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Turbulence, habit and desire: life after two coal mine closures

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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April 2021

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the experiences of workers and their families as they navigate disruptions to everyday life caused by workplace closure and job loss. Situated in the boom-and-bust world of extractive industry, it draws on qualitative fieldwork at two recently closed coal mines in Australia and China to explore the twists and turns of life after loss in restructuring economies.

Picking up people's lives several years after the mine closures, this thesis traces the cascading chain of changes catalysed by the event of closure. It explores how circumstances of life come to press upon bodies in the wake of loss, and how these intensities can come to reshape how people experience the world. It ultimately asks how people might weather the crisis of loss such that they regain a sense of life as an 'ordinary' timespace, reorienting from the past to the future.

To do this, this thesis approaches loss as a non-relational force of interruption, showing how loss decomposes existing relations and exposes people to an unknown present. Drawing on postphenomenological theories of bodily change, it then tracks the shifts in concerns, anxieties, and orientations that emerge in this timespace of vulnerability and exposure.

These processes of change are explored through three empirical chapters on the forces of turbulence, habit and desire. Turbulence shows how loss can bring ordinary life into disorder, leaving people exposed to the intrusions of unfamiliar and often unmanageable conditions. Habit suggests how melancholy durations of life can redraw everyday existence, allowing bodies to pick up different lines of the past to make sense of the present. Finally, desire describes how encounters after loss might begin to mobilise processes of repair, reorienting people from a lost past towards an unfolding future.

By examining the relationship between self and other in the constitution of subjectivity, this thesis shows how transformations of the subject can come about through affective intensities that fold otherness into the self. It contributes to understandings of affect, embodiment, and relationality in geography, addressing how the turbulent circumstances of life after loss can speak to tensions in geographers' understandings of connection and disconnection, presence and absence, relation and non-relation, activity and passivity. By focussing on how people come to live on after loss, this thesis moves beyond the melancholic tendencies of existing literatures on loss to foreground incipient processes of corporeal transformation. Its thrust is thus consolatory: it aims to recognise the gaps and tears that accompany ends, whilst refusing to forgo the vital and affirmative possibilities of life after loss.

Declaration

I certify that:

- i. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy;
- ii. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and
- iii. this thesis is fewer than 100,000 words limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps, and bibliographies.

Vickie Zhang

Acknowledgement of country

This research took place on the lands of the Wurundjeri, Ngunnawal and Wiradjuri peoples.

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of these lands and pay my respects to Elders past and present. I recognise that sovereignty has never been ceded.

Turbulence, habit and desire:

*life after two
coal mine closures*

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank the participants of this research for the time they spent sitting and reflecting with me. Each person I spoke to indelibly inflected and informed the pathway this thesis has taken, and I am grateful for the care and hospitality they each showed in receiving, and occasionally feeding, an inquisitive stranger.

There are no words to capture the influence that my supervisor David Bissell has had on my life and this thesis. This project simply would not exist without his inspiration, perception and grace—it would not have been done, and I am convinced that I would not have wanted to do it either. It was his magnetism that initially drew me to the intellectual task, but it is his compassion and insight ever since that has driven me to continue it, teaching me that the pursuit of knowledge is not foremost a calling of the mind, but of the heart and soul. I thank David for the life-giving force he has imparted on me and this thesis, which shadows every word I have written here and will accompany many more beyond.

My deepest appreciation goes to Mark Wang for opening my eyes as an undergraduate to a different China on the extraordinary *China Field Class*, and for relentlessly supporting me in my pursuit of this imaginary. I thank Mark for attentively seeing me through from Honours to PhD, for his unyielding encouragement and shrewd guidance, and for always urging me to be true to myself.

I originally began this project at the School of Sociology, The Australian National University, where I spent the first year of my candidature. I owe much to the generous community headed by Helen Keane at the School of Sociology, to Russell Smith, Monique Rooney and the Theory Reading Group, to Kristal Coe, R. Alex Henry, Tamara Jacka and, above all, to Clare Southerton.

I acknowledge the financial support of The University of Melbourne's Elizabeth and Vernon Puzey Scholarship, an Australian Government Research Training Place Scholarship and an Australian Government Endeavour Research Fellowship. I also received additional support from Australian Research Council Discovery grant DP160103771.

In Kandos, there are many people to thank for their invaluable assistance, brilliant company and insightful reflections. My thanks in particular go to Alex Wissner, Buzz Sanderson, Georgie Pollard, Christine McMillan, Jenny More, Brett Nutting, Brent Barlow, Dave Standfield and Edwina McEgan. I am grateful for the generous engagement of Centennial Coal, particularly of Buster Munday and Bob Miller. I also thank Dennis Wallace and Greg Guest for allowing me the opportunity to go underground at Airly mine.

In Pingdingshan, I would like to thank Hao Zheng, Jing Cathy Chai, Shufang Tian, Guanghua Qi and Qinggang Lv. I could not be more grateful for the companionship of Lijianan Zhang on fieldwork; without her composure, charm and skill, this fieldwork—and this thesis—would have been immeasurably poorer. I will remember with great fondness the outdoor trips taken on days off with my new friends at the *Tiantianhuwai* climbing club.

I had the good fortune to undertake several institutional visits throughout this project.

I thank Jingzhong Ye for hosting me at the College of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University. I appreciate the assistance of He Li and Xiaohui Pan from the Northeast Institute of Geography and Agroecology, and the invitation from Hong Zhu and Zhenjie Yuan to drop into South China Normal University. I am grateful for the celestial friendship of Effy Xing Qi in Beijing.

In the UK, I was able to spend several meditative months at the Department of Geography, Durham University. My thanks go to Ben Anderson for hosting me on this visit, to Sarah Knuth for letting me hole up in her home and to Paul Harrison for his wisdom and kindness. My thanks also go to Mitch Rose for hosting me on a short but excessively enjoyable visit to Aberystwyth.

Closer to home, I would like to acknowledge the support and friendship from colleagues in the School of Geography (in its many guises) at the University of Melbourne over the years, including Angeliki Balayannis, Jon Barnett, Candice Boyd, Sangeetha Chandrashekeran, Nicole Cook, Alex Cullen, Russell Drysdale, Jane Dyson, Tim Edensor, Paris Hadfield, Lesley Head, Rachel Hughes, Ben Iaquinto, Lisa Palmer, Sarah Rogers, Ian Rutherford, Libby Straughan and Elissa Waters. Props go to the inimitable inhabitants of Room 204, especially Bradley Clarke-Wood, Thea Hewitt, Adam Moore and Pia Treichel, whose digital avatars were the very best of companions in 2020. I would also like to thank Chandra Jayasuriya for generously producing the maps in chapter three.

I am grateful for the close friends who, at many points of this thesis, brought me back to being, especially Adrienne Grech, Megan Hollo, Emma Hoy, Antonija Kurbalija, Mikey McCusker, Alana Smith, and Simon Tinh To.

Thank you to Stan, Ting and Ebie Z for taking me in during the final months of writing, when, despite the quiet of lockdown, chaos seemed to prevail.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Ke Zhang and Jian Ying Yang. The effects of the desires they had and the decisions they made long ago, to uproot from their homelands in search of new worlds, still echo through me today. They haunt every yearning I have, and every word I write.

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Other images that have been included throughout the thesis are not treated as figures; instead, they are intended to play a more impressionistic role in evoking atmospheres of place and encounter.

Order is a rare island; it is an archipelago.
Disorder is the common ocean from which these islands emerge. The undertow erodes the banks; the soil, worn, little by little loses its order and collapses. Elsewhere, a new archipelago will emerge from the waters. Disorder is the end of systems, and their beginning. Everything always goes toward chaos, and, sometimes, everything comes from it.

— Michel Serres (quoted in Girard, 2000, p. 174)

Like a live wire, the subject channels what's going on around it in the process of its own self-composition. ... Things happen. The self moves to react, often pulling itself someplace it didn't exactly intend to go.

— Kathleen Stewart (2007, p. 79)

1 Introduction: life after loss

Introduction

Walking up the dusty main street that zigzags through Drum Village, I make my usual stroll up to the primary school. It is the dead of winter; carved terraces of loess stand dry around me as my foggy breath rises in the frigid air. I am back in China after having finished the research project that first brought me to Drum Village a year prior. Then, I had spoken to men who had once left as migrant workers but had since returned to the village. I wondered what it was that brought them home, when everyone else seemed to be heading the other way. Returning this time, my second visit to the village located in China's coal heartland, Shanxi province, I navigate the village feeling both sheepish and exposed. Exposed, because I am aware of the peculiarity of my presence, a foreign-born young woman sojourning in this non-descript place—an off-the-map village that, to the average Chinese, might come across as unremarkable, one of six hundred thousand such villages across China. I feel sheepish, because of my trouble expressing to people exactly why it is I am here; what is remarkable to me about this apparently undistinguished place; why precisely I am transfixed by the everyday lives of the *laobaixing*, the 'old hundred surnames', the ordinary people. Still working on putting names to the faces that pass me by—the *nainai* and *yeye*, the aunties and uncles, the children and their children's children—I wave to a seemingly familiar passer-by. By the time I arrive at the village school, the chimney is already billowing thick black smoke, coal ovens heating up the classrooms, lessons starting for the day.

A year on from my first research visit, I am back to the village, camera in hand, with the intention of filming footage for a documentary. What, exactly, I am trying to film, I am not yet sure. Instead, I justify it as an exploratory project and simply set about observing the day-to-day of village life. I settle into a series of loops: hanging in the small supermarket, standing on a street corner, lazing by a fallowing field, sitting in an aunty's kitchen. After all, I reason, it doesn't *really* matter where I direct my lens, because the signs of change are everywhere. Four decades of economic reform and growth have brought shock after seismic shock to Chinese society since the late 1970s. As the rising tide affects urbanites and villages alike, the nation hums to the tune of China's 'economic miracle', reshaping the everyday lives of its people. In Drum Village, I witness internet connections being installed in homes for the first time, children heading off to schools in town, young adults farewelling the village for the cities. The neighbouring township slowly expands to swallow its rural peripheries, including for the

inhabitants of Drum Village, on the edge of town, the urban wave couldn't come sooner. And yet, despite these shifting customs and new rituals, change in the village seems to be coming at a pace that is simultaneously too fast and not fast enough. With income inequality soaring in China, villagers are being left behind by urban-centred economic development focussed on coastal megacities. Those in the peripheries watch on, wondering when they too are to reap the benefits of these rapid developments.

Circling the streets of Drum Village, I would often encounter men who had agreed to be interviewed for my study of return migration to the village. Some of them had told me of their happy returns home, of how they were no longer planning to go out again, instead looking forward to working locally or imminent retirement. Those were the good stories. But there were also those who had returned more grudgingly, those reluctantly redirected by layoffs, personal illness, family tragedy. These latter stories are the ones that have stayed with me the most. One interview that I remember vividly was with a man who shares my surname, Zhang. Married with a wife, young daughter and elderly parents at home, Zhang returned to Drum Village when his father became seriously ill. Zhang was, in a way, one of the luckier ones: his decision to return was his own, leaving his migrant job to care for his father, in a labour of filial duty and love. Most of the other reluctantly returning men did not have the luxury of choice, returning upon becoming unemployed or unable to find new work, disposed upon becoming surplus to requirements at their working destinations. Such transitions were invariably bittersweet; the men were happy to return to the comforts of home, but they were also deeply aware of the need to find the next job to replace the last.

Back in the village, Zhang had temporarily taken on his aging father's work grazing the family's sheep. But he did not intend to stay long. He was hopeful about going out again soon, about leaving the village again. He *had* to, Zhang explained, because the family needed the money. The jobs he could pick up near home were barely enough to keep them afloat, let alone to keep pace with the shifting expectations and desires surging through contemporary life. Sitting in the family's *yaodong*—a traditional cave home—I was struck by the material simplicity of their surroundings, mud-paved brown walls rendered with the fine yellow loess ubiquitous to the region. Zhang explained that he hoped to be able to go out again after Chinese New Year, in a few months' time, when work would be more abundant and his father's condition more settled.

A year later, on my second trip to Drum Village, I am surprised to see that Zhang is still around. Strolling down that same dusty road, I wave when I see him. "Still here?" I ask, and he nods. Six months later, when I am back in the summertime, I bump into him again. By now, it has become a refrain in the village—there are no good jobs anymore. The problems are, on the one hand, local.

Shanxi is an inland province known to have a sluggish economy, having posted, at the time, the lowest or second-lowest growth out of China's many provinces for several years running (NBS, 2020). Shanxi is China's coal-producing heartland, but has been marred by issues with oversupply, safety and pollution, with many coal mines closing or being amalgamated into bigger, more efficient mines. This situation has been further complicated by the machinations of its famous coal barons and infamously corrupt officials. More than a regional trend, however, Drum Villagers' difficulties finding work reflect more fundamental changes afoot in China's contemporary economy. After decades of rapid economic growth, one that has seen enormous increases in income and quality of life for its 1.4 billion people, China has entered an era of economic slowdown. China's growth since reform and opening up has relied on an export-oriented model based on the exploitation of natural resources, foreign direct investment, international trade, and the abundant but low-cost labour of surplus agricultural workers. Prevailing forces now being challenged by a dwindling pool of surplus agricultural labour, diminishing returns to infrastructure construction, limits to urbanisation, massive government debt, an oversized and inefficient state-sector, industrial overcapacity and oversupply, increasingly stringent environmental protections and an ageing population that leaves China in a race to 'get rich before it gets old'. These converging conditions have led to president Xi Jinping's declaration of a 'new normal' in China, marking a shift into a lower-growth economy (Chen and Groenewold, 2019).

For an economy already at a crossroads, this complex transition comes at a time when the once-rapid improvement in people's quality of life no longer seems so assured. The government drives to upskill its population, but young and expectant graduates are experiencing increasing uncertainty and difficulty finding work, faced with enormous competition for few jobs, as rural students continue to struggle to access the higher levels of education crucial to economic success. E-commerce and platform service sectors are booming, but they offer workers high-stress, insecure gig work for low pay and few benefits, while simultaneously undermining alternative possibilities for work in disrupted sectors. Rural migrant labour has been central to China's economic miracle, but with labour costs rising, migrant workers are left without work as factories move to regions and countries with cheaper costs. Ramped-up environmental policies target the polluting practices endemic to China's industrial production, but lead also to the forcible closure of the countless factories and mines that workers rely on to live.

These events portend deep economic transitions with wide-ranging social effects in China, jeopardising the hopes of upward mobility and productive employment for a working generation that has come of age in the era of China's economic miracle. They further suggest that a line cannot just be drawn at the Chinese border, as global production networks produce complex linkages that allow effects to resonate

across place (Coe *et al.*, 2004; Wei, 2010). Indeed, China's economy is fundamentally interlinked with those of its trading partners around the world, a fact made strikingly evident during the early days of the reverberating 2008 global financial crisis, when the World Bank estimated that as many as 36 million Chinese workers lost their jobs, despite US\$600 billion (and, by some estimates, closer to a trillion dollars) in government stimulus spending that allowed the nation to avoid the worst of the impacts seen elsewhere (World Bank, 2012). Although much emphasis has been placed on the *outsourcing* of labour from the west to China, China's growth has also made it the world's largest *importer* of raw materials such as iron ore, coal, oil and soybeans from international partners.

Demonstrating the difficulties involved in 'decoupling' from China, a slowdown or pivot in the Chinese economy will also produce effects that filter through to partners around the world. The impact of these restructuring forces on working lives will be immense, impacting the jobs of workers in and out of China, across industries, in blue and white-collar work, from the top to the bottom, reverberating from firm, to worker, to the families that depend on them, and back again.

More worryingly, China's slowdown is not the only source of disruption that threatens to proliferate through an interconnected global economy; it may perhaps not even close to being the most consequential one. Even without the Chinese slowdown, advanced and emerging contemporary economies alike are undergoing massive technological, political and environmental changes, faced with profound disruptions and deep legacies that together undermine the social and economic systems of the past. The OECD's 2019 Global Outlook found that growth slowed to its lowest rate globally since the 2008 crisis, citing challenges posed by "an escalation of trade conflicts, geopolitical tensions, the possibility of a sharper-than-expected slowdown in China and climate change" (OECD, 2019 n.p.). With busts following booms, the current downturn comes at a time when economies are still recovering from the deep and far-reaching impacts of the 2008 financial crisis—a crisis that, as Harvey underscores, is ongoing, because "capital never solves its crisis tendencies; it merely moves them around ... geographically as well as systematically" (Harvey, 2011, pp. 11–12). These cyclical crises are being intensified by structural changes to employment: trends towards precarious work are reshaping the way we work, including the rise of digital platform-based gig economies, decentralised workforces and flexible organisational models able to circumvent existing workplace protections (Srnicsek, 2017). Taking this further, advancements in automation and artificial intelligence are threatening to replace human labour in a wide range of industries; a McKinsey Global Institute (2017) report suggests that up to 14 per cent of the current global workforce might be directly affected by 2030, with essentially *all* jobs expected to change in some way. At the same time, and perhaps most significantly, global climate change hails enormous disruptions to existing modes of production and consumption, with the

IPCC (2018) suggesting that in order to avoid the most catastrophic impacts of climate change, rapid, profound, and unprecedented transformations to existing ways of working must be enacted. Adding to this is the shock of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic—and playing out as this thesis is being written—that has shut down economies around the world, producing effects of mass joblessness that are predicted to extend deep into an already uncertain future.

These currents, and more, are irrevocably, and seemingly unstoppably, redefining working life as we have known it. These deep structural changes foreshadow more than just the usual “creative destruction” endemic to capitalism; instead, they appear to signal a threshold into qualitatively different organisations of economy and society. These processes will be mutually reinforcing as well as mutually incoherent, each with their own potential to upend the existing employment landscape for workers, whilst also cutting across place in complex and unpredictable ways. They are wide-ranging transitions that will affect the lives of vast portions of the working population and the people that rely on them, destroying existing jobs with at times only glimmering promises of what will take their place. And, yet, despite the immensity of these personal impacts, the academic focus has largely been on the economic, technological and political dimensions of these shifts. Much has been written about the structuring forces of capitalist dynamics, indexing changes to economies at national, international and regional scales. But there has been significantly less focus on how these dynamics actually play out in the grounded lives of workers, families, communities and place, how people are actually experiencing and navigating disruptions to the lives that they once lived, and how they inhabit the changed circumstances they now encounter. If the aim is to better understand the potentials and perils of these deep and wide-ranging, but often obscured, economic transitions, then this oversight of economies as they are lived is consequential. As scholars of everyday life have demonstrated, what might be called the ‘micropolitics’ of embodied life cannot be read off the macro-structural scaffolds of a situation. Its dynamics cannot be mapped on to dynamics exhibited by systems at higher levels of abstraction. The life of the individual bears a complicated relation to the spaces and flows around it. The experiential zone of everyday life acts and reacts in complex, divergent, and often incoherent ways to structural changes. As a shifting space of contingencies, its twisting surfaces are as plastic and porous as the people that inhabit it. As a result, it is crucial that further work be done to investigate how structural transitions are coming to be felt and navigated as profoundly *personal* transitions. Unable to be read off wider conditions, everyday life demands its own study. As economic transformations become an increasingly prevalent experience within contemporary everyday life, such research only becomes more vital if we are to blunt the worst—and proliferate the best—of its impacts on people, and the places they hold dear.

Research questions and aims

Set in this context, the overall aim of this thesis is to explore the embodied experiences of workers as they adjust to life in the wake of economic changes. It does so through the example of *job losses* in regions of industrial transformation. Recognising that widespread job loss will emerge as a prevailing experience for bodies caught within the turbulence of structural economic shifts, this thesis uses recent examples of workplace closure to explore workers' experiences of loss and disruption caused by changing economic landscapes. It does so in the context of coal mining, an industry projected to decline throughout the 21st century. Tracking life after loss, I follow the unfolding lives of workers and their families as they navigate the wake of imposed job loss and workplace change. I do so at two recently shuttered, disparately located underground coal mines, one in a small town in eastern Australia and another in a small city in central China—in the years prior to my visit, both mines closed after exhausting their viable resources, leaving a patchwork of unemployed, redeployed and retired former employees.

This is thus a thesis about loss, and about living on in the wake of loss. Although dealing with workplace closure and retrenchment, however, this thesis is not just a story of unemployment and ruin. Although understanding loss as enacting a cut in the fabric of life, my aim is to situate loss in the broader landscape of life, by demonstrating how loss is not just a producer of voids, but also an interruptive force that exposes people to the push and pull of new and potentially unknown intensities and influences. As I explain in more detail in the literature review, this interest in change and transformation comes in response to a tendency to approach loss through the melancholic intensities it provokes. Here, attention is focussed on the emotional immediacy of the event and the propensity for these intensities to endure, continuing to affect bodies long in the future. And, yet, this thesis's contention is that it is possible to acknowledge the difficulties of loss without forgoing the potentials of the present. That is, rather than just focussing on bodies' internalisation of and identification with loss, this thesis aims to draw attention to the accompanying, latent and, I argue, underappreciated capacities for people to adapt to changing circumstances after events of disruption, for bodies shift and diverge, to change in unexpected ways. As I have suggested, everyday life is a constantly unfolding and contingent process, where even the most routine and regularised versions of existence are shot through with unremitting novelty and transformation. Accordingly, this thesis aims to explore processes of distancing and estrangement *alongside* those of reconciling and redirecting. Recognising its *discontinuities*, I conceptualise the timespace following the cut of loss as an open interval, where the future cannot always be read off events of the past, at least not in any straightforward or linear way.

After the imposition of workplace closures, families move, priorities shift, situations develop and practices transition; many will find work elsewhere—some immediately, some after trials and more ends, some maybe never. By opening up the space of loss to the lateral forces of the present—and not just the melancholy of the past—workplace closure becomes an event that opens up an indeterminate future. Set in this indeterminate timespace, this thesis aims to track the complex array of forces that come to shape and orient bodies in the shifting circumstances of life after loss.

In this context, and focussing on those still in their working years, my research questions in this thesis are:

1. How do people respond to shocks and disturbances to their everyday lives brought about by workplace closure and job loss?
2. In the wake of such disruptions, how do circumstances of life after loss attain capacities to alter and transform bodies?
3. After the crisis of loss, how might people regain a sense of life as an ‘ordinary’ timespace, reorienting from the past to the future?

The main story tracked by this thesis, then, is the vicissitudes of bodily adjustment to changing conditions. Picking up the threads of workers’ lives several years after the respective coal mine closures, this thesis tracks the experiences of reckoning that arise during a period of personal crisis and transition, backtracing the trajectories that come to redefine life in the interceding interval. Its overall thrust is thus consolatory—it aims to recognise the gaps and tears that accompany ends, whilst refusing to forego the vital and affirmative possibilities of life.

In developing this argument, this thesis has three interrelated disciplinary aims, which contribute to geographies of relationality, affect and embodiment. I briefly introduce these three aims here, before further elaborating the broader sub-disciplinary contexts in the sections that follow. Firstly, through the example of job loss, this thesis aims to understand how bodies experience the cut in *relationality* brought upon by the workplace closures, and the interruptions it subsequently imposes upon everyday life. In this context, job loss becomes an occasion to conceive of bodies as passive and affected by others, rather than intentional and affecting. This shift of emphasis opens the recognition of passivity as a legitimate ‘force’ that intervenes in the constitution of subjectivities, understanding the operation of bodies through the vulnerability of their relations to diverse others. Secondly, this thesis extends cultural geographies of loss to develop a *processual* approach to loss that suggests how bodies might navigate and adjust to imposed circumstances. Building on the understanding of bodies as exposed and passive, the aim here is to understand how bodily change might come about after loss through the

absorption and conversion of externally imposed conditions, folding otherness into the body to produce new attributes of the self. Thirdly, and finally, this thesis brings these arguments together to show how painful events such as job loss can be followed by experiences of renewal and *revitalisation*, with the proviso that resources and circumstances amenable to producing such effects are at play. The emphasis here is on the capacity for life to surprise, producing affirmable micro-shocks that have the potential to reorient and restore bodies, breathing new life into experiential worlds.

Through these three aims, explored in three corresponding chapters, the overall objective of the thesis is to illuminate the more hidden durations of life after loss, sidestepping the stasis of melancholy and grief to understand how it is that people might come to carry on, live on—and ultimately even move on—after profound events of disruption to everyday life. In the remainder of this introduction, I elaborate these aims with broad reference to three sub-disciplinary bodies of literature—economic geography, cultural economy and cultural geography—to show how this thesis’ approach to job loss contributes to debates in each of these fields. I conclude by outlining the chapters that follow.

Affected economies: economic geographies of workplace closure

The empirical context for this exploration of life after loss is the contemporary world of work, looking at economic change through the more specific instance of workplace closure. Existing research in economic geography and political economy have generally been interested in the broad patterns, causes and consequences of economic change, undertaking macro-analyses at the regional (including the metropolitan) and national scales. Recognising that the ‘capitalisation of almost everything’ means that ordinary lives cannot be divorced from the dynamics of geographically distant financial markets, the effects of events such as financial crises and economic cycles are also understood to routinely ripple out to produce rounds of unemployment in places near and far (Leyshon and Thrift, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2009; Martin, 2011; Blažek and Netrdová, 2012; Pollard, 2013; Crescenzi *et al.*, 2016). However, these studies tend to rely on numerical analyses focussed on production-side aggregates such as the firm, the industrial sector, and the region, rather than workers themselves. Localised demand-side conditions are emphasised, finding a consistently influential role for local labour markets and policies in post-redundancy employment outcomes, often generating mobility within and across industries and regions (Beer and Thomas, 2007; Bailey *et al.*, 2012; Eriksson *et al.*, 2016, 2018; Beer *et al.*, 2019). Where the individual is addressed directly, it is often done using variables such as age, gender, relationship status, education, income, and employment status, with a focus on population, cohort and locational effects (Shuttleworth *et al.*, 2005; Doussard *et al.*, 2009; Bailey *et al.*, 2012; Eriksson *et al.*, 2016).

With its focus on numbers, sectors and regions, the economic geography approach only tells one side of the story, exploring systemic changes to the organisation of labour and production. Taken together, I argue that these studies work with an overly simplified model of human subjectivity, one that is more interested in people as *labour* than people as people. To appropriate MacKinnon's (2017) words, the focus is on "how *labour* as a social actor adapts to economic change", rather than how *people* adapt to change (p. 70, emphasis added). By conflating the person with their labour power, studies in economic geography often overlook the felt impact of these complex transitions on workers by assuming that people's reactions can be mapped on to structural changes in the economy, through shifts that can be read as either beneficial for or detrimental to workers. Rather than expanding on how economic change routes its way through the complex lives of the thinking-feeling-labouring bodies, workers are reduced to units of labour power circulating within the push-and-pull of determining structures. Refusing to reify labour power as an isolated capacity, feminist economic geographers have long shown that domains of work and life cannot be easily separated. What has come to narrowly count as 'work' is inextricably interwoven with the social, cultural and political lives of people and their communities, and reliant on a whole network of social and material infrastructures (Cameron and Gibson-Graham, 2003; Pratt, 2004; Weeks, 2011; McDowell, 2015). Despite this, McDowell (2015) notes that mainstream discussions of economic change have continued to focus predominantly on the forces of *production* over the social reproductive labour that underpins the possibility of that activity in the first place.

Zooming in from the broad brush of economy-wide characterisations, this thesis extends economic geography approaches to workplace closure by affirming the importance of understanding economic shifts through their complex manifestations as embodied transitions: though transformed workplaces, changing addresses, interrupted careers, and displaced bodies—through people, families and communities coming to terms with the circumstances of new jobs and new lives, often under conditions not of their choosing. In demonstrating ways in which work and life are entangled, this thesis illuminates experiential worlds that are simultaneously part of, as well as *excessive to*, labour market forces, revealing an open and indeterminate world where the swarm of *affective* forces constantly ricochet against the structuring machinations of power and order. Situated at the juncture of work and life, this thesis investigates how people adapt—practically, emotionally, corporeally—to the transformations foisted upon them by changing worlds of work. Building on these feminist-inspired insights, the next section explains how this thesis extends economic geographical approaches to job loss by bringing this literature on workplace closure into closer dialogue with cultural geographical approaches to work, attuned to how the impacts of work extend spatially (beyond the workplace) and

temporally (beyond working hours) to capture identities, desires, hopes, tactics and energies that are excessive to—whilst also being entirely inseparable from—the production and reproduction of working lives.

Economic affects: cultural economies of working life

Contributing to theorisations of life at the intersection of economy and culture, this thesis attends to the ‘infrastructural’ nature of affect as it comes to circulate in disrupted economic worlds. As I explain below, affect is an ‘immaterial’ force that is expressed in bodies as intensities of feeling. By producing transitions in bodies’ powers of acting, affect can be considered infrastructural that actively participates in the operation of economic systems, as part of what Thrift (2012, p. 144) calls the “expressive infrastructure” of contemporary economies. Oversight of affect’s infrastructural function is significant because, as Anderson (2014) underscores, embodied and affective dynamics are critical to the operation of any political or economic system. To make inroads on this relation between the material and the immaterial, this thesis draws from the interdisciplinary field of ‘cultural economy’, influenced by its conceptualisation of entangled cultural and material worlds. Cutting across disciplines such as geography, anthropology, and science and technology studies, cultural economy emerges from a critique of theories that have tended to exclude culture as a key component in the operation of economic worlds, or to see culture as a secondary input to already-constituted economic systems (du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Amin and Thrift, 2007; Anderson *et al.*, 2020). Like much recent cultural geography interested in rethinking human subjectivity (see Simpson, 2017), cultural economy approaches are driven by an insistence that bodies are not ‘rational’ in the *homo economicus* sense, but rather a distributed, relational effect of diverse environments that shape, govern and inform behaviour.

Of course, an interest in embodied life is, in many senses, not new. A turn to themes of emotion and feeling has been a hallmark of social scientific endeavour in the past two decades; pioneered by thinkers in cultural studies, queer theory, feminist theory and philosophy, diverse approaches to the ‘affective economies’ of the body have emerged across different parts of geography. As Sharp (2009) suggests, feminists were early contributors to the geographical discourse, primarily through an interest in emotion and a commitment to understanding life outside of its so-called ‘rational’ guises. Thus, Anderson and Smith (2001), writing at the turn of the millennium, note the limited work on emotion in geography, suggesting that the “gendered basis of knowledge production”—its masculinist bias—has contributed to the persistent sidelining of emotions within critical thought (Anderson and Smith, 2001, p. 7). Related discourses around affect—a cognate, though distinct term—emerge in geography around the same time, similarly interested in intensities of feeling, but, as I elaborate below,

understanding embodied experience as prefigured by impersonal forces that operate prior to signification and meaning (McCormack, 2003; Thrift, 2008; Anderson and Harrison, 2009; Anderson, 2014). Since these early commentaries, however, much has changed, with a diverse range of geographical research investigating emotion and affect in domains as diverse as race and nationalism (Ahmed, 2004; Crang and Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Nayak, 2010; Antonsich *et al.*, 2020), gender (Sharp, 2009; Colls, 2012), geopolitics (Pain, 2009), social and political movements (Bosco, 2007; Askins, 2009; Cass and Walker, 2009); non-human entanglements (Sultana, 2011; Barua, 2020); consumption (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2008; Miller, 2014)); biopolitics (Clough, 2008; Anderson, 2012; Schurr and Militz, 2018); children's geographies (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012), digital media and platforms (Ash, 2012; Bissell, 2020), urban life (Laurier and Philo, 2006; Simpson, 2013; Shaw, 2014); landscape (Macpherson, 2010); illumination (Edensor, 2012); architecture (Adey, 2008; Kraftl and Adey, 2008; Lees and Baxter, 2011); and mobility and migration (Ho, 2009; Bissell, 2016; Zhang, 2018). As Anderson writes (2014), the broad range of interests demonstrates Eve Sedgwick's affirmation of "the freedom of the affects to combine with more or less any aspect of life", with the result that "there can never be a carefully bounded affectual or emotional geography separate from other geographies" (6).

Equally, attention to the embodied life of the *economy* in particular is not new either. It features, for example, in Hochschild's (1983) feminist articulation of 'emotional labour', Burawoy's (1982) exploration of changing working conditions at an agricultural equipment manufacturer near Chicago, and Sennett's (1998) account of the post-Fordist economy's reshaping of workers' values and ethics. Much affect-inflected work on labour has long been inspired by the writings of autonomist Marxists (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Berardi, 2009; Lazzarato, 2014). Studies in geography-adjacent disciplines have long shown the importance of economic cultures in the everyday lives of workers. The interdisciplinary field of working-class studies is exemplary, and ties into a recent return to matters of class in geography in the context of a shifting global economy whose socio-economic structure is being rewritten by transnational and neoliberal forces (Smith, 2000; Dowling, 2009; Rutherford, 2010; McDowell, 2011; Das, 2012; Taylor, 2012). People are understood to relate to working life through intense attachments and embodied identifications, feelings that can often be buried beneath sweeping socio-economic categorisations. With working class presented "as a dynamic and relational category" that is "simultaneously economic and cultural", significant attention is paid to how "subjectivities and materialities intersect" at individual, household and community scales (Russo and Linkon, 2005; Stenning, 2008, pp. 9–10; Strangleman, 2008; Wacquant, 2008). Rather than an imposed classification, class is understood as "an identity [that] is forged and experienced", intersecting with

axes of difference such as gender, age and race, to produce a complex set of working-class subjectivities (Stenning, 2008; Dowling, 2009, p. 834; Taylor, 2012; Emery, 2019). Paralleling some of the turns in this thesis, working class scholars have similarly turned to consider the affective life of post-industrial spaces, speaking to subjectivities influenced by legacies of ‘ruination’ and intergenerational trauma (Navaro-Yashin, 2009; Walkerdine, 2010; Mah, 2012; Emery, 2019).

In this cross-disciplinary context, the current resurgence of geographical interest in embodied economic life should not be framed as a new field of endeavour. Instead, I argue that this burst of work involves a return to longstanding themes *equipped with* insights and concepts that have since been developed across geography. It is also driven in particular by a desire to understand worlds increasingly affected by sets of global economic forces that since grown in prominence. In a late capitalist era, investigations of embodied life have taken on an increasing urgency, recognising that expanding biopolitical logics aimed at the ‘economisation of life’ are redesigning subjectivities in the interests of capital and that proliferating conditions of precarity are eroding capacities to persist and endure, let alone thrive and flourish (Berlant, 2011; Lazzarato, 2014; Murphy, 2017). Indeed, across recent geographical work on the affective life of the economy—whether concerned with the more passively-induced effects of deindustrialisation and the forms of ruin and abandonment it leaves behind (Lavery *et al.*, 2014; Emery, 2019; Pohl, 2019; Dawney, 2020), the embodied life of top-down interventions such as government-imposed austerity measures (Hitchen, 2019; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019; Hitchen and Raynor, 2020; Stenning, 2020), lived experiences of indebtedness and precarity (Harris and Nowicki, 2018; Strauss, 2018; Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Dawney, 2020) or simply what it takes to persist in the workplace cultures of the new economy (Cockayne, 2016; Worth, 2016b; Pettit, 2019; Richardson, 2019; Deuchar and Dyson, 2020)—there is increasing consideration being paid to how the conditions of economic life push and pull bodies across a wide gamut of affects, affecting—and, more often than not, it seems, *diminishing*—the capacity for human flourishing.

Focussed on critiquing late liberal intrusions on life, these studies share a tendency to paint experiences of economic shifts as ultimately negative, causing a slow—even inevitable—attrition of everyday existences, where maintenance and treading water become increasingly difficult. Without disagreeing with these analyses, which forcefully illuminate the injustices of increasingly parsimonious social formations, this thesis aims to amplify the residual presence of more hopeful pockets of experience within these structures of life. The suggestion here is that, even under trying structural conditions, the potential for affirmable difference—for life to feel like it is *improving* rather than worsening—nonetheless remains as a latent possibility. We might understand this potential as the ever-present

‘promise’ of affect, whose openness means that intensities of experience remain perpetually open to change and transformation. Indeed, for Massumi (2002b), affect must be understood as “beyond infrastructural”, recognising affect’s capacity, unlike material infrastructures, to fluctuate and transform, “to switch domains and produce effects across them”, to cut across space ‘transversally’, to sit in the margin of manoeuvrability of a situation (p. 45). Thus, whilst this thesis understands affects as suffusing working life—producing the attachments and connections that hold together the collectives of bodies, objects and technologies that constitute economies—it also emphasises the *indeterminacy* of affective life. As theorists of affect emphasise, affect always exceeds any order or structure that might be attributed to or imposed upon it; affect is always “excessive to the various ways in which life is calculated, specified, assessed, managed and otherwise intervened in” (Anderson, 2014, p. 16). If what it means to live and experience a situation is never fully determined by structural forces, then it follows that then a fuller understanding of contemporary economies must take seriously the affective agencies of bodies as they experience and navigate the worlds around them.

