fewer than three adults, and bonded symbiotically with a non-human species. The sym is responsible for learning about its species, their mutual entanglement with their environments, and with attempting to repair the conditions for its survival. Kim Tallbear writes that her deepest relationship is with the prairies, rivers, and skies of her native land.

You could say that the problem towards which polyamory tends is one of friendship—a problem because entering a poly set-up usually happens for reasons of love, romance, and sex, and because polyamory impedes and reconstitutes these familiar buttresses. For this reason, the self-help books frequently talk about 'relationships transitions'—particularly into friendship or non-sexual relationships—instead of break-ups. As a model, friendship does not fix anything, but it begins to unfold sex, love, romance, resources, and care from their compression into couples and families.

Without sex, my relationship with J feels like a particularly chatty form of enmity, as though we are one of cinema's odd couples—Steve Martin and John Candy in *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* perhaps—forced together by circumstances beyond our control. Instead of sex, communication gives us the velocity and sense of purpose we need. When we close the relationship, sex returns, the communication stays, but the momentum is gone.

9.

We have been breaking up in our bedrooms for weeks now, but the conversation that makes it final happens on the couch on J's front verandah. He lives in one of the three houses on this street that I can walk into without knocking. Between them, they share veggies, chickens, cars, cartons of beer, meals, clothes, and holidays. His neighbour, R, is dragging a borrowed lawnmower up the hill. Later, I go to my own home and check the cleaning roster. I'm on mopping the floors. The cold tap has fallen clean off and there is only a stalk protruding from the wall above the sink; on the soap ledge,

someone has thoughtfully placed a pair of pliers with which to grip and turn the stalk to its on and off positions.

Two years later in Melbourne, standing in a lounge room, barefoot on carpet, huddled to one side as three or four people dance together, drunk, mostly filming each other for Instagram rather than dancing in earnest, E and I talk about our friend. The friend in question, D, has fallen suddenly and violently in love with a new man. E and I are struggling with indeterminate jealousies: are we jealous of their happiness, their relationship, or the ballooning of a sudden intimacy that doesn't include us? E has been crashing on D's couch and spending a lot of time with the happy couple, fielding an overflow of their love (every couple needs a third, platonic or otherwise). She says D talks about politics with a new kind of placid abstraction.

'She keeps joking about turkey basters, as if it's all some fun experiment. Like how we're all gonna raise kids together.'

I tell her that I'm not sure I wouldn't do the same if someone really good came along.

'That's the thing,' she says. 'We all talk about it, but are we going to do it? Are we really going to do it?'

In Defense of Partying

Melbourne, mid-afternoon, I have just moved from Brisbane. After I leave, Nic waits a week before announcing their intention to visit. We meet on the steps of the State Library. They are settled with a book, a black pillar rising from a white carpet of seagulls. In the year or so I have known them, save the first time I met them on Boundary Street when they wore a tie-dye shirt they now flatly deny ever owning, they have only worn black.

We walk around the corner to catch a taxi and to watch the thickening clots of Friday afternoon passer-bys. A boy—a beautiful boy—strolls by. We break off mid-conversation and watch him for a few seconds before Nic says, 'Hey', sweeping one hand over their ear, brushing back imaginary hair. This is not a shy gesture. It is a gesture of grooming one's plumage, an entitlement to the virtual as the substance of the real. The 'hey', too, is both infinitely casual and infinitely suggestive, as though the boy is an acquaintance already, someone Nic doesn't like all that much or needs to feign not liking for strategic reasons, or someone Nic is cruising at a club. In it there is slight disgust: at having to greet someone they should by rights already know, disgust at the paywall of small talk—an entitlement undone by the vulnerability greeting a stranger entails, or a vulnerability undone by the entitlement of greeting a stranger. The 'hey' dangles there on the street, a little hoop of tension for the boy to walk through. He feels it. He looks back over his shoulder and replies in kind.

It doesn't make sense for Nic to wear colour. Black glues them together. They need to pare themselves down in order to be as excessive as they want to be. When they shaved off their eyebrows it made perfect sense.

We get a text from a friend at midnight: 'Coburg party, come.' We go, even though the bottle-shops are shut and we have no booze, even though we have no idea who will be there or what it will be like. We pull up in a cab and walk through splayed iron gates, a hilarious suburban affectation, down a wide gravel drive, past a garage open to create a diorama of mid-twenties Melbourne life, through the backyard, too packed to move except for a basketball court (in use), into a glass-doored living-area/kitchen in which a hundred or more people are dancing to the kind of house music that features vocal samples about house music. The decks are set up on the kitchen counter, DJs behind it in matching white cowboy hats. I look up and a bottle of champagne travels over the heads of dancers, Nic's arm distantly attached. I reach across to place a pill on their tongue. I don't even remember buying it. Nic calls this state 'ahr-rahving': a derivative of 'arriving', a state of total effortlessness, as in, 'we ahr-rahved' [flicks wrist]. Nic dances in their fierce way, blurrily fast. I have a long conversation with someone I'm attracted to and vomit mid-sentence; it comes out of my mouth like just another word, taking me completely by surprise, a fist of liquid that lands at our feet and that neither of us bother acknowledging.

In defense of partying: people like Nic deserve an audience.

Aimless Individuality Persists

‘The object of work is not to satisfy but to excite’- Paul Preciado

My friends and I take clubbing more seriously than work, dedicated in a way we can only feign to our bosses, employment agents, and jobseeker diaries. To survive dwindling prospects and dead end casual work, we instrumentalise dedication. I don’t know anyone who likes their job.

Clubbing starts long before the club. Often it begins the week before, on the first lucid day after the previous weekend. It begins by gathering informal RSVPs—‘are you going to *x* this weekend?’—and by carving an aesthetic from infinite variables: how you will feel, what everyone else is wearing, what looks the club usually attracts and whether to swim with or against this tide, the weather, what clothes are clean, what you can borrow from friends, what you might find at second-hand shops. Where to go before the club, ‘what time do you want to get there?’, soundclouding DJs in commutes, sourcing drugs (MDMA, MDA, Ketamine, Cocaine, GHB, PCP) or deciding against them. (Though drugs are an integral part of clubbing, the sober rave, far from signaling an ambivalent practice, is the pinnacle of achievement. The sober day rave—in fact, the sober morning rave—is pure dedication.) The only certainty is comfortable footwear; comfortable footwear demonstrates one’s dedication to the rave.

Does one have to be dedicated *to* something, or can one just be dedicated? Dedication to clubbing is self-discipline, the reward that would usually come after self-discipline. It is its own end, the closest you can get to dropping the *to*. In 1992, Simon Reynolds wrote that clubbing was an attempt to 'cram all the intensity absent from a week of drudgery into a few hours of fervour...a quest to reach escape velocity.' In 2018, the club is not an escape from duty but an excuse for the practice of dedication. A practice of immanence. (A Protestant party ethic?)

The day of we wake up already feeling warm ripples in the gut, a stone dropped in a pond. (Sometimes just thinking about MDMA make me nauseous.) We do stretches in the lounge room and eat something light, listening to pop music. We drink and then at a point stop drinking. We take a tram and eye others who look like they might be going to the same place.

At the club, preparation pays off if conditions are right. Most important is a dancefloor of individuals knit together fiercely, invisibly, and so without the need to be overly physically or verbally demonstrative. There should be minimal transversal movement. Each clubber should have enough room to dance. Bags should be cloaked. No phones. On the one hand it's irrational to face the front—there's usually no performance to witness—and yes, it's a little fascist in the way of the lecture theatre's disciplinary architecture, in a throwback way (but that's not where 21st century techno-capitalism gets you; it gets you in your 3X3cm baggie of MD, in the drop of your stomach and the dilation of blood vessels as you libidinise a stranger, in the birth control you preemptively employed for such an occasion). On the other hand, facing the front

creates a sense of anonymity, blinkering individuals into a loss of inhibition that slides into a suspension of identity. We have eyes only on the back of someone else's head.

What is it to have a 'good time'? What is a 'good time' in the club? It's not exactly being in the moment, but a sense of being outside of time. When we work a job, we produce time along with commodities; time is not a neutral measure of productivity but is determined by productivity in the first place, the global standard of hours and minutes calibrated by waged labour. To be outside of time is to temporarily suspend the reproduction of capitalist time. To have a good time is to feel as though we are consuming time: gorging on it, luxuriating in its wastage.

When I am having a good time at the club, I feel a little behind myself, like an after-image from a flash of light. Because I am behind myself, I am also ahead; the night stretches both endlessly on and has already ended. I remember things even as they happen: kissing my friends, telling a stranger I love them, telling a friend I love them, fielding life stories in the bathroom queue. If time stays straight it can feel like walking the plank to the night's inevitable conclusion. The night's end should come as a complete surprise, concealed as it is between my own split perspectives. It ends when time re-syncs. Post-gluttony panic sets in. We gather our coats and the 7am train home is a brutal rehabituation to Western capitalist space-time: an empty container hurtling forward.

*

I arrive at the 2017 Venice Biennale on a thirty-three degree day in late September. I am with Nic, who is living in Europe for the summer—six-and-a-half-feet of unapologetic muscle decorated by spaghetti straps and a neoprene handbag. I am slumped against their side, hiding beneath a cap pockmarked by diamantes that once spelled: ITALIA. We are sweating off sunscreen, crumpled from a sleepless 18 hour bus ride through Germany and Italy, staunchly Aasic'd among the well-heeled patrons at the Giardini della Biennale.

'Of course the German Pavilion has a line,' Nic says.

We are waiting to see Anne Imhof's performance piece *Faust*, which, among other things, riffs on Berlin's club scene, notorious for its two or three hour lines that often terminate in rejection. *Faust* won a Golden Lion award for best national participant and has drawn daily crowds since it opened in March. Even the durational element is reminiscent of clubbing; the performances are five hours long, six days a week, and will continue until the Biennale's close in November. It's about the cycle, the punishing accretion. Eat, sleep, rave, repeat.

'No big cameras, no flash photography, respect the performers' personal space,' says the usher as we enter through the side door.

The front entrance, flanked by austere grey columns, has been blocked off with a security fence behind which are two Doberman Pinschers, languid in the heat. The Pavilion, erected in 1908 but renovated in 1938 to reflect the aesthetic principles of the Third Reich, is large, high-ceilinged, and constructed from marble and cement. In comparison to other Pavilions like Canada's, a graceful glass-and-wood bungalow built

around a tree, it feels oppressive and immovable. Inside, the windows are positioned along the very tops of the walls, well out of view, so that light pours in top-down.

Against this weight, Imhof has somehow converted the Pavilion to 'Junkspace', architect Rem Koolhas' term for the disposable, fragmented buildings of postmodern public space: airports, hospitals, shopping centers. 'In previous building, materiality was based on a final state that could only be modified at the expense of partial destruction', Koolhas writes, but in Junkspace, where all is modular, temporary, and easy to replace, you can tinker without leaving a mark. In 1993, artist Hans Haacke dissented to the Pavilion's heritage by tearing up the marble floor of its 1938 redesign; Imhof has constructed a reinforced glass floor (or ceiling) about 1.5 metres above the restored floor. Haacke's Pavilion—entirely bare except for two wooden construction beams and the word GERMANIA emblazoned on the wall—amplified the original architecture's fascist overtones. The 2017 Pavilion's fascism cannot be torn out; Junkspace is 'fascism minus a dictator'. Transparency—of wall, of window, of the open-plan office—offers an invitation that Junkspace's ruthless conditioning by and for the bottom-line surreptitiously withdraws.

Faust's set is a continuation rather than a disruption of the analgesic design of the Biennale's grounds; the Giardini, too, is Junkspace: a miracle of suspended impermanence (chain link fences, ticket booths, casual staff) dusted across the coagulated history of Venice. Nic and I are well practiced in navigating a subtle architectonics of exclusion in supposedly open terrain. Genderqueers, even Anglo ones, we are looked upon with a suspicion that often tips into open hostility, fielding scoffs

and glares every few minutes. The grounds of the Giardini mandate inclusion only because we hold passes, and only for as long as our passes last.