Affective economies: cultural geographies of embodiment

By foregrounding the indetermination and excess of affective life, this thesis foregrounds affect’s circulation as forces that operate prior to their crystallisation into particular forms or states of feeling. Whilst some geographers, have tended to focus on affective states and atmospheres that have gained a certain, if provisional, metastability (e.g. Hitchen, 2019 on paranoia; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019 on weariness; Anderson *et al.*, 2020 on relief and pressure)—recognising, of course, that such intensities “are only imperfectly housed in the proper names we give to emotions” (Anderson, 2009, p. 77), named as they are ‘after-the-fact’—this thesis does not take particular emotional states or intensities as its point of focus. Instead, my analysis centres on a timespace—that of life *after* the event of job loss—tracking how people’s lives unfold from a single point in time into diverse trajectories that have the potential to diverge, converge and cross lines of coherence. By doing so, I position my analysis of the body upstream of nameable affects or emotions, staying closer to a Spinozist approach to affect as a more indeterminate force that augments or diminishes a (nominally human) body’s capacity to act, tracking the way in which bodies are pushed and pulled by intensities that modulate these outcomes of experience. Doing so, I employ what has been termed a ‘postphenomenological’ approach to lifeworlds (Ash and Simpson, 2016; McCormack, 2017; Roberts, 2018; Kinkaid, 2020). At their core, postphenomenological approaches emphasise the generative force of the body’s exposure to situations and encounters, “mov[ing] away from the assumption of a subject that exists prior to experience towards an examination of how the subject comes to be in or through experience” (Ash and Simpson,

2016, p. 49). Postphenomenological approaches are interested in conditions of palpability and experience that do not assume an intending, sovereign subject, situating the subject in the distributed context of the objects and surrounds that relationally co-constitute the (human) body. And, yet, despite a resolute focus on the objects and surrounds of life, I affirm McCormack's assertion that "postphenomenological does not mean post-palpable" (McCormack, 2017, p. 7; cf. Ash and Simpson, 2016). As McCormack underscores, there is no reason that one cannot attend to forces excessive of the subject whilst *also* being attentive to how such forces come to impress upon the affect-image of the body—a process of becoming-palpable that Stewart (2011) calls 'worlding.' Accordingly, this thesis situates its analysis at the interface of environment-body relations, focussing on how circumstantial forces affect bodies from the outside to precipitate felt intensities and shifts in capacities for acting.

Despite the explosion of recent interest, it is worth noting that attention to affect and emotion remains a relatively recent endeavour in geography (see Anderson and Smith, 2001; Thrift, 2008). Although early discussions in geography tended to make a clear distinction between the two terms, usage appears to have become a matter of personal definition rather than disciplinary consensus. For some, the terms are often synonymous or overlapping (e.g. Anderson 2014), whereas for others they are resolutely distinct (e.g. McCormack, 2007). As Anderson (2014) notes, "affect" can be a source for confusion because it "is not part of the standard Euro-American lexicon", with origins in psychology and philosophy (p. 6). Even amongst affect scholars, the term affect has a resolutely heterogenous conceptual history; in their touchstone collection, Seigworth and Gregg (2010) identify at least eight distinct but often overlapping orientations to affect (p. 5-9). Where emotion might be understood as a relatively distinct state of feeling—legible for example through cultural codes and discourses—affect denotes the set of bodily forces that operate before, as well as alongside, such manifestations. Affects *can* crystallise into identifiable emotions, but they might not. The 'excess' and non-determinism of affect suggests that there is no straightforward link between particular affects and emotional states that might follow from them (see Anderson 2014, p. 16). Conversely, a focus on a particular emotion can obscure the other affective forces that might be at play in a situation. Affect is thus the more general term, related to synonyms such as moods, intensities, feelings and passions, with emotion referring to a narrower, 'downstream' set of codified expressions of affective life.

One important way in which studies of affect and emotion in geography have been seen to diverge is in the model of human subjectivity they (more or less explicitly) operationalise. Whereas emotion tends to suppose the existence of a distinctly human imaginary (in the sense that it is the fully-formed 'human' is assumed as the site at which the given emotional intensity takes place), geographies of affect mobilise

a posthuman understanding of the subject, atomising the body to consider the diverse elements and objects that collectively come to produce its capacities (McCormack, 2007; Wolfe, 2010; Braidotti, 2017; Williams *et al.*, 2019). As such, posthumanist geographers of affect, including those working under the rubric of what has been termed ‘non-representational theory’ (Thrift, 2008; Anderson and Harrison, 2009), have tended to draw on a Spinozist understanding of the body, usually via Deleuze, where the body’s affective powers are defined in relation to its capacity to affect or be affected by—to come into relation with—other bodies, “foregrounding material situatedness and nonhuman powers or agencies” (Williams *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). Bodies are defined not by their ostensible form—the human body being the obvious example—but rather their function: by the way bodies are constituted by a diverse array of objects and forces that organise to produce the “relations of speed and slowness, of motion and rest” that come to characterise a given body (Deleuze, 1988, p. 128). As such, affect is generally considered by non-representational geographers as pre-individual and pre-personal force, participating in situations before the emergence of the stable human subject, decentering the human body or subject as the main locus of analysis and interrogating the geographically situated ‘ecologies of experience’ that engender and inform corporeal life (Simpson, 2013).

By foregrounding what posthumanist geographies of affect have identified as the ‘excessive’ powers of life to become otherwise after loss, this thesis enacts what might be described as an ‘affirmationist’ stance to knowledge. As Harrison notes, ours is a subdiscipline in which “theories of life, of vitality, and of affirmation, are in the ascendant”, at a time when “affirmation of life and the life of affirmation form the keystone of many contemporary accounts of ontology, ethics, and politics” (Harrison, 2015, p. 285). Approaching existence through its potential for change, difference and escape, geographers of affect have advocated an affirmation of life and its capacities to animate and vitalise existence, emphasising the potential for difference, indetermination and excess in a given situation (Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000; Anderson and Harrison, 2009; Massumi, 2015). With its focus on the potentials and possibilities of becoming, affirmationist geographies have tended to emphasise the additive and productive dimensions of existence, portraying a world that is “not one of impotence but one of teeming potentiality” (Rose *et al.*, forthcoming). In response to affirmation’s ‘ascendancy’, hesitations have recently emerged about the blind spots, disavowals and sacrifices of such an approach (Harrison, 2015). As Philo (2017) explains, a concern is that with the rise of ‘more-than-human’ geographies oriented to the ‘and, and, and’ of a lively world, we are forgetting that “there is maybe a whole other, more expansive, trajectory to explore, a flip-side, an antipode ... alert to what diminishes the human, cribs and confines it, curtails or destroys its capacities” (p. 257–58). In a similar vein, Bissell and Gorman-Murray (2019) diagnose that a relational approach—common to much recent human

geography today—has tended to favour connective, constructive and productive facets of life over those disconnective, disruptive and destructive. The concern is that the version of life offered here, “a story of forward movement”, can serve to wilfully elide the gaps, holes and tears that incessantly pockmark existence—experiences that can be ignored, but ultimately never eliminated from corporeal life (p. 7). The critique is that there are ways of working ‘besides affirmation’ that are being sidelined, even forgotten, in the push of non-representational theory’s affirmation of affirmation (Dekeyser and Jellis, 2020).

My contention in this thesis, then, is that an analysis of loss (and job loss in particular) might serve as a corrective to the more straightforwardly affirmative accounts often associated with non-representational theory. Casting an eye to more ‘negative’ facets of existence, I suggest that the melancholy disposition of the literature on loss provides an empirical occasion to think through the emerging critique of geography’s affirmation of life. Concurrently, however, I suggest that affect’s focus on becoming and change pushes forward more negative understandings of loss, in an analysis that ultimately denies the prioritisation of either side of the apparently oppositional couplets of affirmation and negativity; becoming and stagnation; production and destruction. As such, the contribution of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, it extends geographies of loss by conceptualising an affirmative approach to affective life after loss; on the other hand, it balances affirmative geographies of affect by situating loss within the textured landscapes of life. This thesis thus ascribes a peculiar ambivalence to loss, an ambivalence that flows from an understanding of life as both *vulnerable* and *finite*: that vulnerability—the inherent exposure of bodies to an ‘outside’—and finitude—the understanding that all things have an end—are not just limits to, but also *conditions for* life’s possibilities (Rose, 2010, 2014; Romanillos, 2011). Accordingly, the negativity usually associated with life’s limits is understood as not just a constraining, but also an enabling—and *necessary* condition of living (Rose *et al.*, forthcoming). Balancing the two approaches, this thesis’s aim is to dive deeper into the complex relationship between affirmation and negativity in affective life, as it comes to be navigated in times of disruption.

Where affirmative theories of affect have tended to foreground the hopeful potential for life to be otherwise, in contrast, studies of loss focus on how life often remains in the grip of the traumatic event, mediated by feelings such as nostalgia, melancholy and grief. Although this backwards-looking approach to loss appears to sit uneasily with affect’s resolute focus on the potentials of the present and future, geographers have begun to acknowledge a certain liveliness to these ends. That is, although death and loss are forces that are seen to curtail existence, they are also events that come to drive activity in the wake of loss. Losses *remain*—through memories that haunt being, as cinders that testify

to the fire of events lived (Derrida, 1991; McGeachan, 2014). As cinders, these traces are not inert; instead, ember-like, they stand ready to reignite, to quicken, animate and activate life (Jones, 2011, p. 875). Memories return—willed or unwilled—not as mute repetitions of the past, but as embodied events that affect bodies in the present. As this thesis’ literature review will demonstrate, this tendency is implicit in studies of bereavement that track the ‘continuing bonds’ with lost loved ones (Maddrell, 2013; Pearce, 2019); in examinations of the spectral ‘absent presences’ that remain and endure through time (Edensor, 2005; Wylie, 2007); and in explorations of deindustrialising places in which legacies of ruination and decline have been left behind (Mah, 2012; Emery, 2019). Although the melancholy tendency is to look backwards to memories of the past, scholars are increasingly exploring the way those memories pierce the present to animate bodies, drawing a throughline between past, present and future.

Accordingly, this thesis aims to deepen this attention to the experiential timespaces of life after loss. It does so not by approaching bodies through their *continuities* with the drawn-out event of loss, but rather through the *cuts* such losses enact in the fabric of existing relations. That is, it explores the potentials for difference opened up by the *discontinuities* of the ends enacted by loss. As I argue in the next chapter, despite a turn to embodiment as ongoing process, the potential for transformation and change is rarely addressed in geographical studies of loss. Although life being seen to continue after loss, there remains a tendency to approach the future as ultimately refracted through the event of trauma. This inclination is evident, for example, in research on deindustrialising places, with its themes of “smokestack nostalgia” and ongoing legacies of ruination and decay (Strangleman, 2008; Meier, 2013). Rather than framing life after *through* the event of loss, I approach life *after* loss temporally, understanding ‘after’ as life subsequent to the event of disruption. That is, rather than just focussing on the dimensions of loss that endure and metamorphise over time, my objective is to consider the breadth of affective life as it is experienced *in the wake of* the loss. Affirming the embodied nature of experience, affective life is understood to take place in the timespace of the *present*, carrying with it the immediacy and indeterminacy that accompanies the flux of experience. Although the past is understood as emerging in the present, *how* it appears, and *which* aspects of the past appear, remain ambiguous and open to variation. Furthermore, although present experience must be understood through the remains and traces of the past, it is never *just* an outcome of the past. Instead, experience is modulated and conditioned by the circumstantial forces at play in any given situation, pushing and pulling bodies in numerous directions, and enabling and constraining different capacities (McCormack, 2013, 2017). As such, the timespace of the present must be understood as a space of

motion and commotion, “a process of being in transition that is always becoming more than itself” (McCormack, 2013, p. 24).

This emphasis on transformation and becoming is not to deny the importance of the event of loss, but rather to supplement such accounts with the recognition of how bodies can, do and indeed *must* change over time. Bodies do not just remember; they also forget, they re-orient, they live on—they even *move* on (Legg, 2004; Ricoeur, 2004; Muzaini, 2015; Hannah, 2018). Recognising the excessive and indeterminate nature of the present highlights the potential for bodies to change in ways that break with the past, adapting to new environments and producing presents with complex relations to past events. Introducing a spatial depth to experiential time, this thesis conceptualises memory as a corporeal event formed through the contraction of the past actions into the body. Although experiences of the past can take the form of images and flashbacks, they also emerge in bodily *habits* acquired through past actions (Bergson, 1988; Deleuze, 1994; Dewsbury and Bissell, 2015). As a result, the influence of the past is expanded beyond the event of loss in question, shifting the analysis from an understanding of cause-and-effect as being linked to a single traumatic memory, to the intervention of a non-linear set of embodied habits that hold the potential to re-emerge in the present. The overall aim of this thesis is thus to explore life after job loss through this Janus-faced orientation, with one eye to the complex grip of the past and the other with a belief in the potential for the future to be otherwise. Situated in the cut of what William James calls the ‘specious present’—the time of one’s present perception—this thesis contributes to emerging concerns in geography with the limits and thresholds of the body: its propensity, on the one hand, to interruption, curtailment and destruction, and its capacities, on the other hand, for redirection, invigoration and transformation (Bissell *et al.*, forthcoming; Abrahamsson and Simpson, 2011; Malabou, 2012; Dawney, 2013; Bissell and Gorman-Murray, 2019). Balancing theories of embodiment focussed on production, potential and change with those attuned to destruction, curtailment and stasis, this thesis’s affirmation is that life after loss can be a geography of change and surprise as much as it is one of continuity and survival.

Thesis outline

I note at this juncture that this research could well have been undertaken with only one empirical case, rather than two disparate sites with unique histories and circumstances. Before turning to outline the thesis, I would like to explain why I have chosen to pursue my research questions and problems through two sites, and why this is important to the analysis ventured in this thesis. I lay the reasons out here, from the disciplinary to the most personal, to show how disciplinary genealogies and personal histories are inextricably interwoven in the unfolding of research.

First, this thesis aims to undertake a ‘comparative’ analysis of workers’ lives in the two places traversed in the fieldwork. Its use of comparison is less than conventional. Rather than comparing and contrasting the sites, which would involve aligning the two cases through shared indicators and criteria, I use my journey through the two sites to excavate a breadth of situations and proliferate difference. Instead, as I elaborate in my methodology chapter, my aim is to use comparison as a ‘generative’ and ‘genetic’ method of knowledge production (Robinson, 2016). I draw on wilfully disparate sites and encounters across place to explore facets of life and loss that I may not see by only focussing on one or the other. Accordingly, my choice of these sites thus draws on a post-colonial desire to “think through elsewhere”, whilst remaining proximate to the existing canons of geographical theory (Robinson, 2016, p. 5). The example in China, in particular, is part of an attempt to sidestep the usual Anglo-European bias in geography’s conceptual landscape, recognising that this tendency is perhaps even more pronounced in the cultural geographical lineage in which this thesis is positioned. By doing so, it hopes to expand the sub-discipline’s empirical terrain, demonstrating in the process that *anywhere* can be a place from which to think and theorise.

Second, the choice of these two specific examples must also be understood in the context of my own positionality as an Australian-born child of Chinese migrants. By locating my research in these places, I recognise the ways in which affect studies, with their focus on the immediacy of present experience, can often mask the vital importance of different axes of difference in producing and interpreting experience (Tolia-Kelly, 2006). It is thus important to acknowledge the cultural and racial terrain that underlies this thesis. Australia and China represent two places with which I, as an Australian born to Chinese migrants, have abiding attachments assembled through experience that modulate and attune my capacities to be affected by people and place. Put simply, these connections mean that Australia and China are the only places that I would feel comfortable and competent researching and writing about (and this admittedly only sometimes), through personal histories that become intertwined in professional life.

Third, and finally, my decision to choose two sites, rather than just one, reflects a mounting discomfort accrued in previous research that was based exclusively in China. Here, my choice to include an Australian site in this study was driven by concerns about deeply entrenched tendencies to approach Asia as an ‘exotic other.’ Despite several years of engagement with contemporary China through research and studies, as an Australian-born diasporic individual, I could not be sure that latent habits of seeing and acting did not continue to colour my approach to these sites. Thinking of the PhD as a training process, the hope was that by placing Australia—where I grew up and live—alongside

China—a place with which I became familiar through stories, study and sojourns—the experiential juxtaposition might help me to explore my potentially unconscious complicities in practices of othering, allowing me to reflect on the ways that I might navigate, encounter and write these places, and the people within them, differently.

The final section of this introduction offers the reader a map for navigating the chapters that make up this thesis.

Chapter two, ‘After the cut,’ sets up the conceptual approach of this thesis. It begins by giving an overview of literature on the effects of mine closure on post-mining lives, arguing that the social impacts of mine closure have largely been neglected in favour of economic, political and environmental studies. Developing research on the cultural and social implications of mine closure, I suggest that geographical literatures on loss can provide a rich resource for considering these transitional moments as durations of lived experience. To this end, I critically review the social and cultural geographical literature on loss, with a focus on four fields in which loss is strongly implicated: geographies of absent presences; geographies of death and dying; geographies of deindustrialisation; and geographies of environmental change. I suggest that these fields all cohere around a shared recognition of vulnerability and finitude in an excessive and often indifferent world. Although showing how existing studies have tended to emphasise the enduring affectivity of loss, I demonstrate that each field, in its own way, is increasingly understanding the junctures of life after loss as vital and insistent timespaces. I then suggest that these threads can be pushed even further to conceptualise life after loss as a duration of bodily transformation. To do so, I argue that, alongside the focus on enduring connections the past after loss, the event of loss must also be seen as a catalyst for *disconnection*, one that folds out into an indeterminate future.

Chapter three, ‘Witnessing life and loss,’ details the methodological approach taken in this thesis. The chapter situates this thesis within a non-representational methodology and explains the way in which it approaches relatively ‘conventional’ methods—based on interviews and observation—through non-representational theory’s experimental imaginary. These methods are supplemented with a video methodology that, as implemented in this thesis, works to expand my capacities to attune, analyse and write through the encounters with interviewees. It introduces the fieldwork with former workers and their families at two now-closed coal mines: Charbon Colliery, near the small towns of Kandos and Rylstone in New South Wales, Australia and Mine No. 7 in the small city of Pingdingshan in Henan, China and describes the process of accessing, sampling and interviewing in each site, before elaborating the resonant process of analysis and the elaborative style of writing that ultimately composed this thesis.

Recognising that the representational and the non-representational are imbricated, this chapter elaborates the relationships between *world and word*, *speaker and listener*, and *writer and reader* as they play out in this thesis—relationships that I frame around principles of *testimony*, *attunement* and *translation*. Overall, my affirmation is that *how* one approaches their empirics is just as important as *what* methods one uses. I bring together theory and empirics not so they will correspond, but so they might push each other in new directions to produce new insights and connections.

The three chapters that follow present the empirical components of this thesis, combining fieldwork and theory to explore trajectories of life after job loss.

Chapter four, ‘Turbulence: abandoning the present’, explores how the precarious durations of life after loss are experienced by workers and their partners. Playing with the couplets of absence and presence, connection and disconnection, it situates the working body in the impasse of a *present* that has been disconnected from its past relations, but before a determinate sense of the future has emerged. Split into three narratives of precarious work after workplace closure, I explore how subjectivity and selfhood become disassembled in the abandoned timespaces of life after loss. Arguing, via Emmanuel Levinas, that bodies never just secure their own existences—selves are brought into being by relations to the (human and nonhuman) others around them—I suggest that if job loss leaves precarious bodies bereft of their securing anchors, then bodies might secure themselves against abandonment anew by coming into new relations with others. Drawing on Michel Serres’s concept of turbulence and Jean-Luc Nancy’s figure of the ‘intruder,’ I show how the volatile rhythms of abandonment hold together two opposing forces: the discomfiting blockages and acute disturbances of abandonment produce sensory experiences that curtail capacities to connect and relate, but abandonment also suggests a heightened sense of exposure and susceptibility to new relations. Taken together, the three stories in this chapter underscore the plasticity of human bodies, showing how circumstances of life after loss can put selves under pressure to warp and shift, in the process becoming different from the selves they once were.

Chapter five, ‘Habit: interrupting the past,’ explores how loss can be experienced as a melancholic interruption to the everyday rhythms of bodies. By turning to the role of memory in interpreting experience, this chapter traces the enduring force of the *past* as it emerges in the present. Through the writings of Henri Bergson on embodied memory and Félix Ravaisson on habit, this chapter recast psychoanalytic understandings of melancholia by suggesting that its intensities can be reinterpreted through the lens of interrupted habits. In fact, I show how habit is not just diagnostic; it offers a practical response to cycles of melancholy. Subsequently, with habit as the fulcrum, I turn to explore how its achievements can offer a more explicitly productive avenue for bodily transformation in the

wake of job loss. As Ravaillon explains, habit is a progressive producer of competencies: the repetition of an action serves to strengthen a pathway for acting, whilst simultaneously diminishing the sensation involved with it—minimising effort whilst promoting spontaneity. Existing at the intersection of a body's history of action and the enablements and constraints of its current milieu, habits are not free-floating: they rely equally on the productions of the past and the affordances of the present.

Recognising the centrality of habit to the feeling of life as 'ordinary', this chapter tells the stories of three workers who have managed to restore a sense of ease and normalcy to life after loss through the redeployment of old habits and the production of new habits. By situating my analysis several years on from the mine closures, I show how intervening events channel people into new circumstances of life and work. By back-tracking processes of bodily adjustment and adaptation to these potentially unfamiliar conditions, I explore the process of learning that enable new habits to be developed, through sensation, movement and memory. Taken together, this chapter shows how people can rework the melancholy of loss into new habits that, despite transformed circumstances, enable a renewed sense of everyday life to emerge.

Chapter six, "Desire: repairing the future," examines how people can find themselves suddenly reoriented towards new worlds of life after workplace closure. It shifts its gaze resolutely towards the *future*, to how new encounters can inspire people to begin to put the past behind them. Considering a more explicitly 'positive' mode of relation, this chapter centres on the excessive nature of desire, understood as an infrastructural force that engenders new connections in the body. Alongside two stories from fieldwork, this chapter draws on five texts—by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, Gilles Deleuze, Georges Bataille and Michel Serres—to explore the sharp transformations in subjectivity that are engendered by forces of joy, desire and love. Here, the influence of Marcel Proust looms large. In contrast to the melancholy gaze, Proust suggests that we might approach the prospect of self-transformation from another viewpoint, proposing that the past might also be considered from the perspective of the *transformed* future self looking back on who they once were. He thus argues for an understanding of life's cycles of change as a kind of *reincarnation*. Emphasising the inexhaustible capacity of the self to be caught by the unexpected currents of surprise, this chapter unfolds the displacing potentials of movement, sensation and desire to turn what is unknown about the world into an occasion for learning, differentiation and self-interruption. Following the twists and turns of life for two workers whose lives have changed dramatically after the mine closures, this chapter shows how the force of desire has the capacity to inspire new worlds of meaning and endeavour, transforming people in the process.

Chapter seven, “The afterlife,” concludes this thesis, returning to consider its aims in light of the preceding discussion. It begins with a summary of this thesis’ empirical arc, before turning to underscore its key contributions to geographical debates on affect, embodiment and relationality. Showing how the collisions and divisions of past, present and future can form and deform the postphenomenological subject, this chapter identifies the tensions between production and destruction, continuity and change, that emerge throughout this thesis. Highlighting the primacy of passivity in living beings and subject formation, I suggest that these tensions twist the language of loss into the idiom of change, and affirm affect’s function as a plastic operator that can turn the exposure of abandonment into the poise of repair. Returning to the empirical context of coal mining and industrial change, the conclusion suggests an approach to the politics of economic transformation that foregrounds the micropolitics of embodied transitions, before concluding with a final reflection on the limitations and possibilities of the ideas in this thesis.

2 Literature review: after the cut

Introduction

Situated in the context of the contemporary economy, this chapter is a critical review of the literature on loss in social and cultural geography today. Its objective is to situate and justify the approach to loss taken in this thesis. It begins by giving an overview of research on closures in the mining and resource extraction sector, cutting across studies in Global North and South to consider the social and cultural implications of contemporary working life in the extractive industries. I suggest that mining is an industry characterised by closures and uncertain temporalities. But whilst it has always been a boom-and-bust industry, in an era of climate change and technological automation, I argue that the uncertainties of the future are deepening for workers. Overall, I suggest that research has predominantly focussed on the economic, political and environmental dimensions of mining. As a result, there is limited research on the social effects of closure. However, understanding its social impacts remains crucial if the goal is to mitigate the negative impacts of closures for mining workers and communities. By showing how workers' evaluations of contemporary mining are fraught with deep ambivalence, in this section I complicate a straightforward narrative of mine closures as good or bad, arguing that the topic demands further attention.

In the second, and main, section of this chapter, I turn to social and cultural geographic literatures on loss. I broadly cover four fields in which loss features as the central driver of action: geographies of absent presence; dying and death; industrial change and deindustrialisation; and environmental change. I argue that these fields demonstrate how loss is situated at the heart of contemporary geographical concerns, evidencing the depth and diversity of human relations with materials, people, places, and more-than-human worlds, respectively. Taken together, they show how different losses are united around a shared set of problems that hinge on the recognition of human finitude in an excessive world. My discussions of each field here progressively build to reveal how different facets of loss are sharpened by each empirical lens: absent presences emphasise the *enduring affectivity* of losses, which leave memories and traces that continue to affect bodies long into the future; death and dying charts a deeply personal and 'difficult' geography of loss, one which emphasises the *vitality* of death and the importance of rituals and remembrance to managing the

emotions of loss. Deindustrialisation looks to the rupturing experience of loss and what it means to *live on* in the afterlife of events. Finally, environmental change, particularly literature on biodiversity loss, considers how the intensities of grief and sorrow can become a potent resource for *reshaping* life after the end to produce more affirmable worlds.

In contrast to existing studies, which tend to highlight the enduring connections associated with lost people and places over time, this thesis argues for attention to *disconnection* as a key optic for recognising how people experience events of loss. I do so by conceptualising events of loss as interruptive events that produce *absences*, dispersing life into impassive durations that give little sense of what might emerge in its wake. That is, I argue that the fissuring of relationality generated by loss is a catalyst for bodily transformation. Within the disconnective space of the impasse, I draw attention to the latent capacities of bodies to connect to new forms of life, redirecting intensities from the affectivity of loss. Ultimately, then, this chapter sets the scene for this thesis' cautiously affirmative approach to life after loss as a timespace of potential transformation.

Boom and bust: coal mine closure today

Coal production and consumption have experienced a sharp upward trend from the early 2000s, coinciding with a period of high-speed growth in the Chinese economy. Coal generally comes in two forms, thermal (brown) coal and metallurgical (black) coal, with thermal coal making up about three-quarters of global consumption. China is both the world's largest producer and consumer, accounting for around half of the world's annual use. Since 1990, China's consumption of thermal coal has tripled, consuming around 3,200 Mt in 2018 (IEA, 2020). Similarly, China's demand for steel rapidly increased over the same period as the nation invested in infrastructure and construction to drive its rapid urbanisation and export production. Correspondingly, Australia is one of the largest producers and exporters of coal in the world, with a doubling of production since the 1990s. Beginning around 2003, Australia's economy has experienced the biggest mining boom since the gold rush era, sparked by a rise in world commodity prices and aided by surging demand from Asia. As Australia's second-largest export after iron ore, three-quarters of national production (by weight) is exported, accounting for around one-quarter of the total value of Australia's resource exports (and 14 per cent of total exports) over the last decade (RBA, 2019). Much of these resources have flowed to China, with national-level statistics demonstrating the interdependence of Chinese and Australian's economies in recent decades, and the central role of resources trading.

Despite this rapid growth, there are signs that coal use is flatlining, even declining, globally. With prices falling in recent years, an end has come to the highs of Australia's boom years, with a simultaneous slowing of China's need for new construction. China's voracious consumption of coal has been slowly decreasing after peaking in the mid-2010s, influenced by slowing economic growth, production overcapacity, changing technologies, increased environmental regulation and trends towards cleaner energy sources (Hao et al, 2015; Tang et al. 2018). Globally, the most significant driver of changing demand is the recognition of coal's contribution to anthropogenic climate change, and the attendant need to reduce consumption of carbon-intensive energy sources (Edwards 2019). As a result, although overall energy use continues to increase, coal's share of electricity generation appears to be declining globally, driven by a shift towards cleaner sources of energy. The global distribution of these changes remains uneven—coal's share of production is falling in advanced economies and China, but rising in India and other Asian countries—but the overall trend is towards government policies favouring cleaner energy sources and the decreasing cost of renewable energies, resulting in energy and resource transitions in economies around the world. As a result, the long-term trend appears to be towards less coal consumption, with the need for fewer coal mines to be operating and less coal to be produced.

Mining, at the best of times, is a boom-and-bust industry with complex and unpredictable temporalities. Flowing through seasons, rhythms and cycles, mining as a process is constituted by “a set of multiple and complex temporalities influenced by contingent situations which are affected by local and global actors in diverging political and economic scenarios” (D'Angelo and Pijpers, 2018, p. 2016). It is a nomadic industry, leaving behind ‘old’ and resource-exhausted regions in search of new terrain, constantly needing to find new extraction frontiers to ensure continuity of production into the future (Luning, 2018). If coal production decreases, new mines will not be planned and existing mines will be forced to close—particularly smaller-scale mines and those with higher costs. This ‘pipeline’ issue of deferred or cancelled project planning is already occurring in Australia, where investment in new capacity has been falling since 2012 due to lower prices (Saunders, 2015). It is important to emphasise a certain inevitability to closures when it comes to mining a finite resource such as coal. As Ruddell (2017, p. 209) puts it, “while no two boomtowns are alike, all booms eventually bust.” Most mines, however, do not make it to the point of planned closure, with a range of economic, geological, regulatory and community pressures intervening to affect the viability of mines (Laurence, 2006). Noting that there are a diversity of lifespans for mines—even as some deposits might be large enough to be mined continuously for decades—the finite temporalities of coal mines can be at odds with the needs of communities reliant on these

workplaces, meaning that closures, when they come, must be planned in order to avoid disastrous effects for residents (Acquah and Boateng, 2000; Robertson and Blackwell, 2014; Haggerty *et al.*, 2018).

The economic and environmental effects of mine closures around the world have been reasonably well documented and, although local conditions play a large role, there is a consistency to the set of experiences described, including across different mine types (e.g. coal, gold, copper, etc). A primary focus of this literature has been on the importance of managing the environmental impacts of closed mines and the health and safety impacts of such effects on humans and wildlife, such as through the presence of waste, ground and surface water pollution, soil contamination, risks of subsidence, and visual impact of tailings and voids (Robb, 1994; Marques *et al.*, 2001; Prasad and Sangita, 2008; Wright *et al.*, 2018). Overall, studies agree on the necessity of environmental remediation planning to restore the ecology of former mining sites, particularly through planning in the earlier planning stages of a mine's lifespan (Laurence, 2006, 2011; Krzemień *et al.*, 2016). Government policies are particularly important in this context, as profit-driven mine owners are likely to avoid the costs of these rehabilitation activities if allowed to, however, remediation can also be understood as a more-than-bureaucratic process that also involves local community members committed to caring for land, especially local indigenous populations (Beckett, 2020).

As Strambo and colleagues (2019) note in a review of the literature on mine closures, the *economic* impacts of closure have been most well documented. The emphasis here is usually on effects at national and regional levels and on employment outcomes and pathways for affected workers and communities. In a study of a Canadian mining town, Bradbury & St-Martin (1983) find that mine closure is followed by community decline and eventually town closure, with the loss of industry and income resulting in a restructuring of the local workforce, withdrawal of capital from the area, residential mobility and an overall increase in economic insecurity. These effects are seen to begin even before the final closure, with the 'declining phase' of the mine driving capital out of the region. Strongly related to this are the demographic impacts of closure, especially through migration out of the affected areas. Particularly where the local economy is extremely reliant on the industry, closures can result in the abandonment of the town as residents leave the area in search of work (Marais, 2013, p. 504). For example, a government-mandated closure of China's township and village mines from 1998-2002 led to the layoff of hundreds of thousands of workers without compensation; however, as Andrews-Speed and colleagues (2005) find in a study of Chongqing, these layoffs were followed in some cases by local government investment in alternative industries, such as agriculture

and light manufacturing, which, alongside the rapid economic growth of the region at the time, appear to have largely mitigated the economic shock to the local economy. Similarly, Siyongwana & Shabalala's (2019) study of a mine closure in South Africa describe mine closure as having both negative and positive effects—although poverty rose and living standards decreased after closure, some positives were an increase in government initiatives, a renewed sense of community and an increase in agricultural activity in the area. Overall, however, closures are evaluated as a largely negative event, bringing adverse effects on workers' lives that, at best, can be mitigated by top-down interventions.

In comparison to economic and environmental studies, the social and cultural impacts of mine closure are underexamined. In a review of the literature on the social effects of mine closure, Bainton & Holcombe (2018) find that the social dimensions of mine closure are far less explored than the physical aspects. As a result “the real costs of mine closure are poorly understood”, producing conditions that allow mining companies and governments to evade responsibility for underacknowledged impacts on landscapes, workers and communities (Bainton and Holcombe, 2018, p. 468). Similarly, McDonald and colleagues (2012) suggest that, despite profound changes in the mining sector, research continues to focus on workplaces as the main side of interest, leaving hidden the importance of family and community to working life. Although the term ‘transition’ is commonly used to describe the process of mine closure, the term is “ambiguous”, opening up into a range of planned and unplanned futures, including the perennial deferral of closure for mines placed under ‘care and maintenance’, or the simple abandonment of mine sites after closures (Bainton & Holcombe 2018, p. 470). The available literature on mine closure is largely written from a practitioner or industry perspective, with a focus on the closure *planning* process as part of mine life-cycle assessments. Bainton and Holcombe suggest that this outsized focus on planning might be due to the fact that “there are so few documented examples of successful closure and relinquishment, so the focus remains on *planning* for closure during the mine's operation” rather than analyses of actual mine closures (2018, p. 470). Nonetheless, Owen and Kemp (2018) note that mining companies continue to readily mobilise planning scenarios that claim to ensure “continuing economic and social uplift” of the local area upon mine closure, despite this being “by far the most difficult scenario to achieve”; as the authors note, this is seemingly used—and accepted—as a way “to create “safe passage” through the approvals process”, despite its often unsubstantiated and unrealised nature (p. 26). As a result of these colliding forces, the social impacts of contemporary mine closures often remain underexamined, overlooking the diverse ways

that closures generate interruptions to the everyday lives of workers, families and their local communities.

One prominent exception to this trend is pivotal geographical research on the coalfields of the UK—a particularly strong focus of the mining imaginary for geographers—and the enormous social and economic fallout from the decline of these coalfields throughout the 20th century. From the earliest days of industrialisation, the UK's energy mix almost exclusively reliant on 'King Coal,' the 1950s and 60s, however, saw a rapid shift away from coal-powered energies with the passing of environmental protection policies such as the *Clean Air Acts* and the emergence of competing sources of energy such as oil and natural gas, which saw coal's share of UK energy consumption rapidly falling from 85.4 per cent in 1955 to 36.2 per cent in 1975 (North and Spooner, 1977; Beynon, Cox and Hudson, 1999). In this context, geographers focussed attention on the resulting shut down of workplaces for over 400,000 workers, and the widespread decimation, division and displacements of coal communities throughout the UK. Key early research concentrated on tracking the movement of labour at a time of intense restructuring in the energy market (Spooner, 1974; North and Spooner, 1977). As events played themselves out, researchers turned their concern to the places newly abandoned by capital, notably pit villages in the North East of England in the wake of mine closures, notably through the Cardiff-Durham 'Coalfields Research Programme' (Beynon, Hudson and Sadler, 1991; Bennett, Beynon and Hudson, 2000; Beynon, Cox and Hudson, 1999)¹. Spanning political economy and social-cultural life, this research excavated the psychic and emotional traumas faced by places and communities that had lost the lifeblood that underpinned their existences and explored the stuttering attempts at coalfields regeneration that cut across these everyday lives in place. As Bennett, Beynon and Hudson (1999) suggest, this time of turbulence and change was not just a time of mourning for what was lost, but also a time in which symbolic representations of, and identifications with, place were produced, as communities scrambled to create anchors of meaning to cope with the devastation of deindustrialisation and construct themselves as worthy of regeneration (see also Strangleman *et al.*, 1999; Bennett, 2009). In particular, Katy Bennett's later work is exemplary in further investigating the emotional geographies of these former mining communities. Laying important groundwork for geographical studies of the deindustrialisation's emotional life, Bennett (2004, 2009, 2013, 2015) opens up attention to the ongoing difficulties experienced by people still making their lives in these shattered post-industrial

¹ The full series of Coalfield Discussion papers (No. 1–7, 1998–2002, Cardiff University) is available at: huwbeynon.com/publications/working-papers-and-discussion-papers (Accessed: 12 April 2021).

landscapes, exploring the intertwined nature of identity and regeneration after mine closures, the intersection of political economy and state-led regeneration programs with the emotional life of people in place, and the changing life of women in former coalfield regions.

Between a rock and a hard place: ambivalent geographies of mining

To understand the social and cultural impact of contemporary mine closures, it is important to understand the broader social context of mining. Straightforwardly ‘negative’ assessment of mine closures can paper over the more ambivalent accounts that characterise workers’ experiences of the mining industry today, suggesting a more complex emotional landscape to contemporary mine closures. In contrast to the social impact of mining *closure*, there is a significant body of literature on the social impacts of mining itself. Drawing on this literature, this section aims to complicate a straightforward narrative about the self-evidently ‘negative’ emotional valence of closure by suggesting that a more pockmarked geography of loss might accompany the closure of these ambivalent workplaces.

In the past decades, the mining industry has undergone enormous transformations in technology, governance, and scale. The 20th century saw developments such as improved explosives and machinery expand the intensity and scale of operations, with new frontiers such as deep-sea and ice-covered terrain being opened up for oil, gas and mineral mining. Comparing mining towns in Australia, Canada and South Africa, Marais and colleagues (2018) note that a dense array of factors has reshaped mining towns, including “globalisation, corporate decision making, political ideology and government policy” (p. 779). The rising price of minerals since the turn of the 21st century has been accompanied by a massive expansion in the size of the mining industry as a whole, alongside greater government regulation of the industry. In many parts of the world, mining has moved from a practice undertaken by ‘artisanal’ or ‘small-scale’ miners using largely hand-based tools, to an industry dominated by multi-national corporations using capital-intensive and highly mechanised extraction methods. Although rising prices have been accompanied by a large expansion in the number of artisanal miners—estimated to have increased from around 13 million in 1999 to 40.5 million in 2017, with some estimates suggesting figures of up to 100 million (World Bank, 2012; IGF (Intergovernmental Forum on Mining, Minerals, Metals and Sustainable Development), 2017)—the production of industrial minerals such as coal is largely dominated by large-scale

enterprises able to leverage economies of scale of mechanised processes.² Accordingly, coal in Australia is almost exclusively produced by large corporations, and although China's mining landscape is divided into state-owned coal mines and smaller-scale 'town and village' enterprises, the powerful National Development and Reform Commission has been restructuring China's coal production since 2006, with the aim of shutting down small-scale coal mines in favour of large state-owned conglomerates (but see Gunson and Yue, 2001; Shen and Gunson, 2006 for background to small-scale sites).

The changing nature of mining has been accompanied by a changing nature of place for mining settlements in the 21st century. Mining landscapes are constituted by fluid and complex processes incorporating material, discursive and socio-cultural dimensions, affecting understandings and experiences of such places (Ey and Sherval, 2016). The rapid expansion of the industry has come with a move from established company towns to more informal and ad hoc mining settlements in many parts of the world, undermining social cohesion for workers at sites that have traditionally been places of intense belonging and identification (Strangleman, 2001; Robertson, 2010; Walkerdine, 2010; Carrington and Pereira, 2011; Chapman *et al.*, 2015; Ey *et al.*, 2017).

Transient, long-distance and migrant work has become the norm in many places, with 'fly in-fly out' (FIFO) practices proliferating in places like Australia, and migrant workers forming a large part of the mining population in places like China (Gunson and Yue, 2001; Beach *et al.*, 2003; Perry and Rowe, 2015). Such practices of remote work, however, have been found to have severely negative impacts on workers and their families (Blackman, 2012; Vojnovic *et al.*, 2014; Bowers *et al.*, 2018; Gardner *et al.*, 2018). Bowers and colleagues (2018) find, in a mental health survey of 1124 employees in remote construction and open cut and underground mining in Australia, the prevalence of psychological distress to be significantly higher amongst remote mining and construction workers than in the overall population. The rhythms of such long-distanced work produce cycles of intensity and exhaustion, causing workers to fall in and out of touch with their partners, families and loved ones—even themselves—as they bounce between the spaces of work and home (Bissell and Gorman-Murray, 2019; Straughan *et al.*, 2019; Bissell *et al.*, 2020). Deepening the discussion of the emotional dimensions of mining families, Pini and Mayes (2012) explore the

² Industrial minerals include iron ore, copper, manganese, lead and coal. Artisanal miners particularly favour high-value metals such as gold, silver, diamonds and other gemstones, but also minerals such as tungsten, bauxite, tin.

emotional labour undertaken by partners to keep their families—and themselves—together, by constructing emotionally-laden gendered subject positions related to being a miner's wife. Overall, however, the masculine context of mining means that there is a tendency to dismiss the emotional impacts of mining, part of the 'rationalist' emotional regulation intrinsic to masculine subjectivities (Ey, 2018).

Ultimately, evaluations of mobile working practices are equivocal. Blackman and colleagues (2014) find that FIFO workers in Australia experience on the one hand greater job insecurity, dissatisfaction with working hours and ability to make time for family and friends, but enjoy on the other hand higher pay, sustained time off, clear work-life separation and variety in their day-to-day work (see HRSCRA, 2013). Although not just employed in mining, migrant workers in China have generally been found to experience marginalisation and discrimination at their working destinations, with very few able to settle in urban destinations permanently; despite this, however, they are able to carve out viable livelihoods 'on the move' (Fan, 2007; Wong *et al.*, 2007; Wang and Wu, 2010). In contrast to the transient Australian experience, studies in the global South show that mining settlements are not always considered to be temporary or transient. Gough and colleagues (2019) argue, in a study based in Ghana, that far from being monocultural single-purpose shelters, mining settlements are places of great economic diversity, with migrants aspiring to settle and build homes in the area, even if many will be unable to achieve this. More positively, O'Faircheallaigh (1995) recognises that the more negative sides of FIFO practices can be balanced with positive outcomes for indigenous populations in Australia in Canada, as it might allow some to earn a cash livelihood whilst staying close to the land and maintaining traditional lifestyles.

The environmental effects of mining are closely related to the social and emotional impacts; indeed, the very presence of mining may already be associated with losses both material and psychological, in an 'anticipatory geography' of loss that arises long before the final event of mine closure (Anderson, 2010). Despite improvements in operating best practices, mining remains a fundamentally destructive operation. Gains for mining companies and miners come with losses for local residents, with mining sites becoming an environmental 'sacrifice zone' and 'contested terrain' that evidences the unbalanced power geometries wrought upon places by globalisation (Massey, 1999; Bridge, 2004; Cottle, 2013). Drawing on an empirical study of a village in Australia, Askland and Brunn (2018) develop the concept of *solastagia*, derived from Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht, to describe the experiential displacement experienced by populations witnessing the environmental destruction of their local areas, as "a condition that captures the sense

of lost home when still at home” (p. 18). Similarly, Robertson and Blackwell (2015) draw attention to the wide array of local stakeholders that are affected by mining beyond just workers and their families, such as residents proximate to the mines and the ‘hinterland communities’ reliant upon the infrastructures enabled by mining income.

This combination of economic dependency and limited local alternatives to coal means that the closures of coal mines are often events that produce intense disruptions in the life of the regions in which they are located, above and beyond other forms of workplace closure. Local resource dependency on boom-and-bust commodities means that industrial communities have often come to live with a long-term sense of uncertainty. Walkerdine (2010) describes the psychological ramifications of this instability through the example of a closed steelworks, suggesting that it is precisely the uncertain cycles of production that have fostered the development of particularly strong senses of community amongst industrial workers. These strong relations function as a ‘psychic envelope’ that helps individuals to collectively withstand the inherent instability of a volatile industry (Walkerdine, 2010, p. 97). As a result of this ‘second skin’, we might speculate that the subsequent rupture generated by industrial closures might be felt particularly intensely, as a profoundly personal rupture of self that produces a deep sense of exposure which, perversely, can feel even stronger one than if the lost job were stable to begin with.

And yet, the booming commodity prices of recent decades have worked to further hinder economic diversification in mining regions, deepening this sense of exposure by leaving communities bereft of obvious alternatives after industrial closures (Marais and Nel, 2016). Over time, the impacts of mining are cumulative, with its layered environmental, social and economic effects exerting increasing pressure on communities. By the time mine closures are announced, communities are often already locked into the pathways opened up by mining development. Petrov & Marinova (2013) explain that a ‘dependency culture’ emerges in resource regions, as communities come to rely on the mining industry to provide ongoing economic opportunities to local communities, in places that are often bereft of alternatives. Discourses of dependency are encouraged by businesses, culminating in ‘doxic’ beliefs in the need for coal-producing industries and generating hegemonic narratives that make it difficult for communities to see envision pathways for economic growth and prosperity beyond coal (Bowden, 2018). Indeed, although collective attitudes towards mining differ between politico-economic landscapes, this is a discourse that looms particularly large in the Australian context, where arguments for new mining developments are regularly justified through their capacities to provide jobs for local communities. As a result, mining communities are often left

vulnerable after mine closure, with little sense of how to maintain the ties that bind people to place, and communities together, with a sense of inevitable decline. Indeed, as Robertson and Blackwell remark, “[t]he history of mining is replete with examples of communities being unsustainable post mine closure” (2015, p. 583).

In sum, I argue that the social impacts of mine closure remain underexamined by researchers, recognising at the same time that the category of the ‘social’ exceeds the categories to which it is conventionally ascribed, functioning as a ‘black box’ that renders invisible, and tractable, the complexity of socio-material systems (Latour, 1987). Turning to the research on the social impacts of mining while mines are still in operation offers directions for inquiry into post-mining lives, by demonstrating the fraught nature of the industry today. Studies demonstrate that contemporary mining lives are often evaluated as ambivalent: offering much-needed livelihoods, but with resonating impacts on the everyday lives of families and communities. This brings an element of complexity to mine closures, suggesting that closures themselves might also be a source of ambivalence—cutting across currents of life both helpful and harmful to producing ambiguous evaluations of these interruptive events. Looking to life after closure, the dependence of communities on local mining operations underscores the vulnerability of mining regions upon the closure of workplaces, given the limited alternatives to sustaining life. Life after mine closure might thus be understood as an ambivalent site of exposure—a space open to modification and re-evaluation by the potentials of life that emerge after closure. Yet, despite becoming an increasingly pressing concern as technological advances and environmental challenges intensify, the question of how to sustain members of coal communities after closure remains open, with few successful examples of this being achieved. Indeed, there is a sombre recognition of the *difficulty* of maintaining community ties after closures (Robertson and Blackwell, 2015; Johnstone and Hielscher, 2017). Although closures demonstrate the contingent nature of the processes holding together production (see Swanton, 2013), there is a limited understanding of how the lives entangled within industrial processes become *disassembled* alongside processes of closure, redrawing relations to place and community. The literature at the intersection of energy transitions and human geography tends to focus on the socio-technical dimensions of transitions, such as policy change, technological innovation, financial levers, and supply-and-demand management (Bridge et al. 2013). In contrast, there is limited research on industrial closure as a ‘contact zone’ for workers whose current way of life will be rendered obsolete in such a future (Schwanen, 2018). As Rohse and colleagues (2020) emphasise, geographies of energy transitions must recognise that workplace closures are emotional timespaces. Appreciating the textured dynamics of such processes requires

attention to the social and emotional life of workplace closure, in particular recognising the way that the loss of a job can result in the loss of the practices, routines and attachments that are vital to everyday life. Recognising the ambivalence of losses wrought by mine closures and the uncertain itineraries that follow, the following section reviews geographic literature to consider how geographers have come to approach life during, and after, events of loss.

The vitality of ends: cultural geographies of loss

This section, the main discussion of this chapter, turns to review cultural geographies of loss across four broad areas—geographies of absent presence; death, dying and survival; industrial change and deindustrialisation; and environmental change and grief—to understand how geographers have understood and conceptualised the impacts of loss on bodies, and the lives that are lived subsequent to that loss. The diversity of these concerns recognises the expansive remit of loss—its implication in all domains of life—and its ubiquity in our relations with materials, people, places and more-than-human worlds respectively. The objective in each section is to draw out the approaches to loss that characterise each field, emphasising dimensions that are particularly prominent in each field. These discussions are accompanied by a broader conceptual progression that builds towards an increasingly productive and transformative understanding of loss. The ordering of the sections thus reflects each field's position in the arc of this chapter, which moves from the hauntings of the past to consider how intensities of loss reorient the subject towards a renewed sense of the future. This discussion then sets the scene for this thesis' processual and affirmative approach to life after loss.

I Haunting and the absent presence

Despite their material absence, losses can linger in the imagination and burn long into the future. This is the contention of the 'absent presence', a concept that refers to how a material absence can become felt as an event of presence. Inspired by phenomenology, it is an approach that considers the lost object or person through the ways that such entities reappear and return to experience, as encounters with 'hauntings', 'spectres' or 'ghosts' that are felt by bodies as affective presences in place. Absent presences present a way of approaching losses through their enduring effect on bodies. Tying into longstanding disciplinary concerns with memory, memorialisation, landscape, history and heritage, studies of absent presences have produced a conceptually rich body of work interested in how the haunting and historical nature of the 'absent presence' defies binary distinctions between absence and presence, drawing attention to the excessive nature of space, the entanglement of the

material and affective, and the capacity of space to evoke memories of past events. Loss is, of course, not the same as absence, but the literature on absent presences is related to loss in that it considers what happens to people and places after something is no longer present, and how bodies experience life after loss. Accordingly, studies of absent presences are situated temporally in the ‘afterlife’ of an event, tracking how the trace of the lost thing continues to endure and affect in the present tense. Compared to loss, however, absence presents an emotionally ‘neutral’ container for approaching an event of loss, incorporating a wider register of engagements with memories and hauntings from the past, including ones that can be recuperative of loss. Related to studies of memory, this approach has been taken up in relation to figures and spaces such as the post-industrial ruin (Edensor, 2005; Hill, 2013; Meier, 2013; Lavery *et al.*, 2014), the militarised ruin (Dawney, 2020; Miller *et al.*, 2020), the deceased (Wylie, 2009; Maddrell, 2013), the afterlife (Vanolo, 2016), discards and second-hand objects (Hetherington, 2004), plants (Ginn, 2014), missing people (Parr and Stevenson, 2015) and prisons (Moran and Disney, 2017).

This section explores three key themes of this literature—abundance, relations, and co-presence—situating each theme through its relation to life after loss. In a theme-setting piece on absent presences in an industrial ruin, Edensor (2005) describes how the affective presence of ‘ghosts’ in the material remains of the past are able to disrupt official, regulated notions of place. By ‘refusing fixity’ (p. 829), traces of the past evident in the material remains of the site reveal the disordered, aleatory and excessive nature of space. By foregrounding the specificity of the traces that remain, Edensor speaks of the excessive *abundance* of these haunting presences, which continue to affect and disrupt long after the original entities are gone. This sense of haunting is inspired by Derrida’s ‘hauntology’, a ‘spectral’ geography that emphasises the abundance of the trace, and the revenance of its return—that, in “neither coming from somewhere nor going anywhere, the spectral constitutes an incessance that belies origins or ends” (Wylie, 2007, p. 171). The absent presence, as trace, thus refers to an encounter with figures that unsettle a linear sense of time, recognising the presence of others beyond their material, obdurate and psychical forms (Frers, 2013). By emphasising immaterial endurance, this Derridean understanding of objects conversely “entails recognizing how those entities which we posit in their fullness and plenitude are never immune from processes of internal and external decay ... nor uncontaminated by processes of fragmentation” (Romanillos, 2015, p. 563). Thus, studies of absence have served to critique the phenomenological approach, which has tended to focus on acts of presence and the coincidence of sense and world, over moments of distancing, longing and loss (Wylie, 2009).

Accordingly, absent presences evidence the endurance of people's *relations* to lost objects, places and people, demonstrating how ties between bodies endure and morph despite distance and time. Although Edensor writes of aleatory encounters with novel spaces, other studies sketch a more personal, fraught, and insistent emotional terrain. Of note is Maddrell's abiding research into absence through the geographies of death, loss and bereavement. In a piece on the 'continuing bonds' of bereavement and focussing on sites of memorialisation in the British Isles, Maddrell traces the emergence of informal, public spaces of private remembrance for the bereaved, exploring how these sites of presencing act as a live conduit for an ongoing relationship with the deceased. Going beyond particular people, these personal experiences of absence can also relate to experiences of place. Meier (2013) considers the haunting nature of place for aging metalworkers in Germany as they revisit their previous places of work, and the emotional geography of loss associated with these encounters. Linking workers' employment to their sense of identity, Meier associates the persistent, intense sense of loss that the interviewed workers feel upon visiting their closed workplaces with the enduring working-class identity that was fostered through years of long-term employment at the metalworks. Compared to the more anonymous material traces associated with the 'spectral' account above, the haunting nature of these experiences is produced by the disjuncture "between what is encountered today and what is remembered from former experiences" (Meier, 2013, p. 470), with such accounts often highlighting the emotionally charged experience of such encounters with absence.

Absent presences are thus about how bodies can be made *co-present* with lost people, objects and places, even as they are no longer physically co-present in their original forms. A key distinction here is between *personal* and *public* acts of memory and imagination. Like Meier, who approaches the post-industrial ruin as a 'personal memory site' (Meier, 2013, p. 469), Emery (2019) emphasises the difference in perspective between those encountering material remains from their *own* pasts and histories, compared to the gaze of an 'outsider' upon places of ruination or decay. Acknowledging that many "traces cannot be seen by everyone, only by those with experiences of the place" (Meier 2013, 471), Emery asserts the importance of exploring the specific intensities of workers' experiences of deindustrialisation. This question of perspective is particularly important given the introspective nature of the phenomenological approach, recognising that experiences are often not shared between bodies, and are thus not always visible to the researcher detouring through place (e.g. Blacksell, 2005; Wylie, 2005). It is worth noting that although Edensor (2005) speaks of 'memory', he is in fact referring to acts of mediated 'imagination' that draw on historical tropes and personal memories transported from other sites. Thus, Edensor is thinking with a specific kind of

“social and political” memory associated with “monumental ‘memoryscapes’—mediatised spaces, heritage districts, and museums”—located in the circulating domain of *public* memory (p. 830). This invocation of ‘memory’ is not in the conventional sense of an image of a personally experienced past event, but collective and circulating cultural images that are evoked upon the specific encounter with a particular place; accordingly, haunting here can even become a matter of design, productively manipulated to produce a desired atmosphere in a place (Buser, 2017). In contrast, researchers such as Meier, Maddrell and Emery are interested in a *personal* sense of memory as an enduring experience with particular bodies and objects, through practices that generate a sense of enduring co-presence with lost others.

For Hill (2013), however, this separation between the researcher’s experience of place and that of the people they wish to research is not irreconcilable; instead, Hill sees it as a matter of methodology. Rather than focussing on the reflections of the researcher or lamenting the hermetically sealed nature of the other’s experience, Hill explains that her approach to absent presences “aspires to create a narrative style that allows other voices to be heard” (Hill, 2013, p. 382). That is, extending Wylie’s (2007) influential prescriptions for a spectral style, Hill contends that a narrative style that blends the geographer’s own haunted encounters with the recounted memories of others can cut through the impasse to communicate a vibrant and resonant sense of place. Presenting a fragmented, spectral account of a walk undertaken with a former miner along an old miners’ path in the UK, Hill interlaces her own reflections with those offered by her interlocutor, in a methodological approach to co-presence that resonates with Sundberg’s (2014) critique of posthumanist methodologies advocating for a style of knowledge-making that involves ‘walking with’ the other.

Studies of absence-as-presence share an important refusal to cleave to a distinction that marks contemporary cultural geography: between an interest in the immaterial forces of affect and emotion, and an interest in matter and materiality. Instead, the geographical literature on absent presences is attentive to the multifaceted and multi-directional relationships between material traces and affective intensities, conceptualising an imbricated terrain of cause and effect that sits between sensation and signification (Urry, 2014). By demonstrating the excessive abundance of loss and the absences they produce, geographers demonstrate the capacity for absences to continue to affect long into the future, returning to haunt people and place. As a result, relations to lost objects endure despite their material absence, producing practices and rituals that maintain and develop bonds to produce an enduring sense of co-presence. Spanning the domains of public and personal memory,

absent presences are a relatively neutral term, mapping on to a wide spectrum of intensities from the merely pleasant to the heart-wrenchingly mournful, with a complexity that can accommodate the co-presence of such intensities. In recent years, however, geographers have highlighted the importance of approaching the afterlife of deindustrialising events through the testimony of those who personally lived through such experiences, highlighting the specific and singular nature of loss. Deepening this line of thought, the following section explores the related field of death, dying and survival to explore the profound emotional intensities that can be involved in an intimate event of loss.

II Dying, death and survival

Compared to absent presences, geographies of death and dying suggest a more *intimate* geography of loss. Traversing intensely emotional terrain, careful recognition is given to the depth of emotion associated with personal events of loss that come to reshape people's lives, with interests in rituals and practices associated with death, through burial ceremonies (Kong, 2012; Dunn *et al.*, 2016), spaces of memory and memorialisation (Clope and Pawson, 2008; Maddrell, 2016), mobilities (Pearce, 2019), taxidermy (Patchett, 2017), public representations of death (Rose, 2009a), suicide (Balayannis and Cook, 2016; Stevenson, 2016), cadavers (Young and Light, 2013), pregnancy losses (McNiven, 2016) and terminal care (Brown, 2003). Whereas literature on absent presence has been more concerned with temporalities relatively distant to the event of loss, geographers of death and dying draw attention to the immediacy of loss. I identify three key themes in this literature: finitude, vitalism and survival. As the first section elaborates, the losses of death exemplify the finitude of human life, drawing a line in the economies of growth and decay that define organic life. Evidencing a particular liveliness, the loss of loved ones is seen to drive action and rituals, including ones that are not always visible to the observer, showing how life endures after ends. The focus, then, is on the practices involved either side of loss—in the lead-up to death, and how people deal with the afterlife of losses. Expanding on this vital impulse, this section traces the activities of life after loss, demonstrating how researchers are increasingly exploring the transition from the intensities of loss to the possibilities of surviving and living on after loss.

In his deft review of geographies 'on the other side of life', Romanillos (2015) suggests that geographies of death, through its usual association with distancing, can occlude the ways in which proximities endure and relations to the dead continue to be performed, even after someone or something is gone. Mirroring the absent presence, there is a refusal to see absence or loss as an event

of pure absence; instead, “the spatialities surrounding death describe both an irreducible distancing *and* an insistent form of proximity” (Romanillos, 2015, p. 561, original emphasis). Sitting at the threshold between presence and absence, what is at stake in death is an encounter with the limits of organic human life and the finitude of bodies and beings. Finitude marks a susceptibility and vulnerability to death that is an ineradicable fact of human existence. As Romanillos (2011) emphasises, however, finitude should be understood as both limit and *condition* for living. As the ungraspable limit of life, finitude is understood as the exigency that equally drives life, compelling care for the living and giving rise to language, action, and representation. This understanding of finitude as productive resonates with Maddrell’s commentary on the ‘vitalism’ of death. Here, Maddrell refers to how the energetics of loss can offer the impetus for acts and activities of living, paradoxically giving meaning to life—it is precisely this economy of love and loss that gives life its liveliness and intensities. Accordingly, death’s vitality blurs straightforward evaluations of loss as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ events, recognising the complexity of the emotional terrain of finitude. Recognising the tension between absence and presence that characterises death, Romanillos insists that the ambivalent landscape of death demands “conceptual resources that hold on to, rather than resolve or subsume, these difficult geographies” (Romanillos, 2015, p. 562).

The difficulty of death and finitude stems in part from the insistent nature of death, its reference to an *unwilled* event that nonetheless remains as an ineradicable part of corporeal life. Indeed, one does not *choose* to be dogged by trauma, loss, pain or longing, but rather these states of experience exist as insistent affective intensities that befall you without consent, that one cannot anticipate, avoid, or control. The grief of mourning marks an event of loss that is the corollary of having loved and cared. As a result, finitude might be expanded beyond the binary of life and death to a more general understanding of the vulnerability of corporeal life: the vulnerability to death of finitude, but also a vulnerability to the vast emotional terrain leading up to and after death. The past returns, prompted by a scene, a smell, a sound, and insists on being heard. And yet, in his attempt to situate corporeal vulnerability as a fundamental condition of embodiment, Harrison is clear that vulnerability should not be thought of as a *necessarily* tragic or mournful fact of existence.

Describing vulnerability as a trait that “cannot be willed, chosen, cultivated, or honed” (Harrison, 2008, p. 427), Harrison critiques the persistent tendency in the social sciences to view vulnerability as an undesirable fact of existence, with the implication that vulnerability is something that ought to be eradicated from human life. Instead, Harrison recognises the foundational nature of vulnerability in corporal life: that vulnerability is what exposes us to joys, as well as sorrows—it is what exposes us to anything at all. Rather than seeing one’s vulnerability to death or loss as a purely

objectionable event, geographers of death and dying highlight its productive possibilities to offer a more ambivalent geography of loss. Affirming the ineliminable nature of finitude and vulnerability, the focus turns to how these states of existence might be recuperated and worked with, rather than eliminated or avoided.

Accordingly, geographers have sought to illustrate a wider sense of bereavement's emotional intensities. Maddrell affirms that "[a]lthough often assumed to be negative, absence of the deceased can be viewed and experienced as part of the natural lifecycle, as relief from debilitating illness, release from a difficult relationship, or liberation from an exhausting duty of care" (Maddrell, 2016, p. 171); the deceased's absence may even "have minimal impact in cases where there was little attachment" (p. 171). Drawing out this ambivalence, geographers are increasingly recognising the *vitality* of the ends that come with events of loss. At the threshold of life, Emerson (2018) uses the example of laughter in aged care homes to demonstrate the vital way in which life keeps on being lived in the timespaces of dying. He explains laughter in such sites is pragmatic: not just about release (a *letting go* of death), but also an integration (a *folding within* of death) that prepares bodies for what is to come. Maddrell's long-standing work on death has been instrumental to these developments; in a recent agenda-setting paper, Maddrell (2016) discusses the complex spatial dimensions of mourning and remembrance by exploring the productive relationship of grief to place—how experiences of place are mediated by grief, how grief mediates experiences in place, as something carried within. Highlighting that there is more than one 'grief process', Maddrell affirms that grief does not follow a linear progression through stages that lead to recovery. Grief and loss should not be conceptualised as 'pathological'—a problem to be eradicated—but can refer to potentially life-long and life-giving attachments. These ideas are developed by Pearce's (2019) description of the practices and mobilities that accompany mourning as an unfolding process. Drawing on Bergson, memories of lost loved ones are understood to be associated with activities undertaken in particular places in the past; Pearce (2019) suggests that returning to such places is part of ongoing rituals of mourning that can serve to *intensify* one's relationship to the lost loved one, rather than aiding in 'recovery' from the intensity of loss.

What might be recognised from this discussion is that the geographies of death are as much about death as *survival*. That is, they are as much about death as they are about *living on*. Important here are the temporalities of life after death, suggesting durations that are marked by connection as well as disconnection—through "continuing bonds" (Maddrell, 2013) as well as "broken bonds" (Young and Light, 2013). Madge (2018), for example, develops the seemingly paradoxical demands of life

and death with the concept of ‘livingdying’ amongst long-term breast cancer survivors, moving “beyond normative dualisms of life and death” and “carving out a vocabulary that makes space for the intimacies and paradoxes of “living on” ... that can simultaneously accommodate connection and disconnection, mutuality and separation and vitality and finitude” (Madge, 2018, p. 258). Similarly, Stevenson (2016) writes of how suicidal journeys, as ‘intended deaths’, can be a ‘vibrant and vital’ moment of life (p. 191)—both of which might contribute to a more ‘enlivened’ account of death and dying (Stevenson *et al.*, 2016), to move “beyond *just* the morbid, and traumatic and re-engage with a politics of hope even in intractable situations” (p. 162, original emphasis). Madge notes, however, that “[a]lthough geographies of dying and death is a growing field, less has been written about “living on” (2018, p. 246). Nevertheless, the literature on survival is beginning to recognise the seemingly opposing facts of being both *changed* by brushes with loss and *living on* after it, revealing temporalities that open up beyond the immediate intensity surrounding death.

After the impasse: beyond presence, towards absence

Deepening this attention to the temporalities of life after loss, I argue that the philosopher Alphonso Lingis offers conceptual resources that build on this turn to *living on* after loss in geography. Although Lingis is not commonly drawn on in geography, his lyrical writings on embodied life offer a rare and insightful combination of rigorous (post)phenomenological thought and a nomadic ethnographic sensibility grounded in concrete events in time and place. Extending geographers’ engagements with his thought, I suggest that Lingis’ subtle attention to the affective interface between mortal bodies and the attachments, desires and ways of knowing offers a way to think about the hidden motion of bodies through densely expressive cultural worlds. Like Lingis’ thought, the liminal timespace of absence blurs the line between the familiar and the foreign, between the known and the unknowable, between self and other, assembling a conceptual approach attuned to the disquieting sensuousness of embodied life. In this context, this section draws particularly on Lingis’ reflections on the time of loss in *Irrevocable Loss* (2018). Acting as a pivot between the understandings of loss offered in the previous two sections (absent presence; death and dying) and the two that follow (deindustrialisation; environmental loss), I argue that Lingis’ account helps to clarify the involuntary nature of the vulnerability associated with loss, whilst drawing attention to the drift of *time* on these acutely affecting sensibilities. Reading his text somewhat against the grain, I suggest that his approach helps to populate a wider terrain for the experiential afterlife of loss, extending aforementioned accounts of survival to give a sense of how it is that bodies might become transformed within and by these timespaces.

In 'Irrevocable loss', Lingis explores the experience of living on after death by narrating a story he was told about the actions of a man after the death of his partner. Lingis describes the way that rituals come to matter in response to loss, as time stills and loops in the seemingly unmoving time of an impasse, where "one finds oneself in a now that does not pass, that continues, without extending possibilities" (Lingis, 2018, p. 178). The impasse describes an uncertain duration of heightened intensity where action-oriented, teleological action breaks down, crowded out by the imposition of an unaffirmable and painful presence. In the impasse of loss, the capacities usually ascribed to bodies—competencies of language, speech, action and volition—can be overwhelmed by the presence of grief and mourning, powers of acting diminished by the intensities of loss. In this less-than-conscious bodily state, Lingis describes the importance of repetitive and ritualistic activities, where "action that is set forth is not tightly engaged with the material forces in the immediate environment" (Lingis, 2018, p. 176). In ritual, language, behaviour and meaning are uncoupled, breaking the line between action and intention; in ritual, steps are taken before we can say what each step means.

The sense in which Lingis describes ritual here differs from the rituals of memorialisation suggested previously. In describing the timespaces of ritual as an escape or refuge from loss, ritual shares a resemblance with what Berlant (2011) might call "floating sideways" through activities that function as a time out from directed, life-building action. Compared to rituals of memorialisation that are associated with *remembrance* and *connection*, ritual here offers *dissociation* and *disconnection* from the unwilling intensities of memory and the painful forms of embodied presence they produce. Lingis notes that the impassive time of loss is not exactly, or yet, a time of mourning; this would, according to Freud, involve the *work* of detaching one's libido from an object so that it might be available for attachment to new objects. Instead, the impasse "is a stretch of duration without achievement or accomplishment" (Lingis, 2018, p. 184), a momentary stilling of the body, moments that, as Harrison suggests:

cannot be described as enacting an attitude or disposition of any kind; rather, they are, in all kinds of ways, precisely the cessation, breakdown, or failure of such performances. Those moments, hours, days, perhaps even years "when Ariadne's thread is broken" (Bataille, 1988, page 33) and there is stasis and drift without project and orientation. (Harrison 2008, 433).

By breaking apart the billiard-ball linearity that tethers the work of life-building to the passing of time, Lingis suggests that irrecoverable loss is an event that throws bodies "outside of this time, into the incalculable time of chance, of fate. A time that does not advance by measurable units, that is

not progressive, that is a limitless stretch of duration in which events happen” (Lingis, 2018, p. 184). The impasse exists as an interruption from past timelines, but does not yet itself point to new horizons. Instead, this time is an opening to the winds of fate, exposed to the vicissitudes of unbound encounters blown in by circumstance.

Lingis’ account presents a transitional sense of the timespace after loss, a time in which imposed disconnections produce voids of meaning that cannot be filled or replaced. Although Lingis charts a map through the immediate intensities of loss, his account stops short of repairing loss. Instead, I suggest that his arc is recuperative of the *subject* and meaning, even if it is not recuperative of the loss itself. This is because, by dwelling in the arrested days, weeks and months in which life does not seem to move, Lingis implicitly posits a time *after* this intensity of loss. That is, although it is out of our control and we cannot say when it might occur, time seems to be stuck until—suddenly, somehow—*something* shifts to change our sensibilities. Open to fortune and fate, suddenly circumstances connect to enable worlds of possibility to emerge. This is not to say that memories and bonds do not endure the impasse—indeed, “the experience and expression of absence-presence through continuing bonds is a dynamic process, which may fade, flux or persist over time” (Maddrell, 2013, p. 517)—nor is it to efface the significance of the immediate intensities of loss. But it is to affirm that bodily intensities retain a latent openness to change, that intensities of pain and suffering abate before the timelines of mourning end.

With this open understanding of the temporalities of loss in mind, I argue that the afterlife of the impasse is a point of inflection for the subject, in which the continued *presencing* of loss turns into an *absencing* of loss’s intensities. Indeed, this orientation to the afterlife of loss is a key distinction of the turn to survival and ‘living on’. By emphasising renewed horizons for life after loss, questions are directed towards how living becomes transformed in the wake of absence. I suggest that this is about how *bodies* endure after loss, rather than how *loss* endures in bodies. As a result, I argue that a shift towards absence as *disconnection* sharpens geographical understandings of absence, setting up a distinction between absence-as-*presence* and absence-as-*absence*. This is a distinction that, I suggest, can be compellingly clarified through the style of relation described by Rose’s (2006) concept of a ‘dream of presence’. For Rose, an encounter with presence is a fundamentally *associative* experience. Regardless of its content, presence is “defined by its direction—that is, by its orientation towards *attachment*” (2006, 543). A dream of presence emerges in response to the orienting call of desire, responsibility and care. Drawing on Rose, I suggest that foregoing literatures on absent presence

and death and dying are chiefly concerned with the *enduring associations* that bodies have to loss, providing evidence of continuing bonds and recurring relations to lost others.

My argument, then, is that this dominant emphasis on presencing, although compelling, nonetheless leads to a significant blind spot in our understandings of loss. Beyond associative presence, I suggest that it is important to recognise that a form of absence is not just presence, but *absence*. That is, the absences of loss do not just function as a relation of association or connection to an other, but also as a relation of non-relation, as the destruction and disappearance of relation. Loss, as it says on the box, is a move to deprivation, lack and separation; to distancing, abandonment and withdrawal. Absence's signature is not a figure of presence, but the caesura of the *void*. Before absence returns as presence, absence begins as *absence*.

There is, then, a foundational elision at play in geographies of loss that emphasise the *ongoing presence* of relation over the *becoming absent* of relations. This bias can perhaps be best understood in the context of relational thought in geography today, with its relational ontology of a productive world (Jones, 2009; Anderson *et al.*, 2012). As Bissell and Gorman-Murray (2019) have recently argued, the dominance of relational ontologies has led to an over-attendance to connection as the main mode of relation in corporeal life. Accordingly, *disconnections* have lost their status as anything other than another variety of connection. Indeed, as Colebrook (2019) notes, the history of western thought has privileged relationality and knowledge—through relations of self to self, of self to other—and the complex systems seen to emerge from such relations, in its positing of how human life should unfold, resulting in an intellectual landscape where “any form of life that has not achieved this immanent liberation is deemed to be barely human” (p. 178). However, the differences between the two matter. Exploring themes of incomprehension, confusion, and disintegration, Bissell and Gorman-Murray explain that, in each instance, disorientation “signals a loss of bodily capacity to know others; to know how to proceed; and to know how to hold a situation together” (2019, p. 2). Rather than approaching experience through the endurance of relations, the authors make a space for the gaps engendered by the loss of previously orienting relations: for the *absence* of relation. Speaking to instances of disconnection, Bissell and Gorman-Murray are clear that what is being encountered are not associations and attachments, but *limits* (see Rose *et al.*, forthcoming). In the next section on deindustrialisation, I further develop the importance of disconnection in relation to loss by suggesting that experiences of loss can be disconnective experiences that open up new timelines and trajectories of living that do not always,

or even often, lead back to the original objects of loss. In such worlds, living on is as much a process of survival as it is one of nascent transformation.

III Deindustrialisation and ruination

In this section, I demonstrate how the closure of a workplace is about more than just the loss of a job. It can involve the loss of home, community, ways of life, friends, shops, sights, sounds, atmospheres. It can spiral out interrupt whole ways of living, cut through entire rhythms of place. Accordingly, this section reviews literature on deindustrialisation to explore the ways in which geographers have sought to understand the lives of people and place after industrial closures as a threshold experience of distancing and disconnection, in which the absences and impasses of loss fold into eroding lifeworlds and uncertain futures. What is foregrounded by this approach is the multiplicity of loss as not just a single event, but an ongoing process that continues to unfold after the event of industrial and workplace closure. A key emphasis has been on mapping the emotional geography of workplace closure and tracing the legacies of ruination that endure in deindustrialised places. As I suggest, however, attention is beginning to turn to questions of how life after closure can be accompanied by intensities beyond trauma and ruination, as a space where positive as well as negative experiences can occur. Like geographies of death and dying interested in survival and living on, I suggest analysis is increasingly directed towards the diverging futures that can emerge after events of loss.

The closure of a workplace is a major interruption not just to the lives of workers, but also the broader communities in which they are embedded. To understand how, it is important to recognise the importance of workplaces to the social life of communities, particularly in regional and rural areas. As Walkerdine's (2010) influential study explains, workplaces are key conduits for community formation and reproduction. Walkerdine draws on psychoanalytic models of attachment to conceptualises community as a 'skin' or membrane that provides psychic comfort and 'bodily containment' through activities undertaken collectively. The rhythms, routines, sounds and activity of the workplace, as well as the forms of neighbourly and collegial relation enabled by the operation of the steelworks come to be integral to a particular way of life; by interrupting these familiar processes and retracting the "embodied affordances of place", the closure of the workplace leads to the rupture of this psychic skin, which subsequently registers as a traumatic experience (Degnen, 2016). For Meier (2013), workplace closures are similarly traumatic experiences due to the loss of working identities and connections to place they generate, as the intimacy with place

experienced over years of labour “inevitably brings about a development of a sense of place, which in turn means that the worker’s identity alters and becomes closely connected to the workplace” (p. 473). Emphasising the affectivity of place’s materialities, Pini and colleagues (2010) speak of how former employees expressed grief at the sight of scenes that violate their expectations and memories of place, through examples such as “a sense of unease at being the only passenger on the bus each morning”, or the striking quiet in the mine because there’s no longer “smoke coming out of the stacks” (p. 564, 568). Indeed, Taylor (2019) recognises the importance of materials and buildings in emotional accounts of deindustrialisation, describing how acts of demolition are intensely emotive events of spatial erasure that can destroy members of a community’s sense of place to create an ongoing line of fracture within communities. By splintering communities, deindustrialisation can upend attachments to place, turning the comfort usually associated with home into the pain of the devastation being wrought upon the community (Mah, 2009).