Imhof's troupe are also visibly queer, or have at least adopted an aesthetics of queerness for the performance; they are a-gender in their gender presentation (the press-release says 'post-gender'), youngish, good looking in their gauntness. Quarantined by their status as performers, their gender-fucking is a celebrated part of the work. They are dressed like Berlin club kids, which is to say like the last two years of trend-reports pared down to their most pragmatic: sports-wear, but not sports-luxe; occasionally but not showily branded; sneakers and knee pads: more Heaven's Gate than health goth. At least one of them, Imhof's partner Eliza Douglas, models for Balenciaga.

Inside the Pavilion, the performers are beneath the glass, underfoot of the audience. I watch through other people's raised iPhones. Apart from the droning music, there is a reverent hush. They crawl, slide, creep, contort, crossing paths, coupling, lingering, detangling. The performers are magnets; above the glass, the spectators are metal filings. Where they go, we go. We move without thought when the bodies are under glass, but when they move from an opening in the floor to the level of the audience, the practice of viewing is suddenly compromised. I am poured back into my body; the gaze emanates, again, from a perspective that takes up space. The bestial shapes pulled by the performers and their unexpected flights across the floor force us into an awkward improvisation. How do we cede or take ground?

I peer down and see objects scattered across the marble. A slingshot. Bowls of ball bearings. Spray cans. Water bottles. If clubbing occurs along a continuum of joy and desolation, *Faust* emphasises the latter end, where accretion rehearses addiction and the 48-hour-party becomes a safety net in a vicious rental market. Towels. Charging banks for phones. Bars of soap lined up on a metal sink. A heroin kit. The lights have gone on in the club.

*

The basic drawcard of *Faust* seems to be its promise of excitement. In exhilarated tones, reviews remark on its salaciousness, citing rumours that the performers, at times, even masturbate. But why is *Faust* titillating? If you miss the masturbation scenes, as I did, what about it is sexual? Is it simply that the performers are young, good-looking, and touching each other, albeit in the manner of an awkward game of Twister? Is it that its aesthetics and postures reference BDSM? (But surely the past few years of daddy jokes and slave collars in H&M went most of the way to divorcing BDSM aesthetics from practice…?)

These references—BDSM, club culture, drug-taking, high fashion, queerness—are all decidedly amenable to the Insta-frame, and reviewers have been quick to point out its resemblance to a fashion show or commercial. Depending on where your sympathies lie, it's easy to read *Faust* as either an exploitation of or comment on spectacular image culture. Implicit in these critiques is the idea that art usually distinguishes itself from commerce by impeding its own value production. This idea has its root in the schema

of distinct spheres for the private and public. Here, it's as though privacy fosters authentic experience, which the public world of commerce parasitically uses or encroaches on, sapping the purity of an originally non-commodified form such as queerness.

Faust shows this up as a myth, one that is certainly irrelevant to a post-Fordist system of production. *Faust* is not simply an attempt to flummox the lines between art and commerce. Nor is it a cynical adherence to the 'sex sells' mantra of advertising. Rather, it suggests that excitement is inextricable from production, drawing a through-line from titillation to techno-capitalism. It invites us to see excitement as generative rather than simply responsive; it is an exercise in putting excitement to work.

Philosopher Paul Preciado, who is quoted in *Faust*'s press release, calls this technologically produced affect *potentia gaudendi*: the total capacity for a body's excitation. For Preciado, all labour is geared towards capitalising on this potential. Though *potentia gaudendi* has a sexual dimension, it is not a natural wellspring of libido or desire. Rather, it is a kind of techno-vitalism, generated and sustained in the circulation of porn, medication, images, hormones, chemical compounds, money, digital signals, minerals, and genetic material of all kinds. Labour is the activation of this circulation, the 'excitation-frustration-excitation' loop that remains unfulfilled, self-perpetuating. This process does not even need a living body to function; it ignores bio/necro distinctions in its conversion of all life to information.'Excitation-frustration' *ad infinitum*: another name for titillation.

Another review has it that 'the dynamics of control pervade [the performer's] actions. The micro-movements demonstrate how organic beings buckle under abstract powers and systems' (Hadden Manhattan, *AQNB*). This reading poses an orthopedic, socio-political apparatus acting on an already existing subject. Given the physical constraints of the Pavilion and its planes of glass offering total surveillance, it is a tempting interpretation.

But the beings in *Faust* are not exactly controlled, and nor are they organic. Rather, they are produced—self-made, even—within the technological apparatus of the work: impure, implicated, and undead, networked and dispersed as data within platform capitalism, whose avatar in *Faust* is Instagram. On Instagram as in *Faust*, power is not imposed but willingly imbibed. Value is not extracted by force but produced in the flex of agency. Far from attempting to control or limit, it is in the interests of capital that the subject cultivates the fullness of their excitement so that it may be tapped and exploited. Under post-Fordism, the process of labouring does not terminate with its reification into an object or service. Even if one or both are produced, the production of commodities is almost besides the point. Rather, labour is the ongoing production of responsive, fluid, excite-able subjects.

On the opposite side of Venice, in the Fondazione Prada pavilion, there is a video work by Alexander Kluge in which an assembly-line worker explains how she manages to stomach her job. She describes the circumscribed windows of time allotted for each task, synced to the rhythm of the machines, which permit only a limited range of movement subordinated to efficiency. She then describes how she has developed an

alternate choreography within these small windows while still meeting her quotas. She whips an arm up, twirls her wrists, flexes fingers, improvises. All activity remains in service of the assembly line, but she still manages to snatch some pleasure from an otherwise crushing repetition.

Faust is the worker's alternate choreography, unloosed. The movements of the performers are ambiguous and idiosyncratic, the kinds of unproductive superfluities that were once shaved off in Fordist production but are now encouraged as productive in and of themselves. Not only do we not know what the performers will do next, we do not know what they *can* do. Despite the spatial constraints, they are unconstrained: less human than abject potential. (It does not matter whether or not the performers *actually* masturbate as part of the work, but that we can imagine them masturbating). Within the space of the German Pavilion, we, the audience, are not just spectators and not exactly 'participants'. Rather, we are produced in simultaneity with the performers as subjects that are excitable, and excited-with. Call it workplace training.

In this, *Faust* is not exceptional but rather an exemplary manifestation of what Preciado calls the 'pornification of labour'. 'The cultural industry is *porn envy*', he writes. By this he means that all forms of production increasingly mimic porn's conversion of excitement into capital; the non-pornographic arts can only dream of porn's efficiency. The difference between art and porn is that art traditionally hamstrings its own efficiency whereas porn does not. And nor does *Faust*. In this way and in this way only—not because of the performers' nudity or because its erotics transgress and transform the medium—*Faust* skews closer to porn than art.

At the club, upholding the barriers between porn and art, sex and aesthetics, is not only impossible but unprofitable. *Faust* learns from the club, removing—or making visible—the few steps separating performance and partying. It does so physically as well as conceptually, the detritus in the Pavilion impling a wider context from which it has been abstracted; the performers, in their postures of dominance and submission, variously look as though teleported mid-act from a sex club, a dance-floor, or a night club's dark room.

If *Faust* also shorthands advertising—if it looks and feels like an ad—this is because we recognise implicitly the ways in which value is generated in post-Fordism: through *potentia gaudendi*, the body's potential for excitation. In this sense, critiques that decry *Faust's* use of reliable millennial hype-mongers like Vetements-Balenciaga are justified but miss the point. *Faust* joins excitement to production within the work and, in doing so, beyond the work. The Biennale, and *Faust* within it, functions as one node in a global economy of speculation built on hype. Showing in Venice drives up the value of past and future works, and for Imhof, who also makes objects (paintings and photographs) that function as commodities, *Faust* will have been a profitable venture. A friend of a friend of one of Imhof's dancers tells me later that they quit the show in protest when they learned Imhof did not intend to pay her performers—cultural gatekeepers have the production of surplus value down to a fine art.

*

What is it to have a good time? Having a good time is so often a question of duration, of knowing when to stop. *Faust* considers what happens when you do not or cannot stop, when there is no pause available. Clubbing is not just about the rupture of stultifying repetition. Clubbing is about a knowing and voluntary capture within what you were already captured by. It's about reveling in techno's infinite escalating entrapments that feel like release but hold you fast (sometimes it's literally impossible to tear yourself away from the dance floor); in the narcosexual economy of the club toilets; in the slide from identity into a trans-personal circuit, which is less a stripping back to some raw, libidinal charge than a stripping back to the framework within which this charge thrives (a collective becoming-club, becoming-network). Clubbing happens in the *Faustian* time of Imhof's piece and of Goethe's original: a lust for the perpetual pleasure MDMA, without thought for the comedown.

The difference between work and play, then, lies less in quality than in the duration of the excitation-frustration-excitation loop. Clubbing shortens it so that frustration is indistinguishable from excitation. Fordist production lengthened the loop, Monday to Friday. And if clubbing was once hostile to work and work hostile to clubbing, in post-Fordism work's BPM coincides with that of the club's. Anne Imhof's *Faust* keeps pace.

Funny Games

1.

An artist and a comedian walk into a bar. It's an autumn night in London, 1822, and the weather is unusually cold for this time of year—by December, parts of the Thames will have frozen over, a once-in-a-decade event. The artist, Joseph Lisle, has curly brown hair and is wearing small oval spectacles. The comedian, William Sinnett, is blonde and rosy cheeked. They pass the main entrance to Drury Lane Theatre on Catherine Street, turn down Russell, pass the stage door, cross the road, and enter the small, bright Harp Inn, where a large group of very drunk men greet them loudly. There are men in top-hats, men carrying canes, and men wearing coats that were fashionable ten years ago, worn thin at the cuffs and elbows. An influx of actors arrive from the theatre, and though Lisle and Sinnett earn their living as stage-hands, they are all talking, drinking, laughing, and singing as one, all brought together under the auspices of a club called the City of Lushington.

As the name suggests, The City of Lushington is structured as a city. Its primary purpose is drinking. There is a Mayor, a chairman, and four alderman, who each preside over one of the four wards: Suicide, Poverty, Lunacy, and Jupiter. There are lesser officers too, including the City Taster, the City Physician, and the City Barber. The Taster's role is to taste the ale. If it is found to be delicious, which it usually is, the Inn is fined two gallons. Lisle and Sinnett are un-titled, part of the citizenry.

The artist and the comedian walk out of the bar. Or are kicked out of the bar. At some point, they are no longer welcome. The City is too populous and the workers—the less illustrious ones—are the first to go. The artist goes home to his garret. He has an armchair in the corner of his room under a window, a frying pan on his hearth for cooking. He is yet to publish his first book of drawings, a collection of satirical caricatures, which will come eight years later and garner him some success (but not much).

The artist and the comedian have a plan. Ousted from the City, they will start a family, albeit one without women or fathers or sons: a fraternity, only brothers, only equals. They decide to meet in the same tavern, and though they are clearly motivated by revenge, they claim its purpose is to 'perpetuate the hitherto ignored ballad "We'll Chase the Buffalo!"':

> Come all you wild Indians who chance to appear
> We will defend our dwellings, boys, with gun and with fear
> We will all unite together and we'll strike the fatal blow
> And we'll settle on the banks of the lovely Ohio
> We'll settle on the banks where the pleasant rivers flow,
> Through the wild woods we'll wander and we'll chase the buffalo

The song is popular at the time, brought back to the motherland by English colonists in Ohio, who, by 1790, had hunted native buffalo almost to extinction. Lisle and Sinnett call their club 'The Buffalo Society' and hold their first meeting at the Harp Inn in

August 1822. Soon after, they become the ‘Loyal Order of the Buffaloes’ to show their allegiance to the Parliament and Crown; gradually, through slips of the tongue lubricated by booze, this becomes ‘Royal’. ‘Antediluvian’ comes last, in the 1850s, as a way to add gravitas and history: the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes.

2.

The artist and the comedian are nothing special. They are just two of the thousands of men who, at some point during Britain’s industrial era, joined a fraternal club, society, or order. By the late 1700s in London—population approximately one million—there were at least 3,000 different clubs and societies. In 1778, the Freemasons had 137 lodges in London alone, 109 in the rest of England, and 171 abroad. Edinburgh had approximately 200 different societies, while in Exeter, society men could be found ‘boasting they have not passed one evening at home year round’.