What is evident from studies of deindustrialisation is that there is a politics to workplace closure, exposing the gap between purely ‘economic’ understandings of workplaces as part of profit-making systems, and its lively and constitutive role in the life of workers and community—particularly for regional communities where large employers are particularly integral to life in place. Like Walkerdine, Meier uses the metaphor of the workplace as a ‘second family’ (Meier, 2013, p. 480). For Meier, part of the ‘violence’ of workplace closure comes from the ‘betrayal’ of worker’s intimate belonging to place. Despite workers’ sense of belonging to workplaces, the lack of autonomy and ownership over such space is revealed by the interruption of closure. The powerlessness of workers to resist these forces evidences the imbalanced and often conflicted power relations between the working community and their employers. Writing on the emotional geography of a nickel mine closure in Australia, Pini and colleagues (2010) describe how the *process* of closure was a crucial factor in exacerbating the distress of workers, including frustration at defamatory news reports in local media and anger at the handling of the closure by the mining company. Surprisingly, Pini and colleagues note that a “constant refrain was that it was the way the mine had been closed which had caused emotional distress and not simply (or even) the closure of the mine itself” (2010, p. 567). With data collection undertaken at the time of the closure, though the authors are unable to comment on workers’ experiences after the closures; they note, however, that “while emotions littered the interviews with mine employees this was seldom in reference to a loss of income or concerns with future employment” (Pini *et al.*, 2010, p. 563). That is, although workplace closure is a duration of intense uncertainty and emotion, it is not—at least at this point—life *after* the closure that is the cause of distress.

Accordingly, where studies of experiences of industrial change have tended to focus on relations to the past or coping in the present, questions of labour and employment point towards the timespace of people's trajectories after such events. Studies situate analysis after the event of closure to demonstrate the difficulty experienced by workers as they face newly uncertain futures. Mah's (2012) influential account of deindustrialisation as a continually lived process of "industrial ruination" is instructive, in the way it recognises ruination as an ongoing production in regions of post-industrial decline. Emery draws on Mah to emphasise how the traumas of regional ruination are also passed on intergenerationally. The focus here is therefore not just on how interruptions and voids are created through loss, but also how such voids *are kept open* over time. Although research on people's experiences of *employment* after industrial closures is limited, the trajectories appear fraught. As Bennett (2015) explains, drawing on research in the Northeast of England, those living and working in places affected by industrial closures can struggle to cope in a post-mining economy constrained by few job opportunities, insecure work and low wages. Bennett shows that those who remain can not only experience intergenerational inequality, but drawing on the experiences of women, she demonstrates that this marginalisation can also be *intersectional*, layering inequality upon inequality in a race to the bottom for working-class communities.

By foregrounding the lens of 'place', however, I argue that there is a tendency in these studies to conflate the trajectories of retrenched former workers with those of place. That is, by writing about places where "relatively little had replaced the evidence of industrial decline either physically or economically" (Mah, 2010, p. 399), there is a tendency to assume workers are tethered to this decline, that their fates are intertwined with those of place. And yet, as indicated above, mining and resource extraction in the contemporary era is an industry fundamentally shaped by *mobility*. Workers do not just stay in place, they also *move*. I argue that this omission is critical for imagining life after closure, in which some people will remain in place, whilst others move on, seeking—and perhaps finding—new lives elsewhere. As Mah asserts, although "local accounts of the industrial past represent 'living memories', embodying complex relationships with the industrial past: many people who have lived through processes of industrial ruination focus on *imminent regeneration* rather than mourning or celebrating the industrial past" (2010, p. 398, my emphasis). That is, the focus for workers and families themselves is not on the past, but on *what* and *where* comes next—at least in the immediate aftermath of the event. In this context, the recognition of movement is important because it gestures towards the possibility of *change* for workers; that there is a range of agency in mobility, even in circumscribed contexts, potentially available to them (Zhang 2018). Indeed, in- and out-migration can be a source of 'reinvention' for *people* as well as *place* (Pottie-Sherman,

2020). This is not to say the picture is all rosy—out-migration simultaneously suggests the disintegration of local communities after closure, fracturing the collective to units such as the household, family and individual and undoing the relations that once held communities together—but to begin to suggest more hopeful readings of life after closure that are obscured by straightforward narratives of ‘ruination’ for people and place.

Accordingly, although the accounts of deindustrialisation given in previous examples paint rather bleak pictures, I suggest that delaminating the fates of *people* from the potential ruination imposed upon *place* allows for increasing recognition of the potential for repair and recuperation after events of loss. Indeed, the overwhelming focus on deindustrialisation as an event of pure ruination and traumatic rupture perhaps reflects a research field “predominately centred on spaces where the worst ruination has taken place” (Emery, 2019, p. 5), rather than being representative of economic deindustrialisation more broadly. Instead, we might emphasise that industrial change is what Walkerdine (2010) characterises as a ‘play of light and dark’, a situation that can bring forces both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (p. 113). Indeed, as Dawney (2020) shows, even places of *ruination* can be spaces of care and vitality. Conceptually, this recalibration requires research to move beyond a pathologisation of the end, towards an understanding of how the wider field of conditions after loss affect bodies. The closure is an interruption to existing lives, but it is also a time of eventfulness that remains open, fluctuating and unfolding in the durative and embodied present.

I argue that this potential might be further gleaned through an attention to the temporal structure of what Povinelli (2011, p. 11) describes as ‘tense’, as in the past, present and future tenses present in language. Borrowing from this grammatical concept, Povinelli distinguishes between different tenses of the event to draw attention to the teleological attributions often ascribed to events, enabling active operations in the present to appear as foregone conclusions of the past. Disambiguating the future perfect tense (‘will *have* happened’) from the future imperfect tense: (‘will *be* happening’), Povinelli describes an ‘economy of abandonment’ in which present suffering can be justified by an imagined end that gives present events their meaning. In the context of deindustrialisation, we might consider that a narrative alignment of people and place with the suffering of ruination can perversely justify neglect through the assumption of inevitable ruination and decline of places and people associated with those places. This is a narrative that might also be associated with the centre-periphery relations implicit in increasingly technologised and urban imaginaries of the future. My argument is that the concept of tense allows us to recognise a more diverse set of possibilities at play after the ‘end’. The trajectories of life opened by the cut of loss is a

duration poorly captured by *will-have-been* assumptions of devastation and ruination. For some, workplace closure may mean a shift into ever more precarious positions, but for others, the afterlife of loss can involve renewed stability or even upward mobility. I therefore suggest that there is further room for thinking about how the qualities and intensities initiated with workplace closure and loss might transform over time, such as through heightened attention to changing circumstances of people's worlds. In the final section, it is to this glimmer of hope—the possibility of an affirmation from the ashes—that I turn in the final section on reorienting from loss, drawing on discourses of environmental change that aim to turn the grief and sorrow of loss into the production of more sustainable worlds.

IV Environmental loss and change

This chapter has argued that increasing attention is being paid to the afterlives of loss in geography, spanning literatures such as those absence, death and deindustrialisation. I argue that researchers are shifting attention from experiences of melancholy and ruin to analyses of how survival and living might be possible after events of loss. Through discussions of finitude and vulnerability, the previous sections set up how loss is fundamental to living—not a weakness to be eradicated but a fundamental part of the ebbs and flows, the light and dark, of life. In this section, I start to think about loss explicitly through the vitality of its energetics, conceptualising the way it might be put to work for affirmable ends. Recognising that loss cannot be eliminated from life, the logic here is how loss might be worked with in ways that do not necessarily remove, eliminate or disavow loss, but rather aim to work with it as part of a process of moving forwards. Accordingly, the final section deepens this turn to the affirmative possibilities of life by tracing these emerging narratives through geographical literatures on people's experiences of environmental change, particularly biodiversity loss and extinction. I show how such geographers are increasingly energised by questions of how societies might adapt and adjust to environmental change in ways that might begin to repair possibilities for living after loss. This may seem a surprising choice given the more closely aligned discussions of loss in previous sessions. However, I argue that the forward-oriented discourses on environmental loss interrupt the foregone narrations of tense that tend to characterise other discourses on loss, where the inevitability of ruination appears inevitable. On the one hand, this structure of relation recognises that it remains possible for present actions to limit further losses. But, more operatively for this thesis, it does so increasingly alongside a recognition of the problematic nature of existing relations to non-human worlds. What I wish to draw out through this discussion, then, is the space this literature opens for conceptualising how existing subject

positions might be reconfigured within, and by, the intensities of loss. I suggest that a *micropolitics* of embodied life thus emerges alongside a politics of action, one that demonstrates how bodies can reorient from the voids of loss towards more affirmative and reparative versions of the self.

Climate change is widely recognised as a phenomenon that produces extensive, profound and differentiated interruptions to the lives of people around the world. The confronting intensities of climate-altered futures are inseparable from the recognition of human vulnerability to the emergent volatility and complexity of an infinitely complex, inherently interconnected, excessive world of elemental energies (Clark, 2010). Recognising that climate change is an affective experience, geographers have argued for a shift from describing climate change-induced impacts in the language of ‘damages’ to one of loss (Barnett *et al.*, 2016; McNamara and Jackson, 2019; Tschakert *et al.*, 2019). Barnett and colleagues (2016) explain that many of the losses associated with climate change are incommensurable and cannot be substituted; in such a context, the language of damage is misleading as these are events of dispossession for which “there can be no effective compensation” (2016, p. 977). Accordingly, the authors argue that understanding what people value is fundamental to avoiding irrevocable losses, so that the most acute losses might be prioritised and avoided. This is particularly in recognition that, although many of the losses are yet to be incurred, there is a danger of underinvestment in vulnerable places and populations when decision-makers succumb to a fatalism around losses. The harm and grief associated with losses are not inevitable; harm can be offset through anticipatory measures with “palliative potential”, and precautionary processes that “minimize” losses (Barnett, *et al.*, p. 978).

Recognising the spaces of climate change as deeply affective, researchers have been exploring the potential for different emotions to be harnessed in responses to climate change. Although climate change losses are immediately associated with negative and undesired impacts, the focus for identifying these impacts has fundamentally productive aims: rather than simply languishing in these emotions, geographers emphasise how these difficult emotions can be redirected to recuperative projects. As Roelvink and Zolkos (2015) suggest, the deep sense of sorrow experienced by those witnessing environmental damage can precipitate an event of disruption in which “new possibilities for action arise, actions guided by the subject’s ethical sensitivity, responsivity and responsibility to earth others” (p. 45). Sorrow, the authors suggest, is an experience that connects bodies with others; in the context of climate change, sorrow might function to redraw relations between human and non-human entities, promoting care and consideration for others. Subsequently, Roelvink and Zolkos find solace in sorrow, affirming that “despair (or deep

pessimism) and hope are not mutually exclusive but are bound together” (2011, p. 52). Shaw and Bonnett (2016) make an analogous argument about the “adaptive and creative aspects of the work of grief” in environmental loss (p. 572). Rather than seeking to repair grief, however, Shaw and Bonnet are more critical, arguing that more sympathetic readings of grief may “fail to acknowledge the culture of self-concern, of narcissistic pleasures that are implicated as part of the challenges of environmental responsibility and irresponsibility” (p. 572). That is, although acknowledging the deep grief associated with climate change losses, Shaw and Bonnett also recognise a level of *complicity* for causing environmental damage amongst western audiences—including those who mourn—identifying a narcissism that can also involve an ongoing “unwillingness to change damaging and self-absorbed patterns of behaviour” that promote environmental destruction in the first place (Shaw and Bonnett, 2016, p. 571).

As a result, Shaw and Bonnet are more critical of grief, suggesting that the loss that we grieve in environmental loss is partly also the loss of the ‘modern’ way of life predicated on environmental destruction. They suggest that what the Anthropocene destroys is the western image of an environment unsullied by human intervention, one that is grounded in romantic imagery of wilderness and its problematic racist imaginary of authenticity. In this way, environmental loss may in fact be a productive event that also triggers, as geographers have long called for, “a decolonisation of the coloniser through unsettling their geographical imagination” by resituating human life within a broader Earth ecosystem unconcerned with such distinctions (Last, 2015, p. 56). Similarly, Yusoff (2012) draws on Judith Butler’s writing on grievable lives to argue that mourning is “an indeterminate space of transformation” that puts the self at risk with unknown consequences (p. 588). On the topic of biodiversity loss, Yusoff suggests that “grief itself can be made into a resource for politics, which rather than rendering inaction instead cements a commitment to identification, and thus gives itself to relation” (2012, p. 581-582). Yusoff notes the communicative possibilities of the *violence* of biodiversity loss, arguing that it is a “space of potential ... that holds within it something other than negative possibility” (2012, p. 590); this potential lies not in the matter of loss itself, but in the recognition that the compulsion to grieve demonstrates a deep relationality that affirms our deep and often disavowed entanglements with non-human others. As Colebrook (2014) suggests, the extinction of life heralded by the climate crisis prompts us to rethink what it means to be human and its relation to ecology and life. For van Dooren (2014), extinction slowly unravels the entanglements of humans and non-humans that define our existing ways of life; in the face of irrevocable loss, telling stories of extinction becomes a vital ethical act, by “exposing readers to their lives and deaths in a way that might give rise to genuine care and concern” (p. 9).

Collectively, the authors argue that realisations catalysed by loss might then come to lay the foundation for affirmative action and ethics, recognising the violences and injustices of existing worlds might be redirected to produce more caring, less grievable worlds.

In this way, geographers are beginning to recuperate the negativity of loss, turning mourning into a “politicised space” by highlighting the potentially transformative possibilities of environmental change (Romanillos, 2014, p. 569). Paradoxically, through the mist of grief, loss and sorrow, we see a geography of *hope* emerging for the potential of transformed life in the Anthropocene (Head, 2016). The hope for better worlds from less-than-ideal circumstances is “is not a belief but an empirical question”—less about blind faith or wilful optimism and more about the possibilities of cultivating an attentiveness to those currents hidden or underexplored, that may well offer alternatives to the present moment (Anderson, 2006; Back, 2020, p. 5). This approach to loss resonates with attempts across the social sciences and humanities to repair the political possibility of bad, ‘ugly’ or negative feelings as a site of potential and transformation (Ngai, 2004; Muñoz, 2006; Halberstam, 2011; e.g. Cvetkovich, 2012; Harrison, 2015; Thacker, 2015; Philo, 2017; Osborne, 2019; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019). Van Dooren and Rose (2015) argue that although dwelling with loss is part of the necessary work of reflection and mourning, it is an activity that “is not opposed to practical action, rather it is the foundation of any sustainable and informed response” (p. 377). For Yusoff (2012), a recognition of the violent relations that exist between humans and non-humans is fundamental to biodiversity loss’s political potential, as it is only through recognising and confronting the less-than-affirmable harms inflicted by human life that we might begin to transform these relations. Returning to the opening theme of absent presences, McCorristine and Adams (2020) draw attention to the spectral geographies of extinction, arguing that stories of the ghosts and hauntings of extinct animals “inspires conservationists to action” through efforts that “foster an aware-ness of a shared commons” (p. 111). And for Wakefield (2020), the doomsday imaginaries of the Anthropocene can be re-framed through the lens of the ‘back loop’, a concept borrowed from resilience ecology that denotes “a time of confusion and collapse as well as potential and reorganization” from which new ways of living might emerge (p. 10).

Increasingly, then, there is an interest in how the intensities of loss might be channelled into more affirmable projects, ones with the potential to reorient and transform bodies experiencing loss. I argue that these studies highlight affirmative approaches that might be translated into life after loss for workers after industrial loss, tentatively demonstrating the potential for repair latent within

intensities of grief and sorrow. By recognising the possibility that present conditions might harbour resources for disassembling what is problematic about existing worlds, such approaches harness the forces contained in loss's different affective and emotional registers, arguing that, even under constrained conditions, intensities of life can be channelled towards the production of more liveable existences. As a result, I suggest that there is a strange hope emerging in the spaces of destruction, where what was once seen as excessive "might turn out to be generative and vital", able to be recuperated (if only partially) into regimes of production that can serve as the basis for different versions of life and subjectivity (Yusoff, 2009, p. 1024). Researchers are increasingly recognising the excessive capacities of loss to reconfigure relations in a way that imparts not just destruction, but also affirmative potential, to experiences of loss. In the process, they reveal tentative senses of optimism and renewal in the lifeworlds of people and place after loss, recuperating potentials for repair that might otherwise be difficult to see or imagine.

Conclusion

This chapter began by emphasising the ambivalence with which workers approach contemporary working life in the extractive industries, suggesting a more complex emotional landscape to contemporary mine closures than a straightforward evaluation of 'good' or 'bad'. It has reviewed cultural geographical discourses on loss, traversing key literatures on absent presences, death and dying, deindustrialisation, and environmental change. I suggest that these topics are united around a set of problems that hinge on the recognition of human finitude in an excessive world. They emphasise the specificity of the other that is lost—it is not just the general 'you' of the *other*, or the plural 'you' of the *they*, but the singular 'you' of the *you*. This is a *you* that recognises the "absolute singularity of the Other whom we mourn", an other that cannot be substituted or replaced, but whose singular presence and being must be mourned on its own terms (Romanillos, 2015, p. 567). Given this specificity with which events of loss must be understood, an enduring theme across this broad literature is the *methodological* challenge of researching and representing loss, given its nature as an object that is material and affective; felt but not always visible; difficult to thematise through language and profoundly personal. Although I have not had the scope to discuss this here, the difficulty of apprehending loss is a topic to which I will return in the next chapter on my methodology.

Quickly putting the possibility of an easy distinction between the 'material' and the 'affective' aside, absent presences emphasise the excessive abundance of losses caused by death and destruction and

the capacity for ghosts of the past to endure as hauntings etched into the materiality of people and place. Deepening attention to the more intimate dimensions of loss, geographies of death and dying demonstrate the vitality and emotional intensity of ends. A running theme through these sets of literatures is the importance of remembrance and rituals of memorialisation that mourn losses of people, things and places.

In emphasising the finitude of life, however, geographers of death suggest finitude's double-edged sword: that it is the source of our vulnerability, but also the condition that gives life its vital impetus. As Barnes writes in a report on the history and philosophy of the discipline: "[w]hile I began this progress report with two deaths, the life of geography came quickly breaking in; indeed, those deaths were catalysts for further life" (2008, p. 565). Turning from the individual to the collective, studies of deindustrialisation show how loss cuts through the fabric of populations, fracturing senses of community and disassembling belonging to place. Studies focus equally on the event of disaster—the industrial closures themselves—and the *afterlives* of loss—the legacies that subsequently become left behind in deindustrialising places. Finally, I show how geographies of climate change and environmental loss are increasingly re-evaluating the destructive tenor of loss by showing how its unwilled intensities can be redirected towards more affirmative world-building projects.

There is, accordingly, an increasing attentiveness to how people live on and survive after the ends of loss. This chapter has demonstrated the vital impulse that courses through life as it confronts the ends of loss, producing an energetics that can animate bodies into and beyond the end. Tying the four sets of literature together is an ultimate sense of ambivalence around loss and its effects; an ambivalence that perhaps reflects the deeper ambivalence inherent to the vulnerability and finitude of human life. Together, these literatures demonstrate that the ends of loss fizz with intensities that deeply affect bodies. These intensities are drawn into vital and ongoing practices of mourning and remembrance, which, increasingly, are understood to suggest resources that might offer foundations for ongoing life. In the process, researchers demonstrate the potential for repair—rather than just ruin—after events of irrevocable loss. As I have argued, loss is increasingly being understood not through the enduring presence of lost *objects*, but through the capacity of *life* to endure and survive after loss. Facing the afterlife of loss, scholars of deindustrialisation emphasise the importance of the *futures* of people and place after events of ruination, thus orienting themselves not just to a memorialisation of the past, but turning a vigilant eye to the possibilities of regeneration and renewal in the future. I suggest that this sense of forward movement presents a recuperative

moment to loss, eschewing presumptions of ruination by foregrounding the possibility that the futures of people and place need not be tied to the event of loss and destruction. This turn indicates that a re-evaluation of loss is underway in human geography, one which I contend is most clearly demonstrated in recent literature on environmental change, particularly in relation to biodiversity loss. Here, scholars conceptualise how the excesses of loss can become a tentative resource for politics and renewal, pivoting concern from the grief and sorrow of lost worlds to the more hopeful possibilities of repair latent in such bodily states. I argue that this literature helps us to rethink the nature of ends, thinking of loss as a moment of deep interruption, as a radical disjuncture from the past, as an indeterminate and transitional period of impasse—but certainly not as The End to end all ends.

Snowballing the conceptual insights of these literatures, I conclude this chapter by affirming and deepening this move from presence to *absence*, from connection to *disconnection*, from proximity to *distance* in the timespaces of life after loss. In pivoting to the non-relations of absence, this study characterises the experience of loss as an interruption that opens an irrevocable break from what came before. Loss enacts a cut in the existing fabric of relationality, marking the end of a particular arrangement of the world; in the process, the ends of loss open up diverse and indeterminate temporalities, decaying and disassembling existing relations. Rather than the ‘will have been’ of ruination and abandonment, however, I argue that the gaps and aporias of absence instead unfold an *ambiguous* sense of the future, imparting an *ambivalence* to the emotional valence of loss. That is, although loss enacts a cut, the original event can sometimes tell us little about what comes *after* the cut. I contend that this sense of openness to loss is vital to its political possibilities; as a minimum, it is fundamental to be able to conceptualise loss as something other than an inevitable event of absolute disaster and ruination, even if it is not yet clear what might come to offer the lifeline that people so often need. Accordingly, whilst existing accounts have focussed on the continuing bonds of loss, my gesture here is towards the capacities of the body to change, transform and become—to *redirect* and *reorient*—to become anew, in ways potentially unanticipated in previous regimes of self and sensibility.

3 Methodology: witnessing life and loss

Introduction

This chapter details the methodological approach employed in the coming-to-existence of this thesis, describing the processes that inform its discussions of the unfolding lives of workers and their families as they navigate the wake of job loss and workplace change after industrial closure. For Thrift, non-representational theory is “the geography of what happens”; it is the taking place of life as it unfolds in the world (Thrift, 2008, p. 2). Central to the non-representational project has been, as the name suggests, a critique of existing norms of representation for capturing the vitality of life. Drawing on theories of performance, practice and affect, time and space are considered active and enacted compositions caught in processes of becoming. My suggestion is that non-representational theory’s roving eye is particularly well suited to this thesis’ aim of tracking the embodied interruptions and transitions of life after the closure of two industrial employers, given its attention to the micropolitical push and pull of forces that have not yet reached established thresholds of identitarian existence. In fact, I argue that its expressly affirmative sensitivity to subtle and situational transitions in power is particularly well suited to the embodied afterlife of loss, in which incipient forms of relationality can often be obscured by loss’s non-relational intensities. Inspired by the ‘push’ of non-representational theories, this chapter therefore details my traversal of empirical and conceptual worlds, refusing the possibility of any clear separation of the two. Accordingly, acknowledging that research is not just *about* affect, but is *itself* affective (Vannini, 2015), this chapter draws on a non-representational imaginary to track two happenings as they converge at one point in time: the ‘what happened’ in the lives of the people with whom I speak, and the ‘what happened’ in my attempts to listen to those stories.

At the heart of this thesis is a set of ‘conventional’ methods based on interviews and observation; however, as I will attempt to show, *how* one approaches and understands their empirical data is just as central to a non-representational imaginary as *what* methods one uses. Methods, in this ethos, are less a set of protocols that might secure the objective status of data, and more a variety of practices that facilitate avenues for exploration in an encounter, in a ‘post-qualitative’ style of analysis (Lather

and St. Pierre, 2013). As Stewart (2011) highlights, methods provide space to *figure out* matters of significance. As such, non-‘field’-based practices such as the elaborative acts of *thinking* and *writing* are as much a method as the sensory, embodied or talk-based tools usually associated with the term. Recognising, however, the importance of representation to the possibility of the non-representational, a focus in this chapter is thus on the relationships between *world and word*, *speaker and listener*, and *writer and reader* as they play out in this thesis—relationships I frame around principles of *testimony*, *attunement* and *translation*.

Reflecting the status of my fieldwork as what Serres might call a *randonnée* (Serres, 2009, p. 259)—in French “a quite long and difficult walk” and in English a ‘ramble’ or ‘rambling’—this chapter cycles through the three principles that together demonstrate this thesis’ methodological approach. I begin with a discussion of *testimony* and *attunement*. My aim here is to draw on non-representational, postcolonial and feminist literatures to foreground the gaps in speech that accompany all attempts at relation. I do so firstly in recognition of affect’s autonomy from speech, existing in a register that is not immediately amenable to textual coding. But I also do so acknowledging that this gap is only widened by the topic matter of loss, which exists as a non-relational void or disastrous intensity long before it can be transfigured into the communicative gaze of meaning and speech. In this sense, the prominence of these principles in this chapter acts as a memento of these non-relational fissures, which are “all but erased” in the smooth markings of representation and story that necessarily follow (Harrison, 2008, p. 425). I then describe the fieldwork undertaken in the two sites explored in this thesis, Kandos-Rylstone, Australia and Pingdingshan, China. Here, I describe how I gained access to the field, sampled for participants and undertook interviews with people in place, before turning to the third principle, *translation*, to explain how these encounters became the text that populates this thesis. Here, I invoke concepts of *example*, *comparison* and *trajectory* to guide my processes of analysis and writing. I conclude with a reflection on the representations made in this chapter and thesis, thinking of writing as an attempt, however small, to connect across the distances that divide us.

I Testimony

In asking people to speak to their experiences, I am asking them to give testimony: to communicate traces of the past. As a precursor to the discussions that follow, this section discusses the way in which testimony, understood through its gaps, offers a ground to rethink the process by which geographical methodologies unfold. Testimony has traditionally been understood as ‘evidence’ of an

event, a demonstration of the truth of ‘what happened’. As Harrison (2009b) notes, testimony’s logic is fundamental to social scientific endeavour, with its truth function working to render the individual transparently available to analysis via the social. In spite of this, Harrison identifies several fundamental problems with testimony’s mobilisation as ‘evidence’. The first is the gap between the general nature of language and the specific nature of experience. In order to communicate experience (which is always specific) one must use *shared* technologies of abstraction and signification, most commonly language. This introduces a gap between what is thematisable in speech and what is available to experience. A second issue is that the testifying subject narrates an experience in the past, one that is already distanced from the event and thus subject to the distortions of time. Testimony, then, is not the experience itself but the result of an “after-the-event process of representational reflection” mediated by memory (McCormack, 2013, p. 20). Third, and adding to Harrison’s points, is Carter-White’s (2009) suggestion that the experiences that subjects are being asked to recall may themselves not have been accessed from the perspective of a fully lucid, self-present subject to begin with. Drawing on the traumatic experiences of Holocaust witnesses, Carter-White suggests that a self-witnessing subject may not have even existed at the time of an experience, due to necessities of survival which foster psychological dissociation, splitting and coping, with lasting effects on the way the event is remembered.

The argument here is that the interiorities opened by events—especially extreme events of exhaustion, pain, mourning, trauma and loss—produce gaps in self-knowledge. As a result, testimony is marked gaps in the text “between the referent and reality, between representation and experience” (Harrison, 2009b, p. 162). To think with testimony’s form demands the problematisation of what speech or writing conveys, gesturing towards the proximity of moments that resist meaning. Harrison’s reminder is that such gaps haunt all texts, whether they are visible or not. My desire in evoking this principle, then, is to begin to approach questions of methodology with this acknowledgment: to highlight the work involved in bridging gaps in the attempt to grasp another’s experience, to emphasise that there is no self-evident way of narrating experience. Recognising the necessity of non-knowledge and interpretation means that rather than outlining a methodology that would *secure* and *verify* the status of speech, this chapter will take a different tack: its aim will be to track processes of *translation* that have enabled a particular reading to occur.

II Attunement

Testimony is always already a relation “between addressor and the addressee” (Harrison, 2009b, p. 162); it is an event that takes place between bodies—between you and me. In his concluding thoughts, Harrison affirms that the “enigmatic and anasemic” gaps that shadow testimony should not be seen as instants of radically unfixed meaning or meaninglessness (2009b, p. 176). Turning from the content of the speech to the conditions of the relation that would allow speech to occur, Harrison suggests that the ethical accompaniment to testimony’s aporia is a demand to reflect on the conditions of dialogue—to reflect on the relation between self and other that would enable testimony’s address to occur. That is, the emphasis shifts from the relation between *world and word*, to the relation between *speaker and listener*.

This question of the conditions for dialogue—the question of what it takes to hear the other—is famously explored by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (Spivak, 1988) To simplify, Spivak calls out a (western) critical tradition in which the intellectual claims to speaking on behalf of an other (the subaltern), despite persisting in the use of the intellectual’s own terms of discourse. Spivak argues that this approach ventriloquises the other, ultimately rendering her voice silent by allowing it to only be expressed *negatively*—through its difference from another’s discourse—rather than on her own terms. For Spivak, this is an issue that cannot be righted simply through an attempt at a better representation. Instead, in order to hear the other, it is not content but *relation* that must come first. Practically speaking, this is a process that might be gleaned from what Spivak later describes as an act of ‘translation’ (2009 [1998]).

Thinking of the other as ‘text’, Spivak argues that a ‘good’ translation emerges from an act of *surrender*, an act in which the translator yields to the scene the of text in pursuit of the ‘rhetorical’ edge of language. ‘Rhetoric’ refers to how a speaker or writer acts with language—an agency that is hidden “in the silence between and around words” and only readable with the proper cultural preparation (Spivak, 2009, p. 203). This puts translation in an affective realm: to ‘surrender’ in translation is to transform not just the text, but also to transform *oneself* by cultivating a discursive imagination capable of recognising the other’s agency. A ‘good’ translator must have earned her right to translate by becoming intimate with the sphere of the other—the presuppositions of the speaker, but also the intricacies of the host culture, history and, of course, the language itself. For me, the importance of this preparation and familiarity goes some distance to acknowledging my choice of fieldsites in Australia and China: that these are ‘places’ (broadly writ) which I—through a mix of felicity, circumstance, history and choice—have an ‘abiding’ relation (Jazeel, 2018).

Correspondingly, Spivak's critique relates more broadly to how I think about my positionality in this thesis, as a performative that makes a difference in encounters. Although approaches to positionality have tended to play an 'accounting' role—what Rose calls 'transparent reflexivity' (1997)—Rose explains that the assumption of a shared 'landscape of power' between researcher and participant is misguided—"the researched must be placed in a different position from the researcher since they are separate and different from her" (pp. 312-313). For Rose, reflexivity and positionality do not exist to justify or put a caveat on speech, but as an active and responsible practice of reflection and change so that "non-overgeneralizing knowledges that learn from other kinds of knowledges" may be possible (1997, p. 317). The wider point I want to make here is that the capacity to hear the other is not a given: it requires reflexivity, preparation, effort, commitment to cultivating specific imaginations and cannot be accessed through a universal method. As Jazeel (2018) writes, echoing Spivak, "there can be no formulaic access to the singular" (p. 2). My ethical practice in this thesis has thus involved several related approaches. First, I have explained the importance of cultivating familiarity and cultural competency in the environments within which one seeks to do research, such that one is able to recognise the agency of the other within their circumstances. This is, no doubt, an ongoing and potentially endless task, which, as Jazeel (2018) asserts, demands an 'abiding' approach to our topics of interest. Second, I have described the importance of a situational reflexivity that recognises the ethical value of self-critique. This has involved a commitment to what has recently been described as 'attunement'. The key to attunement is not necessarily a particular way of feeling, but rather one's *orientation* to other bodies and relations in recognition of the self as an 'aporetic subject' with "always already excessive capacities to become otherwise through aesthetic experience and practice" (Jackson, 2016, p. 15). Attunement is related to the concept of attention as a "continuously shifting oscillation" that draws on sensory and material inputs in dialogue with memory by channelling the body's focus within particular environments (Ash, 2012, p. 8). However, rather than amplifying the *capacity to affect*, attunement is about opening the body's *capacity to be affected* in a "radical decentring of authority", acknowledging the participation of other agencies (including non-human agencies) in the "co-author[ing of] heterogeneous worlds" in which we are immersed (Brigstocke and Noorani, 2016, p. 5). Although beyond the scope of this chapter, I have explored these ideas in the context of this project in a series of essays on research ethics, offering reflections on the demands of attunement (Zhang, 2020) and the fraught conditions of cultural translation as it intersects with personal histories (Zhang, forthcoming).

Atmospheres, forces, duration

In the above paragraphs, I discussed the *conditions* of listening, thinking about attunement through the constitutive side of the encounter with the other. Here I turn to consider the question of *what* I am attempting to attune to through this process. I do so tentatively, recognising the danger of determining this too tightly (a stance that would perhaps defy the whole point of listening). Given this, I emphasise the way that inheritances of convention have historically made representational forms such as talk, text and discourse paradigmatic within geography. In this context, the task is to expand the remit of what counts as a ‘proper’ target of consideration for analytic attention. As such, before turning to my experiences in the field, I first offer a preliminary sense of how I understand the ‘object’ of attunement in this project.

In their chapter on ‘Atmospheric methods’, Anderson and Ash (2015) suggest that the concept of ‘atmosphere’ might be seen as the ““paradigmatic non-representational object”, exemplifying the challenge the non-representational poses to social scientific habits (p. 48). Underwritten by a processual logic, the atmospheric imaginary is “associated with the uncertain, disordered, shifting and contingent—that which never quite achieves the stability of form” (Anderson, 2009, p. 78). Recognising the doomed task of ‘knowing’ an indeterminate substance such as an atmosphere, let alone representing it, non-representational theorists have shifted interest from more determinate questions of *form* to the nature of diffuse *forces*. Following Bergson, this distinction might be elaborated through his concepts of *analysis* and *intuition*. Analysis relies on the work of symbols to make sense of the world; and yet symbols are only capable of presenting static snapshots in time, leaving mysterious the forces that link moments together. Owing to its pointillism, analysis is unable to access what Bergson calls ‘duration’—the “continuous flux” (1999, p. 25) and multiplicity of which embodied life is constituted; durations can only be accessed affectively through *intuition*. Rather than relying on symbols, non-representational approaches are interested in approaching the atmospheric multiplicity of embodied life through its duration, as an unrolling experience of qualitative change in which moments bleed and extend into each other.

The processual and durational imaginary suggested here finds what is perhaps its apotheosis in the work of Kathleen Stewart (2007, 2011), for whom the process of attunement and the object of attunement are interlinked. For Stewart, atmospheric attunements require ‘weak theory’: a “[t]heory that comes unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters, or becomes undone by its attention to things that don’t just *add up*” (2008, p. 72 original emphasis). Stewart emphasises the process of composition or *poeisis* in the taking place of experience, one that is lived

through the “saturation of the senses” (2008, p. 73). Sensing, in this conception, is always a ‘sensing with’ the environments, materials and forces around us, “[i]n a double moment of solicitation and response” from which sensibility and experience emerge (Anderson and Wylie, 2009, p. 326). To quote Stewart’s idiosyncratic prose once more for clarity: “the point of analysis [is] not to track the predetermined *effects* of abstractable logics and structures but, rather, to compose a register of the lived *affects* of the things that took place in a social-aesthetic-material-political worlding” (2017, pp. 192–193, original emphasis).

Two places

Having given an initial guide for what I will be attempting to track in fieldwork and the ethics of my approach to the other, the present section finally brings us to the field in order to detail my interactions as they took place across two places: Kandos-Rylstone, NSW, Australia and Pingdingshan, Henan, China.

Sites, decisions, access

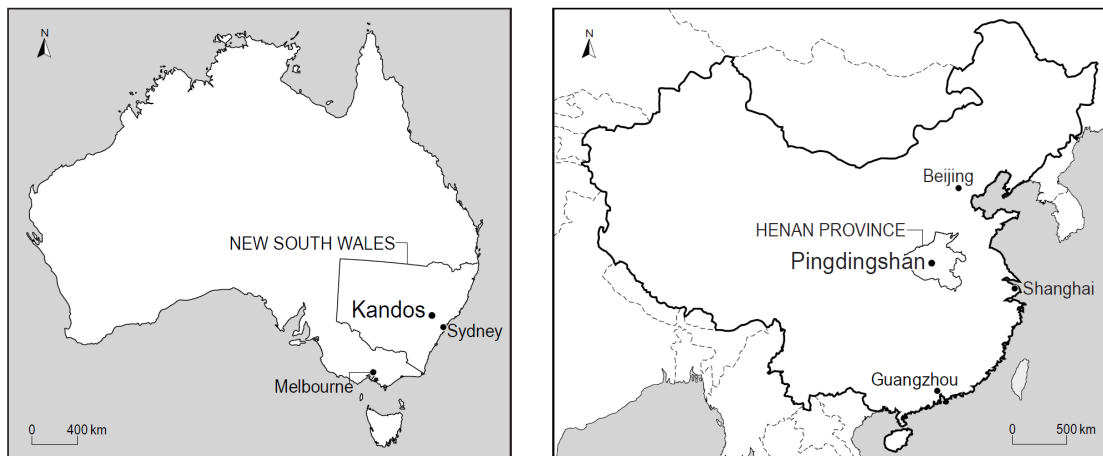
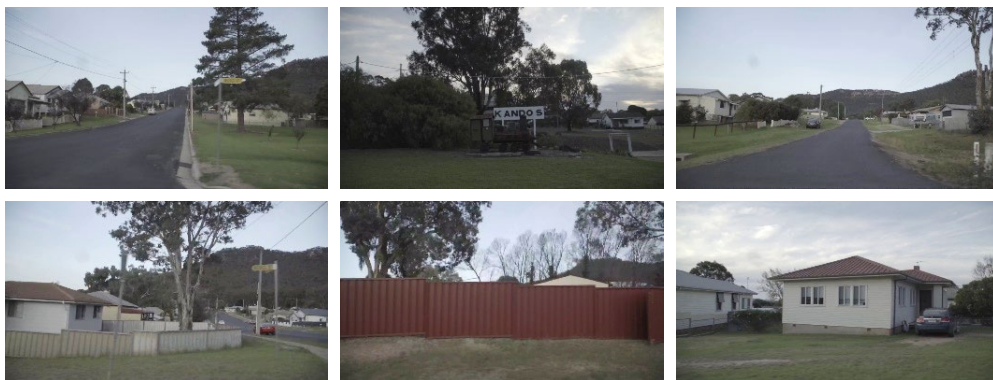


Figure 1: Location of field sites



Scenes from the streets of Kandos, filmed from my car window.