What did these clubs do? Anything from holding debates to planning revolutions to playing chess to helping the needy to discussing literature to playing sports to advocating for the abolition or continuation of slavery. Gentlemen’s clubs were second homes in the city for aristocratic and professional men in the 18th and 19th century, often consisting of palatial rooms with libraries, dining areas, and sitting rooms. The working-class equivalent tended to develop in industrial areas and had a large cross-over with the trade union movement; many clubs were run by unionists, or provided a base of solidarity that could then be unionised. Yet another form of club—mutual aid and friendly societies—offered members an early form of private

insurance. Members bought in and paid fees, which were then paid out to members and their families for medical costs, periods of unemployment, and funeral expenses.

Then there were clubs, like the Buffaloes, that did all of the above: union-insurance-welfare hybrids, with all the benefits of a social club. They raised money mostly through membership fees and by taking donations at meetings, and only for members of the club; at most, benefits extended to immediate families and, sometimes, friends or strangers in need of charity. Unlike contemporary welfare, these societies were not universal or state-run but exclusive and tended to form around specific trades. Unlike insurance agencies, they were social, not just financial. And unlike unions, most societies didn't call for strikes, or fight to improve conditions across their industry, or demand sick pay or shorter hours from their bosses—they insulated workers from the worst excesses of capitalist modernity by allowing them to shoulder the costs of their own exploitation.

3.

The artist and the comedian are minor players in a stranger story. Around the same time the Buffaloes began, a fervent esotericism gripped England and the Americas. Charles Dickens dabbled in mesmerism, W.B Yeats channelled poetry from the spirit world, and Madame Blavatsky was followed by 'raps' wherever she went. Europe plundered sacred objects from its colonies and installed them in its museums, which stoked fantasies of wrathful gods and ancient magic unleashed. The bourgeoisie and aristocracy became amateur or expert Egyptologists, Orientalists, Indophiles,

anthropologists, phrenologists, eugenicists. And, alongside trade and convivial organisations, countless societies sprang up to study and practice the occult.

According to one Charles E Ellis in his 1910 book on fraternities, *An authentic history of the Benevolent and protective order of Elks*, the Buffalo Society was a debased offshoot of a much older tradition, one that stretches back to literally antediluvian times. In a section on the pre-history of the Elks, his own club (founded by an ex-Buffalo), Ellis claims that Noah, of Noah's Ark, was a Buffalo, as was King Solomon, Samson, Brutus, Marc Antony, and William Shakespeare. The founder of the Buffaloes is known only as 'George Cooper Murray', a cipher concealing his true identity to non-initiates, who revived the ancient order by establishing a lodge in London in the late 1600s. He called it 'Harpocrates Lodge' after the Greek god of secrecy and silence, the Hellenised version of the Egyptian child-god Horus the Younger. When Lisle and Sinnett started their Buffalo Society, they were riffing on this venerable tradition.

Ellis plants three clues to Murray's real identity. First, he claims that the name is a *temurah*, a method of Kabbalah used to divine hidden meanings from the Bible, in which letters are rearranged to uncover latent readings. Next, that it uses gematria, another Kabbalistic method, in which each letter has a numeric value resulting in a unique meaning for each word and phrase. Finally, he points out that George Cooper

Murray is comprised of three words, six letters each—666, the number of the beast in the Book of Revelation.[21]

To make things even more complicated, this is also the moniker of Aleister Crowley, the English writer, artist, and magician known as 'The Great Beast 666' and 'the wickedest man in the world'. It could be a coincidence—a reference to Satan proper

[21] There are actually three types of temurah—*atbash*, *avgad*, and *albam*—and Ellis does not specify which method has been used here; bear with me as I try each. First, though, you have to translate 'George Cooper Murray' into Hebrew, the original language of Kabbalah. In Hebrew, words often have three consonants and no vowels. 'George Cooper Murray' translated tri-consonantly is גרג קפר מרי. Deciphered using *atbash*, and then translated back into English, this becomes 'regards.' In *avgad*, each letter replaces the preceding one in the alphabet, so deciphering it means replacing each letter with the next: גרג קפר מרי becomes בקב צעק לקט, and translates to 'the captain shouted to Leket' ('leket' are ears of corn). *Albam*, which replaces the first letter of the alphabet with the twelfth, the second with the thirteenth and so on, results in a phrase that translates to 'weave a thread'. Using gematria, the tri-consonantal version of George Cooper Murray gives you 756. I don't speak Hebrew and have laboriously conducted this translation with the help of several online services, kind strangers on Hebrew mysticism forums, and a Christian preacher, who is fluent, and who tells me there are several ways of translating both the decrypted results and 'George Cooper Murray'. He also says—and DustyFeet18 from the Abrahamic Religions thread on TheosophyNexus confirms—that 'George' just isn't a Hebrew name, and might actually be equivalent to 'Adam' or אדם, in which case we would need to start this whole process again. Beyond some kind of obvious reference to the devil, I don't even know what I'm looking for so it's possible that I've stumbled across the answer already but don't realise it; maybe 'the captain shouted to Leket' means something to you, in which case, get in touch, but for now the cipher stays ciphered.

rather than a Satanic-proxy—if not for two things. First, Crowley was a habitual club-starter and -joiner. He was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, A.A (different AA), and Ordo Templis Orientis, all secret societies of occult purpose. Second, during a trip to Cairo, Crowley claimed that he was visited by a messenger sent by Horus, the namesake of Murray's first ever Buffalo lodge, who charged him with ushering in the Aeon of Horus. The principal value of this age would be the pursuit of self-realisation, its commandment 'do what thou wilt'.[22]

Despite these parallels, it's unlikely that George Cooper Murray is actually Aleister Crowley, or that he was some kind of Satanic entity incarnated in an English gentleman (no more than an English gentleman is always a little Satanic). I say this for the usual reasons, and because Crowley was born in 1875, a few hundred years after Murray is supposed to have founded the Buffaloes. More likely, Ellis was a follower or fan of Crowley who wanted to rewrite his club's history to include the wickedest man in the world. Two birds, one stone: he could also give his own club classier forefathers than a bunch of down-at-heel drunks.

[22] Ordo Templis Orientis runs on Thelemic principles, which today have formed an unholy alliance with a kind of libertarian self-help ethos: the Grand Lodge of Australia offers 'e-learning and online coaching' to help you discover your 'true will and innate central nature', but 'unlike every other system of thought or school of religion in the history of humankind, OTO is not interested in dictating or controlling the will of individual members...our basic unit is the individual and the flourishing of each person in their own way.'

Ellis' own father had made his fortune in the lumber industry and a horse-drawn street car company, and left $1 million to each of his three sons upon his death. Ellis became President of the company, sold shares for $20 apiece, expanded its rails and cars across several blocks, and eventually sold the company at a tidy profit. In his 1905 will, he granted his wife a $15,000 yearly income, his daughter $6000 a year, and reserved $4 million to establish The Charles E. Ellis College for Fatherless Girls, which provided 'free education and maintenance for white, fatherless girls' (this is taken verbatim from the will). He died in 1909 from a gunshot to the head, self-inflicted from his gold-plated revolver, though it's not clear whether it was an accident or suicide. The school closed in 1977, and was reborn as a trust that operates to this day, albeit without the race restrictions. All this is to say that Ellis was wealthy and powerful, a respected businessman, philanthropist, loving husband and father, and, in all likelihood, a worshipper of Satan.

4.

By the time I learned of the Buffaloes, I had been inadvertently frequenting their Australian headquarters for years. It was a Friday night and I was drunk outside a nightclub in Melbourne called Hugs & Kisses. I wondered aloud about the building—a two-storey red-brick warehouse that looked industrial, or pre-gentrification industrial, given that 'industrial' usually refers to post-industrial buildings retrofitted with industrial chic (open spaces, washed concrete, bare bulbs). The club, my friend said, was leased to the owner by an all-male secret society who occupied the bottom floor. We were standing right outside their front door.

A few months later, we hear that Hugs is shutting down, and that the Buffaloes have sold the building for $6.25 million. I email an address on a website to find out more. The reply comes swiftly from someone named Greg: did I want to drop by their closing party? I pitch it to my supervisor as an investigative turn in my writing practice.

'Where is the money going?' I ask, rhetorically. She looks at me with alarm, then amusement, then back to alarm.

'Don't go alone,' she urges. 'Take someone with you.'

I ask my new housemate, Liv, who has just moved to Melbourne after living in Berlin for two years. Since her arrival, she has been searching unsuccessfully for work, sitting on the mattress in her otherwise empty room, and 3D modelling her ideal bedroom layout on open-source design software—she says yes.

In preparation, I conduct research by typing every configuration of 'RAOB', 'Buffaloes', and 'The Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes' into Google. On page 1 of the results, I click through real-estate articles about the sale. On page 2, I read that in 2009, six RAOB trustees in northern England were suspended for 'misappropriating funds'. As they tell it, they applied to use £30,000 from the Buffaloes' charity fund for an investment and pay it back at interest. Their suspension led to mass resignations and the closure of several lodges around England. In 2015, the Grand Lodge of England was investigated for financial irregularities; approximately £100,000 had gone missing from their books. There have been no follow up stories, though a case of unfair dismissal was brought by the Grand Secretary of the lodge, Christopher McMahon, and

then withdrawn in 2017, maybe unrelated, or maybe McMahon had been sacked after the audit.

On page 3, I hit the forums—message-boards with names like ‘Australian Land Rover Owners’ and ‘Above Top Secret’:

> Beacon: In a new video from Beyoncé she appears to be wearing the insignia of the RAOB - The Royal Antideluvian Order of the Buffaloes - and displaying their motto, Justice, Truth, Philanthropy!
>
> Birdy123: I believe that raob is a very secretive group as I cannot find much information on them.Im very interested to find out more if anyone is kind enough to help.I have pictures if anyone would like to see
>
> Buffalo67: I have read some of the posts here with mounting trepidation, and have to confess; Yes we are evil and run the World. Sorry. Yeah, right... we are a Fraternal Society i.e. no girlies (Women can join The Glades which is of course our sister organisation).

On page 4, I find the video of Beyoncé; she really *is* wearing an RAOB medallion.

When the day arrives, Liv and I dress carefully, a jean-skirt, linen pants, two monochrome ironed t-shirts between us. We take a tram to the city, and walk down Elizabeth Street in the direction of the river. Greg had said to come by sometime

around 1pm; it's now 1:30 and I'm getting antsy. I stride forward, and Liv walks half a step behind, smoking a cigarette, an unhurried European saunter, a *dérive*, somehow seeming to move sideways rather than ahead. We talk about the afternoon ahead. We will not lie to the Buffaloes, we agree, but we will not correct them if they happen to assume we are journalists. This isn't for any nefarious purpose but for our own self-regard. She will be the photographer. I will be the interviewer. By the time we turn down the alleyway leading to the club, it's almost 2pm. I feel my stomach constrict, picturing men in suits squinting at fob watches.

On Sutherland Street, which is more an alley than a street proper, there are three people smoking tailors of a particularly pungent variety and laughing uproariously. One of the people is a woman—a girlie?—with hair frazzled from years of packet-dye, swigging from a bottle in a brown paper bag. The man on her right has a thin face with watery blue eyes and has raked back his few remaining strands of hair with gel, which forms a lacquer over his white skull. The other man is plump, pink, and wearing a black synthetic polo shirt. They fall silent and watch us as we walk past them to the other entrance, the one that services Hugs. The door is shut. We turn back the way we came. We stop in front of them. They look at us. We look at them. I ask for Greg. Eyeing us suspiciously, the woman leads us inside.

5.

Only months after the party did it occur to me that the origin story could be fake, not just in its strange particulars—George Cooper Murray, Crowley, Satan, etc—but as a whole. The first written record of the Buffaloes comes not from the club itself, and not

from Ellis' book, but from Pierce Egan's *Life in London*, a popular serial published throughout the 1820s, which follows the adventures of three young hedonists: Tom, Jerry, and Bob Logic. Together, they traverse high society as well as its gambling dens, boxing rings, taverns and, in one episode, a Buffalo initiation ritual. Egan footnotes a potted history of the club for context: 'The Buffalo Society was first established in August 1822, at the Harp Inn on Great Russell Street, opposite Drury Lane Theatre. Our founders were an eccentric young artist named Joseph Lisle and a comedian by the name of William Sinnett…'

At some point, RAOB seem to have adopted this version of its history wholesale—you will find this story repeated, word for word, in the annals of Buffalo literature. But the narrators are unreliable: Tom, Jerry, and Bob Logic are characters, or to be precise, *personae*, examples of the popular Victorian technique of inventing archetypal characters to explore real-life events and places. Tom represents the urbane young gentleman, Jerry, the naive country boy, on an eye-opening trip to London, and Bob Logic, the amoral London chancer. It occurs to me that Lisle and Sinnett might also be personae, avatars for the working-artisan's gutsy struggle against the Drury-Lane class—that the 'Buffalo Club' itself could be a personae, standing-in for all of London's clubs and societies.

Lisle, verified by his cartoons, his book, and short biographies scattered across the web, seems real; Sinnett, less so. The only mentions of a 'William Sinnett' in relation to the Buffaloes occurs within histories taken from Buffalo sources taken from *Life in London*. (I gave Sinnett un-corroborated blonde hair and rosy cheeks to contrast with

Lisle's fact-checked dark hair and glasses). As for the Buffaloes, if they didn't exist then, they do exist now, somehow moving from fiction to reality in the intervening years, the proof of which is right in front of us: a dim wooden vestibule decorated by a huge painting of a Buffalo, side-on. The woman leads us into an office where three men are sitting, two bearded, one clean-shaven, all in their fifties or sixties, all tall, even while sitting, with beer guts resting on their thighs. It's just gone 2pm. Introductions: Moses, Greg, Graeme, Liv, Sally.

Greg is the Grand Secretary of Victoria—70% billowing yellow Hawaiian shirt, with a supple-skinned face topped by short grey hair. Graeme, the current Grand Primo of Australia, i.e the most senior position in Australia, has a delicate face and bald legs, one of which is marked by a long scar that starts somewhere under his cargo shorts and runs down his calf. I'm impressed by 'Grand Primo'. What does the Grand Primo do?

'Bugger all,' says Greg.

Moses is an ex-Grand Primo of Victoria and of Australia. He looks at us, even when we're not looking at him, arms folded across a black synthetic polo with 'RAOB' embroidered in red on the breast pocket, white beard fringing a round pink gnomic face. He is a truck driver in ordinary life. I feel his gaze and find myself stealing glances at him to check if he's still watching. He always is, and with an unsmiling expression that borders on petulance. I feel a corner of my attention tune to his mood, a backchannel running calculations and surveillance. All of them, in different and tesselating ways, remind me of my dad.

Liv and I perch on wooden and leather chairs along the side of the room. The three men are sitting around a table, facing us. The room, like the vestibule, is panelled in wood that emanates golden light, though it's chipped and peeling in parts, and almost every available surface is covered in knick-knacks, mouldering documents, framed photographs, mugs, and generally just stuff. It couldn't look more different to upstairs, which has walls painted a tarry black that become slick with evaporating sweat on packed nights. Smell-wise, though R.A.O.B HQ carries the same base note of trapped air and stale beer as the nightclub, it is here overlaid by tea-bag tea, wood, and an old-book smell that must come from the sheafs of paper.

Greg clears his throat. 'We've got a traitor in our midst.'

My chair creaks as I shift my weight. He breaks into a grin, pointing at a mug decorated with the Western Bulldogs' team crest. The three men start laughing, arms bouncing over chests.

'I go for the Bulldogs,' I say apologetically, trying to join in. It's a mistake—I've only watched one AFL match ever, not featuring the Bulldogs, and the next few minutes passes in increasingly abstracted banter, petering out into silence.

'I'm from Queensland,' I say. 'Originally.'

Liv is smiling politely, lips frozen in place.

'What can we do for you?' Greg asks. I have a spiel prepared, using the best dot points on my CV as an alibi. I'm a student and tutor at the [pause for emphasis] University of Melbourne and I'm conducting research on this area of the city, especially the history of this building. I'm looking into-

‘You know Nick Cave?’ Greg asks. ‘A movie with him in it was shot around here.’

‘You should talk to Noel,’ Graeme says. ‘Noel was here at the opening.’

He rifles through the papers in front of him. Greg asks what he’s looking for, heaves himself to his feet, and joins Graeme at the table to sift through documents. Moses doesn’t move. I hover an inch above my seat, as if to get up and help—the process looks disproportionately hard, the men’s hands paddling through detritus, spines crooked over the desk, glasses slipping down noses—then sit back down.

Graeme plucks something out of a pile and hands me a photocopied booklet: the program from the opening party of the new lodge—this one—in 1954. The centrefold contains the evening’s menu. They ate oysters, soup, poultry and ham with vegetables, apple pie and cream, coffee and lemon, sandwiches and sausage rolls. The night’s entertainment included sing- alongs and speeches by members.

The woman from before pokes her head in. I can see another man hovering behind her, grinning, craning to get a glimpse into the office. Greg tells her to go and get Noel. He totters in a few minutes later. He is eighty-ish, wearing a grey check tweed suit, a red pocket kerchief, a maroon and blue tie with a gold tie pin shaped like a tiny set of buffalo horns. He beams at us with the kind of non-specific warmth old men reserve for the entire subset of neatly dressed young women.

‘When we moved in,’ Noel says. ‘The building had a dirt floor.’ He leans closer, conspiratorial. I nod, pen poised above notepad. ‘There were car parks all around, which was very convenient.’

The other three men nod solemnly.

‘I think it was a printing factory before us. Or a stables.’

Greg interrupts: ‘They paid something like fifty grand back then. A pittance.’

Noel chuckles. ‘I’ll tell you something.’

In the early 1950s, he says, every Victorian member agreed to pay 10 shillings towards the new lodge at Sutherland Street—all but the Richmond branch. They already had their own hall, purchased with their own members’ fees and donations. The lodges argued back and forth, and still the Richmond lodge refused to chip in. Eventually, they were ousted from the Buffaloes: barred from participating in any official business or affiliating themselves with RAOB.

Noel, eyes gleaming: ‘They didn’t come to the party. So they were put in the red book.’

But the Richmond chapter still wouldn't back down. They continued to operate under the Buffalo name, even recruiting new members, who found themselves unable to attend meetings at other lodges or inter-lodge meetups. When the lodge eventually folded and the members attempted to sell their assets, they saw that the building was legally owned by their treasurer Dave Langdon. He had used their money to buy it in his own name.

I ask for more details but Noel is done, sitting back satisfied in his chair.

6.

22 Sutherland Street's first recorded occupation by Europeans is in 1866, but there is no information on what it was used for or who owned it. The earliest information I can find is from 1905, when it was the SF Sharp Clothing Factory; in 1925, it was a steel merchants called Search & Houston; and in the 1940s, it housed the Melbourne General Cleaning Company. The Buffalos bought the lodge in 1954 for £51,500, and sold it at auction in March 2018 for $6.25 million. Before European invasion, Elizabeth Street—just around the corner from Sutherland—was water, a tributary of the Yarra, home to sacred Wurundjeri sites.

The man who bought 22 Sutherland Street in 2018 is Aviv Kheir, better known as 'Ozzie' Kheir, a Melbourne-based businessman most famous for owning and part-owning several Melbourne Cup-winning racehorses. His company, Resimax, has luxury nightclubs and hotels in Melbourne's CBD, one of which, Bond, was the setting of a 2016 reality TV show called *Clubland* that followed socialites and promoters as they attempted to launch the club. In the show, the socialites are women with puffy, collapsing faces, and the promoters all men, whose arms in shirt-sleeves look like socks stuffed with tennis balls. At Bond, you can book a four person, all-night table for $990, which includes 1X bottle of champagne, 5X shots, 1X VIP waitress, free entry to the club, table hire, and 1X 1.75 ml bottle of Belvedere Luminous—vodka inset with LEDs that light up the bottle. In *Clubland*, Kheir wore an eyebrow ring and earrings in both ears, but he seems to favour dark-blue suits and V-necks nowadays. I call Resimax, without much hope, to see if I can convince someone to convince Kheir to talk to me, but the receptionist puts me on hold until eventually the line goes dead.

Resimax is one of Australia's largest privately-owned property groups, whose many pursuits include real estate sales, construction, marketing, property-investment consultancy, and wealth creation through property-investment. To give you a sense of scale: in one 24-hour period in December 2015, Resimax purchased $50 million worth of commercial property, and each year they develop around 500 new properties. In Hong Kong, escalating unrest—protests that began over extradition laws to mainland China—has started causing capital flight. The marketing and sales leader of Resimax's property-investment arm, Ken Dodd, has called this 'an opportunity', and noted that Resimax had made several sales to Hong Kong investors looking for a safe haven, physical and financial, in Australia. Last I heard, Kheir intends to refit 22 Sutherland Street as a dumpling restaurant and karaoke bar.

Before Kheir, the Buffalos rented their top floor to Hugo Atkins, another nightclub owner. Hugo tells me—I'm calling him from my supervisor's office, phone on speaker so I can take notes while we talk—he started Hugs & Kisses in 2010 when he was 21. He had been working at a bar in the city—dark and divey, with a forgiving liquor licence—and had a feeling there would be other places like it. He walked around the city with a paper map, crossing off areas. On the second day, he helped an elderly man across the road. They started chatting, reached the man's destination. Hugo looked up: above the door, a dirty white sign:

R.A.O.B G.A.B

City Temple

25’s & Over Club

LIVE Bands 50s & 60s Rock

Friday & Saturday Nights

🍸 LICENCED 🍸

He went inside with the man. ‘Then it just got better and better,’ he says. They had a 24 hour liquor licence and a space available upstairs. The committee agreed to rent it to him for a one-off event for ‘really cheap’. How cheap?

‘Really cheap,’ he says again, with an embarrassed laugh, and when I push a bit harder, tells me $365.

But before he could rent it, he had to become a member. He remembers the initiation taking around three hours during an afternoon. He was kept outside the main hall, given infinite ciders—‘they were trying to get me wasted’—blindfolded for about twenty minutes.

‘It became surreal,’ he says. He remembers smoking from a clay pipe, he remembers people chanting, he remembers the phrase ‘bring in the goat’—there was no goat, it was some kind of in-joke—and receiving secrets and passwords, which he says was kind of like a nursery rhyme where each party filled in the blanks. He received a ‘club passport’ and was renting upstairs within the week. This time, he won’t tell me how much rent he paid.

Awkward pause: ‘probably shouldn’t disclose.’

Before Hugo, the upper-floor was leased by a Karate instructor—‘the biggest shark I ever met,’ says Hugo. Hugo moved in but the instructor didn’t move out.

‘This used to be the Dojo, man,’ he told Hugo. ‘I could karate chop you right now and you’d be dead.’

Not necessarily an idle threat; the instructor was 6’2”, a white guy in track pants and a food-stained singlet. He and Hugo faced off for days, Hugo walking around trying to get rid of him, the instructor making up pretences for staying. Some years before, the Buffaloes had discussed selling the upper floor to the instructor for a pittance, ballpark figure $250K. (Hugo suspects he was taking advantage of the most ancient members). The instructor had turned down the offer at the time, but now told Hugo he was intending to buy. He announced that he would be taking over management of the prospective nightclub. Hugo came back with a lawyer in a suit and the instructor finally left.

Within two months of Hugo’s initiation, the upstairs opened as The Buffalo Club. He kept going to meetings—him and some other friends who joined to help out with the club—but gradually dropped off. They were always at inopportune times, weekday afternoons, and were ‘incredibly antiquated’ (Hugo makes an inarticulate grizzling sound, old man vocal fry). He says that the nightclub and the Buffaloes maintained a good relationship. As he was moving in, there was a sense of impending doom as RAOB slowly disintegrated: old members dying and no new ones coming in —so ‘they thought it was kind of cool’ to have the nightclub upstairs. Also, he had told the Buffaloes it was a jazz club. He would invite the Buffaloes up early in the night and give them beers: the old men in suits, wasted, mingling with the arriving clubbers.