Kandos, New South Wales³

Kandos is a small town with a big industrial heritage! Neighbouring Rylstone, an agricultural hub, the two towns may have separate names, but share a community. Located 3.5 hours west of Sydney by car, with a shared population of 1800 people, the district was originally settled in the 1820s, making it one of the oldest settlements west of the Blue Mountains. Boasting Australia's very first cement factory (later known as Kandos Cement), built in 1914 at the Commonwealth's behest, Kandos is "the town that made the cement that made your town"—it even supplied some of the cement for the Sydney Harbour Bridge!

Rich in coal and limestone deposits, the area's cement industry—with its attendant coal mines, power plants and lime works—once made Kandos into one of the most prosperous towns in the region. The town itself, a company town subdivided into workers housing, was even one of the first towns in the state of New South Wales to have electric lighting. At its peak in the 60s and 70s, the thriving town boasted two car dealerships and a Polish delicatessen—the latter came before even Sydney had one! Up until the 90s, Kandos Cement was one of the biggest cement producers in the nation.

But the times are a changin'. One by one, businesses and factories have closed due to technological automation, rising competition, increased regulation, and resource exhaustion. After almost a century in operation, Kandos Cement shut in 2011. Soon after, in 2014, the last big employer in the area, Charbon Colliery, was also forced to close its doors. The open-cut section of the Charbon mine, contracted out to a company called Big Rim, was the last to go in 2015. At the time of the closure, around 80 men were employed underground: half were redeployed to Airly mine, also owned by parent company Centennial Coal; the other half were made redundant. But at Big Rim, there was nowhere else to go: all the workers found themselves laid off. With the local economy slashed by decades of progressive cuts and closures, many left the area to seek livelihoods further afield. School numbers dropped, shops shut, services were cut. There are hopes—and whispers—of industry returning—of new mines setting up, old factories expanding. A growing group of artists have set up in the town, pushing the place in new directions. But for now, the town's fate hangs in the balance, caught in limbo, eyes fixed on the uncertain horizon.

³ These introductions to the field sites are presented in the exaggerated style of a promotional tourism flyer. A few words of explanation may help to orient the reader. This genre has been chosen in reflection of the way in which I came to both of these places: as a stranger with little more than online tourism promo material to orient myself in place. Here, I have attempted to retain the points that would otherwise be communicated by more conventionally written version of this paragraph in a methodology chapter, whilst also trying to evoke something of the unfamiliarity with which I approached each place. I offer that this stylistic choice ultimately has two aims: one is to evade the performance of mastery usually enacted in such descriptions of place, and the other is to position the reader *beside* me—rather than behind me—in the subsequent journeys and learnings offered in this thesis, which work to nuance the more wilfully naïve representations offered here.

From: Vickie Zhang
To: David Bissell
Date: Thursday, 2 November 2017 at 17:45
Subject: RE: meeting #9 notes

speaking of kandos – the internet tells me three exciting things: firstly there is a fabulous looking museum about the area in kandos that promises a beguiling archive of its industrial history <http://www.kandosmuseum.org.au/>

secondly there is an annual car show called the ‘Kandos Street Machine and Hot Rod Show’ [...]

but most importantly, there is ‘cementa’, a four-day biennial festival of contemporary art <http://cementa.com.au/> (a la documenta in kassel, i’m guessing) [...]

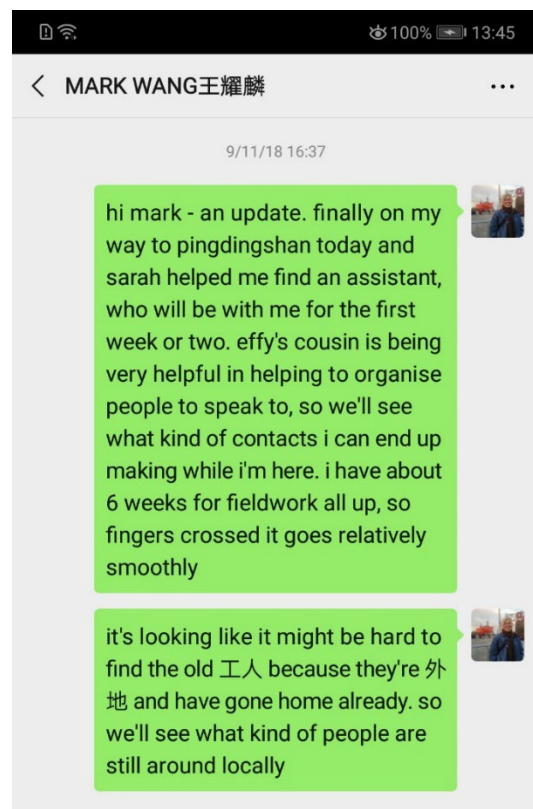
i suppose from an academic perspective, that’s an interesting take on rural-urban transformation, and on mobility (reversing the rural-to-urban thing a la counterurbanisation) [...]

but also it just sounds like a really interesting place to spend a few months...

I didn’t *mean* to go to Pingdingshan—at least, it wasn’t the destination I intended upon when I set out for China. But I *did* intend to go to Kandos—if stumbling upon a dot named Kandos on a map of defunct coal mines meets the threshold for ‘intentional action’. As Del Casino (2001) writes, the flux of ethnographic-style research means that decisions are often not made in pre-planned and intentional ways, but rather “subconsciously and “on the fly” when confronted with challenges and unexpected issues” (p. 452). My barometer for many early, crucial decisions was bodily rather than cognitive: unfamiliar with the locations I would be visiting, choices were made on limited knowledge, instinct, speculation, and more than a little hope.

How did I end up in Kandos and Pingdingshan in particular? Although I knew that I hoped to go to field sites in Australia, as a culturally proximate space, and China, as a more distant familial landscape, my working criteria was minimal: a coal mine in each country that had closed recently—in, say, the last 3-4 years. In some ways, I reasoned that it didn’t matter where I went beyond this basic set of criteria: the particularities of place, once unfolded, inevitably renders places singular and incomparable. Unfamiliar with the sites, then, the existence of local ‘gatekeepers’ eventually came to be the crucial factor in my decision-making (Campbell *et al.*, 2006).

Truth be told, I was initially more anxious about going to rural Australia than I was going to China. In retrospect, this appraisal was radically off the mark, but having spent little time in country Australia at the time, I was reasonably concerned that it would be a hyper-white space that, historically hostile to people of Chinese origin, might retain a lingering sense of this discomfiting past (see Forrest and Dunn, 2013). For this reason, I was particularly drawn to Kandos upon discovering that Kandos not only had a neighbouring coal mine that had recently closed, but that a contemporary art collective from Sydney had set up a residency program in the small town. My thinking went: if I was to be potentially exposing myself to discomforts, at least I would have the comforting cocoon of a familiar urban milieu—people with interests and backgrounds similar to mine—to turn to. An added bonus was that they might be able to facilitate introductions to people dotted around town. Testing the waters, I sent an email to the director of the group, asking if they would accommodate a researcher residency. With a happily affirmative response, and wheels already turning, it was quickly settled that Kandos was where I would go.



Pingdingshan, Henan 平顶山市

Come to Pingdingshan, a coal city at the heart of modern China! Pingdingshan is located in Henan province: China's most populous province, the 'birthplace of Chinese civilisation' and a modern-day agricultural heartland. The city of Pingdingshan was established by the government in the early 50s, soon after the founding of modern China, recognising the importance of its abundant natural mineral resources to the nation's industrialisation efforts. Experts and workers were brought in from all over the country to help it grow; from these humble beginnings, the city now boasts over 1 million inhabitants.

One of Pingdingshan's many state-owned coal mines is Mine No. 7, one of the large mines that have existed since the city's founding. It is owned by the giant state-owned China Pingmei Shenma Energy & Chemical Group, the largest enterprise in Henan province, whose coal mines and chemical plants dot the city and its outskirts. After many decades in operation, Mine No. 7 closed in 2016. The closure was caused by coal resources being exhausted at the long-running site, in a fate shared by several nearby mines.

Mine No. 7's closure meant the loss of work for its over 7,000 workers. Despite being heavily indebted, a large state-owned enterprise such as Pingmei—with an annual turnover of 127.3 billion yuan (USD 18 billion) and over 160,000 workers across the province—cannot just abandon its workers. The state-owned enterprise is one of the final places in China today where the 'iron rice bowl' welfare of the socialist state still holds sway. Instead, upon Mine No 7's closure, workers over 50 years of age were offered early retirement—a small pension of around 1,500 (USD 220) yuan per month and health insurance—and those under 50 redeployed to one of the enterprise's other work units in mining and chemicals production. The latter category included over 4,000 workers, in a tiered process that took place over several years.

Staying longer in Pingdingshan? Then consider visiting neighbouring Yexian county, named the 'Capital of China's Rock Salt' by the China Mining Association!

Field site choice in China ended up being a more complicated ordeal, although it initially seemed, as it often does, so simple. My secondary supervisor, an expert on deindustrialisation in China, and I settled on going to *Dongbei*—the North-East—a prominent deindustrialising region of China. A close Chinese collaborator in the region identified a city that would be suitable—Fuxin, Liaoning province—owing to the recent closure of several large coal mines there. We did not have any local contacts, but the colleague promised to organise a student to accompany me on my initial visit. Having previously done fieldwork in a rural Chinese village (where I had assistance from the village

head), I imagined I would be prepared for the ‘step up’ of research in China without any local connections. In the end, the pilot trip to Fuxin made the difficulties of this clear—that, in a relatively closed society, people would be wary of a stranger showing up at their door asking questions, let alone a foreigner, let alone about a state-owned enterprise in a region in decline. At the same time, a close friend in China suggested that I might instead consider going to her home province, where her uncle formerly worked at a state-owned mine. He had now passed away, but her cousin should be able to show me around and get me started. At the very least, I would know *someone* locally. After much consultation, and aware of the ticking clock on my time in China, I decided to head to Pingdingshan.

Gatekeepers, assistants, sampling

This thesis centres on the trajectories of the former workers at the now-closed mines. My initial aim was to speak to around 20 people in each location, with around half of these being workers and their partners, aiming for depth of engagement over quantity of interviews. For practical reasons, I limited my scope to people who still lived in the communities. My priority was to speak to workers who were employed at the mine at the time of the closure, along with their partners. Given the reverberating community feedback effects, I supplemented this by speaking with people across the community, such as local business owners, community leaders, environmental groups and townspeople.

Whilst, in some situations, gatekeepers can be integral for securing access to participants (through that figure’s position within the hierarchical power-relations of a group or community), in others, gatekeepers have a more general role in that they do not *control*, but rather *facilitate* interaction with prospective research subjects (such as through more transversal networks of friends and acquaintances). As I would be speaking to a wide range of people in a personal capacity, procuring the ‘right’ approvals was not strictly necessary; instead, the hope was that these gatekeepers, or ‘contacts’, might act as “helpful facilitators who provide access to and increase acceptance among research subjects”, easing the comfort of the recruitment process (Campbell *et al.*, 2006, p. 103).

Contacts were integral for several related reasons: first, my target group of coal mine workers and their families are a potentially dispersed population that might be difficult to identify. Second, I knew that the existence of trusted contacts in the field would ease the anxiety of the recruitment process, offering some comfort in what can be an uncomfortable process. Finally, having a local contact also addressed my concerns about safety on fieldwork in unfamiliar places. The downside of

relying on particular contacts was the possibility that their social circles might return a smaller subset of the range of experiences when compared to the entire target population. In the relatively enclosed communities explored here, however, I found that people are already highly connected to each other, mitigating some of the distortionary effects of this strategy. Nonetheless, I aimed to reduce reliance on any given contact by ensuring that I recruited participants through several different contacts.

#	Name	Gender	Relation to project
1	Lily	F	Young person who left the area due to limited job opportunities
2	Ric	M	Former miner at Charbon who voluntarily left prior to the closure; now works as a solar installer and electrician
3	Aunty Mary	F	Aboriginal elder living in the area since 2010
4	Buster	M	Former miner at Charbon; now the rehabilitation manager at Charbon
5	Scott	M	Former miner at Charbon; now works at Airly mine; partner of Lisa (below)
6	Lisa	F	Partner of Scott (above)
7	Owain	M	Former mine accountant at Charbon; now retired
8	Bob	M	Former miner at Charbon; now works as a contractor at the Charbon mine rehabilitation site
9	Baskie	M	Former miner at Charbon; now works as a contractor at the Charbon mine rehabilitation site
10	Bob	M	Formerly mine manager at Charbon and managed the transition from Charbon to Airly when Charbon ceased operations
11	Ray	M	Local pub owner; partner of Julie (below)
12	Julie	F	Local pub owner; partner of Ray (above)
13	Brent	M	Local journalist, president of local radio station and edits community newsletter; partner of Caroline (below)
14	Caroline	F	Runs local environment group; partner of Brent (above)
15	Jack	M	Prominent local figure, former business owner
16	Robbie	M	Former miner at Charbon; now at Airly; Nic's partner (below)
17	Nic	F	Partner of Robbie (above)
18	Shaun	M	Owns and runs local engineering contracting company
19	Pete	M	Local musician, originally from Sydney
20	Norm	M	Former miner at Big Rim; now a sheep herder, jack-of-all-trades
21	Haydn	M	Former miner at Big Rim; runs a shop in Rylstone
22	Edwina	F	Teacher at local school
23	Phil	M	Former miner at Big Rim; now works as a contractor at the Charbon mine rehabilitation site

Table 1: List of interviewees in Kandos and Rylstone

In Kandos, I began by simply attempting to make contacts in all directions, wherever the opportunity arose. I would be there for three months (February—May 2018); my initial aim was to get the lay of the land and make myself known. Luckily, this was easy: my new artist friends invited me around for coffee, my landlord, a prominent local figure, regularly dropped around for repairs; people introduced me to locals; I was even put in touch with the company that owned Charbon Colliery, who were incredibly generous with their hospitality. More actively, I introduced myself on air at the local radio station during a morning breakfast show and I put a notice in the monthly community newsletter.

Despite the flurry of activity, my target population of workers and partners seemed to be difficult to get a hold of—possibly due to the long working hours and commutes at their present jobs, possibly because the few jobs in the area meant that many had already left for lives further afield, possibly because they were in different social networks to the ones I was forging; definitely because it was ultimately a small group of people. When I found someone who met the bill (a worker employed at the time of the closure or a partner of one), I prioritised finding a convenient time to speak with them. At the end of the interview, I would ask if they knew anyone else who might be willing to speak to me, snowball sampling for further participants. In my downtime, I spoke to townspeople for context, followed up leads, wrote fieldnotes and socialised with new friends. By the end of my days in Kandos, I completed formal in-depth interviews with 23 people (7 workers, 2 partners, the former mine manager, 2 former workers (who left prior to the closure), 3 local business owners, 4 prominent locals, 1 local school teacher), alongside countless conversations with locals, even undertaking an underground tour during an afternoon shift at Centennial's Airly mine.

In Pingdingshan, my approach was notably different. Although I had planned for about three months in China (August—November 2018)—two months of fieldwork and a month visiting a university—by the time I had changed my field site to Pingdingshan, I only had around 6 weeks left for fieldwork. I was lucky to be accompanied in my first month by a recently completed master's student from the China University of Geosciences in Beijing, Lijianan Zhang, or Jianan. Jianan ended up playing many roles on fieldwork, all of which were crucial to its completion. Having undertaken fieldwork for her master's thesis, she was acutely aware of the difficulties of undertaking fieldwork in China without *guanxi*, an enabling network of personal connections. As such, she was wise to how to 'cold' approach people in the street, who to ask, how to introduce ourselves, when to persist with an encounter, when to give it up. This is in addition, of course, to her familiarity with cultural norms, fluency with standard Mandarin, but also her sunny personality and good-

humoured nature, all of which contrasted with my often anxious and weary self. At many points, I felt like I was being carried by Jianan, rather than the other way around.



Jianan (right) and I on the train to Pingdingshan.

In Pingdingshan, I was forced to rely more on contacts rather than spinning my own web as in Kandos, and Jianan and I employed diverse avenues to do this. Although I had been optimistic that my local contact—a friend’s cousin—would be able to assist, he was ultimately unable to get us in touch with local miners, although he did help to get us started by orienting us around town. Despite my disappointment, I resolved to persist with the site. Having identified Mine No. 7 as a promising candidate, Jianan and I went for pilot visits to the former mine site, discovering that the adjacent blocks were company-built housing for workers. We decided to focus our attentions here, returning daily to approach people entering and exiting. Through our cold approach, we were able to interview the two men at the security office guarding the residential compound—themselves retired Mine No. 7 workers—and a kind older woman who ran the small convenience store at the front of the compound, Auntie Tian, who had herself worked in the washroom at Mine No. 7. After our interview with Auntie Tian, she offered to help put us in touch with others, asking what kind of people we would like to talk to, age, gender, occupation. Jianan and I spent the first month staying at a local hotel; in the final fortnight of my fieldwork (which I undertook alone), I stayed with Auntie Tian.

Jianan and I also spoke to local business surrounding the mine, focussing on the strip of shops opposite the residential site. Here, we met Uncle Qi, a middle-aged man who ran a small supermarket and had himself worked at Mine No. 7 several years before its closure. After interviewing him about the impacts of the closure on his small business, Uncle Qi also introduced us to several other former workers—including his own brother and cousin, who had since been allocated to other coal mines. In addition, we were also able to snowball sample from interviewees. And whenever we encountered a friendly face, we would ask whether they had connections to Mine No. 7, just in case. We also included several interviews with workers from Mine No. 3 owing to its

similarities—located around 500m from Mine No. 7, Mine No. 3 is also owned by the same state-owned enterprise, closed in the same year for the same reasons, and underwent the same process of reallocation and retirement.

#	Name	Gender	Present occupation
1	Wang 王	M	Contracted security guard at Mine No. 7 washery
2	Li 李	M	Security guard at the Mine No. 7 residential community
3	Zhang 张	M	Security guard at the Mine No. 7 residential community
4	Wang 王	M	Taxi driver
5	Qi 祁	M	Runs convenience store opposite Mine No. 7 residential community
6	Yang 杨	M	Reallocated to coal mine—miner in the transportation team
7	Tian 田	F	Runs small kiosk in the Mine No. 7 residential community
8	Liu 刘	M	Runs an after-school study school
9	Xu 许	M	Reallocated to coal mine—mine electrician
10	Bai 白	M	Reallocated to coal mine—miner in the tunneling team
11	Liu 刘	M	Reallocated to Mine No. 7 Washery
12	Qi 祁	M	Reallocated to coal mine—miner in the transportation team
13	Yang 杨	M	Kitchen manager at a restaurant
14	Song 宋	M	Construction contracting manager
15	Chen 陈	F	Wife of miner reallocated to coal mine—explosives team
16	Xu 许	M	Head of the accounting and human resources office at Mine No. 7
17	Yao 姚	M	Reallocated to nylon 6 factory
18	Xu 徐	M	Reallocated to nylon 6 factory
19	Wang 王	M	Reallocated to nylon 6 factory
20	Liu 刘	M	Reallocated to coal mine
21	Xing 邢	F	Reallocated to coal mine—works in the lamp room
22	Lv 吕	M	Manager at Pingmei headquarters

Table 2: List of interviewees in Pingdingshan

Other interviews were obtained more coincidentally: in my downtime, I made friends with members of a rock-climbing club, excited that this hobby of mine, niche in China, existed in this small city. One of the members generously offered to help, as her younger sister worked at a chemical factory owned by the state-owned enterprise that had also taken in workers. I also arranged a brief visit to South China Normal University; to my surprise, an academic in the geography department was from Pingdingshan. She put me in touch with a former classmate who put me in touch with a senior manager at the state-owned company—someone I would never have

hoped to reach by my own devices. For a society based on *guanxi*, these were coincidental connections with lucky outcomes.

Overall, the sampling in Pingdingshan was more targeted than in Kandos; everyone we spoke to ended up being a former mine worker or partner of a mine worker, even where we had identified them for another reason (e.g. the supermarket owner). This reflected my finding from fieldwork in Kandos that, as the impacts of the closures were by far most acutely and extensively felt by unemployed workers, the ‘situating’ interviews I undertook with townspeople had diminishing returns for my aims once the context had been established. In Pingdingshan, I thus elected to ascertain general information through more informal conversations rather than formal interviews. As Mine No. 7 employed a very large workforce, concentrated spatially at the residential estates, it was easier to catch former workers than in Kandos, allowing for a higher sampling rate despite the shorter time spent there.

Methods

Interviews, videos, observation

As the previous chapter argued, loss initially relates to an event of *absence* rather than presence. As DeLyser (2014) explains, the “elusive nature” of absence challenges our research methods as absences cannot be accessed directly (p. 41); they can often only be gestured towards through the traces they leave behind. The attempt to trace absence is further complicated by the fact that one may not know *exactly* what has gone missing in a situation. This plurality and imprecision demand an openness from our research methods, both in terms of the “methodological versatility” suggested by geographers of absence who advocate a mixed methodology including playful, imaginative and embodied methods (Wylie, 2009; DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013; DeLyser, 2014, p. 46), as well as a commitment to using the breadth of ‘traditional’ methods where they enable situationally responsive engagements to occur.

Mirroring DeLyser’s call to make the most of the geographer’s hard-won toolkit of established methods, the key method I rely on in this project is interviews. As Secor (2010) writes, we “need to talk to people if we are trying to learn about things that we cannot observe for ourselves” (p. 195); this is particularly true when attempting to understand the experiences of others—experiences we are incapable of accessing directly. As advocates of non-representational theories have stated, the aim is not to throw out laboriously developed methods, but to change the way we think about their use; there is, after all, no reason our conventional methods can’t be “made to dance a little”

(Latham, 2003, p. 2000). My aim, then, was to use relatively unstructured interviews as a way of navigating the elusive nature of loss, encouraging the participant to control the narrative of the conversation and allowing me to be responsive to the content raised throughout the discussion. As DeLyser asserts, the task of tracing absence is not just to verify or identify whether a particular absence exists, but “to show how what is absent, as much as what is present, can structure—and restructure—our landscapes and social worlds” (2014, p. 46). My questions attempted to draw out each interviewee’s trajectory after the closure of the workplace, trying to get a sense of the twists and turns of life after the cut in relations produced by the closure.

LISA / SCOTT

CHANGES?
FEEL? DECIDE?
ALTERNATIVE?

- how did you get started in mining?
- what was the work like? changes?
- what has changed about work?
- changes in family life
- changes in leisure time
- how did these 2 come about?

how do they feel?

- how did you feel about the work then vs. now?
- thinking about a regular day, what's changed?

CHARBON TO AIRLY

- how did the transfer happen?
- did you know in advance?
- why do choice? to stay or go?
- consider leaving? or smth diff?

Figure 2: Questions prepared in my notebook

这次调查我们不是针对七矿关闭的具体事情，我们针对的是煤矿关闭对于职工生活的影响，注重职工的心理和生活体验，关注于人本身，并不是事情本身。不会涉及到任何政治敏感问题，如果不愿意回答，可以不回答，也可以退出访谈，完全自愿。感谢您对我学业的帮助和支持！

以下是我们会问您的问题：

- 1、你在七矿工作过吗？
- 2、什么时候开始的？
- 3、怎么找到的这份工作？做什么？
- 4、当时觉得这份工作怎么样？
- 5、再做这个工作期间，有没有调动过？
- 6、每天的工作是什么样子的？
- 7、什么时候知道七矿要关闭？怎么知道的？
- 8、当时有什么想法？
- 9、知道以后你做了什么？
- 10、关闭的时候，每天的工作生活有变化吗？
- 11、关闭之后，是马上有了工作还是休息了一段时间？这段时间做了什么？
- 12、关闭之后你找到了什么样的工作？感觉怎么样？
- 13、对你的生活和家人生活有什么影响？
- 14、怎么找到现在的工作？有什么感觉？
- 15、会继续吗？（为什么）
- 16、满足了你生活的需求了吗？
- 17、七矿关闭之前的生活好，还是之后的生活好？（为什么）
- 18、以后你和你的家人还有什么计划？
- 19、对于七矿的关闭，对你和平顶山有什么影响？

Figure 3: Questions sent to interviewee on WeChat

My interviews ranged from very unstructured to semi-structured formats, with my discussions in Kandos being generally less structured than those in Pingdingshan. Emphasising the intimate and experiential dimensions in which I was interested, interviews predominantly took place in people’s homes. My questioning followed a set of general principles. In both places, I would hand-write a short list of questions before each interview as a prompt, tailored to what I knew in advance of each person, or questions that remained unanswered for me from other encounters (see Figure 2 for an example). I began every interview asking: ‘how did you get into coalmining?’—an attempt to put the event of closure in the bigger picture of each person’s life. From here, I traced the ins and outs of their career in coalmining, attempting to track the vicissitudes of each person’s relationship to the

job and how it intertwined with other demographic events, up to and beyond the event of closure. Living locally for the duration of the fieldwork enabled me to engage with broader domains of life in place, generating a circumstantial awareness that enabled me to more effectively ask follow-up questions. This responsiveness often produced an atmosphere of ease between me and the participant, often turning the conversation into less of an interview and more of a discussion.

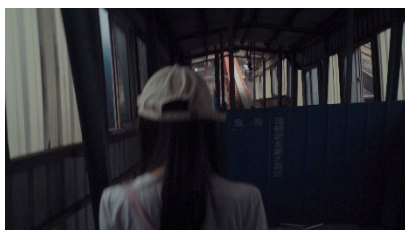
As hinted above, my interview style and technique differed between Kandos and Pingdingshan owing to a number of contextual considerations. Whilst I was able to maintain a very open-ended interviewing style in Kandos, this had to be adapted somewhat in Pingdingshan. Generally speaking, a cultural reticence towards ‘outsiders’ in China meant that discussion did not flow as freely in Pingdingshan as it did in Kandos, where the Australian culture of hospitality and my own comfort in place lubricated conversation. That said, as in all places, this appeared to be largely dependent on personality and age difference. I also felt less confident extemporising in Chinese as I would in English, given my comparatively limited experience in China. As a result, I went into my Pingdingshan interviews prepared with a more structured set of interview questions to mitigate any ebbs and discontinuities in conversation (see Figures 2 and 3 on p. 65 for examples of the questions I prepared in each place). Furthermore, Jianan played a very active role in the interviews. We would share responsibility for posing questions and quickly built up a rapport where each of us would chime in with follow up questions and remarks, turning each interview into a richer three-way discussion.

All interviews were audio, and, with only a few exceptions, video recorded. Much has been made of video methods in recent years, where it is variously used as a participatory method, a prompt for reflection and a medium for communication (Garrett, 2011; Bates, 2015; Jacobs, 2016). Video is a medium seen to attend to “the textures and rhythms of the everyday”, capturing facets of experience that can be lost to talk or text methods, including gestures, movements and expressions (Bates, 2015, p. 1). For me, video was admittedly a largely passive tool; other than a few minutes setting up the camera and audio, there was limited engagement with the camera during each interview.

Overall, it acted for me as a supplement to conventional methods rather than a replacement.

Alongside provoking reflections and memories that otherwise may not have come through in an audio recording, its brilliance was stylistic: by efficiently capturing minute details of the encounter, it offered more options for how I might wish to retell these rich and textured scenes when it came time to write, offering a ‘post-phenomenological’ method for engaging with different facets of the encounter beyond words uttered (Ash *et al.*, 2018). Although this may seem like a small addition, I

suggest that it was in fact fundamental to the style of this thesis. That is, by using video in this way—by enabling the space of the interview to unfold through the hard-won and tested disciplinary conventions of interviewing, but extending this space of immersion through the on-demand replay of video—I argue that the writing style of this thesis is intimately connected to the capacities enabled by the video footage. This is vital because, as Stewart (2012) argues, writing is a productive act; “writing is not epiphenomenal to thought but its medium” (p. 518). Enabling “disparate and incommensurate things [to] throw themselves together”, the act of writing does not just evoke and describe existing objects of analysis; instead, it also creates new qualitative forms and accrues within situations new depths of association (Stewart, 2012, p. 518). By allowing me to re-immense myself in the atmospheres of encounter long after-the-fact, the video footage enabled me to write through the unfolding timespace of the event in close detail, capturing how the push and pull of the encounter inflected its unfolding and ultimately attuning me to a greater set of forces than audio and memory alone. Montages of screenshots from some of these videos are included throughout this thesis, as windows that hope to impart to the reader something of the textures and atmospheres of place and encounter.



Ruin gazing with Jianan at the site of the closed Mine No. 7, which shares infrastructure with the still-operational Mine No. 7 Washery adjacent.

III Translation

This final section presents the logic for how I worked with the data generated above to produce the knowledge this thesis hopes to offer. Firstly, I outline the way I conceptualise each of the sites visited in this thesis, supplanting ‘case’ with ‘story’ and ‘example’. Secondly, I explain the logics of comparison and resonance that describe the relationship between the sites. Thirdly, I recount the practical process of analysis undertaken. Overall, this section underscores the importance of how empirical data is *read*—beyond the question of how data is *produced*—and the pivotal role of theory in this process.

Empirics, examples, story

To begin, I make explicit the way in which I think about each of the sites, events and participants in this thesis. One popular way to think the empirical’s relation to the theoretical is through the ‘case study’. Berlant (2007) explains that a case study is an event marked by a judgement that recasts the singular as an instance of the general. That is, by identifying an event as a ‘case’ of something broader, its logic enables us to understand a particular instance as a subset of a larger, abstracted phenomenon. This logic often constitutes the very basis of our projects: case studies are often chosen *after* one has already decided on the phenomenon in which one is interested. For our purposes, what is relevant is the recognition of norms that govern the relationship between the singular (empirical) and the general (theoretical) in social science.

The logic of ‘empirics’ can be contrasted with the excess of the ‘example’ or the distance of the ‘story’. Drawing on Massumi, McCormack suggests how the use of examples differs from a logic of evidence or case study: “because examples are unruly and excessive, exemplification is a way of remaining faithful to the singularity of ... circumstances rather than presenting this singularity as a particular instance of a general rule or theory” (see also Massumi, 2002b, pp. 18–19; McCormack, 2013, p. 12). Exemplification differs from a case study or evidence in that it allows the phenomenon to diverge from the concept, “avoiding using these details as a case study of a process or phenomenon that has already been defined in advance” (McCormack, 2013, p. 12).

Furthermore, examples can even work to complicate the original terms rather than necessarily affirming them. Similarly offering an alternative to the logic of the empirical, Rose (2016) makes a different distinction between empirics and the work of what he calls *stories*. For Rose, empirics

function as ‘evidence’ whose “purpose is to illuminate some truth or insight, often expressed through a theory” (Rose, 2016, p. 134). The relationship between empirics and theory is thus one of ‘correspondence’, with empirics servicing theory in a way that “leave[s] little daylight between the writing and the world itself” (Rose, 2016, p. 134). Stories, on the other hand, serve a different purpose. Rather than acting as evidence or proof of a theory, they relate to the world without imposing a single meaning upon it. Rather than bring world and word into correspondence, stories acknowledge distance whilst also attempting to make connections across the chasm, “reach[ing] out, striving across an unbridgeable distance not to mirror the world but to transpose it” (Rose, 2016, p. 135).

What I take from these critiques of realist correspondence between theories and empirics is that there is scope for a loosening of their bonds in the way we write our fieldwork stories. Concepts can converge on worlds without corresponding to them; stories can be told of exemplary encounters without turning them to empirics. Achieving this is, as Rose notes, a matter of style as well as technique—a point to which I return shortly.

Analysis

Comparisons, resonances, genesis

Having advocated the logic of the example and the story over that of the case study or empirics, I turn to how the relationship between the two sites in this thesis are conceptualised. Comparative analysis has recently returned to qualitative geographical methodologies, driven by prominent calls to analyse global urban spaces through a comparative lens (Robinson, 2011, 2016). Robinson outlines several such methods common in social science. One is the ‘individualising’ approach (perhaps most common in geography) that uses a detailed case study and compares it to other cases, often through comparison with a literature review on a particular phenomenon. Another is the ‘encompassing’ approach, which understands each case to be “part of shared circulations and stretched out social relations” that ‘encompass’ a set of distant spaces, such as capitalism or globalisation (Robinson, 2016, p. 6). Attempting to revitalise comparison in face of postcolonial critiques, Robinson suggests two alternative tactics that do not rely on the generalisations of the aforementioned approaches. The first is a *genetic* approach that breaks down the implied unity of a phenomenon, focusing on “the specific set of flows, networks, connections, influences, circulations” that “come together to compose a place, a specific outcome” (Robinson, 2016, p. 12). This approach recognises the correlation or similarity of an outcome without implying they must share a

set of causal assemblages or trajectories. The second, related approach is a *generative* one, “focused on generating and inventing concepts” (Robinson, 2016, p. 14). By approaching sites as singularities, sites are unhooked from presumptions of large-scale processes and become places *from which* to begin theorising.

Robinson’s tactics are a way of recuperating comparative analysis in a discipline that has rendered it a relic of a positivist past. What I take from her discussion is that comparison need not be built on a base of sameness (one which would render my chosen sites too *different* to even be compared). Conversely, the concepts returned by comparison need not only seek out shared processes across place. Important to Robinson’s postcolonial imaginary is the belief, contra the Anglo-American bias of theory, that “*any* case ... [can] be a starting point for conceptualization” (2016, p. 14)—comparison aims to be a source of conceptual innovation “by opening more opportunities to think through elsewhere” in recognition of the multiplicities of the worlds around us (2016, p. 5). As such, my sites were chosen in recognition of the fact that they need not be close enough to be ‘compared’ (i.e. via a set of criteria that would allow them to be rendered the same) but rather close enough to resonate—by sharing a ‘genetic field’ (i.e. job loss due to coal mine closure) that might prompt the generation of common concepts and problems.

Becomings, trajectories, intuition

Having outlined the theoretical basis for my approach to the sites and examples in this project, I turn to detail the concrete process I actually undertook in interpreting the data. I began my analysis by reacquainting myself with the interviews, given that it was anywhere from six months (China) to over a year (Australia) since the fieldwork itself. I started by going over fieldnotes, triggering reflections and memories of the encounters. Owing to the relatively small number of interviews, I found that I tended to have a good memory of the encounters with each participant. I also found that each narrative tended to have distinct themes or moments that struck me, tinting that person’s story atmospherically. A key for me was not to make an *a priori* distinction between the stories told in Australia or China, but to see them as one empirical set from which to prompt thought.

I began by grouping these interviews into similarly inflected narratives—groupings that eventually became the basis of the three chapters that follow. The interviews were placed together based on the resonances between the affective trajectories suggested by the interviewee in navigating their own junctures of post-closure adjustment. This spanned a range of intensities: from those for whom the closures generated minimal changes, to those for whom the fabric of life felt wholly upended. These

groupings were not aimed at producing a ‘representative’ reflection of the sample had interviewed, and the number of participants in each group was not even. Instead, the groupings were aimed at distinguishing and identifying different trajectories that bodies had undertaken in the uncertain junctures of life after loss. As a result, some of these groupings were relatively larger, such as those who had experienced relatively little disruption as their circumstances meant they were able to transition to another source of employment relatively smoothly (e.g. Norm in Chapter 4 and Xu in Chapter 5); others were outliers, the only story of their kind (e.g. Robbie and Nic in Chapter 6). The shared objective in my sampling and was lateral exploration, not representativeness, similarly, my analysis and re-presentation did not aim be representative of the overall affected population either. Instead, my aim was to encounter and explore a wider and richer range of trajectories and affective responses to post-closure life. In retelling the stories, then, I chose to focus on particular interview encounters that felt most richly able to communicate and evoke the themes that appeared to be crystallising around each grouping. I then brought together the stories that, when placed alongside each other, effectively drew out shared elements of the juxtaposed narratives and broader trajectories that would become the overall chapter themes. This means that, in the chapters that follow, I draw specifically on the stories of nine participants drawn from the overall pool of 55 interviews, rather than present a distilled retelling that aims to skim the surface of *all* the stories, such as through a thematic analysis. Despite this, it is important to emphasise that these untold or seemingly omitted stories nonetheless sit in the background of these narratives, as part of what inspired the concepts that became this thesis and enabled these lines of thought to take place. That is, these encounters continue to ‘shadow’ the text through the process from which selections were made about which stories to tell and how to tell them.

Throughout the process of ‘analysis,’ I thus made an explicit choice to treat each interview as an integral whole, rather than cutting across the narratives with a ‘thematic’ analysis that would isolate elements from the wider narrative. To do this, I treated each interview indivisibly, looking to thematise the *trajectories* laid out in the interviews rather than particular utterances. Unlike the trajectories associated with, for example, Hägerstrand’s time-geography, I do not see such trajectories as being formed by intentional projects fashioned by the individual (Pred, 1977). Rather, the space-time paths taken by individuals were seen as timespaces of *becoming*, producing trajectories that cannot be mapped out in advance. Simplifying, becoming is a Deleuzian concept to replace the philosophical notion of ‘being’ dominant in western philosophy. Being is an existential condition based on identity and sameness; in an ontology of being, change only takes place only as a negation of an apparently stable entity. For Deleuze, however, difference is primary: becoming is

an ongoing process of differentiation whereby beings are always-already embroiled in transition and change. Rather than thinking of trajectories as being *caused* by particular events, objects or ideas, we might consider such forces as *inflecting* the continuous flux of experience. In this sense, these forces are ‘attractors’ in what Massumi describes as a ‘quasi-causal’ relation to becoming (Massumi and McKim, 2009). Here, forces are not absolute, but rather intervene in trajectories of becoming by activating *tendencies* towards the future, simultaneously drawing on the work of thought and memory to inform the present.