It was all in the liquor licence. ‘The Buffalo Club’ operated as a subsidiary of RAOB, with patrons signing up online beforehand or at the door to fulfil the terms of the licence, meaning that thousands of Melbourne’s clubbers are also members of RAOB, and that—despite its declining membership—RAOB G.A.B is, on paper, one of the largest members-only clubs in the Southern Hemisphere. Police came often, outraged at first, then more so once they saw the licence and realised that, technically, the nightclub was operating entirely within the law. Currently in Melbourne, there is a freeze on applications for liquor licences seeking to trade after 1am. Hugo recently scoped new locations in Melbourne CBD but licences like the Buffaloes’ had are now prohibitively expensive and extremely rare.

A few years back, Hugo thought of buying the building himself, but by then the Buffaloes wanted 5 million for it. They had a long-term vision to sell it for around 6 million.

‘Probably should have done it and flipped it a year later for a million more’, he says, ‘but I didn’t have that kind of money’.

He says this nonchalantly, as though he almost had that kind of money. He is at ease with numbers. He spent around $100K renovating the upstairs area, getting it up to code—it hadn’t been upgraded since the 1940s—which involved raising the entire staircase. He imagines that the Buffaloes are using their profits to continue trying to exist, putting their money in low risk investments, maybe 4-5% return, that’s $250K profit to play with every year.

Hugo still doesn't understand why they let it happen—his voice goes a little dreamy as he speculates. He had 'some kind of resemblance of a contract' with the committee, and when newer members joined and took over management, maybe they 'understood there was an understanding'.

Here's how Greg tells it: 'My predecessor'—Greg pulls his mouth down and eyebrows up, signalling irreverence—'drew up a lease on an A4 sheet of paper. By hand.' He lists the numbers one by one. The lease was 5X5X5, five years with the option to extend after every five. Hugo paid $1250 a month, no utilities. In the last few months of Hugs, this cost the Buffaloes thousands. The lowest power bill was $800 for the month, water around $700, and the highest—I feel a pang of guilt, remembering a recent 24-hour party—was around $1020.

'You'd go up there and they'd left the freezer open overnight.'

Hugo told Greg he was clearing 130K a year in profits, though Greg thinks he's possibly inflating the number. Greg says that Hugo said he had no intention of leaving—that he still had several years left on the contract and intended to use them. If the Buffalos had stayed in the city, Greg estimates they would have been broke within three years, paying $30K in yearly council rates and subsidising Hugs. Plus, the Brothers were getting older and had a hard time finding parking spots in the city. But they couldn't sell the lodge with him in it. RAOB considered going through the courts, but that would have been a couple hundred thousand going to lawyers. In the end, they paid Hugo $500K to break lease.

‘We lost a lot of money to him,’ he says simply.

7.

A couple months later, on a grey, rainy day, I go to the Buffalo’s new lodge in Caulfield South: a 1930s building on the corner of Hawthorn Road and Glen Huntly Road, which they bought for $1.6 million. As at 22 Sutherland Street, there are two entrances—sliding glass doors facing the intersection, and a back door around the corner. Greg and I greet each other like old friends; he makes me a cup of sweet, milky tea; I watch his face—it’s different to how I remember it, more childlike, more open (defenseless?). The hall, which is roughly the size of an Olympic swimming pool, reeks of cigarettes, as does Greg.

‘We’ve banned smoking in the lodge,’ he assures me.

We sit in Greg’s new office. It’s bigger than the one at Sutherland Street, with a fresh paint job and the same old desks, filing cabinets, and shelves. The old furniture in this new space makes it seem a little staged, a play with a hastily-assembled set. Greg and I talk. I ask him about his life. He was a truck driver for thirty-three years, delivering bread around Melbourne city. He was also a union delegate for what is now United Voice, formerly the Liquor, Hospitality, and Miscellaneous Union. He stresses that he wasn’t a ‘red ragger’, someone more keen to walk-out than to work (I tell him, regretfully, that I am a red-ragger). Then he got stomach cancer, and moved into a full-time role at RAOB. He’s in remission. He knocks on the wood of his desk.

It’s not until I’m leaving, Greg seeing me across the threshold of the automatic doors, that I think to ask about the building. It was a bank, he tells me, and before it was a

bank—there are still metal grooves on the ceiling, which he thinks could be runners for meat-hooks—it was a butcher's shop.

8.

Moses shifts in his chair (he's still staring at us), pats his chest pocket, and leaves the room presumably to go and smoke a cigarette. I can tell the other men want to get back to the party, but I still don't know exactly what the Buffalos *do*—why or how they exist. In the late 20th and early 21st century, many societies shed their their rituals, their costumes, and their lodges, transforming into anodyne financial institutions. Australian Unity, a mutual company (mutuals are owned by their members, not by shareholders) began as a friendly society in the 1840s. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, it campaigned heavily for an Australian-wide celebration on the 26th of January, which it saw as a way of bringing the nation together. It now offers health insurance, financial advice, banking, investment portfolios, and aged care living.

The Buffaloes, for its part, is a holdover. Every need it meets could be met more fully and more efficiently by other means: esotericism by The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn; cloak-and-daggers ritual plus fabled political and commercial influence by the Freemasons; insurance by insurance agencies; socialising through a church, or an RSL, or a sporting team, or work, or university; workplace protection by unions. Still, it persists largely unchanged, preserved in an airless pocket.

'What happens at meetings?' I ask Greg. He seems nonplussed by the question, and tells me housekeeping, feasting, and fundraising for charities. They often hold

in-house events for specific charities, democratically nominated, with entertainment provided by members.

'The Brothers might tell some yarns,' he says. 'Some of them play instruments. We might have a bit of a sing.'

Along with religion and gambling, politics are strictly banned from discussion in the lodges.

By unspoken agreement, we get to our feet. The men hang back, letting us go first, Greg holding the door open. We hover in the foyer, waiting for them to lead; we don't want to go in without a buffer.

In the main hall, nothing happens that I can point to. It's not like everybody stares, all at once. But there's a rift. White noise; everyone tunes in. I can see that Liv feels it too by the way her movements suddenly become very precise and understated. The hall is a long rectangle filled with skinny wooden laminate tables around which sit about fifty or so people, most with pots or cans of beer in front of them. (Greg hands us both tinnies). Down the middle of the tables, there are plastic bowls filled with snacks. The room, which is towards the back of the building and so shares walls with other buildings, is either windowless or almost entirely windowless; if there were windows, let the record show that it felt windowless. There's no music playing, just loud conversation and raucous laughter, bouncing between six wooden surfaces.

I can see two women here. The paper-bag drinker from before, and a woman drinking a coke and wearing a floral shirt. Heni is the paper-bag drinker. She is pouring clear liquid into a tumbler and drinking it straight. She pulls the bag down to show me that

it's vodka. Everytime I talk to her, she dissolves into wheezing laughter. She is from Aotearoa, Māori, and might be the only non-white person here. Michelle is on call for her job as a coach driver and is not drinking. She recently injured her knee picking up toys from the bus floor and is waiting for WorkCover to come through. I ask what they think of the all-male thing. Heni wheeze-laughs.

'It's great,' Michelle says.

Heni, cackling: 'Stops them bothering us for two seconds.'

'They're all getting older now. Gives them something to look forward to.'

Noel retells the story of Dave Langdon the grifter to the assembled crowd, word for word, while I sit on the side of the stage and write down all the shoes I can see. New Balances, incongruous skate shoes, leather boaters, suede boaters, polished black dress shoes (Noel), a lot of New Balances, actually, as well as unbranded puffy white sneakers. Only a few suits today, mostly on the very old. One man is wearing a sky-blue button-down shirt, made of thick satin fabric rolling with light. There are several synthetic black polos with 'RAOB' embroidered on the pockets, jean shorts, droopy grey cardigans made of coarse wool, thin cotton dress-shirts. There is, right in front of me, a long grey rat-tail, unfurling from a balding head, hanging down over the chair's back, its length partitioned by elastic bands.

I feel the column of my spine pull up when Graeme, in his speech, mentions 'two very special guests', but of course he doesn't mean us, he means some interstate Buffaloes. The room begins to break apart. People are brought to us like gifts. Noel points out his brother Bill, full name William James Dunstan, who is 94 years old and drinking a

glass of beer. He is the same age as the other oldest member, Jeff Hugo, also here, in a grey suit with only a couple of stains on it.

Jeff Hugo leans over to Liv and says, 'we've got to stop meeting like this.' Several men haul him to his feet and hold him up next to Bill for a photo that they have insisted Liv would like to take. In the photograph, Jeff is bisected by two hairy arms clasped around his chest.

He asks Liv: 'what are you doing Wednesday night? I'll pick you up at 8?'

Everyone is getting drunker, us included. Liv is surrounded by several men, grinning down at her; I'm talking about Queensland's sugar industry to the man with the rat's tail. I feel frustrated that I won't find out anything this way, my own presence obstructing the view; it's clear that by being there as observers we are changing the dynamic we hope to observe. Is this even a mystery anyone wants solved? Is it even a mystery? Everyone is telling the same story: brotherhood, brought in by an uncle or a mate, sad to see the lodge go, been a member for 25 years. There might be nothing more to it than what we see.

I sit down at one of the tables, alone except for a man at the opposite end, staring into the middle-distance. We ignore each other companionably. The tabletops are scattered with half-finished plates of food, and for the first time I notice what they've been eating: jelly snakes, Kingstons, Monte Carlos, Scotch Fingers, yellow crinkle-cut chips, ham sandwiches on white bread, jelly-beans, mini sausage rolls. I feel a wave of despair, related to the food but not *of* the food, and I don't know whether it's because all this will pass—the subject of another reality series, perhaps, Kheir razing everything

but keeping the Buffalo painting for character—or because it hasn't yet passed, should have passed years ago.

The Beautiful Piece

There is a magazine from Melbourne that publishes book reviews online. It promises that these are innovative and unlike other book reviews. A brief survey reveals a formula: personal experience is fused to an analysis of the book, often in a paragraph-by-paragraph oscillation. Sometimes, instead of the personal, the reviewer tag-teams their analysis with theory: queer, literary, critical race, affect, feminist. More ambitious works will throw in a third term. For instance, the most recent piece has three components—

A [theory]
B [analysis of book]
C [personal experience]

—in which the writer's experience of trauma inflects their reading of the text on trauma and both are informed by a theory of representing pain. Here is what the review looks like when mapped paragraph by paragraph:

A, A, B, C, B, B, B, B, A/B, A, A, B, B, A/B/C

Here is the second most recent review: C, C B, B, C, C, B, C, B, B, B, C, C, C/B

And another: C, C , B, C, C, B, B, C, C

And finally: CX8, BX12

In the first two reviews, the Cs also contain As and Bs, some Bs contain As, and so on—content leaks across form. In the final two, each line of inquiry is sealed hermetically in paragraphs or sections and the reader is left to infer or produce their relationships. Two forms—one allusory, a tight interweaving of sources and concepts, often lyrically-disposed; the other, fragmentary, disjointed—and two ways of synthesising texts. In the former, the writer has already done most of this work, while in the latter, the task of synthesis falls more heavily to the reader. An example of the former might be Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, and the latter, also by Nelson, *Bluets*.

At readings—in dark-panelled pubs, bowls clubs, gentrification bars, white-cube galleries, beer-humid function rooms—these forms are on high rotation: long personal essay intellectualising Carly Rae Jepson, lyric essay on museums and the fragment, childbirth memoir plus Cixous. The formula holds in little and big magazines, bestsellers, and art-imprint obscurities alike: goshawk plus grief, a text on mania unfolding in fragments knitting together film and literary criticism, 'a seamless blend of memoir, cultural history, literary criticism, and journalistic reportage' (blurb for Leslie Jamison's *The Recovering*, 2018), 'her own brand of essay-meets-prose poetry about identity and culture' (for Durga Chew-Bose's *Too Much and Not The Mood*, 2017), a trip through 'illuminating material from literature, art, philosophy, psychology, pop culture, and more' (for Marina Benjamin's *Insomnia*, 2018). I read the latest

para-academic-queer-autotheory blockbuster and all I got was this eccentric combination of texts applied to the quotidian.

In his hybrid essay for *Texte Zur Kunst* (September 2016 issue), poet and critic Felix Bernstein parodies the eccentricity of the hybrid essay, for instance, the kind that might be published by *Texte Zur Kunst*:

> As I wrote this I was listening to *x* on iTunes, friend x called, we read *x* quote from theory, I had sad memory *x* while at *x* gallery, where I came to conclusion *x* about *x* sensibility. Then I proposed and defined an *x+1* sensibility, using timid caution, as apology and alibi to put forward cluster of *x+1* artists, including me.

Bernstein's formula is a millennial redux of what boomer luminaries have been doing for years, exemplary of which is Mary Cappello's advice to creative nonfiction writers (offered in 2016, though her first book of nonfiction was released in 1999):

> Gather together an uncommon archive made of home movies and Wittgenstein, your aunt's rosary beads and father's garden logs, the nubbly surface of memory's grain, the Pocketbooks that shaped your early adolescence alongside a forgotten literary theorist of your choice. Incorporate a musical soundtrack as interlocutionary base and space, then write from there.

There are degrees of self-awareness here; where Cappello is complacent among the artefacts of a middle-class habitus, Bernstein flounders, aware that he trafficks in precisely the currency he critiques. Nevertheless, Cappello unwittingly illustrates the tenets of what Bernstein names 'the irreproachable essay'. His argument centres around the imperviousness of hybrid texts to critique. If it's both a memoir and a review, it's neither narcissistic nor making claims to objectivity; if it uses theory to elucidate pop-culture, it's neither elitist nor shallow—or less likely to be called so, anyway. Hybridity allows the writer to correct the perceived deficiencies of one discipline or form with another discipline or form. This tessellation of form functions alongside content—'deferential footnotes, astute self-criticism, personal sentiment, poetic language, and academic theory'—to preempt criticism of its elitism, or its complicity with the institution, or its success in the literary market in order to 'create an integrity that is beyond reproach'. Bernstein asks: 'In being this irreproachable, have we not fallen into the same old trap of disciplinary authority?'

Of course, Bernstein does reproach the irreproachable essay, meaning that it's not exactly irreproachable, not to mention that by critiquing its imperviousness to critique he a) positions himself above the irreproachable essay, that is, above being irreproachable, which b) positions him as flawed and implicated, the same manoeuvre he lampoons in essays that vie for imperviousness therefore vying for imperviousness himself, and c) that being the first to name and denounce it is a shortcut to disciplinary authority.

But others have convincingly echoed his sentiment. In her review of Leslie Jamison's *The Recovering*, writer Ellena Savage finds that the text preemptively shapes itself in response to anticipated criticism: 'What can I say about *The Recovering* that Jamison hasn't already predicted I might say? ...its self-knowledge ... not only anticipates a diagnosis, but outperforms the diagnostic expert.' In a critique that feels almost rudely targeted at Cappello *et al* but was written before her and Bernstein's precepts, poetry critic Brian M Reed argues that 'hybrid writing tends to be so skilful, so erudite, that it reads like the prized outcome of the very educational system whose disciplinary logic [the writer] seeks to undermine.' The companion to paranoid reading—Eve Kosofky Sedgewick's term for the deconstruction-adjacent practice of reading to expose a text's latent bias—is paranoid writing: writing to get ahead of the paranoid reader, a guns-at-dawn quick-draw to reveal the text's flaws.

In the ultimate recursion, criticism also preempts criticism of its criticism. You never know who will be reading it, who might take exception to your reading, especially if it circulates online. Ever name-searched yourself on Twitter? Ever screenshotted a questionable Insta-story and sent it to a friend? Online, we embed context within the work, loading it with disclaimers and acknowledgements before we post. The hyper-qualified block-text Insta-story is merely the most distilled version of the irreproachable essay. And the irreproachable essay is merely the most distilled version of the essay itself; *essai* means 'trial' or 'attempt' in the original French—the genre is shaped by its preemptive dissimulation of authority.

A tiring form—to read, to write, to critique. This has a lot to do with (my own) overexposure to hybrid writing but more to do with something immanent to the form itself. Hybrid writing is akin to what theorist Sianne Ngai identifies as the strenuous play of zaniness: a form of amusement edged with frenzy. Zaniness indexes failure insofar as the performer's varied attempts to perform displays only their attempts, thereby falling short of a performance. Zaniness is a failure that doesn't rise to the status of a 'queer art' because it remains wedded to success, no ironic distance available. Many of Jim Carrey's characters—the cable guy and the workaholic father from *Liar Liar*—are 'zanies', and their elasticity in response to precarity and hyperemployment is exemplary of the just-barely-keeping-it-together aesthetic of zaniness. Lucille Ball of *I Love Lucy* is a zany, thirsting for show business and undertaking a series of complicated plots to get there. The freelance writer is a zany, often casually employed to support their practice, attempting to sell stories, essays, and books, stranded somewhere between the better-moneyed academic and art worlds, locked out of insurance and leave and represented, if at all, by a patchwork of unions ill-adapted for contemporary arts work—there's no one project or job, no one source of income, no mandated routine, no regular workplace. Zaniness is precisely this: an aesthetic of overwork as play. (I run into a friend's ex from a non-relationship in the library of a uni neither of us attend, a guy I thought of as zany long before I read Ngai, mid-morning on a Thursday, and he tells me about his project: he gathers multiple texts, opens each of them at random and reads transversally, skipping from book to book, to see what connections emerge.)

Ngai is obviously describing the post-Fordist worker, one who produces social relationships and affects, and the incorporation of affect, personality, and play into existing work structures. Part of this paradigm is what we could call predictive labour: the labour of pre-empting needs, requests, possible problems; of making oneself available and responsive. (Pre-empting the labour to come is work in itself.) As well as actually doing the odd jobs and tasks, managing them—continually re/arranging conflicting commitments into temporary stability—is an invisible part of contemporary work, and concealing this work is also part of the job. Case in point: the 'surprisingly human' scheduling bot 'Amy Ingram' turned out to have a team of human workers behind her, covering for oversights and inflecting her communications with human warmth. But where the Mechanical (Digital?) Turk hides its sweating human substrate, zaniness places it front and centre. Arguably, making the invisible visible is a defining feature of zaniness, whose drama and comedy come precisely from exaggerating the laboriousness of synthesising, or from bungling the attempt at concealment so badly that you only increase its visibility.

When I read a hybrid text, perhaps I react sourly to Ngai's version of zaniness: not a work's obvious quirks, its slide across disciplines and forms, but hybridity's shadowing by the ludicrous position of the hybrid writer (of me)—and most writers, unless wealthy or funded, are hybrid entities by necessity. If hybridity is a new form of mastery, as Bernstein suggests, seeming to cede authority while actually consolidating it, it is also precarity in action; its mastery is visibly unstable, temporary, unsettled, its attentions in-demand and split. The freelance writer is a supplicant with a pitch, competing with a thousand others just like them, diversifying their wheelhouse to meet

any possible brief. At its most alienated, the hybrid text is an outcome of conflicting demands, using a combinatorial logic to create novelty and scarcity in an attention economy—a modular specificity that can be undone and reconstituted as the situation demands in an attempt to corner a market. The hybrid text indexes a hopeless in-between that is not outside the status quo, a challenge to the institution or labour market, but of it. Ngai again: hybridity as the 'weakening of art's capacity to serve as an image of non-alienated labor'.

*

This isn't quite the full picture. Anne Carson, we know, divides her writing time between three different desks in three different rooms for three different projects. Writing for pay is hardly the worst job going, and though fraught with exploitation, writing for literary magazines or within an institution is generally far better work than writing content or clickbait (more on this later), let alone, say, dying a personal heat-death in an unventilated Amazon warehouse or collecting rubbish at a Work for the Dole site in rural Queensland. Even as the text reveals its precarious conditions of production, even as the writer dissimulates their authority and prestige, the form—how can it not?—carries and imparts a certain status. As Cappello and Bernstein's formulas make clear, hybrid texts are sometimes little more than celebrations of the writer and their good, educated, erudite tastes (after all, knowing when to concede and when to dissimulate this prestige is perhaps the ultimate marker of good taste).

If you take Michel de Montaigne as the originator of the form, or at least the name for the form, the essay's patrician tendencies will come as no surprise. In 1571, the story

goes, Montaigne retired from public life to a tower in his family's castle in Bordeaux (like all good freelancers, Montaigne worked from home). He had been a counsellor in parliament and a courtier for Charles XI. His family were landed gentry, with a large estate and income from the salt-herring and wine trade. It's thought that the loss of his closest friend, the writer and judge Étienne de La Boétie, inspired Montaigne to write as a 'means of communication' where 'the reader takes the place of the dead friend'. He wrote in the first person, on all subjects, from idleness to cannibalism, but his real topic was himself: 'I myself am the matter of my book'. By exploring the depths of the self, he characterised the self as something that had depth and could be explored, dramatising the process of self-fashioning, which was inextricable from essaying. He wrote that to *essai* is 'to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind, to penetrate the opaque depths of its innermost folds, to pick out and immobilise the innumerable flutterings that agitate it.'

Here you can see several key ingredients of the essay as it will develop, not least among them its long association with wealth and status: the essay as a conversational, convivial, intimate medium, alive and fleet-footed; the essay as almost definitionally personal, less generously, narcissistic; the essay as something 'occasioned' by a particular situation; the essay as a genteel pastime for learned gentlemen, especially in their twilight years (the weirdly tenacious connection between retirement and the essay deserves an essay of its own); and the essay as a form that habitually reflects on its own construction as a form within itself (Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities* is about 'essayism', Jorge Luis Borges writes short fiction in essay form, but these are

exceptions; fiction largely outsources its navel-gazing to the essay and rarely returns the favour).

Any essay origin-story that starts with Montaigne can't avoid stumbling, almost immediately, into the obvious and somewhat inconvenient fact that essays have always been hybrid, therefore rendering the term 'hybrid essay' a tautology. I could prove this with recourse to several examples drawn from one of the many door-stopper anthologies of the essay, say, *The Oxford Book of Essays* (1625-1980), and explicate, for instance, Henry David Thoreau's 'Night and Moonlight' (1862), but suffice to say that if A= reflection and analysis, B= references and discussion of references (to literature, philosophy, and science), and C= personal experience, the first three pages of 'Night and Moonlight' look like this, beginning, as many essays do, in the personal:

C, B, A, A, A, A, B/A, A, A/B, A/B, A, C

There is a problem of causality here, both for genre-bending zealots and for my argument. If the essay has always been hybrid, is it possible to claim with any integrity that it's caused by precarity? (Likewise, zaniness comes from around the 14th century in Italy—from the *commedia dell'arte*, a form of theatre, which included the stock character of a cunning trickster known as a *Zanni*.) We frequently imagine that genre works by reiterating, with variation, an original form. But the essay has not been piped directly from Montaigne to Thoreau to the creative writing workshop. The essay of a rural English rector in 1680 is different to the essay of a cosmopolitan English philosopher in 1680 is different to the essay of an English journalist in 1690, and so on,

ad infinitum. There is no monolithic Essay that all essays conform to or rebel against (and you would expect nothing less of a form characterised by its variety). This is partly what makes the discourse around genre-bending so maddening; positioning a text as genre-transgressive often reinstates the primacy of genre, or inflates its supposed grip on older texts and epochs in order to stage the transgression.

The answer cannot be found by looking at the essay on its own, the essay written by an individual and read by an individual, or even a whole range of essays; it can only be found by examining the form's production and circulation within a given milieu. The earliest essays were collected and printed in books; the advent of the newspaper and periodical in the 17th century disarticulated the book and encouraged the production of standalone essays; the internet accelerates this disarticulation, disseminating texts further and faster than ever before. Though the essay has always been hybrid, the essay's hybridity is now being put to new uses. Far from its rarefied origins and its rarefied present—its long five-minutes of fame in the Anglophone literary world—the hybrid text is now so familiar, so ubiquitous, that we barely even notice it.

*

To get the full measure of the situation, I want to look at clickbait—a kind of canary-in-the-coal-mine for literary alienation, the most reviled of online content, the biggest grift since a million Nigerian princes sent a million requests for alms. If you've spent any time online, you will know it intimately. Clickbait is content that exists primarily to garner clicks, likes, subscriptions, and, ultimately, advertising revenue. It is

content that promises big with its headline—‘3 Simple Steps to Shed Belly Fat After 40’; ‘This Man Tried to Hug A Wild Lion. You Won’t Believe What Happened Next’—and fails to deliver in content: we lose fat by cutting out sugar; the man does not get devoured by the lion. I’m going to include in this category clickbait-adjacent media, content that uses similar or identical tactics for a similar or identical goal, even if concealed by a more dignified frame; no matter how they distinguish themselves (*Junkee*, the Australian pop culture and news site, calls its material ‘clickable’ rather than clickbait) the difference is one of degree rather than kind.