My analysis of each selected interview aimed at a reconstruction of the haphazard trajectories retold in interviewees’ stories, one that aimed to track the elements that influenced their becomings whilst maintaining the openness of a processual ontology. In practice, I translated the principle of the ‘trajectory’ by writing through each encounter in narrative form, bringing my selective transcriptions of each interview together with my recollections from the day, reflections from my fieldwork diary and the non-textual aspects of the encounter evident from the videos, with the aim of drawing out the continuities and discontinuities of movement in each narrative (this could get lengthy—one such story is over 12,000 words). I then extracted sections from written narratives to fit with chapter themes as they developed, trying to write the examples in a way that retained the complex interplay of forces at any given moment. During this process, I moved constantly between story and theory—reading and writing with texts that seemed to gesture at the *some things* I intuitively recognised in the interview narratives. Accordingly, I emphasise the active role played by concepts in this back-and-forth. Rather than being abstractions that simplify or reduce, concepts worked as performative abstractions that “participate[d] in the felt process of being drawn into, and drawing out, the affective qualities of worldly experience” (McCormack, 2013, p. 9). Thought and experience are connected; for this reason, my fieldwork must be understood as facilitating an empirical exploration of concepts as much as people in place. To this, it must be said, came resonances between these narratives with events that had occurred (or were occurring) in my own life, which inevitably inflected the currents of what I was intuitively drawn to.

Acknowledging the distance described in previous sections, in the chapters that follow I have tried to hold apart the empirical and theoretical components of the arguments made. For this, I draw inspiration from another of Rose’s (2014) works, in which he separates the piece into distinct sections which correspond to the empirical and the theoretical material. This is, again, an acknowledgment that theory and empirics can “relate to each other in a manner where they are not required to seamlessly and convincingly join, but ... where disjuncture, refraction and even betrayal

are possible” (Rose, 2016, p. 210). It is also a recognition that the point of engagement with the other is “to explore [their world] for the unique forms of thought it offers”, not “as a means to know the other” (Rose, 2016, pp. 210, 209). Inspired by Rose, in the chapters that follow I oscillate between the empirical and the theoretical, with an aim to produce for the reader an experiential effect of resonance (rather than correspondence), whilst maintaining the autonomy of each domain. Doing so, I acknowledge the “the double-bind of representational and nonrepresentational modes of thought”—that, ultimately, “both need each other” (Dewsbury, 2010, p. 2); in Bergsonian terms, the aim is to use representation to lead to an experiential realm beyond it, where the immediacy and flux of duration might be felt *intuitively* by the reader.

Re-presentation

By way of conclusion, I finish this chapter with a short reflection on the stories we tell—of the stories told in this chapter and in this thesis. In emphasising the distance between world and word, I do not wish to imply that stories are compromised for their inability to precisely mirror the worlds around us. Indeed, I would suggest that this represents its recuperative moment: the desire to transform worlds is exactly why we tell stories. Stories may “write the world different than what it is” (Rose, 2016, p. 135), but, at its heart, the act of writing is precisely an attempt to inflect the world. Writing’s aim is precisely about making possible new ways of apprehending conditions of existence, in the hope of impressing the “force of representations” upon the reader (Anderson, 2018). Representations are a means of making connections. Although others will have a different ethics, for me, writing is ultimately about fostering what Nancy (2000) calls ‘compassion’—the recognition of collective finitude in a world of singularities (see Romanillos, 2011).

As a result, I conclude with some final thoughts on the journey told in this chapter—on my own testimony, if you will. Firstly, I wish to acknowledge the co-authored nature of the ideas presented here. As Rose (2016) asserts, stories tell the beginning of thought: as the ‘gift’ from which all research must begin, my ideas have been utterly reliant on my encounters with others, including the many people whose impact, though not explicit in the final text, lie ever in its shadow. Secondly, it remains to be said that although I have gotten *all this* from others, I do not know what these encounters have done for those who have kindly accommodated my presence. I hope to have been an attentive and entertaining interlocutor and, at worst, to have done no harm. Finally, then, I end with a recognition of my own narrative’s testimonial difficulties. As far as feels possible, my aim has been to give an honest and transparent account of my experiences, and, yet, the impossibility of

doing justice to the often passive and opaque trajectory detailed here remains. The communicative gaps in testimony suggested at the outset are ones that qualitative research must equally traverse, even if our accounts act as if they possessed this propriety. As Barthes writes, “language is naturally assertive: to utter a word is immediately to affirm its referent” (2005, p. 42). Discourse has no natural place for doubt, uncertainty, or hesitation; the same is true of writing. For these hesitant registers to exist, they must be made to appear via a supplement, “signaled by special marks” that subvert the original proposition (Barthes, 2005, p. 42). For the benefit of the reader, I have avoided adding these irresolute marks to my writing even though, if I were true to myself, it would be impossible to speak without them.

4 Turbulence: abandoning the present

Introduction

This chapter is the first in a set of three empirical chapters that explore the embodied experiences of life after loss. It sets the foundation for this thesis' narrative arc by considering the exposed and non-relational intensities that emerge in the immediate aftermath of industrial closure. Starting from the event of loss, I explore the destabilising intensities experienced by bodies as they find their way through the impasse of a present disconnected from past relations, but before new relations have emerged. This discussion is the fulcrum for the chapters that follow. Taking their lead from the shifting forms of inchoate relationality and exposed non-relationality explored in this chapter, subsequent chapters begin to pivot from the disruptions of loss towards the process of rebuilding subjectivity amidst the cut.

In this chapter, I begin this narrative arc by approaching life after loss as an embodied timespace of abandonment and vulnerability. It explores how bodies experience the turbulent durations that emerge in the absence of what once enabled everyday life, producing timespaces in which what is unknown about the present and future triumph over what is known. I show how such durations lay the primacy of the things, people and places around us bare; diverse others that call our specific subjectivity into being. Accordingly, this chapter tracks some of the complex, shifting and asymmetrical relationships between self and other that characterise what Judith Butler (2004) calls 'precarious life'.

This chapter is split into three separate but resonating narratives, each of which tracks a story of precarious work in the wake of workplace closure: those of Chen, Shaun and Phil. Each part explores a different intensity that emerges in the feeling-space of closure: insecurity, turbulence and intrusion. The first story draws on Chen's story of *security* after closure to explore the complex relationship between economic precarity and ontological security in contemporary economies. By underscoring the inherent precariousness of bodies, I argue that geographers of precarity must expand their analyses beyond the prevailing focus on the powers that *produce* the insecurities of precarity, to the question of how *always-already* precarious bodies might be secured. The second

story draws on Levinas and Michel Serres to describe the experience of *turbulence* after loss and abandonment. It draws on metaphors of darkness and chaos, showing how abandonment enacts a simultaneous overexposure to too much presence and too much absence. In the chaotic timespace of turbulence, capacities to act, to decide—and thus to find ways to re-secure the self—become circumscribed by newly volatile and unpredictable rhythms of life. Caught in the impasse, the third story thus seeks to return the other to presence, arguing that bodies must come into new relations with others if they are to reorient from the opaque timespaces of abandonment. Generating new relations of proximity, however, comes at the risk of producing intolerable experiences, as bodies encounter unfamiliar and potentially unassimilable conditions that can push them beyond their limits. Working with Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the 'intruder,' I show how precarious bodies experience a forced openness to strange and unfamiliar others, requiring the self to learn to conform to conditions that are unyielding.

Collectively, these stories track how the embodied forces of security, turbulence and intrusion can function to maintain, undermine or reassemble selves after the abandonments of loss, as operators that exert pressures upon bodies to endure or to change. I turn to the writings of Emmanuel Levinas to explore how subjects do not just secure themselves; instead, they are brought into being by diverse relations to the others around them. By understanding the self as constituted by forces beyond the self, I suggest that job loss unfolds into a situation of precarious abandonment that can leave people bereft of their former anchors of self. Recognising that the self is an always-already fragmented unity, the intensities explored in each story are linked to progressively more forceful vectors of modification, pushing and pulling on bodies to reshape how people relate to the circumstances they find themselves in. These forces are, I suggest, ambivalent. The *non-relationality* of abandonment demonstrates how the existing self can be transformed from within, generating deeply alienating intensities and producing blockages to action. At the same time, by returning bodies to a state of precariousness, abandonment also opens bodies to the *relationality* of intrusion, through the compelled necessity of exposure to strange others. Operating in a context where there is no exit from existence, I conclude this chapter by highlighting the more redemptive side of abandonment, turning to the limits of a body's plastic potential.

I On the securities of precarity

In the first part of this chapter, I read Chen and her family's story of working life after Mine No. 7's closure through the lens of precarity and ontological security. My aim is to examine the relationship

between precarious conditions of working life and the feelings of insecurity that working bodies experience as always-already precarious beings, to suggest how work and feeling are intertwined in contemporary life. I suggest that even precarious work is experienced across a “continuum” of security and insecurity, as part of the continual movement that characterises human existence (Bondi, 2014, p. 334). As a result, I argue in this section that Chen’s story reflects a securitising narrative in which the promise of their ongoing attachment to her husband’s employer stabilises the self, despite his extended engagement in precarious conditions of work. By exploring the precariousness of bodies alongside the couplet of ontological security and insecurity, I argue that geographical discussions of precarity have been overly focussed on questions of how the self is rendered *insecure*, to the neglect of questions of how the always-already precarious self can be made to feel *secure*. This discussion acts as a preface to the subsequent sections of this chapter, in which I develop ideas of security and insecurity to further explore the experiences of loss for bodies that, unlike Chen, have been unable to retain these securing attachments.

* * *

Jianan and I sit in the concreted driveway behind Aunty Tian’s flat, perched on tiny stools. We are at the Mine No. 7 Residential Community, a housing estate located directly adjacent to the now-closed Mine No. 7. Rising either side of us are blocks of flats, six stories high, taupe-rendered outer walls draped with breezy clothes lines and whirring air-conditioning units. Here, everyone has a connection to Mine No. 7. Redeveloped by the state-owned mining company in the late 2000s, the housing was then sold to workers at a fraction of the market price.

Aunty Tian sits opposite us. It’s a warm autumn day and there is a rhythm of liveliness to the residential place. Having taken a liking to us on our early site visits, Aunty Tian—a former washroom worker at Mine No. 7 who now runs a small shop out of her ground floor flat—is helping us to identify former workers to interview. From her prime position at the estate entrance, she pretty well knows everyone who comes and goes.

Today, she has called over her neighbour Mrs Chen. Her husband, Mr Yu, had worked at Mine No. 7 since he was 18. Moving to Pingdingshan from a rural village in a neighbouring prefecture, Yu joined the

underground blasting explosives team three decades ago, one of the most dangerous jobs on site. “Your family are all farmers and they’ve got no money,” Mrs Chen explains. For them, being a coal miner at a state-owned company was a good job.



Yu began as a contract worker, but in 1996 received a permanent position, one of the prized ‘proper’ (*zhengshi*) jobs associated with the ‘iron rice bowl’ (*tiefanwan*) of the communist state. Once you are a proper worker, Chen explains, you don’t leave the job. The extra-monetary benefits of working for a state-owned enterprise explain why a proper job is desirable—social welfare, pension, health insurance,

housing are all linked to your position. And it's secure—as secure as the state. People jostle to get their children a position with the company. Auntie Tian elaborates it pointedly, “when you've got no skills (*benshi*), no education (*wenhua*), what are you going to do?”

At the time of the announcement, Chen says her husband didn't tell her about the impending closure. She recognises the protective impulse that went into Yu's reticence. As the sole breadwinner for their family, their livelihood depends on his wage. Although the mine would still be operational for several months, no one knew what would happen upon its closure. “If the mine closes, he'll be out of work. But if you're not really good at doing anything else, if you're already over 50, what else are you going to do?”

The workers are relieved to eventually learn that they will be reallocated to other positions within the vast state-owned enterprise. The anxiousness abates. But then the final day of work comes and goes and still no one knows where they will each be going. Whilst waiting, the workers are paid a monthly living allowance of 410 yuan (US\$65), barely enough to survive on. The prevailing air of anxiety returns. For a long time, no news comes out, no one gets their reallocation. Some even doubted that the reallocations would ever eventuate.

In the meantime, with the family in need of an alternative income, Yu was constantly on the lookout for paid work. The field was thin. When he did find work, it was mostly as a day labourer on construction sites. “He would do a day or two here, a day or two there.” The rhythms were different to the regularities of life at Mine No. 7. The income was fickle, inconstant. To endure, they have to borrow money from family and friends. “I was very concerned,” Chen says. It was not just the financial adjustments; after so many decades of regularity, the day-to-day changes left her feeling disoriented. The irregular rhythms meant that she had to constantly change when to wait up, when to sleep, what to buy, when to cook.

A few months pass and other workers begin to receive their allocations. This allays some tensions, but it's twelve months of precarious work before Yu is finally called into the old office. There, he is informed of his redeployment to Mine No. 1. The family are a bit disappointed. Yu's commute has gone from a 5-minute walk up the street to a 40-minute scooter ride across town. His work crew has been split up and he's been demoted from a deputy to a regular worker.

But Mine No. 1 is the only mine in the enterprise's portfolio that still requires an explosives team, Yu's longstanding speciality. They are happy that he does not need to retrain, especially with only a few years until retirement. Above all, though, the pair are glad that Yu still has a position with the company. Although Chen says that her spirits were low at the time, by the time I speak to her that autumn afternoon, a year and a half on, the family appear to have taken the changes in their stride.

"After all," Mrs Chen says proudly of her husband, "he knows how to *eat bitterness*. No matter how bitter it is, he can do it."⁴

* * *

Discourses on precarity, dispossession and abandonment have recently emerged in geography as key concepts for understanding the felt present. Precarity—"an inelegant neologism" from the French term *precarité*—is a broad term that references a state of unpredictability and flexibility caused by insecure conditions of life (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005 n.p.). As Philo and colleagues (2019) suggest, precarity folds in a certain volatility, suggesting "something geographical about not being securely 'placed' in the world, ... such as 'on a slippery slope', 'on thin ice', 'hazardous' or even 'groundless'" (p. 151). Anderson (2017) notes that such concepts offer "something like a new vocabulary for describing how some lives survive, endure and flourish as other lives are made or left to die or devalue" (p. 504), interpolating a language increasingly apt to global capitalism's turbulent lifeworlds. The term has become ubiquitous across geography, especially in sub-disciplines such as feminist, urban, labour and transnational geographies; despite this, precarity remains "complex and contested conceptual terrain" (Lewis *et al.*, 2015; Strauss, 2018, p. 626). In its dominant inflection

⁴ 'Eat bitterness', *chiku*, is a common Chinese phrase that means 'enduring hardship.'

as *economic* precarity, precarity encompasses a wide set of practices associated with limited employment security—“all possible shapes of unsure, not guaranteed, flexible exploitation”—including unstable, irregular, informal, short-term, casual and temporary, contracted, sub-contracted and third-party work (Nielson and Rossiter, 2005, n.p.).

Recent studies have shifted from describing the changing contours of precarity, to tracking the *affective* impact of such conditions on people and populations. Geographers are interested not just in the conditions of precarious work, but how such work *feels*, moving from work to the site of the body (Worth, 2016a; Harris and Nowicki, 2018; Lancione, 2019; Marcu, 2019; Pettit, 2019; Philo *et al.*, 2019). By turning to the feeling-space of precarity, precarity draws inspiration from feminist approaches that illuminate “the interrelation of ‘labour’ and ‘life’” (Strauss, 2018, p. 626), refusing any easy distinction between what counts as an economic or a social relation. In this context, commentators of economic precarity almost invariably touch on Butler’s concept of precariousness to name the vulnerability and exposure inherent to organic bodies, a concept originally developed in the context of war and injury.⁵

Precariousness refers to the inherent vulnerability of all human bodies, to what is injurable and can be harmed in them. Though there remains a tendency to divide “between those who see [precarity] as something specific to work under neoliberal market conditions ... and those who see it as a feature of broader life” (Lewis, *et al.*, 2015, p. 584; Strauss 2018), it is clear how intertwined the concepts have become. Han (2018) characterises them as ‘two poles’ of the same concept (332). Millar (2017) notes that, pace Butler, “precarity now appears in many works as if it is a synonym for vulnerability or insecurity” (4). No longer just referring to an economic condition, precariousness exists in an associative word-web with terms such as vulnerability, death, grievability, survival, poverty, hurt, suffering, unlivability, disposability, ‘productively blurring’ “notions of

⁵ Butler actually offers her own set of definitions for the two terms, that differ to those represented here. For Butler, ‘precarity’ is defined not by its ‘economic’ status, but more expansively as the outcome of political and governmental operations that affect a given population. *Precariousness* is the more general fact of the body that subtends this political possibility, referring to the inherent fragility that characterises human existence: that life “can be expunged at will or by accident”, where one’s “persistence is in no sense guaranteed” (2016, p. 25). *Precarity*, on the other hand, “designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler, 2009, p. 25). This distinction results in an understanding that while all life is equally defined by precariousness, not all lives are equally affected by precarity. Her project is not to critique a certain order of global capitalism, but to offer a ground for ethical action in a globalised world that start with the recognition a shared condition of corporeal life.

precarity grounded in political economy and those grounded in political philosophy” (Strauss 2018, p. 622). This convergence is not without its critics—Waite (2009) ultimately finds this version of precarity-as-vulnerability too broad, losing its analytical purchase when disconnected from specific conditions of labour and risking the dilution of its political potential—but others have found Butler’s concept of precariousness valuable for interrogating issues of pain, violence and suffering in diverse populations (Waite *et al.*, 2014; Woon, 2014; Van Wichelen, 2015; Tyner, 2016; Lancione, 2019).

Given this movement towards bodily impact in understanding economic precarity, I suggest that this approach to precarious working life can be productively extended through concepts of bodily insecurity. As Philo (2014) explains, geographers have moved from ‘big-S’ concerns with geopolitics to the “closest-in” versions of security concerned with the body and self. Moving away from an understanding of selves as “coherent, bodily-bounded, self-contained”, the human body is now widely understood by geographers as “a precarious assemblage” that is distributed, fractured, variable and exposed, changing from “context to context” (Philo, 2014, p. 287, 286). Pushing forward humanistic and phenomenological approaches, geographies of bodily security contend the dispersal of not only the material body but also the ‘psychic’ self, exploring the flux of emotional and affective inner life across changing conditions and over time (Anderson and Adey, 2011; McCormack, 2012; Noxolo and Featherstone, 2014; Hopkins *et al.*, 2019).

To explore vulnerabilities of bodily security, geographers have drawn in particular on the concept of ‘ontological security’ and its flipside, ontological *in*security. Although originally coined by psychoanalyst R. D. Laing, geographers have most commonly cited Giddens’s version of the concept, which emphasises that the reliability of one’s surroundings is what enables the sense of trust that grounds ontological security, whilst unreliable external conditions have the opposite effect of undermining the continuity, identity and stability of the self (Bondi, 2014). The conceptual pair recognises that the stability of the self cannot be taken for granted; that grounding the self is an achievement that varies over time, space and is “inextricably located” in the worlds of the experiencing individual (Valentine, 1998; Bondi, 2014; Noxolo, 2014; Philo, 2014; Benwell, 2019; Botterill *et al.*, 2019). As Bondi (2014) argues, however, Giddens’ theorisation simplifies the psychoanalytic origins of the term, leading geographers to see security and insecurity as largely independent and exclusive states that can be linked to the attributes of particular environments or conditions. Instead, Bondi suggests that the original formulation of ontological in/security by R. D. Laing offers a richer understanding of the complex and dynamic interplay between inner and outer

life. Rather than aligning exterior worlds with inner life and thus leaving little room to consider how the qualities of internal and external worlds might diverge, Laing understands ontological insecurity as emerging even under externally secure circumstance, and, vice versa, that ontological security can be maintained even under outwardly insecure conditions. Laing thus allows not only for external worlds to affect internal experience, but also for internal states to affect one's perception of their external environment.

I argue that reading conditions of economic precarity through Laing's concept of ontological in/security can work to pluralise understandings of precarity's inner life currently circulating in geography. Where geographies of precarity generally emphasise how the unreliable conditions of precarious work produce ontological insecurity, Bondi suggests that externally insecure conditions can be experienced as variously secure *or* insecure timespaces, able to oscillate between the two states through external conditions remain the same. The suggestion here is that the *affective* life of precarity and the *conditions* of precarity can diverge in complex ways. As Bondi points out, the precarious asylum-seekers interviewed by Waite and colleagues (2014), for example, may not necessarily experience ontological insecurity because it appears that, "although [they are] under intense pressure, their ontological security has survived" (Bondi, 2014, p. 333). That is, despite situations of extreme duress, they manage to retain a sense of confidence in the outrage of their mistreatment and their right to seek asylum, producing a ballast against erosions of identity and sense of self-worth. In the domain of precarious work, we might recognise a similar divergence—that bodies engaged in *secure* employment may feel ontologically *insecure*, just as others in *insecure* work might feel ontologically *secure*. By understanding ontological security and insecurity not as a binary but a "continuum" across which bodies constantly move, Laing offers a graduated understanding of how bodies experience external worlds, one formulated in terms of thresholds and degrees rather than absolute positions (Bondi, 2014, p. 334).

Returning to Butler's concept of precariousness, I suggest that parallels can be drawn between the ontologically *insecure* self and the *precariousness* of life. Both present negative states of bare existence that, as inherent conditions of human life, bear the incessant potential to re-emerge. Neither can be eradicated, only eluded temporarily. Unlike ontological security's two-sided framework, Butler's concept of precariousness has tended to be used by geographers to highlight the potential for bodily experiences of pain and suffering, in particular those inflicted by powerful and oppressive institutions and entities (perhaps influenced by her own thematic concerns). Whilst not finding fault with this use of the concept, I suggest that aligning precarity with power limits the insight of

Butler's concept. As Anderson suggests in a recent review, geographical "[w]ork on precaritization and dispossession share a concern for scrutinizing how *power* is felt and lived with different intensities as part of the composition of lived experience" (Anderson, 2017, p. 6 emphasis added). However, in contrast to this alignment of precarity with power, precariousness suggests that it is not *just* power that generates precarity as a lived intensity. Instead, as a fundamental incapacity of the body, precariousness is a condition that emerges even in the absence of any oppressor, as an integral and ineradicable part of life itself. Injury, pain, hunger and death all happen, even in the absence of institutions to forcefully impose it (Rose, 2014).

In this context, I argue that ontological security's quicksilver polarity offers a complementary framework for expanding—or at least clarifying—the concept of bodily precariousness in geography. Through its exploration of the "dynamic interplay between feelings of security *and* insecurity", I argue that the ontological security can redirect studies of precarity away from analyses of institutions that cause suffering, towards a broader understanding of what it takes to produce the bodily comforts of security (Bondi, 2014, p. 334, emphasis added). That is, compared to approaches that focus on the body's painful precariousness, such as Waite and colleagues' (2014) 'capacity to hurt', the framework of ontological in/security suggests that not-feeling-precarious is about more than just *removing* forces that are seen to cause insecurity, but also by *producing* the relations that might enable bodily security. Ontological security gestures not just towards the importance of the *absence* of suffering upon the body, but also the *presence* of the discourses, materials, affects and relations that can "enable the force of insecurity to be mitigated or diminished" (Anderson, 2017, p. 4). It does so, whilst recognising that security is never a permanent achievement for inherently precarious living beings.

With this understanding of precarity in mind, I turn back to the story that opened this chapter, Mrs Chen's story of economic precarity, reading her story through the lenses of precariousness and ontological security. We can clearly see Chen's fear of losing the security of the 'iron rice bowl' of permanent employment at a state-owned enterprise. She recognises the privilege of these working conditions in China's contemporary economy, where security is rare for blue-collar workers, and is thus anxious to hold on to the rare and quickly fading space of secure employment. Mr Yu's year of outside work clearly demonstrates the insecure and informal conditions of employment that he can expect in China's market economy. From her story, we might suggest, on the one hand, that the fear of precarious work is matched by the fear of precariousness—of the suffering, hunger and impoverishment associated with the loss of a livelihood in China's urban economy. For the pair,

this state is viscerally connected to their past as impoverished farmers. On the other hand, however, reading for ontological *security* enables us to see how Mrs Chen is able to bear the emotional impact of precarious work due to the belief and understanding that Yu's secure employment would return. Accordingly, she gains a strong sense of security from their ongoing attachment to the company. This is further underscored by the desirability of the 'proper' job, as not just an economic necessity, but also a facet of one's identity, an identification underscored by Yu's skills in the dangerous explosive team. Although security and insecurity are married in Mrs Chen's account, ultimately, I suggest that she is able to maintain her ontological security—her sense of self—through the continuity of the family's relation to their employer and profession.

Ontological security thus orients issues of economic precarity to matters of relation, attachment, and desire. This can be about secure relations to precarious work, but it can be about relations beyond work that secure precarious bodies. Ontological security thus suggests that whether an individual feels precarious can depend on circumstances beyond their immediate conditions of labour (Millar, 2017). For example, for Worth (2016), the interdependent and mutual relations that the millennial women share with family, friends and partners are crucial to whether they experience their working lives as precarious or not. Similarly, Cockayne notes that entrepreneurs often draw on other forms of personal security such as savings and social networks to mitigate their economic precarity (Cockayne, 2016). Past experiences also make a difference to how one responds to the feeling-space of precarious work. As Berlant (2011) asserts, "[p]eople born into unwelcoming worlds and unreliable environments have a different response to the new precarities than do people who presumed they would be protected" (p. 20). For those such as the released prisoners in Richardson and Thieme's study (2020), precarious conditions of work are even experienced as a form of 'mundane stability' in comparison to their time in incarceration. Indeed, as Lewis and colleagues (2015) caution, it is important to remember that precarity exists on a "continuum of unfreedom", where some may feel trapped with no alternatives, whilst others may prefer the rhythms of such work (p. 580).

My contention in this section, then, is that to understand what happens in and after job loss, we need to first understand the relations of attachment and desire that permeate and enable working worlds. In the broader context of contemporary work, the question of what it takes to *secure* precarious life illuminates a paradox that, I argue, is beginning to be recognised by geographers. That is, although precarious work may intensify feelings of ontological *insecurity*, through increasingly flexible, unstable, short-term jobs, paid work is also increasingly that which offers the

very possibility of ontological *security*—through mortal considerations, but also through attachments to and desires for the work we engage in. Contemporary precarity is increasingly situated in contexts where work has become that which “secures not only income and job but identity and lifestyle, linking capitalism and intimacy in an affective desire for security itself” (Berlant, 2011; Allison, 2013, p. 5). As Kathi Weeks (2011) suggests, work is now widely accepted as not only a requirement of contemporary (western) life, but as something that is willingly and actively taken on by people, as a fulfilling pursuit that sits at the heart of who we are, and from which we derive an unparalleled sense of self-worth and satisfaction. With work installed at the heart of the modern subject and work become increasingly precaritized, as a scene of work, even *precarious* forms of work must be understood as integral to the self’s potential for ontological security.

In geography, this point has been most sharply articulated in recent writing on new cultures of insecure work in high-tech, creative and education sectors. The increasing centrality of affective attachments to precarious work is implied by Harris and Nowicki (2018), in their discussion of how new cultures of precarity are increasingly entrenched through *cultural* and not just economic operations, “through imaginaries of and assumptions about how day-to-day life is, and should be, lived” (p. 388). In the context of creative entrepreneurial work, Cockayne (2016) argues that desire is central to producing and perpetuating attachments to precarious working conditions through justifications of precarious experiences as being integral to the pursuit of strongly desired aspirations. Pettit makes a related suggestion when he writes of the hopes of young educated underemployed men in Egypt for upward mobility, and the ways in which men hang on to “a vital sense of hope” under extremely competitive and exclusory conditions (2019, p. 2).⁶ And Deuchar and Dyson (2020) even suggest that precarious job markets and prolonged unemployment do not just undermine, but can also *reinforce* one’s attachments to their objects of desire, compelling intensified participation in precarious practices. Across these stories of precarity, the convictions of hope and desire work to secure selves, protecting the optimism of their attachments to precarious work and thus safeguarding the security of their identities.

⁶ Precarious has a slightly different inflection in Pettit’s study: the men consider their jobs precarious because they are unable “provide a stable basis for family life”, rather than necessarily being insecure or temporary (Pettit 2019, p. 8).

What is revealed by this discussion then, is the increasing “ambivalence” of work, offering both affirmation *and* negation (Richardson, 2016). It suggests complex relationships between *feelings* of ontological in-security and *conditions* of economic precarity, suggesting that the former cannot be read off of the unreliable nature of the latter. Instead, precarity exists in an entangled feeling-space that is inflected by less visible relations, such as those to attachments, desires, identities, people, objects, places—and, indeed, facets of the work itself. Through Chen’s story of continuity, I show how securing attachments can mitigate the ontologically destabilising potential of precarious work. Although work is but one of many relations that can secure bodies, it is one that has become central to the possibility of ontological security in contemporary societies. Having recognised this, the question then becomes: what happens to precarious bodies after the cut of loss? In this impassive timespace, how might abandoned bodies begin to recreate a secure sense of self?

* * *

II On the turbulence of abandonment

Having suggested how different styles of relation can variously secure or unsecure the self, part two of this chapter turns to consider what happens when securing relations are *lost* after workplace closure. The concept of ontological security draws attention to how the ideas, people and things around us help prop up our worlds. This section furthers this discussion by demonstrating how *others* play a foundational role in constituting self and subjectivity. I draw on philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of ‘responsibility’ and ‘substitution’ to show how the subject is brought to existence in the approach of the other.⁷ Precariousness prefigures the idea that bodies are enacted by their relations to the things around them. But it also recognises that it is not the sheer fact of relation itself that matters. Indeed, with the rise of relational thought in geography, it has been easy to forget that the fact of relation itself tells us very little, that relation is “nothing but the trait of being-held-toward-another” (Gasché, 1999, p. 9, quoted in Harrison, 2007, p. 591). Instead, this section begins to think about the *quality* of these relations, including the relations of *non-relation* that emerge after the cut of loss.

⁷ I note that Levinas’s writing also serves as the inspiration for Butler’s concept of precariousness.

Accompanying this discussion is the story of Shaun, a local small business owner whose working life is exemplified by increasingly precarious rhythms caused by the progressive industrial closures. Using Levinas's image of the 'darkness' of the 'there-is' of bereft being, I describe the experience of precariousness that emerges in the absence of the things, relations and people that once enacted the subject. Through the concepts of 'abandonment' and 'turbulence', I explore what happens to self-experience when relations that compose the self are lost, when bodies 'lose touch' with the people, places and things that once produced their worlds and selves (Bissell *et al.*, 2020). Although the focus in Levinas' thought is generally the *human* other, I extend Levinas's discussion to encompass styles of otherness presented by non-human forces and entities. Drawing on philosopher Michel Serres' concept of turbulence, I show how Shaun experiences the haphazard timespace of his newly precarious work, as an arrhythmic experience that alternates between pockets of stability and instability, between the intensities of over-absence and over-presence.

In the process, this chapter changes its idiom from a psychologised subjectivity concerned with the *interiority* of selves to a postphenomenological self that approaches subjects through what might be called the *extensivity* of a body's capacity to affect and be affected by others. As has perhaps been most evident in the literature on emotions, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist approaches to subjectivity are not mutually exclusive, and have been mobilised in geography ways that both overlap and diverge (Callard, 2003; Bondi, 2005; Pile, 2010; Pile and Kingsbury, 2014; Simpson, 2017; Kingsbury and Secor, 2021). Although I do not have the scope to elaborate on this complex terrain, I suggest that two key differences in the way these two traditions have been utilised in geography are pertinent to my discussion. First is the divergent ontologies of subjectivity they each mobilise, with the postphenomenological self understood not through a bounded or contained notion of the individual, but a distributed and 'spaced' subjectivity that is passive to the outside, constituted by a broader range of more-than-human forces. Second, and relatedly, is the temporalities the two broad approaches tend to mobilise. Broadly speaking, whereas psychoanalytic theories emphasise the inertia and return of the past's repressions, poststructuralist theories are more concerned with the processual and productive nature of the present, emphasising the excessive potential of the world to differ from the past. These are, of course, caricatured positions, and throughout this thesis I draw on thinkers in both traditions to show how they can work in parallel to weave a richer sense of the human self, one that emphasises how the past prefigures the present, without losing sight of the potential of encounters in the present to shape the future.

The primacy of the other

For Levinas, the other brings time; the other that calls the self into being. Here, the other is not just an abstraction, but refers to a specific encounter with an other, as exemplified by Levinas' notion of 'the face'. The face is a catachresis that is best understood by what it *does* rather than what it *is*. As a "living performative" (Bergo, 2011, p. 23), the face is a 'moment' in the lived connection to another in an encounter. It generates a relationship of self to other that Levinas describes as one of 'responsibility'. That is, Levinasian responsibility refers to the mode of subjective dispossession that beings enter into, willingly or not, in the encounter with an other (Bergo, 2011, p. see; Bernasconi, 2019). Responsibility "does not begin from the I as accountability does", but is rather a force that dispossesses and alters the self, one that challenges the right of the *conatus essendi* to persist (Bernasconi, 2019, p. 91). As such, whilst geographers and other social scientists have applied Levinasian responsibility in a moral register (Howitt, 2002, p. e.g.; Barnett, 2005), it is important to note that this responsibility should not be confused with its conventional understanding in ethics as a mode of accountability or obligation. Ethics, for Levinas, is a first philosophy—a fundamental ontology—not a set of moral directives.

The relationship between self and other described by 'responsibility' should be understood as a precursor to subjectivity. The other exists as an *interruptive* force that emerges in the moment of encounter, as something closer to a sensation or affect than a material substance. Accordingly, although the recognition of the other's precariousness is fundamental to Levinas's understanding of the other, it is self's radical *passivity* in face of the other that his writings emphasise. The self is understood as radically and inherently open, exposed, vulnerable to the other. It is in the approach of the other that Levinas understands 'being' as being called into existence, in a relation of responsibility that Levinas will, in his later works, perhaps more intuitively describe as 'substitution'. To understand how responsibility *qua* substitution takes place, one might return to the distinction made in his earlier works between the 'me' and the 'self', the *moi* and the *soi* (Levinas, 1978). Alongside the me, *moi* (sometimes translated as 'ego'), what is generally recognised as the subject, Levinas introduces the concept of the self, *soi*, to denote the existence of a more primary, pre-individual, anonymous self that precedes—and thus makes possible—the emergence of the subject. The *soi* is a self that belongs to me but is not yet 'me'. This distinction is what allows him to position the other as prior to the subject, the 'me'. It is by way of a detour through the other that the anonymous *soi* becomes a subjective *moi*, a process Levinas calls hypostasis. Substitution transcends the self and the extant 'me' through a process of dispossession whereby "I, the unique

one, substitutes itself for others” (Levinas, 1998, p. 117). In substitution, I become precisely who I am by way of the encounter with the other.

Where the term responsibility highlighted the *exteriority* of one’s relation to the face, substitution suggests that this relation can be explored through the immanent *relationality* of one’s relationship to others. That is, substitution might lead us to note the way in which the self is not just interrupted from their existence by the other, but that they are also irreversibly *dependent* on the other for their me-hood to begin with. Responsibility dispossesses, but, in a more affirmative idiom, it might also be aligned with what Diprose (2002) calls the ‘generosity’ of the other in the production of liveable worlds. The assemblages that constitute us, and in which we are embedded, can thus be seen as generous—not just constraining, but also necessarily enabling and enlivening. As a result, although the relationship with the other is radically asymmetrical, that the other *negates* the self, this does not mean that such relations should (or can) be eradicated. Whilst we cannot predict the precise range of possibilities brought into being by the other, it is precisely the other that makes the future possible; ‘[t]he very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future’ (Levinas, 1987, p. 77).

If the self is reliant on the other, what happens, then, in the absence of the others we once relied on for our rhythms of self? Levinas suggests that the absence of the other causes a kind of ‘impersonal death’ in the subject, through which the self loses its place in the world (Large, 2002, p. 139). This death, however, is not the biological we associate with natural death, but a more existential death caused by the decomposition of the arrangements that call our lives into being. Impersonal death does not generate a relation to another, but rather a non-relation to self. The impersonal event of death is the overwhelming event in which one’s powers of existence become fractured by the retreat of the other. Rather than subjectifying, this loss or death is the event of *desubjectification*, returning the *moi* to the anonymity of the *soi*.

By cutting relations of everyday life, I suggest that the abandonments associated with workplace closure—of lost colleagues, rhythms, spaces, activities, landscapes—can plunge the subject into the anonymity of the *soi*. By depriving the subject of others upon which it relied for its capacities to move through everyday life, loss disorients subjectivity. It does so not just by misdirecting or redirecting, but also by *undirecting* bodies, ripping through the fabric of existing relations without offering anything in its place. After Blanchot, Levinas designates the experience of this “impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable” self the ‘there-is’ (*il y a*) of generalised existence (Levinas, 1989, p. 30). Rather than being a subject position in itself, the there-is marks the experience of the self in

the absence of the other who calls forth the subject; it expresses the “simple facticity of being riveted to existence without an exit” (Critchley, 1997, p. 32). Summarily put, “[t]he experience of the “there is” is the experience of existence without individuation” (Large, 2002, p. 138). Unlike the being of Heidegger’s *Dasein*, which is proper to the body and can never perish, the there-is is an experience that strips the subject of its existing powers of being. That is, it is “not that the subject somehow ceases to be who she is upon encountering impersonal existence”, but rather that the there-is presents a breakdown of the self’s capacity to be an intentional, active subject, gesturing to those times when one becomes a “stranger in one’s own skin” (Sealey, 2013, pp. 437, 438). What defines Levinasian absence, then, is an undifferentiated force that overwhelms any attempt to distinguish the specific from a scene-filling, chaotic presence. Levinas uses the metaphor of ‘darkness’ to describe this limit experience, opposing it to the ‘lightness’ of being. In darkness, “[t]here is a nocturnal space, but it is no longer empty space ... it is full, but full of the nothingness of everything.” (Levinas, 1989, p. 31).

I argue that this aspect of loss’s abandonments was foregrounded in my interview with Shaun, the owner of a small business offering engineering contracting services in Kandos. Through Levinas, my suggestion is that the closure of a workplace can present the loss of a set of others that once underwrote the self, submerging self and subjectivity in the “nocturnal” void of non-relation (Levinas, 1989, p. 31). Shaun’s life and work have been strongly affected by the cascading closures in the once heavily industrial region. Industrial closure has resulted in an *abandonment* of existence by the others that once made its habitual rhythms possible. Speaking three years after the closure, Shaun explains that his working life has been characterised by the newfound volatility of his day-to-day work rhythms, producing an indeterminacy that threatens to spill into other domains of life by defying his attempts to plan for the future. By resulting in the disappearance and *loss* of subjectifying others, the closure of the mine acts as the catalyst for a set of *decompositions* to the subject, undermining the securities of who Shaun once was.

Alongside the darkness of the there-is, I show how Shaun’s experiences of loss and precariousness in the years after the mine closure are accompanied by what philosopher Michel Serres calls ‘turbulence.’ Turbulence represents a mixed state of order and disorder, with volatile rhythms and non-linear dynamics that lurch from relation to non-relation and back. Mapping turbulence in relation to the precariousness of Levinasian darkness, I suggest that the indeterminacy facing Shaun is not just the hush of the anonymous self’s silence, but also the chaos of a disordered world, one that wraps around like a Möbius strip to produce an analogous effect of meaningless indeterminacy

and unnavigable space.⁸ Taken together, I argue that Shaun's story suggests an understanding of precarity's inner life not as a persistent state of insecurity or security, but as a temporal indeterminacy caused by the stochastic—that is, following a probabilistic pattern, but random or arbitrary—variation between security and insecurity, *moi* and *soi*, light and dark, relation and non-relation, order and disorder that defines turbulence. In this conception, precarity becomes a cycle of abandonment and adoption, detachment and attachment, that intermittently secures and unsecures the subject in an unanticipable and chance-laden spiral.

* * *

Shaun runs a small engineering services contracting business right on the highway that runs between Kandos and Rylstone. Originally from Dubbo, 2.5 hours' drive away, Shaun moved to the area after buying the small business in late 2008. Trained as a fitter machinist and tool maker, Shaun spent 10 years at a white goods manufacturer before getting into sub-contracting; he has basically worked for himself in the two decades since. Even though he moved to Kandos, his wife and kids stayed behind in Dubbo. The kids were in school and happy, Shaun explains that he didn't see the point in uprooting them. Instead, Shaun started commuting the long distance to Kandos every Monday morning, staying for the working week before making the long drive home each weekend.

The progressive closure of heavy industry in the area “changes the way you think, like, definitely,” Shaun says. Whilst Charbon was still running, Shaun's company used to regularly service the machinery at the mine. In fact, it was on a visit to Charbon that we, quite literally, crossed paths. Pointing to the present situation as a cumulative effect of

⁸ Although Levinas's account of the other prioritizes *human* others, in line with recent posthumanist interventions across geography and the social sciences, the suggestion in making this parallel with Serres is that the subjectifying status of the other in Levinas can also be extended to a wider range of materials, substances and objects, such as the diverse materials that assemble industrial life. As Bergo (2011) explains, although though the 'face' in Levinas' earlier works refers to the physical encounter with the human form (and not just one's physical face, but also the pain-arched back, the blood-curling scream, the twisting corporeality of the human), by his later works, the 'face' becomes an increasingly more diffuse force. That is, the other gains increasing autonomy from the 'face' and shifts to encompass a wider set of “embodied passions” that evidence an “intersubjective quality” that overtakes the self (Bergo, 2011, p. 18). This is an intersubjectivity we might witness in the upwelling surge of memories from the past, in the gift indelibly that is linked to its giver, in the roads we once travelled together.

closures—of death by 1000 cuts—Shaun highlights that his present situation cannot be read through an isolated focus on a single closure. The eponymous town’s cement works closing in 2011 would become a sign of things to come; the whole area has “just had this die back.” Cascading closures in the region had already been progressively upsetting the balance upon which his business is premised, but with the closure of Charbon, the last big employer in the area, Shaun’s life is at a palpable crossroads.



By transforming aspects of work that were once tractable domains into volatile and uncertain compounds, the closures turn what were once familiar rhythms of work turn into indeterminate and shifting surfaces. In the past, “just *stuff* would come in, you know.” I ask Shaun who his clients would have been in the past, and Shaun scrolls through his brain-rolodex, identifying the losses. The cement works has shut. Charbon has shut. A nearby lime works is still operational, but things are very quiet there. A number of smaller places, like the local timber supplier, have folded and pulled out of the area.

Since the loss of big industry, “it’s all just been the small stuff.” Shaun explains that the little jobs—the farmers, the local stuff—the stuff that is left—in the past, that “was just filler.” He draws an analogy: “you used

to have the big jobs—like big rocks, so to speak—and, you know, all this smaller stuff would just go in between and fill the gaps.” Now, the rhythms have changed. Instead of the big jobs alongside filler, now it’s mostly all filler, no killer.

He offers a specific example that I might recognise. “Over at the main plant,” referring to the Kandos Cementworks that backs on to the town, “you see the big concrete silo, which is 50 metres tall. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, there’s a stack there which is also about 50 metres tall—a single stack, like a big chimney. We made that and put it in. That’s *50 metres* high. That was a *1.3 million* dollar job,” Shaun emphasises with pride. But his look turns pensive. “I guess, you get a little bit—”, he stutters, “I feel, sometimes—not so much now because I’m getting used to it—but I feel sometimes—” he pauses, eyes looking into the distance. “Oh, I dunno, it’s a little bit—is it *humiliating*?” he says. “You seem to be mucking around now with, you know, just *silly little tin bits*, because you’ve got to accept everything.” He gestures to a small job sitting behind him on his desk, what looks like a small pile of nugget-sized scrap metal. “You’ve got to do an old lady’s *ashtray*.” He turns back to look at me, “I know you’re more focussing on Charbon, but it’s the *whole area*. Like, big industry is *gone* at the moment.”

The industrial retractions produce uncertain rhythms for Shaun, by recomposing the terms of his business and livelihood. The changing distribution of work means the business is now “up and down, ebb and flow.” Big jobs used to go for weeks or months at a time, were often booked in advance, operating on more-or-less consistent operating rhythms and with reliable clients with whom Shaun had built a rapport over time. With smaller jobs, these regularities are upended; jobs are difficult to anticipate or plan for, their durations are too short, deadlines too soon, working hours too few. He can no longer anticipate when jobs are coming in, how many workers he’ll need to employ for the jobs, where they’re coming from and how long they might stick around. The

indeterminacies make it impossible for Shaun to see more than a few weeks ahead at a time, render it impossible to plan for a volatile future.

* * *

Shaun's story emphasises that each event of closure is not an island. Each closure also becomes a threshold event that produces a wider chain of spatial disorganisations, with each spiral potentially making further demands for change and adjustment. Different individuals are affected differently, just as each individual is affected in different ways over time. The time of industrial closure thus becomes a curious timespace in which some elements of life are preserved whilst others are thrown into disarray, a space of both continuity and change. In this section, I explore the tenuous relation between continuity and change that emerges after loss through the thought of philosopher Michel Serres. My aim is to show how Charbon's closure can be considered a threshold event within a non-linear system, one that renders Shaun's working life precarious and turbulent, both secure and insecure.

Drawing on the atomic thought of ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius, Serres (2000) analogises the workings of organic life with the fluid dynamics of non-linear systems. In the thought of Lucretius, the 'clinamen' is a concept that describes the tendency of an atom to swerve when falling in a void. For Serres, the swerve of the clinamen is the basis of every system, as it creates the conditions through which atoms can meet and thus form relations; without the swerve, falling atoms would fall in parallel without coinciding, separated from all others, unable to produce the beginning of the world. This unswerving state "is what Serres calls the 'first chaos', the absence of order in perfect order, the *absence of all relation*" in which no systems, collectives or assemblages could exist (Webb, 2000, p. x emphasis added). Serres co-opts the clinamen to conceptualise the chain of effects generated by a change of angle as an atom cuts through space. The clinamen, through its disordering operation, turns the 'first chaos' of the void into the 'pure chaos' of perfect disorder. The clinamen is "the slope that begins with a loss of equilibrium", turning the order of the void into a space of what he calls 'turbulence' (Serres, 2000, p. 33).

For Levinas, the experience of the there-is is characterised by the indeterminacy and undifferentiation of darkness. For Serres, chaos is "non-sense ... the absence of a sign, the absence of a signal"; it is the inability to differentiate, to distinguish, to determine (Serres, 2000, p. 144). Like Levinas, Serres exemplifies this state of non-relation with the communicational 'blackness' of a

chaotic noise that refuses distinction.⁹ What characterises Levinas' and Serres's respective versions of darkness is not their ostensible content, but the fact that both are characterised by the undifferentiation that comes from the inability to distinguish between entities, regardless of absolute proximity or distance to objects in Euclidean space. In both cases, the material world has not actually disappeared, but has instead become impenetrable, resistant and overwhelming. Like the *there-is*, chaos is characterised by its inability to be coded with meaning.

Order, in Serres's understanding, exists as a moment balanced between the two foundational states of chaotic indeterminacy, "as a suspension between the two extreme states of chaos" (Webb, 2000, p. xix). The fluctuation of the *clinamen* produces disorder, but it also the same movement that generates order. The *clinamen* is both "formative and declining", "productive and destructive" (Serres, 2000, p. 92). Disorder does not exist in *opposition* to order, but *precedes* and thus *enables* order. For Serres, the difference between order and disorder—between the security of order and the insecurity of chaos—is as infinitesimally small as the swerve of the atom. Disorder produces the conditions from which order might once again emerge, just as order threatens to turn into disorder at the slightest chance. As a result, I suggest that the disruptive swerve of the *clinamen* can be analogised with the other that approaches the other, as an undoing of the subject, but also the chaotic beginnings of a new subjectivity.

For Serres, the state of order is not static; instead, it is a *flow* state. Order is produced by the chance convergence of independent conditions that combine to share compatible rhythms, "remaining held by the regular movement of the flow" (Webb, 2006, p. 127). This combining of atoms produces new linkages between formerly separate entities, stabilise into the laminar flow of a 'vortex' pattern, caught in a cycle of repetition. This regularity is not permanent—"destined eventually to break down and ... gradually return to the cosmic flux through the void" (Webb, 2006, p. 127). The irresolvable complexity introduced by the originary state of chaos means that even in the vortex of a stable and seemingly isolated system, unexpected deviations scatter the nested and overlapping

⁹ A closer reading of Levinas offers further congruences: Levinas' concept of the *there-is* (*il y a*) is inflected with a marked sense of the *tohu wa-bohu*, a Hebrew term in the Biblical story of Genesis describing the primordial condition of the earth immediately before the creation of light. *Tohu wa-bohu* is translated as both confusion and void, chaos and emptiness, bring together two senses of chaos that also exist in Serres's concept of the *clinamen*.

subspaces of laminar flow. Nonetheless, it is the converging of flows that generates quasi-stable local entities that can sustain an equilibrium of regularity and repeatability, at least for a time.

Combining chaos and order, turbulence thus describes a mixed, intermediary state that moves between the two extremes of chaos and order, incorporating *both* of these moments. “Chaos appears there, spontaneously, in the order, order appears there in the midst of disorder” (Serres, 1995, p. 109). Turbulence is a matter of distribution: it is a state that is characterised by the pockets of order and disorder that emerge in its midst. In turbulence, one cannot predict what comes next. It is an *incalculable* state, following not the straight-line laws of geometry but the complex mechanics of fluids. Turbulent variation between order and disorder is stochastic; its distribution can be characterised probabilistically, in general terms, but not in its specifically.

Through Serres’ description, I suggest that precarity is experienced as turbulence’s unpredictable movement between order and chaos, familiarity and impenetrability, as local pockets of order that fall into unpredictability, only to turn back to regularity. For Shaun, it is this volatile oscillation between determinacy and indeterminacy that characterises his experience of precarity, one that denies his attempts to adapt by producing longer-term consistencies to match its rhythms. Caught not in the quasi-stable eddies of order that make prediction and regularities possible, his world is a turbulent envelope open to the conjunctural winds of chance and circumstance. Each new inflection of change threatens to undermine existing stabilities, sending tendrils of disorder into the midst of existing relations, threatening to reconfigure linkages to produce new combinations of order unlike those that came before.

* * *

With all the changes, Shaun has been considering whether it’s worth making the long drive out each week. The impenetrability and indeterminacy of the circumstances induce reflection and introspection about the viability of his working arrangements. “You start to think: *what am I doing this for?*”

‘It’s all gone through my mind’ Shaun sighs, every option for the future. Throughout our conversation, Shaun swings back and forth through the options, as if he’s trying out the positions in real time.

He’s been thinking seriously of making a break with it all. “We’re empty nesters now,” he says, referring to him and his wife. He tells me with

pride that their kids are all at university and doing well for themselves. His wife has been good with all the travel over the years—“very good actually”—but “it seems to be a bit more polarising now that there’s no—we’ve got no kids at home. She’s getting lonely.” He reflects that “I’ve been doing this, as I say, since I was 16. So, I think I need a break from the whole industry. Get *right away from it*, you know, like, just do something else.”



He tells me a bit about the personal projects he has on the go at the moment. He’s been slowly fixing up some houses for a while now, and it’d be nice to have some time to dedicate himself to that.

But then Shaun swings back around, looking forward to things going back to the way they were. “Big industry is *gone* at the moment.” But he is optimistic; “I think it’ll come back, you know.” He’s been keeping a close eye on the planning proposals in the area. We’ve got a coal mine; it’s going to open up at Bylong,” referring to a controversial mining project nearby. “*Or*,” he qualifies, “let’s *hope* it does.” There’s another silver mine that has “been simmering away for years.” He’s sure that will happen too.

Shaun wonders how long he can keep up the rhythm, how long he can hold out in the impasse. “I’m sort of at the stage where I’m sick of waiting for them.” But, he knows that “they don’t just happen overnight,” the mines, and “they are starting to get quite close now.” The town can smell it in the air. “It’s just in the offing” he asserts—somewhere in the vast expanse between the ocean shore and sky’s horizon.

* * *

The progressive closure of industry has thrown Shaun’s timespaces of work the disarray of turbulence, with the disappearance of clients, jobs, machinery, materials and workers that once secured existence. This indeterminacy destabilises Shaun’s capacity to make sense of how to engage with his surroundings, emitting resonating signs of change into his midst. I argue that Shaun’s precarious working life is thus characterised by neither order nor disorder, but by a state that crosses the perceptual threshold between poles of stability and instability. His working life is characterised by an oscillation between moments when life seems tractable and familiar, and others when turmoil and indeterminacy reign. Through Serres’s concept of the *clinamen*—the swerve that disturbs ostensibly laminar flow—we might observe how the disturbance of each closure brings its own forms of turbulence to the semblance of order that Shaun has established over time. Each modification cumulatively encloses Shaun in new spirals of disorder that threaten to undermine his livelihood and sense of self tethered to this successful working life, forcing him to find a way to manage the forces or otherwise be overtaken by its pressures.

I suggest that the substituting other in Levinas can be analogised with Serres’s description of the ‘quasi-object’ as “a marker of the subject” that is a “constructor of intersubjectivity”, bringing a wider set of ‘others’ into consideration, beyond the human other (Serres, 1982, p. 227). Although recognising differences between Levinas and Serres’ ontological and ethical commitments, what I emphasise is the quasi-object’s subjectifying dimension. The quasi-object is a “token” that “weaves the collective” (Brown, 2005, p. 21). Using the example of a ball in a rugby game, Serres demonstrates that is through the passing around and coming into play of these objects that subjects gain their sense of how to act and what to do—in relation to the object but also each other. It is only through our interaction with the quasi-object that we know “how and when we are subjects and when and how we are no longer subjects” (Serres, 1982, p. 227).

For Shaun, the jobs that once came in were tied to clients and infrastructures—machinery, metal structures, heavy vehicles—that worked like privileged ‘quasi-objects’ in the system, circulating across space to produce a scurry of action around it. The closure of the mine stills this movement of objects and people, disabling the whirl of activity once enabled by the industry’s circulation. This progressive stilling undermines his relation to the things that once supported his sense of self. By depopulating and recomposing the day-to-day life to which he is accustomed, the absences and transformations of industrial loss force him to inhabit circumstances to which he cannot stabilise a way of relating, in which he doesn’t know how to act. His world ‘shrinks’, made ever more tense by increasingly austere social and economic conditions (Hitchen and Shaw, 2019). And yet, Shaun remains reliant on the worlds around him for his sense of self and his capacities to act. The decompositions of place put into question Shaun’s sense of self and self-regard by undermining his long-held capacities as a successful tradesperson, manager, small business owner, provider, boss. In the face of this new unpredictability, volatile conditions of day-to-day life threaten to further spiral out of Shaun’s control, with wider impacts in place reverberating back on to his business and self. Despite this, he doesn’t know whether to stay or whether to go. Still attached to the former version of his life as a successful local business owner, he remains tied to place, as he attempts to find ways to sustain his past existence despite the changed conditions of the local economy, trying to feel out an equilibrium in which the security of his existing attachments might coalesce with the rhythms of work and life on offer.

In the space of disorder and chaos, time disappears. Unable to address himself to an apparent future, Shaun is left in the indecisive space of the impasse—“a space of betweenness, a no-man’s land” (Secor and Linz, 2017, p. 568). Stuck between past attachments and a future that remains opaque, Shaun is exposed to vacillating circumstances that present unnavigable limits. Precarity’s rhythms are stochastic, mixing the predictable with the unpredictable, and presenting non-linear dynamics in which substantial and cascading shifts can occur in response to relatively small triggers. Although Shaun does not know precisely *when* something will emerge to shift the impassive scene, the mounting pressures under avowedly tenuous circumstances give a palpable certainty to his sense that something *must* change—sooner or later, and with or without him.

The founding declination of the clinamen means that existence is carved out against a background of pure disorder that, following the second law of thermodynamics, experiences the slow deterioration of entropic time. But although a global or universal sense of order may not be possible, pockets of local order constantly emerge within this greater noise, forming vortexes of

repetition before a disturbance cuts across its forces to scatter them back into disordered chaos once more. Within this context, action is less about sovereignty over circumstances and more about choosing “how to intervene in this decline, how to reinforce a recurrent structure or to accelerate the dissolution of another ... to construct a time of one’s own in the balance between equilibrium and disequilibrium” (Webb, 2006, p. 133). Unable to transcend the circumstances of his existence, Shaun can only find the calm of equilibrium in collaboration with the flows that surround him. As evident in his story, there are several ways he can do this. One is by *reinforcing* his rapport with his present circumstances, such as by changing his expectations for work and family life or fostering an optimism to fend off more destabilising intensities. Another option is to use what powers he has to *reorient* his circumstances to align with discernible currents of order, such as by selling up shop and moving back home. A third choice is to *wait*, hoping that a clinamen will come along to turn circumstances around. Stuck in an impasse where the attachments of the past rub against the uncertainties of the future, Shaun is forced to reconsider who he is, where his life is leading and who he wants to be. By surveying the different scenes of life currently available to him, Shaun is checking all the doors—identifying potential rhythms of order in the worlds that surround him—so that, when the *right* wind sweeps through, he is ready to go with the flow, rather than be disoriented by its currents.

III On the intrusion of the other

In the third section, I think about the experience of the self as it begins to connect and rebuild relations in the wake of loss. The previous section argued that loss destabilises the subject, turning the body towards the turbulence of abandonment. I have shown how precarity exists as a timespace that holds together pockets of disorder as well as order. Bereft of the resources that once held together his world, the industrial closures leave Shaun vulnerable to outside forces, as life’s sync is interrupted by spirals of disorder that reverberate beyond working life. To stem threatened dissolution, Shaun puts up barriers and embankments, redirecting forces to hold together the scene that has sustained him for so long.

Part three builds on the impasse of turbulence to begin to consider how the body can turn the volatility of turbulence into the laminarity of order. It explores the *sensations* that accompany relationality, including the corporeal forms of judgement through which bodies experience the presence of the others they encounter. This final story is thus about the process of coming into

relations with new-found others upon which one must rely to secure their existences, focussing on the reordering and recomposing of the subject that emerges from turbulence.

It tells the story of Phil, a former coal miner at Charbon whose post-closure resumé reflects a melee of short-term, informal and insecure jobs. As a small business owner, Shaun has embankments of time and capital that enable him to bide his time. For Phil, however, things moved quickly after the final closure. After the loss of his job with Big Rim—the contractor for Charbon’s small open-cut section—Phil must find paid work again as soon as possible; he is thwarted, however, by the sparseness of the opportunity in the thin local economy. Phil’s experience of precarity is thus marked by a different kind of abandonment and indeterminacy to Shaun’s: not the abandonment of the self *by* past others, but the abandonment of self *to* the new others it encounters. Alongside the turbulent temporalities generated by abandonment’s decomposition of existing relations, Phil’s precarity is characterised by an indeterminacy caused by the need to *recompose* new relations with strange and unfamiliar others.

In this section, I draw on Nancy’s concept of the intruder to examine Phil’s experience of precarious work after the closure of Charbon. Nancy uses the figure of the ‘intruder’ to describe a force of interruption and discontinuity that emerges in the self upon an encounter with an unhospitable other. The discomforts of intrusion can rub at the limits of tolerability, pushing bodies over thresholds that, like the spirals of turbulent disruption, herald chains of cascading differentiation beyond the initial event of interruption. By turning to the new relations forged by bodies abandoned by once-securitising relations, this section begins to explore how bodies can carve out new feeling-spaces for the self after the ends of workplace closure. Through intrusion, I set the scene for a new sense of self to emerge from the interruptive address of the other.

* * *

“When I went to Big Rim, I knew there was a limited time with the mine,” Phil explains. “They didn’t say ‘you’re going to be here for another 20 years’. They said, ‘well, there’s enough reserves here for another four or five years. And there won’t be anything after that for Big Rim’. You always knew that.” Four or five years eventually stretched out to nine, at which point there was nothing left to mine. The small open-cut pit finally closed a few months after the main underground section at Charbon.



“There was never any doubt in most people’s minds that we weren’t going to get paid out,” Phil says, speaking about their redundancy payments. But things didn’t go to plan. Shortly after the closure is announced, the contracting company reveal that they are going into receivership. Other debtors are given precedence and paid ahead of the workers, leaving little in the end for the men themselves, right when they need it most. It was technically legal, but the way it was done felt unfair. Phil estimates that he ended up receiving far less than half of what he was owed, and it took years to arrive; in fact, he had only just received his final payment several months prior to our conversation. Grim as that was though, Phil says, that wasn’t really even the worst thing to happen from

the closure. Instead, he explains that “the worst thing was ... I didn’t have a job.”

To put this remark into perspective, we detour back through Phil’s working history. Over four decades of work, Phil plots for me the trials and tribulations of carving out a livelihood against the backdrop of the local industrial economy’s slow decline.

Phil is a Kandos native. He grew up in the area, did his apprenticeship as an electrician straight out of school at the town’s cement works and had always worked nearby. At 19, Phil moved over to the Kandos Colliery, which supplied coal and power to the cement works, and ended up there for 18 years. It was a good mine to work at, he explains. Everyone was local; it was a very close-knit community. Times were still good in Kandos; the town was thriving. It was around the time Phil left the Colliery that the tide started to turn in Kandos. When things looked like they were winding down at the long-running Colliery in the late 90s, Phil jumped ship to another local mine, hoping to beat the inevitable squeeze for a job that would come from the mass layoff they all anticipated. But two years later, there is a major and unexpected downturn in the boom-and-bust coal industry, one that hits his new workplace too.

Following the ‘last on, first off’ seniority rule, Phil is made redundant. It is Phil’s first layoff, but, as I find out, it isn’t even close to being his last. “When the coal industry’s good, it’s good to its workers. You know, monetary wise,” Phil says. “But when it turns bad, it turns *real* bad.”

* * *

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that people are reliant on the presence of others for their sense of self, that humans are, initially and foremost, passive and exposed beings. Levinas’s concept of substitution suggests that the self becomes itself only by way of the other, as an ‘other-in-the-same’. The approach of the other inaugurates being. But it also enacts a mode of ‘dispossession’. It is important, therefore, to note that the relations between self, me and other that first develop out of this encounter are not necessarily—or even often—harmonious. The scene of substitution is one

that “restores the strangeness and terror of the inter-human relation” Critchley (1997, p. 117). The others we encounter are not just *familiars* with whom we have developed a rapport, but often *strangers* with whom we may have no existing relation.

Sara Ahmed explains that strangers are usually thought of as “those who are, in their very proximity, *already recognised as not belonging*, as being out of place” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 21 original emphasis). Describing the paranoid reflex through which the stranger comes to exist as other, Ahmed draws attention to the skin as the tactile interface for this boundary-making. Recognising the skin’s interminable openness as a site of vulnerability, the stranger is that which is kept away from the body: vigilantly distanced and out of proximity to one’s body. To bring this stranger close to the body is to allow it to touch a site from which it is usually held distant.

Extending Ahmed’s understanding of the stranger as an abjected person or *figure*, I draw on the feeling of strange exposure as explored by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in his essay *L’intrus*, or, The Intruder (2002). Like Ahmed, Nancy stays close to the surface of the body, exploring how relations between self and other can work to rupture a sense of unified being. Unlike Ahmed, however, Nancy shows what happens when the intruder *meets* the body and self, when it can no longer be avoided or kept away. Despite its representation as a figure or person, the intruder is defined by the force of its impact, as a palpable intensity that ‘breaks apart’ the integrity of the body or self. The intruder is that which “enters by force, through surprise or ruse, in any case without the right and without having first been admitted” (Nancy, 2002, p. 11). The force of intrusion is characterised by a moment of rupture in the self, “following which the subject can no longer instil confidence in any stable identity” (Blacker, 2010, p. 36). The example that Nancy gives to exemplify the intruder is that of his heart. Reflecting on the organ transplant he once received, Nancy uses the event of his once-silent, now-failing heart’s ‘intrusion’ into the domain of palpability to demonstrate how fragmentation, discontinuity and otherness exist at the core of the self. Although the example used by Nancy, his heart, is straightforwardly a part of the body, I suggest that his concept nonetheless addresses a broader realm of others and relations that co-compose the self and self-experience.

The intruder differs from the stranger. Where the stranger is internalised through a paranoid relation of abjection—as an other *in opposition to* which the self emerges—the intruder describes an other that, by the time it becomes palpable, is already *part of* the self. That is, “the intruder comes first of all not from an outside to assault an integral whole, but from *within*” (Geroulanos and Meyers, 2009, p. 84 emphasis added). The intruder therefore suggests a state of dependence, where the experience of surprise or ‘breaking apart’ occurs precisely because the self is already reliant on

this silenced other, whether palpably felt as such or not. Unlike Ahmed's logic of the stranger, in which the overdetermined other is already *known* through its abjectness, Nancy highlights that the intruder's otherwise latent presence means that its emergence comes with an element of surprise. As a result, there is always an element of indeterminacy in one's relationship to the intruder, producing a disturbance that resists being absorbed without hesitation or pause.

* * *

Detouring through the twists and turns of Phil's working life, I get a sense of just how much the local economy has changed over the years, and how the region's downward spiral fosters the precarious conditions of work that Phil is confronted with today.

After his first layoff twenty years ago, "you don't know where to sort of pick up." Even *then* there just wasn't much going on, with technological change, resource exhaustion and changing owners meaning that jobs were getting ever scarcer in the area. Quick off the ranks, Phil called around and found an acquaintance—"a brother of a mate"—who happened to be looking for workers to help get a vineyard up. Phil had no experience, but he put in for the job and managed to line it up, finishing up at the mine on Friday and starting at the vineyard on the Monday. "Quick turnaround," I suggest. "Hell yeah," Phil says, not missing a beat. "You don't mess around. Like, if you don't take the opportunity, it won't be there Wednesday."

Phil's never done the work before, but he gets lucky, and is surprised to find that he enjoys it. Compared to mining, it was "like a breath of fresh air." He starts off as a casual employee, but ends up staying for nine years. In the end, grape overproduction was threatening the viability of vineyards and, after a disagreement with a boss already on edge, Phil found himself on the hunt for work once more.

After losing his job this time, the conditions are even more trying. It's the mid-2000s and "the community's starting to shrink up like a prune." Phil can only get odd jobs. He picks up a few months of work out in

Dubbo, 2.5 hours away. He is on a 13-days-on, one-day-off roster, and his wife Cheryl is at home looking after their two kids and the beloved working dogs from the vineyard.



Thinking back on this time in their lives, Cheryl sighs, “it was *hard*.” The details are hazy, but the feelings are not: “all I know is I was left at home with two kids and everything—everything just went *wrong*”, the intensity rising in her voice. “I had no Phil here to help fix everything and it was just—” turning to Phil, “you were away for *months*.” Cheryl says. “It really was tough; emotionally, it was tough.”

“What else could you have done at the time, work-wise?” I ask, trying to get a sense of the manoeuvrability of their situation. “There was *nothing*,”

they say simultaneously. “You were *always* looking,” Cheryl recalls, “you were *always* online looking for something.”

It was while working behind the counter at an agricultural suppliers’ store that Phil found out about the job at Big Rim. An old colleague from the vineyard happened to come through the store and mentioned that Big Rim was looking for a serviceman at Charbon. “I do remember thinking you were *very* lucky,” Cheryl reflects, “because the closure of the cement works,” which happened around the same time, “was very chaotic. There was a lot of people unemployed.”

By the time Charbon closes nine years later, is easily the biggest workplace left in the area, employing over 100 men across its underground and open-cut sections. It’s not clear what, if anything, will fill its place.

* * *

Nancy explains that the intruder is what cannot be “naturalized” in the body due to its sense of being foreign, strange and intolerable (Nancy, 2002, p. 1). It exists as a ‘vector of force’ that exerts intensities upon the body, defined “by the tensions it imposes—not by the origin itself” (Geroulanos and Meyers, 2009, p. 87). It exists as a moment of impact, at the level of sensation and sign, in the communication between the human body and the components that constitute its milieu. The intrusion is set in contrast with what has become proper to the self through the familiar repetitions of the past. Three trajectories are implied in response to the force of intrusion: 1. the intruder will be banished and thus disappear; 2. the intrusion will keep coming, but the body will adapt to it; or 3. it will continue to disturb, and for as long as it still arrives, it “will not cease ... being in some respect an intrusion” (Nancy, 2002, p. 2).

Affecting at the level of sensation, the intruder breaks apart the integrity of the body, generating a source of pain, disturbance or discomfort within the self. The event of Nancy’s failing heart is a seemingly initial intrusion that is soon joined by a *chain* of intrusions that transform his being—the intrusion of the new heart, which his immune system attacks; the intrusion of the ailments that emerge from this attack; the intrusion of the immunosuppressant drugs; the intrusion of the cancer

that later comes.¹⁰ Throughout this process, the body's attention shifts to manage each disturbance; it is "the wellbeing of the graft [that] becomes the highest priority while the host alters the bodily milieu to accommodate the graft" (Geroulanos and Meyers, 2009, p. 84). As a result, the intrusion is "not so much in the sense of 'penetrated'—though this sense remains—as instead in the sense of *dismantled into a field of competing forces*" that transforms the body—splits it, opens and fragments it—in a chain that unfolds from the initial intrusion (Geroulanos and Meyers, 2009, p. 86, emphasis added). By turning the body from closed to open, the intruder renders the body into a site of "unremitting strangeness" (Nancy, 2002, p. 10).

Tracking the unfolding chain of effects, Nancy notes the intruder's impact on the self. The impact of intrusion is not yet an event of subjectivity, but initially the event of its disordering and disorientation. The intruder, through its revelation of a suffering from within, causes a distancing of the self from its body. "The empty identity of an 'I' can no longer rest in its simple adequation (its 'I' ≠ 'I') when it speaks [*s'énonce*]: 'I am suffering' implies that there are two 'I's, each one foreign to the other (yet touching)" (Nancy, 2002, p. 11). Like Levinas' there-is, this is a state of intrusion in which the "empty identity of an 'I' can no longer rest"; instead, "[o]ne emerges from this adventure lost", becoming "a slackening, floating strangeness, suspended between poorly identified states" (Nancy, 2002, p. 11).

Given its serial and external nature, it is useful to contextualise the intruder's emergence in a historical perspective. In Nancy's case, the domain is that of health and medicine, but his arguments can be analogised to the economic and working worlds of this thesis. Despite being acutely aware that the new heart is what keeps him alive, Nancy highlights the fraught circumstances of such a gift, explaining that its reception must be understood in terms of acquiescence rather than free choice. The institutions and expectations formed around technologised modern medicine mean that, for Nancy, one does not *choose* to receive the heart, but rather one merely *participates* in its reception—"this gift has become an elementary obligation of humanity" (Nancy, 2002, p. 29). The heart is an intruder that becomes an imperative; it is not his to ignore or even really to refuse, forcing him into the vertiginous chain of bodily effects that follow on from the transplantation of this organ. My suggestion that the same understanding of historicised boundaries to the field of action is at play in contemporary labour markets. As Phil's story shows, he does not have a choice

¹⁰ I say 'seemingly' here because for Nancy there never is a 'first' intrusion, but rather a life lived through its intrusions.

whether to work or not; he *must* work to produce a livelihood for his family, to keep them alive and thriving. As such, Phil's choice is not a choice. In the thin conditions of work that confront him, he is forced to acquiesce to whatever job comes his way, with few alternatives that would allow him to refuse the 'gift' of paid work, regardless of what it entails. Exposed to circumstances outside of his control, but to which he must submit, Phil must find a way to manage the chain of effects that stem from this intrusion, even as they put increasing pressure on his limits and the limits of the people around him.

* * *

After Charbon finally closes, Phil says that "no one knew where to go." The fewer jobs there are, the further the concept of 'local' expands to cover ever-greater distances. But, even accounting for a long-distance commute, the field is thin. Airly, the nearest mine, is about 55km away, and it isn't looking for any more workers. The big open-cut mines over an hour away—Moolarben, Wilpinjong, Ulan—preferred to hire people from Queensland, hundreds of kilometres away. Big pits were more common there, which meant employers didn't have to spend money training workers for the specialist machinery.

Phil quips that, in the three years since Charbon's closure, "I've had more jobs than Phar Lap," referring to the legendary Australian racehorse. "Or, at least," Phil corrects, "more *starts* than Phar Lap."

Phil tells me of his mixed successes: he helped out with his son's butcher shop in town before that had to shut too, because too many people were leaving the area. He went to help out a farm three and a half hours' drive away, cutting and selling firewood. He worked as a contract roof bolter a big open-cut pit an hour north. He was loader driver with a contractor about two and a half hours east. "I just bounced around; it was crazy," Phil says. He was overlooked for jobs because of his age, because there were just too many others looking, because friends and families with the supervisors and managers were getting a start over the top of him. "I think you went about 18 months before you picked up a regular sort of a job," Cheryl recalls.

Over the years, the pair have developed a deep pragmatism about working life in the area. Phil is willing to try anything that anyone would give him a go at. “You listen to Phil’s story and he’s had a lot of different employment. You know, he seems to reinvent himself over and over and over,” Cheryl says. But Phil stresses that there’s no other way. “You *gotta* be able to do it ... if you’re going to keep tripping over your bottom lip every time you lose your job, you’re not going anywhere.”

The need to be open to whatever came his way took its toll on Phil and his family. When the job was bad, it could get really bad. The changing rhythms, the long hours and constant pressure could bring out the worst in the usually unflappable Phil. “Oh, it got *tough*,” Cheryl stresses. She uses the example of a job that Phil had at a mine almost 100km away, with long hours followed by a hazardous commute. “In the end, I said to Phil, ‘you leave Moolarben [mine] or I’ll leave you.’ And *I wasn’t joking*.” The demands of the job changed his character. “He was short-fused *all the time*. And he’s normally the *calmest* person on the planet, and that was one thing the rest of us”—Cheryl looks to Phil, pausing—“um, *did* notice.”

Despite this, Cheryl is quick to identify the inescapable force exerted by the undesirable circumstances, empathetic to how Phil’s disposition was changed by the unreliable conditions thrust upon him by the position. The work was often physically demanding and insecure conditions of work meant that he always had to be on his A-game to avoid being replaced. The hours were exhaustingly long, followed each day by a dangerous commute over dark country roads as he fought to keep his fatigued body awake. “He’d get up at 4 in the morning and wouldn’t get home until 9 at night and then by the time he’d showered and ate dinner, it would be 10 and he’d go to bed and get up at 4 in the morning again.” Cheryl shakes her head, “it just is not a *life*.”