Consider, then, clickbait and content as hybrid forms. For instance, each *Junkee* or *BuzzFeed* article is *Junkee*/*BuzzFeed* in miniature: a combination of images, reportage, memes, opinion, video, articles, native advertising (ads formatted and worded to mimic the non-paid content exactly), and a first-person narrative voice. As on the parent page, which presents content in a grid formation that unfurls as you scroll, the unique page doesn’t have an endpoint; the article finishes and a new one takes its place, so that the borders between content are blurry, basically nonexistent.

This aesthetic is coterminous with the structural zaniness of the content writer’s position. Picture Anne Carson squared to the power of one hundred desks, Montaigne but terminally online. *Junkee* staff work in staggered shifts, publishing a certain amount of articles in their allotted time to produce a twenty-four hour feed. Writers for 'churnalism' sites—sites that churn out news and gossip, often recycled from other outlets—must work at a rapid clip to make a living: anything from two to ten articles a day is standard. Content mills, sometimes known as content factories or content farms

(choose your own nostalgic euphemism) employ a huge network of writers, sometimes paid and on staff, sometimes unpaid interns, more frequently freelancers paid a tremendously low rate per article, to produce content based on key search terms. These articles exist only to drive traffic to the site and increase its ranking on Google; sometimes, they are not even meant to be read and are hidden in out-of-the way links, or published as transparent keyword-stuffed text that is picked up by search terms but invisible to readers. On the other side of production, click farms use a combination of bots and low-paid workers to endlessly generate fake accounts that like, subscribe, and retweet to make content go viral, boost the lacklustre metrics of a politician or wannabe influencer, or, in the case of scams, lend it a veneer of legitimacy. It's thought that 40% of all online traffic in 2018 was driven by bots.

Under these conditions, content writers can't afford to cultivate and indulge niche interest over several months, or even several hours. The industry demands of its workers not just the ability to write about anything speedily and efficiently, but the ability to speedily and efficiently switch from writing about one thing to writing about the next. Working across subjects and themes, writers deploy the house tone to maintain the coherence of the publication and brand. Or perhaps more accurately, given that clickbait's overt zaniness is the source of its identity and identifiability, the incoherence maintains the publication's coherency. *Junkee* staff's bylines straddle the site's categories of TV, film, music, politics, and culture; a writer pitches two articles in the morning, posts on the deportation of a refugee family before lunch, and writes about the trailer for *Cats* in the afternoon. In its early days, *BuzzFeed* was governed entirely by an algorithm aggregating content that showed signs of going viral. Founder Jonah

Peretti eventually hired ‘curators’ (his word) to spotlight and structure the most popular content into listicles. Writers and editors came last. *BuzzFeed*’s aesthetic—overwhelming, hyperactive, busy—exists in and because of its aggregative nature, its zaniness produced by the algorithm’s synthesising function, its synthesising function reproduced by its writers.

So, despite an appearance of whimsy, the freelancer tossing-off takes as they marinate online, content is produced within strict parameters. Search any content style guide or SEO advice blog—search Google with confidence, knowing that the top results will have been optimised, that the page therefore knows its stuff (SEO gets high off its own fumes)—and you will find detailed instructions on how to reproduce the form.

The same goes for clickbait, especially its most infamous constituent part, its metonymic emissary, the headline. I know of at least four headline-generator tools, two headline-evaluators, including one that scores for emotional impact, countless AI clickbait-writers in varying states of sophistication. And while there is no universal formula for its production, these tools work off general principles; if there *were* a universal formula, it would have to do with its tenaciousness as a form despite the lack of a universal formula.

Consider the following headlines:

> ‘The 7 Craziest Things Bella Thorne Wore at Coachella’

‘Marvel’s Golden Boy And Excellent Person Taika Waititi Might Be Taking A Role In ‘Suicide Squad’

‘The New Lana Del Rey Album Is Here, And It’s Everything You Want From A Lana Del Rey Album’

These aren’t the most egregious examples—there are no weight-loss hacks, no man-eating lions—but they are recognisably clickbait, even when pulled from their contexts and transplanted here. You will immediately notice a few commonalities: that the sentence is in title-case (the first letter of every word capitalised); that they are packed with names and numbers; that they rely on internet parlance and pop-cultures references; and that the sentences tend to be lengthy.

These are important features of clickbait. But dig a little deeper and you will find that what makes clickbait clickbait is syntax—its particular way of building sentences. First, where traditional headlines’ offer paratactic collages (‘Police Car Rammed Altona’; ‘Hottest Day Since April, Bureau Reports’), clickbait headlines are usually full sentences, grammatically complete.

Second, they contain a high proportion of what are known, coincidentally, as content words. Unlike function words—words that stitch a sentence together—content words point to concrete objects or phenomena, offering information and meaning. Adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and nouns are content words; prepositions (‘in’, ‘at’), conjunctions (‘and’, ‘but’), auxiliary verbs (‘do’, ‘has’), articles (‘the’, ‘a’), and pronouns (‘she’,

‘he’) are function words. In the news headlines above, there are no function words; in the clickbait headlines, the function words remain—the sentences are complete—but they are far outnumbered by content words. For instance, the Waititi headline contains five nouns, two adjectives or adjective phrases, and three forms of verbs, leaving only two function words (‘and’ and ‘a’):

> Marvel’s Golden Boy [possessive noun, adjective, noun] And [conjunction] Excellent Person Taika Waititi [adjective phrase, proper noun] Might Be Taking A Role In ‘Suicide Squad’ [modal verb phrase, verb, noun, proper noun]

Third, clickbait tends to have long ‘syntactic dependencies’—the space that closes a dependent clause, for instance, the amount of words between the first mention of the subject of the sentence and the verb that conveys the subject’s action. In this example, the dependency is created by the drawn-out description of the Waititi:

> ‘[Marvel’s Golden Boy And Excellent Person Taika Waititi= subject] Might Be [Taking= verb] A Role In ‘Suicide Squad’

Finally, they often use cataphora, a word or phrase that refers to a later word or phrase:

> ‘[Marvel’s Golden Boy And Excellent Person= cataphor] [Taika Waititi= referent] Might Be Taking A Role In ‘Suicide Squad’

Clickbait wants its readers to do one thing—click the link—and every element of the headline is honed to produce this result. If clickbait was a film, it would be a B-grade thriller; its syntax is structured for suspense. Cataphor, dependencies, and content words create plots or premises in miniature, giving the reader a protagonist with character traits and a mystery, and both reader and protagonist an abbreviated arc that sends the reader down the sentence and into the link. It withholds action from both its subject (Waititi) and reader until the last moment, then unleashes it all at once ('Might Be Taking A Role') or—in more obvious examples—promises its revelation on the next page ('You Won't Believe What Happens Next').

To show just how important these are in clickbait, let's take them away. Here's the Waititi headline rewritten as a newspaper headline: as an incomplete sentence, with minimal content words, short dependencies, and without cataphora:

> Taika Waititi Takes Role in 'Suicide Squad'

Flat, factual, and stripped of adjectives, it now reads like a Hemingway six-liner, a nigh-unrecognisable abstraction from its overwrought, Foster-Wallacian source material. On the other hand, if you remove the headline's nouns, proper nouns, and numbers, swapping them out for a placeholder—

> 'Marvel's Golden Boy And Excellent Person Taika Waititi Might Be Taking A Role In 'Suicide Squad'=

‘[0] Might Be Taking a [0] in [0]’

—its title case—

‘[0] might be taking a [0] in [0]’

—and every last one of its content words—

[0] [0] [0] And [0] [0] [0] [0] A [0] [0] =

[PN] [Adj] [N] And [Adj phr] [PN] [MVP] [V] A [N] [PN]

—you are left with a blueprint whose alien notation belies its familiarity, but which can be used to construct any number of headlines:

[0] [0] [0] And [0] [0] [0] [0] A [0] [0] =

[PN] [Adj] [N] And [Adj phr] [PN] [MVP] [V] A [N] [PN] =

[possessive noun, adjective, noun] [conjunction] [adjective phrase, proper noun] [modal verb phrase/infinitive] [verb, possessive determiner, noun, proper noun] =

America's Most-Hated President And War Criminal George W Bush Might Be Touring His Art Show 'Portraits of Courage' =

Maryborough's Famous Children's Author and Mary Poppins-Creator P.L Travers Will Be Getting Her Own Movie 'Saving Mr Banks' = (with minor adjustments)

Area Man's Beloved Wife and Business Partner ~~[proper noun]~~ Has Been Trolling His Business's Facebook Page ~~[proper noun]~~

In other words, what matters in clickbait is not the particularities of the content, but the generic nature of the form; stripped of all its old parts with new ones subbed in, it nevertheless retains its identity as clickbait.

This formula allows for the endless generation of new clickbait, constantly honed to hook the reader. It is also what allows clickbait to be detected and blocked. For example, the team behind Stop Clickbait, a browser extension that does what it says in the name, found that it could more accurately filter clickbait from non-clickbait when it based its decisions off sentence patterns rather than key words or common topics—more accurate, even, than a two-pronged approach that took both into account. Once identified, the extension produces a summary of the content, closing the 'curiosity gap', the drawn-out non-revelation. Invariably, if you do click the link, the article will be split across several pages, each clogged with advertising, and the final page will

deflate the surprise promised by the title, ejecting you back into the ether from which you came: there is no answer, only a continued deferral.

Here, the usual hierarchy is reversed: content is more a vehicle for form than form is for content; each particularity is merely are an occasion for replicating the generic. Think of memes and meme formats, of endless iterations of the same joke on Twitter. As long as the form holds, however loosely, the meme, joke, or content will continue to function. In fact, it only becomes funnier—more 'rare'—the more it changes with repetition, the more abstracted it becomes from its beginnings, the more niche its references, the more disjunctive its syntheses. If, as Ngai writes, 'the project augurs its own end'—it is temporary and self-contained, just one of a series of projects that will comprise a life's work—content augurs its own endlessness. It is only useful in vast amounts, both for those who make a living writing it (or exploiting those who write it) and for websites that use it to pull in clicks and views. When you click a link that contains another link and you click that link and another one and another one, the boundaries between content—see how the word sounds strange in the singular here, would sound even stranger if you forced the plural 's' as in 'contents'—tends to blur. Even when the word 'content' is used to describe a single example of content, it alludes to all other content, without which it would not function as content: it would just be—what? An ad? A text? A literary text? An artwork?

If it's difficult to even conceive of content in-itself, it's because content is ultimately content-less. A placeholder or a void, it doesn't matter *what* the particular value is, just that there is a particular value. Content is a hybrid form, not just because it combines

image, text, art, video, and advertising, but because content is, by nature, capacious to the point of emptiness. Like data, everything online and off can be content; it transforms everything it touches into more of itself. It makes an object into a value that can be exchanged with all other values; it is 'the equation of the incompatible', to quote Marx quoting Shakespeare.

You can see what I'm getting at: if content is an empty value, it functions much like a commodity. *Like* a commodity? Online, words *are* commodities. Content is produced on an industrial scale under conditions optimised for exploitation; each word, headline, or article has a measurable numeric value; and each produces surplus value for a corporation or a boss that its makers, for the most part, will never see. More than this, commodification converts the particular into the generic form of value so that it can be exchanged with other chunks of value. To do so, it has to preserve or create the appearance of specificity—I need *this* not *that*, would prefer *that* not *this*.

*

Most writers—and even some content writers—will strenuously deny that their practice has anything to do with the debased business of content production. In content, writing is overdetermined by its conditions of production; it actively seeks to close the gap between writing and value-production by writing to these conditions. Meanwhile, literary writing is often viewed as a kind of unproductive labour—a pleasurable waste of time, a conscientious objection to the furore of overproduction, a non-alienated way of making art, as an excess that escapes the market. Literariness is determined precisely

by its resistance to the instrumentalisation of language—of everything—that content represents.

Here's a representative of the above position—Geordie Williamson, in his introduction to *The Best Australian Essays 2015*—anxiously polarising the forms:

> Wonky, idiosyncratic, fragmentary, paradoxical, drunk on words, the essay has something that the AI algorithms and content-wallahs and social media provocateurs of the web do not: character, style, oomph!—a uniquely human thumbprint that only other thinking people recognise and pen their carefully keylocked attentions for.

This passage is noteworthy for the way it distils many of the essay's foundational conceits. Note, firstly, the obvious: that Williamson's exhortation musters content and the essay into separate enclosures, fortified between. Note that it is an example of the form itself, performing the traits it spruiks: the 'oomph' in his rapid-fire stream of adjectives, its wonkiness mimicked by an unevenly tripartite sentence structure, its drunkenness by the volubility of the sentence and the enthusiasm with which it makes it claims, its character in all of the above plus quirks like the exclamation mark. Note that this combination of precision and variation is crucial to the hybrid form, that it displays the effortful effortlessness characteristic of both the hybrid text and the zany subject, and that it also exemplifies the freewheeling, near-maniacal cheer the form's practitioners often display when spruiking the form—as if to detract from the calculated and frequently un-cheery work of producing the illusion in the first place. Finally, note

that it opposes the cold 'AI algorithms, content-wallahs and social media provocateurs' with the warmth of a uniquely—universally?—'human thumbprint'.

What is Williamson so afraid of? Given that most online content, literary or otherwise, is found through a search engine—Google tops the list of most-visited websites in Australia and America year-in, year-out—it takes some serious blue-pilling to argue that writing remains aloof from its conditions of production, circulation, and consumption; from its competitors on a crowded playing field (if everyone's doing it, it becomes unsustainable not to do it). *Electric Lit*, for example, has wholeheartedly embraced a clickbait/content model of promotion, aggregating commissioned stories, reading lists, and listicles couched in the language of social justice: '9 Stories About Family Violence, '8 Books to Help You Understand the Kashmir Conflict'. *Literary Hub* is a platform that aggregates 'the best of the literary internet', acquiring and republishing work from its partners, which include *The Paris Review*, *n+1*, and *Random House*. *The Betoota Advocate*, a satirical Australian news site, has taken native advertising a step further by selling unmarked ad space in the form of articles, its clients buying their own profitable ridicule (and the paper's 4 million-strong reach).

Nor have the upper echelons of the literary establishment been spared. A manual parse shows that headlines for *The New Yorker*'s online site don't share clickbait's formula, exactly, but are just as formulaic. It recently favoured a '[Determiner] [noun] [preposition] [noun/proper noun]' structure—or translated into the same terms as before, 'The [0] of [0]': 'The World of Jia Tolentino', 'The Survival of Iggy Pop', 'The Power of Investigative Journalism', 'The Urgency of the 2020 Senate Race', 'The

Niche Celebrity Satire of "BH90210"', and 'The Message of Measles'; these all appeared within a seven day window of each other, and I'm not even counting headlines with slight variations. You can try a similar experiment with similar results on *Jacobin*, which appears to be using a soft milling approach, floating its most clickable titles on Twitter—'The Great Socialist Bake Off'—to pull in readers to its altogether more earnest platform.

Headlines and sentences are one thing; whole essays are another. I would like, here, to feed an AI several thousand essay collections, literary memoirs, magazines, standalone essays for literary magazines, and anthologies, *The Best Australian Essays 2015* among them. Picture *Printing out the Internet* in reverse, innumerable pages rolling back into the machine. (A friend tells me he could maybe do it if I send him a few thousand documents, but sourcing and tagging the material is a whole project in itself, and anyway, he's working overtime already and I'm not sure I want to automate this essay out of its job).

DIY in lieu: a representative anthology of creative nonfiction about creative nonfiction by some of the field's most celebrated writers, *Bending Genre*, edited by Nicole Walker and Margot Singer, and published in 2016. Even without the benefit of a thousands-strong dataset, read a few essays in *Bending Genre* and a rhythm begins to emerge—not necessarily the staccato A B C's of the book reviews, though they are there if you want to track them (Eula Biss's contribution oscillates paragraph by paragraph between meditations on organic farming and lyric essays), but a kind of listing to one side of the topic, a zig-zag that starts on the zag. To use the maxim of

creative nonfiction, adopted from an Emily Dickinson poem, the essayists 'tell it slant', often beginning in a tangentially related concept or setting—as usual, personal anecdotes feature heavily here—before shifting focus.

Not coincidentally, the writers in the anthology often define their craft in terms of movement. Karen Brennan identifies 'a specific *physical* restlessness that motivates the genre-bender' (emphasis hers). In an essay that unfolds in small paragraphs, demarcated by indentations but no line breaks, Wayne Koestenbaum writes that: 'Each book, poem, or paragraph I produce is a physical machine, generated by hand movements. I like to put my fingers to work.' Dinty W. Moore writes on 'the energy of the jump' conducted by line breaks, spaces, and other interruptions to the text, and uses these liberally throughout. Not in *Bending Genre* but in a collection of essays called *Nilling*, Lisa Robertson writes that '[e]njambment is the counter-semiotic pause within the rhythmic gesture. It knows that the temporal unit is sprung on the refusal of the regularization of time, which must remain situated in the body, as the body's specificity, its revolt'.

Here, hybrid nonfiction preemptively subverts what it imagines are the expected rhythms of nonfiction prose. Like Williamson, it looks to the implicitly human body to guide this subversion, to offer a counter-rhythm. But is this the rhythm of the body (whose body, where?) or is it the rhythm of the body, say, on Twitter, the shot attention span briefly clamping on fragments of information as it glides down the feed? Is this a 'counter-semiotic pause', or is it a staff writer at *BuzzFeed* grabbing a dinner-break at midnight? Are the working fingers hovering over a typewriter in a light-filled studio, or

are they in a click-farm in Hangzhou, hitting a laptop's trackpad in repetitive spasms? Have you noticed, lately, that the most ruthlessly optimised content is written in an arrhythmic mix of one-, two-, or three-line stanzas? Is there a better working definition of precarity than the 'refusal of the regularization of time'?

Then again, maybe the body belongs to the 16th century nobleman, and the preemption has been preempted by the form it wants to subvert; maybe the form, even in its most unrecognisable contemporary contortions, is playing out an aeons-old identity. The essay, that is, has always been associated with movement. Approximately 447 years ago, Montaigne called the essay a thing that 'wanders'. In 'Night and Moonlight' (1862), Thoreau's moonlit walks supply a metaphor for the limits of human knowledge, mirrored in the roaming structure of the essay; an idea is briefly illumined and then eclipsed as the thinker moseys on. Ernest Rhys in 1913 argued that the essay is the work of 'dilute lyricists, engaged in pursuing a rhythm too subtle for verse'. In 1925 William Carlos Williams called it 'pure motion', and Kenneth Burke, in 1941, a 'kind of Hamletic soliloquy, its rhythm slowed down to a snail's pace, or perhaps to an irregular jog.' The 'AI algorithms and content-wallahs and social media provocateurs' not only have 'style, character, oomph!'; the essay has—has always had—everything that will come to characterise content.

In *Bending Genre*, rhythms change essay to essay and cannot be abstracted into a general formula that holds across the anthology. Still, as in clickbait, throughout the collection there is a sense of uniformity all the more unsettling because of the essays' apparent diversity. What the texts have in common is their randomness, or potential for

it. Fluidity becomes the norm; the uniformity of the essays derives from their insistent specificity, not in spite of it.

When reading a hybrid essay, perhaps I react sourly to this: the endless innovation of optimised content. Anticipating the writer's anticipation of my anticipation, I brace for a scattershot rhythm. Reading is a process of preempting the next move; I read as one might walk down stairs in the dark. The arrhythmia of excitement, of tangents and novelty, undercuts its own force through repetition. When the surprise comes, I am already tired of and by it (Ngai calls this coupling of astonishment and boredom 'stuplimity'). This is partly what makes something zany: that it fails to produce the response, usually approval or enjoyment, it is trying with all its might to produce.

This plays out not just in individual essays. Zoom out and you notice the waves breaking rapidly online, depositing the day's detritus at your feet. If the essay began as a conversation with a dead friend, it carries on now as an argument with vigilant strangers; there is always an imagined interlocutor, thousands of interlocutors, and their intentions are unclear. Exhaustion shadows paranoia and hyperactivity, both for the zany agent and the audience to its zaniness: an affect that indexes the conditions of contemporary production as an exhaustive and exhausting state.

*

We are seeing, more and more, the uncanny-valley effect of writing that functions both as literature and as content—or, more accurately, writing that happens before the

bifurcation of these categories. I have two final examples in mind, both published on *BuzzFeed News*, *BuzzFeed*'s arm for serious journalism, both by a young American writer named Shannon Keating. The first, 'The Time I Went On A Lesbian Cruise and It Blew Up My Entire Life', is a lengthy meditation on contemporary queer politics filtered through the story of a whirlwhind cruise-ship romance that ended her longterm relationship back home. It went viral, has continued trending since its publication in June, and Keating has been meeting with film producers about a possible adaptation. It was also featured on *Longform* under the name 'Going Overboard', demonstrating its optimisation both ways: for *Longform*'s more neutral aesthetic and for *BuzzFeed*'s ruthlessly zany one.

The second essay was written in response to the former's viral fame, and published under the title 'Writers Want To Be Read. But Do They Want to Be Brands?' Here, Keating reflects on the commodification of identity in the first-person-industrial-complex of memoirs and influencers, venturing a feminist defence of first-person writing even as she worries over the exchange of women's private lives, including her own, for clicks. Three days later, when I checked back, it had assumed the altogether more personal and, well, clickable, title 'Am I Writing About My Life, Or Selling Myself Out?' It also has a third title—'Caroline Vs. Natalie and My Personal Essay Identity Crisis'—that appears second on Google if you search 'Caroline Vs. Natalie', a cash-in on influencer Caroline Calloway's highly public feud with her ex-ghostwriter, Natalie Beach.

As a senior staff writer and the LGBT editor for *BuzzFeed News*, Keating must have known, even hoped, that her own essay might be sucked into the machine she helped create; indeed, in 'Writers Want To Be Read', she spends several memoir-y paragraphs discussing her formative years selling memoir online. But she never fully acknowledges her own hefty part in the ploy (say what you will, but you can't reproach this essay for being irreproachable), dodging a *mea culpa* re: careerism and offering yet another personal revelation in its place: she published the first essay partly to feel better about leaving her partner for her cruise-ship fling.

This is beside the point: whatever Keating says or doesn't say in this piece is, mostly, besides the point. Published on the same platform as the cruise essay, it contains hyperlinks to her previous work for *BuzzFeed*, including the cruise essay, as well as a memoir whose 'nearly half a million views' she claims to feel 'torturously conflicted about' for its participation in the trauma economy. Like all other long-form content on *BuzzFeed*, the essay is primed for scanning in bite-sized paragraphs and sections, its reading experience telegraphed in advance. It is littered (stuffed?) with of-the-moment pop-culture references and internet parlance. It wears its Tweet/Share/Copy buttons in the same place as usual: after the title and by-line but before the article proper. It starts with a personal anecdote before moving onto the premise of the piece. It ends and cedes the floor to a neverending grid of *BuzzFeed* clickbait. It reproduces the conditions that produced Keating's virality while denouncing them. It knows that this denunciation means next to nothing given that the essay isn't meant to be read, just engaged with, and that engagement can take many forms besides reading. It puts new batteries in the same old machine and expects different results.

Like many essays on the essay—like Williamson's—it functions as a native advertisement for the essay: it is content that mimics the form of the essay precisely. Even as it insists on its prestige, it wants, ultimately, to be consumed, and replicates the conditions that make its production and consumption most efficient. The innovations of hybridity replicate the European essay in its most traditional form, and we see that innovation is, as often as not, a form that preserves and reproduces tradition (the division of wealth, of labour, of genre, of attention) while pretending to annul it. As long as it operates within these conditions, the hybrid essay is structurally unable to fulfil its own brief of transgression. To protect prestige, you need a boundary, and to protect a boundary, you have to be paranoid.

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