In another twist of fate, by the time we speak, Phil’s resume has recently come full circle. He is back on-site at Charbon, brought back by a phone call from an old colleague, working on the environmental rehabilitation

of the former mining surface. He has come full circle—but maybe also full spiral. It will be Phil's third time working at Charbon, and with each change of job his working conditions have become more insecure, and his future more uncertain. He has gone from an ongoing employee at Charbon Colliery in the 80s and 90s; to an employee for a contractor in the 2010s, knowing the mine would shut; to now being a sub-contractor for a labour hire company that is contracted to work on the site.

It's only been four months at the new job, but something about being back on familiar ground agrees with Phil. The change has been marked—the entire family has noticed. “Your health has improved significantly,” Cheryl says. They know the stability won't last, but they'll cross that bridge when they come to it. He receives no leave benefits and can be dismissed at any time. All he knows is that there's about 12 months' worth of work. But it is Phil's first full-time position since leaving Big Rim almost three years ago and, given all they have been through, the pair are glad to have found the position. After years of constant disorder and spinning plates, for now, being able to just stop and settle for a moment is a relief in itself.

* * *

As Phil recounts his recent history of precarious work, I am dazzled by the whiplash that he and Cheryl must have experienced moving between intense cycles of over-absence and over-presence, shuttling between precipitous activity and skittish dormancy. With each new job, Phil is thrust into encounters with new environments, people and tasks that he must race to make sense of, only to be plunged back into darkness as the loss of work pushes him back to the search. Shooting through the iterative layoffs and re-starts that characterise Phil's working life, I suggest that where it is the abandoning of self *by* the other that characterised Shaun's story of precarious work, Phil's trajectory is marked by a repeated abandoning of the self *to* the other in pursuit of paid work. This version of abandonment unfolds in two ways. First, it implicates an abandonment of his past vocation, by letting go of, and giving up, his past self, and the practices and rhythms that once occupied him. And, second, it involves an abandonment of the self *to* others upon which it must rely in new ways, relinquishing sovereignty over the self to an other, in the hope that the self that emerges in relation to this strange other might be an affirmable, or at least tolerable, one.

As the thinness of the regional economy robs him of his capacity to choose the work he engages in, Phil is forced to acquiesce to whatever comes his way, to give in to, to ‘abandon’ himself to circumstances blown in by the wind. The slow erosion of the local economy alongside changing conditions of work more broadly means that all that remains are short-term, insecure and often low-paid work. Importantly, Phil demonstrates that under these sparse conditions, a reactive abandonment is the precondition to any relation being formed at all—“if you don’t take the opportunity, it won’t be there Wednesday.” As Phil has learned over the years, you can’t be picky—you take what you can get, and count yourself lucky that you were on the scene before someone else. Abandonment becomes a relinquishing of self to the stranger that addresses him, in the face of the need to procure a livelihood for himself and his family.

Given this urgency, Phil must enter into such relations before he has any palpable sense of what they entail, abandoning himself to unknown others, to strangers—to the intrusion of the intruder. Phil’s story illuminates the way in which precarity is characterised by an asymmetrical relation, in which precarious bodies experience a “forced openness” to the others upon whom they depend for the satisfaction of their modest desires, in circumstances that are often unyielding and impenetrable (Povinelli and Berlant, 2014 n.p.). The necessity of dependence on unreliable others fosters a kind of acquiescence, producing an asymmetry in which Phil is often flying blind, entering into relations before knows what he is getting into, hoping that *this* intruder is one that he might be able to adapt and naturalise. Just as in Nancy’s example of the donated heart that cannot easily be refused, Phil does not *choose* to participate in economies of work; in a market economic system of livelihood provision, this is a necessity foisted upon him. Although one might suggest that, in Phil’s case, the ‘intrusion’ of each new job was ‘invited in’ or ‘applied for’, as I have tried to show in this chapter, to define this act through sovereign decision-hood would be to misrecognise ‘abandon’ as a positive or volitional act, rather than a disposition fostered by the circumstances in which he is encircled.

Accordingly, it is important to recognise that Phil himself is open to change. Nancy understands *every* other as necessarily bringing with it an intrusion, and, as such, is not disturbance itself that is in question, for some degree of intrusion is necessary. As an unfamiliar timespace, each new job confronts Phil with a disorienting moment of intrusion. But cycles of precarious work have given Phil a hard-won realism, and a pragmatic flexibility about his working life. He does not resent the discomfort of trying new things, of entering into new relations. His frustration lies at the lack of opportunities, at the lack of others around which he and his family can build a rhythm or rapport of familiarity. The problem for Phil, then, is not that of the intruder, but the *bad* intruder—or, more

specifically, “what in the intrusion of the *intrus* is intolerable”, producing a feeling of intolerability that comes to characterise the whole image of the other (Nancy, 2002, p. 30). What is ‘bad’ about the ‘bad’ intruder, then, is not that it is an intruder, but rather that the intolerable dimension of the intrusion is unable to be contracted into the ‘ordinary’ image of the body and thus *remains* intolerable, even as time passes. Such an intrusion, “being without right, familiarity, accustomedness, or habit ... will not cease being a disturbance and perturbation of intimacy” (Nancy, 2002, p. 2). This ongoing ‘rejection’ of the intruder other comes from the forced proximity of “the other that cannot be a substitute, but that has nonetheless become one”, in a clash between the intolerable intruder and the existing limits of the sensing body (Nancy, 2000, p. 30). Unable to stem the chain that stems from the initial intrusion—for Phil, the exhaustion, the volatile moods, the impact on family and friends, the danger of running off the road after a long shift—the initial intrusion can threaten to give way to a cascading scene of interruption, one that crosses beyond the domain of work to further undermine the integrity of the self and the diverse relations and conditions that might otherwise secure it.

As the following chapter explores in more detail, what is ‘familiar’ only becomes familiar through past and ongoing developments of habit. For Phil and Cheryl, the fatigue, burnout, dangerousness and transience of precarious working life continually exerts its destabilising force on them and their family. The short durations of the job inhibit the development of new habits. The constantly changing work throws them into situations where old habits may not be useful. Their openness and pragmatism help to counter intrusive forces, but even this can be insufficient to manage the ever-shifting circumstances. The long tail of weariness leaves them with little left in the tank to adapt to, or recover from, the palpable shocks. The exhaustion of the physically demanding blue-collar work adds to the burdens borne by bodies, shrinking their capacities and inflecting their limits in ways that differ from those thrown up by immaterial, white-collar work (c.f. Cockayne, 2016; Urry, 2013). As the hyperactivity of Phil’s precarious life shows, “what intrusion renders unlivable is a somnambulist life”, one that would allow him to float and rest in the calm of order (Geroulanos and Meyers, 2009, p. 87). Finding his way back to work at Charbon, although still insecure, allows the family a chance to catch their breath. There, in that familiar scene, intruders seldom disturb Phil and Cheryl, as a lifetime of past experiences has already absorbed the others and rhythms of place into the self’s nervous system.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the vulnerability of life after loss, by approaching the timespaces of precarity after workplace closure through lenses of precariousness, vulnerability and transformation. Taken together, the three parts of this chapter map different stories of absence after loss by way of the self's relations to the outside, moving from the equilibrium of the past self towards ever greater states of transformation. In the first story, Chen *maintains* the self through the continuity of her securing attachments, ones that help to paper over some of the cracks of insecurity usually attributed to precarious working conditions by buttressing it with the promise of other securing relations. In contrast, in the second story, although it might appear that little has changed for Shaun externally, it is clear throughout our conversation that he is balanced internally on the *precipice* of change. Finally, in the third story, Phil stands on the other side of the threshold, as the enforced precarity of his employment fosters an unrelenting exposure to otherness, requiring him to constantly *adapt* to the new conditions in which he finds himself.

In this sense, the three stories suggest an ambivalent place for attachments in either producing or disabling ontological security. Whilst Chen is ultimately faced with conditions of continuity that maintain the working attachments that underwrite her self, for business owner Shaun, it seems that his nostalgia for his former life may function to keep him tethered to the hope of regeneration and renewal, even as others have long given up on the region. In contrast, instead of fighting against the tide, Phil dives deep, untethering himself from the attachments of his past working identities through an openness to new relations. This exposure is then followed by effects that are ambivalent and unanticipatable.

By highlighting the primacy of the other in producing the subject, this chapter has demonstrated the radically *asymmetrical* relation between self and other, highlighting that the self is constantly exposed to conditions and others that dispossess it. Although understanding the self as exposed, it is important to emphasise that the fact of bodily precariousness is not, in itself, a 'problem' in the approaches taken across this chapter's three parts. As Harrison (2008) underscores, vulnerability has often been considered by western thinkers as "an incidental and empirical trait to be solved, overcome and thus eliminated" (p. 426); in contrast, Harrison argues that the vulnerability of precariousness should be understood first and foremost as a neutral fate of the body, one that is "inherent in and to the living-on of all corporeal existents" (Harrison, 2008, p. 426). That is, as "the condition of *receptivity* as much as it is the condition [of] susceptibility", it is important to

emphasise that vulnerability is what opens bodies to anything *at all* (Harrison, 2008, p. 428, emphasis added).

In flattening the ostensibly ‘negative’ valence of vulnerability, my aim is to not to diminish the suffering of precarity by gesturing to a more fundamental, abstract or general state of precariousness. Instead, my discussion aims to *expand*, not negate existing approaches to precarity. Rather than seeking the origins of precariousness in operations of *power*, I have aimed to examine the inherent precariousness of bodies, and its passivity before the other. In response to these conditions of existence, this chapter has suggested that the only way to escape the abandonments of loss—the void of darkness, the chaos of turbulence—is through the encounter with the *other*. Whilst we cannot predict the precise range of possibilities brought into being by these encounters, for Levinas, it is precisely the other that makes the future possible: ‘[t]he very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future’ (Levinas 1987, p. 77).

As a result, I argue that the stories of turbulence and intrusion can be read not just as demonstrating the indifference of the other, but also through a more redemptive lens. Although intrusion occurs without the subject’s consent, it does not lead to necessarily unaffirmable outcomes, even as it travels through challenging and burdensome terrain. This is because intrusion is a potential that exists in all encounters with unfamiliarity: the possibility of intrusion is a precondition to any new relation being formed *at all*. In this sense, the intruder must also be understood as an opportunity for transformation, adaptation and, ultimately, renewal. The chain of adjustments set off by the intruder transforms the body from within. Dismantling a unified sense of self, the intrusion discloses the distributed field of forces that already constitutes the self. Indeed, for Nancy, the recognition that the self’s powers of acting precede the self presents another intrusion—the intrusion of thought, interpretation and reflection. This distancing opened up by this dissociative void makes possible the ‘grafting’ of the other on to the self, an internalisation that stems from the tender and difficult “understanding of [the] contingency” of unalterable circumstances, and “a recognition of the impossibility” of returning the self to who they once were (Geroulanos and Meyers, 2009, p. 90).

It is following this initial disorganising action, then, that Nancy describes the intruder’s role in subjecthood, where what was once an intrusion, perhaps surprisingly, is capable of becoming “a necessary (non-)foundation” of the self (Geroulanos and Meyers, 2009, p. 83). By the end of the chain of intrusions, the intruder is assimilated into the self once more—a self that is, importantly, different to the self that came before. As a result, whilst not disagreeing, for example, with Bissell,

Straughan and Gorman-Murray's (2020) suggestion that the intensity of exposure can lead people to "lose touch" with "who they previously were" (p. 5), the intruder undermines the claim that these past selves were one's 'own' in the first place, as least in any straightforward sense. Despite the intruder's fragmentation, Nancy suggests that the desire for unity in the self remains, with a final intruder ultimately acting as "a force of restoration" that returns multiplicity to singularity—"tearing" the body open, only to "sew it up" again (Geroulanos and Meyers, 2009, p. 94).

More important than the fact of change, then, are questions of degree and speed. Highlighting the danger of the intruder's intolerability cascading into a chain of dismantling disruptions, the intruder highlights the importance of what might be called a 'pharmacological' approach to transformation. As Deleuze and Guattari warn, the art of judgement and caution is especially important when attempting the disarticulation of the body. Advocating "the art of dosages, since overdose is a danger", they explain that "[y]ou don't [dismantle the self] with a sledgehammer, you use a very fine file" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p. 160). To be caught in the freewheeling melancholia of the past, then, is not the worst thing that can happen to a subject, as this at least allows it to maintain a continuity of self. "[T]he worst that can happen is if you throw the [subject] into demented or suicidal collapse" by forcing it to change more than it can bear (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p. 161). Like ontological security, then, affirmable change is a matter of degree, producing relations that cross non-linear thresholds between states of self. The intruder undoes the self, just as turbulence precedes order. Intrusion and turbulence are thus operators with the potential to reconfigure the limits of the plastic self. Their intensities signal the incipient beginnings of the subject after loss, when the dark of night might turn to the light of day.

5 Habit: interrupting the past

Introduction

The previous chapter positioned loss as an event of absence, showing how the abandonments of loss gesture to a non-relational image of the human body as vulnerable and exposed to the outside.

Picking up from this point, this chapter begins to chart a different path through loss's afterlife by considering the nascent forms of relationality emerging from these exposed encounters. Where the previous chapter dwelled in the impasse of a *present* stilled by abandonment and wracked by turbulence, this chapter considers how people might move through the intensities of loss. It does so, perhaps paradoxically, by turning to the sedimentations of the *past* to understand how bodies respond to changes in their circumstances. To make this pivot from past to future, this chapter argues that the *melancholy* induced by loss can be productively conceptualised in relation to *habits* that become accrued within bodies.

This chapter thus begins by redrawing the object of loss. In line with a focus on *relations* rather than terms in relational geographies, this chapter posits the productive potentials of thinking about loss not through the loss of an *object*, but through the loss of a particular set of *relations* in which that object was imbricated (see Anderson, *et al.*, 2012). I argue that part of what is lost through job loss is not just a thing or place, but the ways of *being in relation* that those terms offered. In particular, I focus on the style of relation enabled by habit, suggesting that habit plays a foundational role in the construction of life as an 'ordinary' timespace. More than creating an image of what everyday life might *look* like, habit produces the *feeling* of the mundane. This is because the ease, comfort and competencies that give life its ordinary hum are necessarily founded upon the enablements of habit. Although drawing its concept of melancholy from psychoanalytic literature on melancholia, this chapter recasts melancholy in materialist terms, as an intensity that emerges as a result of an *interruption* to bodily habits. I argue that habit expands the remit of melancholy, suggesting that it is not only the *loved* and lost attachments that are capable of producing its intensities, but also the loss of more ordinary or hidden anchors of everyday life. By mapping an alternative route into the affective state of melancholy, I argue that habit offers more than just a diagnostic concept; it is also

practical. That is, by showing how bodies can progressively transform over time, habit suggests a tentative route not just in to, but also *out of* melancholy's pensive intensities.

Although the term 'melancholia' is no longer commonly used in present day English—splintering into modern ideas of melancholy (as a universal mood) and depression (as a mental illness)—it remains a prominent concept in social scientific discourse, in large part due to the influence of Sigmund Freud's essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1957).¹¹ Unlike the vernacular sense of 'melancholy' as a pensive, even romantic, feeling of sadness, sorrow or mournfulness, Freud's concept of melancholia is attached to a distinct pathology of loss. In his touchstone essay, Freud distinguishes between mourning and melancholia as two responses to the loss of a loved object. The two states share similar symptoms: "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity" (Freud, 1957, p. 244), but differ in their trajectories. Describing two distinct types of object-relation, Freud defines mourning (*Trauer*), as a psychic process of 'reality testing' in which libidinal attachment is progressively withdrawn from the lost object, so that the mourner can redirect their now-freed desire into new objects. In contrast, melancholia (*Melancholie*) presents a blockage to the act of mourning, in which the melancholiac rejects moves toward severance and resolution, languishing in a refusal to move on from loss. What defines melancholia, for Freud, is that the loss from which it stems is "a loss of a more ideal kind" (Freud, 1957, p. 245). It is a loss that registers in the unconscious, meaning that the melancholiac may not know precisely what it is about the object that has been loved or lost. This indeterminacy prolongs the incapacity to resolve the loss as is it unclear how or from what detachment is meant to take place. In the obstacle to 'proper' mourning that melancholy presents, the lost object becomes incorporated as part of the self, turning the melancholiac's loss into an insistent and haunting absent presence that becomes the target of enduring devotion on part of the ego.

¹¹ When referring to psychoanalytic literature, I use their preferred term 'melancholia'. For my own concept, I prefer the more general 'melancholy', both to suggest some distance from the psychologised model of melancholia and to evoke more of the vernacular connotations of the term, such as its associations with nostalgia, memory and sentimentality. In doing so, I recognise the often interchangeable use of the two terms throughout history, and the quirks of translation that produced the diverging terms. Indeed, it was psychoanalysis which transfigured the historical sense of 'melancholy,' which runs back to Aristotle, into 'melancholia', a pathologised disposition linked to present-day discourse on clinical depression.

Freud's concept has gone on to influence other prominent thinkers across the social sciences and humanities. But although Freud considers melancholia a pathological state, others are more equivocal about its pathological nature. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler (1997) argues that melancholia is an originary subjectifying event—no less than the precondition for the ego itself. Exemplary in pushing melancholy as a condition of creative possibility is 20th century German cultural critic Walter Benjamin. Unlike Freud's identification of mourning and melancholia as two separate responses to loss, Benjamin uses mourning and melancholy interchangeably. Brown explains that Benjamin "had a well-developed appreciation of the productive value of acedia, sadness, and mourning for political and cultural work, and ... treated melancholia itself as something of a creative wellspring" (1999, p. 20). Indeed, Eng and Kazanjian suggest that even Freud himself was ultimately equivocal on the relationship between mourning and melancholy, seeing them in later works not as separate trajectories, but recognising that "the work of mourning is not possible without melancholia" (2003, p. 4). As a result, we ultimately find in Freud's work something closer to Benjamin's affirmation of mourning and melancholy as intertwined and productive; rather than being an aberration from a fully-formed self, contemporary theorists of melancholy consider it as foundational to identity, action and being—not just diminishing the subject, but drawing it to life and becoming.

Despite this rich conceptual history, geographers have, perhaps surprisingly, rarely engaged directly with the concept of melancholia. It appears readily as an evocative adjective or descriptor, particularly in studies of ruins and abandoned places, but rarely as a fleshed-out concept (with the exception of Lavery *et al.*, 2014 below). This has resulted in a handful of articles on melancholy/melancholia in geography with an eclectic mix of interests rather than a singular body of literature. In an editorial, Robinson (1997) references Kristeva to conceptualise the relationship between melancholia and transformation in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa, suggesting that the acknowledgement of loss is a necessary step to transforming the blockages of melancholic intensity into forces of transformation. Lavery and colleagues (2014) also focus on the productive potential of melancholy, reframing the melancholic ruins of Hashima, Japan, as a baroque landscape of becoming, resisting the temptation to fix and foreclose representations of the site as a space of pure loss. Although situated in anthropology, Navaro-Yashin's (2009) exploration of melancholy in sites of conflict has also been influential, arguing that melancholia emerges not just after the loss of loved ones, but also after the loss of objects, materials and non-human environments. It is also worth noting literature on nostalgia and memory that sits adjacent to the

concept, although, as Legg (2005) suggests, the origins of nostalgia point to a more social imaginary than melancholia's scientific pathology.

To make its arguments, this chapter offers a different entryway into melancholy through habit, to conceptualise an alternative route in and out of melancholy. Habit has become a key concept in geographical understandings of embodiment (Bissell, 2011; Dewsbury and Bissell, 2015). In particular, geographers have drawn on habit's *enabling* capacities, by drawing attention to habit's enablements, through the concatenating 'and' of habit's productive and problem-solving capacities (Latham, 1999; Hynes and Sharpe, 2015; Lapworth, 2015; Lea *et al.*, 2015; Bridge, 2020). This understanding of habit draws on an understanding of repetition as a productive and generative operation, rather than a force that produces the return of the 'same'. In contrast, this chapter begins by looking to a more contrasting side of habit, considering how bodies respond to a "shock from the outside" that decomposes existing habits (Bissell, 2011, p. 2650; Raynor, 2017). Indeed, as geographers have suggested, despite the apparent durability of habits, its bodily loops are in fact more volatile and vulnerable than might appear. Instead, habits are exposed to the caprices of a becoming world and the impulses of being a live organism. Despite this, Bissell (2015) notes that, in geography, "[w]hilst much is known about how habit helps to develop and refine practical competencies, much less is known about how habits can attenuate and decay, thereby changing the lived experience of place as a result" (p. 128). Correspondingly, I draw on habit to think about the interruptive shock of workplace closure and job change on bodily habits, extending literature on habit by considering an *ongoing* scene of shock that produces a prolonged scene of displacement (c.f. Bissell, 2015; Lapworth, 2015).

This chapter follows as such: to begin, I suggest what a spatial understanding of melancholy might look like through habit, positioning the motor-circuits of the body as it moves through space as the theatre of loss, rather than the psychic interiority of the ego. Here, I show how habit and memory are fundamentally interconnected, with habit existing as an embodied memory of past actions. The force of loss is seen here through the event of *habit interrupted*—through the becoming-impotent of experiential anchors which would otherwise enrol, conform and guide the body as it moves through its milieu. From here, I present three stories of coal mine workers and their stories of adapting to their new lives after the mine closures. The three stories build on each other conceptually to together produce an account of how habit, melancholy and memory are linked in the experience of life after loss. For Bergson (1988), memory is a practical *process*—synthesising the past and the present in service of the future and geared towards problem solving in the present. Drawing on a

productive and adaptive understanding of memory, I demonstrate how each worker has been able to navigate the disruption of loss through the production of cocooning habits that create a sense of life as ordinary. This can be a short or a lengthy process—taking at times years to produce—and depends on the availability of past habits and the subsequent circumstances encountered. Ultimately aligning with thinkers who affirm melancholy’s transformational potential, this chapter suggests that melancholy should not just be seen as a blockage to action or becoming; instead, melancholy is foundationally imbricated in the process of adapting to changing circumstances. In doing so, this chapter works with a plastic notion of the subject, one that is inherently changeable and malleable, but must work within limits that are historically and circumstantially given.

The melancholy impasse

This first section outlines the theory on how habit functions, drawing out the dynamics of what happens when habits fail, either by virtue of their internal movement or through a disruption to the milieu upon which their functioning relies. Drawing on the philosophies of Félix Ravaisson, Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, I underscore the nature of habit as an adaptive response to the primary vulnerability of bodies to their surroundings. I suggest that habit—or, more specifically, the *interruption* to habit—provides an alternative basis for thinking the origins and productions of melancholy in the wake of loss. Drawing parallels between this understanding of habit and Freud’s concept of melancholia, I suggest that habit offers a way of conceptualising the potential and intensity of loss as emerging from beyond the psychic interior of a self-contained individual, at the interface of body and environment. On this basis, I argue that theories of habit are practical: they illuminate new ways of understanding how bodies can not just *fall into*, but also *move out of*, the melancholy of loss.

It is useful to understand habit as an embodied form of *memory*, in which the past is contracted into capacities for acting in the body. To understand how this occurs: for Bergson, the past is understood to survive in two forms, as independent recollections—the image-based version of memory conventionally associated with memory—and as the motor mechanisms of the body—as a habit-memory, or simply habit (Bergson, 1988, p. 78). Habit is thus a particular form of memory that is accrued in the body through the repetition of particular actions in the world. We can understand habits as what makes ordinary life possible. Habits are entraining operations that enable competencies of bodies, through corporeal familiarities that emerge through the repetition of action within an environment. Habits are “a fundamentally creative capacity that produces the possibility

of stability in a universe in which change is fundamental” (Grosz, 2013, p. 219). Habit is essential to the conduct of everyday life; it is the consistency and durability of habit that enables us to carry ourselves through life’s tasks effortlessly and successfully, by creating circuits of movement which can be readily mobilised without the need for conscious reflection. By storing the residue of past movements in the motor functioning of the body, habit creates a line of consistency that folds the past into the present, whilst simultaneously virtualising tendencies of acting in anticipation of the unknowable future; “[h]abit is a past (as result), but this past makes possible a future” (Malabou, 2008, p. viii).

Habit forms in the tension between change and permanence. Ravaisson (2008) calls this the “double law” of habit, in which the repetition of an action strengthens a pathway for acting, whilst diminishing the sensation involved with it (p. 49). Through repetition, actions become more efficient as the effort required to perform those actions diminishes, enabling actions to be initiated more spontaneously (Ravaisson, 2008, p. 51). At the same time, repeated exposure to a stimulus produces a diminishing awareness of the sensations associated with it in the body. Habit thus integrates two styles of comportment that are usually opposed: a *passivity* to absorbing the shocks of an environment, and the *activity* of transforming the body. Alongside *capacity*, the concept of *intensity* is integral to understanding habit and its operation. Dewsbury and Bissell emphasise that is precisely the passivity of exposure to milieus (or *milieux* in original French) that engages the adaptive activity of habit-formation, whereby “[o]ver time and through repetition, the experiential shocks of our milieus, or passive affections, transform our very nature because of the expectations and tendencies, and thus actions or active affections, to which they give rise” (Dewsbury and Bissell, 2015, p. 25).

Habit should thus be understood as emergent effects of body-environment relations that gain consistency through repetition, rather than a property or trait of a sovereign individual. Underlying the work of habit is the ontology of vulnerability from which habit becomes necessary. Habits are an artefact of our ‘immersion’ in the world, signalling “a milieu or environment that living beings must internalize in order to live in comfort and with minimal energy expenditure” (Grosz, 2013, p. 218). Habit emerges in concert with a milieu because we live our lives exposed to milieus—we are irreducibly social. By enabling arriving perceptions to be recognised “as being ‘like’ an impulse the body has already integrated as a functional life content” habit enables external forces to be integrated and absorbed within the nervous system of the body, muting their intensity (Massumi, 2002a, p. xxxi). This is because external forces put the body under pressure; habit is how the body

resists the forces to which it is submitted, by making these influences proper to itself. In this way, habit turns the passivity of the body to external impingements into an internal and active quality of the body, by assimilating change as a habit. Habits are, then, a protective envelope from the cacophony of a vibrant world. As a result, Ravaissou (2008, p. 31) explains that “[t]he general effect of the continuity and repetition of change ... is that, if the change does not destroy it, it is always less and less altered by that change.” By offering a mechanism by which external impingements are transformed into internal actions, habit is an adaptive response to the primary vulnerability of corporeal existence. Affirming that “life is not an independent and isolated world within the outer world”, habit demonstrates the essential ties between organic and inorganic life that enable human existence (Ravaissou, 2008, p. 31).

Accordingly, it is useful to understand the theory of desire associated with habit. Habit is not just a product of desire, but *produces* its own kind of desire. Grosz explains that habit “accompanies passive impressions [external impingements] and gradually transforms them into desires of its own” through the tendency, ease and comfort that accompanies habit (Grosz, 2013, p. 222). Habit “engenders needs and tendencies” in the body, producing a desire for repetition of habituated action; these desires “can just as well be needs of intelligence, tendencies of the heart and of the will, as chronic illnesses, addictions, intoxications and tics” (Malabou, 2008, p. xix). Once developed, a “habit is not an external necessity of constraint, but a necessity of attraction and desire” (Ravaissou, 2008, p. 57). In fact, Ravaissou suggests that desire is the outcome of any prolonged repetition of action, that “[w]hen a sensation is not painful, to the degree that it is prolonged or repeated ... it becomes more and more of a need” (2008, p. 51). Over time, what was once a slight inclination becomes a need that is pre-empted by the body, facilitated by particular lines of repeated action that together carve out the grooves of habit. Facilitating this tendency, Ravaissou explains that the development of a particular habit leads to a kind of ‘anticipating’ (*prévenir*) of action. As a habit becomes developed, the conscious effort required to engage it diminishes (the double law). The body, in order to readily produce action, unconsciously prepares for the deployment of a particular line of habit.

Lubricated by habit, bodies prepare for the deployment of a particular habit (cued perhaps by past experiences in a particular environment), in an action closer to unconscious instinct than conscious volition. Although the workings of habit are largely invisible, they can rise to consciousness “to the extent that it does not attain its habituated end”, such as when some kind of interruption occurs to its realisation (Grosz 2013, 229). This circuit of tendency and anticipation is characterised by what

Ravaissón explains as the *inertia* of habit, as a Leibnizian tendency to persist in existing movement (Ravaissón 27). When the conditions for realising habit do not eventuate, however, Ravaissón explains that a particular sense of disappointment emerges from the breakdown in the circuits of habit. If the desired action itself does not come to pass, the careful equilibrium carved out by habit becomes upset. Ravaissón writes: “Increasingly, if the impression that is necessary to provoke the sensation [produced by habit] no longer occurs, one’s distress and unease reveal an *impotence of desire* in the realm of sensibility” (2008, p. 51, emphasis added). Unable to fulfil an anticipated desire, people can experience an interruption to established habits as an unwelcome shock that manifests as a malaise of anguish and dejection.

It is this ‘impotence of desire’ of interrupted habit that, I argue, can be analogised with melancholy as conceptualised in this chapter. Returning to Freud’s text on melancholia, we might note several points of parallel through which to map melancholy on to habit breakdown. First, Freud explains that melancholia “is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness”, that the ‘patient’ might know “*whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him” (1957, p. 245, original emphasis). This understanding of melancholy as referring to a loss of which one is not fully conscious correspond to the withdrawn and hidden nature of habit. Habit cannot be accessed directly by consciousness; it exists instead as an unconscious capacity or potential that is contracted into the body. Second, and relatedly, Freud writes of melancholic loss as “loss of a more ideal kind” (1957, p. 245), rather than the death or loss of a thing per se—it is the loss of a certain *relation* to an object and, as such, can be a loss borne of rejection, failure, misrecognition or dissonance, rather than the object necessarily being destroyed or gone. This focus on abstraction parallels habit-memory’s status as a *relation*—one that can be interrupted or broken by a change in the milieu of one’s environment. Thirdly, Freud writes that melancholia can result in the “inhibition of all activity” and a subject that feels “incapable of any achievement” (1957, 246). If habit is understood as a motor-skill that guides action in place, then the breakdown of habit implies a *decapacitation* of competencies that can cause an interruption to the circuits of tacit knowledge about how to act within an environment, inhibiting activity and curtailing capabilities. Fourth, Freud explains that “[i]n mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself”, suggesting that the theatre of melancholia is located within the self (1957, p. 246).

My argument is that habit offers an alternative conduit through which this interplay of world and self might take place, folding together passive and active relations between self and other, inside and outside. Finally, the style of desire associated with habit might be analogised with melancholia’s

structure of desire. Brown describes melancholia's persistent 'structure of desire', involving an enduring attachment to the melancholic object despite its loss. In melancholia, "attachment to the object of one's sorrowful loss supersedes any desire to recover from this loss, to live free of it in the present, to be unburdened by it" (1999, p. 20). Habit's production of desire, and the inertia associated with developed habits, suggests a different route into a similarly persistent form of desire that can endure long after an object or environment has been lost. In sum, my contention is that habit offers an alternative concept for understanding how melancholy is induced in bodies. I argue that a form of melancholy can emerge as the result of an interruption to habit, expanding the field of what can be seen to cause melancholy, and how it can be seen to take place.

In the following section, I build on this argument by turning to analyse experiences of job loss through the lens of this concept of melancholy. Pivoting to empirical material, I draw on three stories of adapting to the afterlife of loss. I explore what happens in the melancholy impasse, as the stage upon which the drama of adjustment plays out. Consistent with this thesis' interest in transformations of life after loss, my interest here is in the operations of habit as they emerge to guide bodies in the impasse of loss. This section thus tracks three roads out of melancholy following the interruptions of workplace closure, roads that, I argue, are paved with the restoring of orienting habits. Drawing on Bergson and his discussion of motor memory and image memory in *Matter and Memory*, this section builds on the concept of habit melancholy to show how different processes of habit reactivation and habit formation can serve to shift bodies from the intensities of melancholy. Affirming the *productive* dimensions of memory, this section argues that melancholy should ultimately not be seen as a blockage to action or becoming; instead, it is an active participant in the production of actions that, with effort, repetition and a receptive milieu, can generate the habits necessary to reproducing the calm sensibility of ordinary life. Indeed, memory plays a fundamental role in the process of adaptation to new conditions of life. I begin with the story of Norm, for whom habits in place run deep; followed by Xu, for whom the interruption of the closure was met with shock, reflection and the effortful task of adapting to a new workplace; and, finally, Lisa and Scott, for whom the closure brought realisations, lessons and recalibrations of the future. The three stories sit on an adaptive continuum from least intensive habit development to most intensive—or, alternatively, most readily available habits to least available habits—within the circumstances of life encountered after closure.

I The reactivations of habit

Thinkers of habit emphasise the foundational nature of habit as the building block of being. Ravaissou declares that habit must be understood as the “[t]he universal law, the fundamental character of a being” (27); for Deleuze, “[h]abit is the constitutive root of the subject” (Deleuze *ES* 92-93). Habit can be understood as the contraction of time into the body; it is the result of action carved into the body through repetition over time to produce tendencies for acting. The argument here is that the slow and steady accrual of habits is what makes human existence possible, through the abilities, competencies and skills built up over time that enable bodies to interface with environments to undertake tasks from the simplest to the most complex. Indeed, we cannot help but develop habits through the actions we undertake; bodies have “the habit to take up habits” (Deleuze, 1991, p. 44). Conversely, the ease engendered by habit means that bodies tend to *return* to lines of habit already in motion. With Norm’s story, I put into context this tendency of bodies to pick up old habits; for Norm, the closure of the mine was followed by the primed readiness of the old, and the possibility of a return to old habits.

* * *

I meet Norm at the Globe pub one bright Tuesday afternoon in Rylstone. *You’ve come to the nicest pub in the area*, everyone tells me. I can’t tell if they were just saying that because this was *their* pub or if it was actually true, but—on this shimmering afternoon at least—I decide that both propositions were right. It was close to the end of my stay in the twin towns and, feeling comfortable, I chat to the local clientele as they flow in from seemingly everywhere and nowhere. By the time I strike up a conversation with Norm, it has long turned dark outside and, with several pints behind me, I am well and truly ready to leave. Norm’s head, like many others, sports a faded Akubra-style hat, wide-brimmed silhouette synonymous with sunburnt country life; the speed dealer sunglasses perched on top quickly bring that romantic image back to the present. His sun-tanned skin tells me his headgear is not just fashion, but a necessity of long days spent out on the land. Norm is introduced to me as a sheep herder, but I quickly find out that he also spent 10 years working as a miner at Charbon, working for the company contracted to manage the small open-cut operation on site.

Norm speaks softly and I strain to hear him at times over the boisterous evening crowd that has accrued at the pub. He seems introverted—quiet and composed—until

something makes him laugh, and a wide grin opens up his kind face. Norm explains that he didn't go into mining until he was 39. He had been a sheep herder for most of his life before that, but some friends suggested he give the job at Big Rim a try. He recalls going out to interview for the job. "When I went out there to see the man, he said you'd be out here for 10 years." And it comes to pass that exactly 10 years after Norm starts working there, the mine shuts up shop. The first five years he spends on the dump truck, the final five years on the D11 dozer. He is sanguine about the job. "It was a good job." He got about \$1,200 for 5 days, \$1,600 for 6 days a week, all on day shift—it was good pay, "good boss, good blokes."



We talk about life after the closure. "What did you do after?" I ask. "Oh, what I am doing now," he jokes, "shearing, spraying, fencing... anything." After the closure was announced, Norm's plan had been to head to remote Barrow Island, near Broome on the northern tip of Western Australia. Some acquaintances had found him work at a liquid natural gas plant up there; he planned to head up as soon as the mine finally shut and work dried up. But he never went, because "before the pits shut, I met this

girl.” There was no way she was going to move with him, there’s nothing for her do there. “But that didn’t matter,” Norm explains, he didn’t have to leave. “I found work.”

Norm currently works for about 20 different people, picking up jobs here and there. He tells me that he hasn’t stopped working since the closure three years ago; in fact, he’s working 7 days a week at the moment. The rhythms are irregular one week here, another week there. He gets work all through word of mouth; “you just ring one bloke and he says ‘nah, I haven’t got anything, but such-and-such has’, and you ring them, and you go.” Alongside all the jobs, he tells me that he and a partner also have 300 sheep and 200 cattle, having bought some livestock after Big Rim’s closure. They don’t have their own land, but graze on other people’s land in exchange for a small rent. “Business partner?” I inquire. “Oh, I don’t know whether you could call it *business* or not,” he laughs self-deprecatingly; “it’s just another way of making a bit of money.”



Norm tells me that things are going well, that “I’m booked up for six weeks now.” But he always has backup plans for the leaner times. “If all else fails, and you haven’t got a job, you just go and cut firewood and sell that.” Norm’s nonchalant attitude astounds me, as I think back to the deep anxieties expressed by others in the community around finding work locally. But Norm is unequivocal. He explains that, for the guys at the mines who’d never done anything else, they don’t know what there is to do. Mining wasn’t where he started—it was a good job while it lasted, but he had other things he knew how to go back to. There’s always work if you know how to find it, he explains.

Reflecting on the mosaiced construction of Norm’s working life, I can understand why others might not be able to find comfort in the bursts of short-term work that gets Norm by week-to-week or know the tricks of how to make it work. It’s almost the antithesis of the mining monotony of which the men often speak, with its reliable drone, day-in, day-out. But Norm seems unperturbed; he reckons he’ll keep doing it indefinitely, or as long as there’s something to keep him around. “I like it,” he explains, “it’s *free*.”

* * *

I’d like to read Norm’s story through the lens of habit, in particular of past habits reactivated and further developed. Bodies not only have a habit of taking up habits, but they also have a tendency to move towards existing habits that have been developed in the past. Just as habits form through embodied repetition, Ravaisson affirms that habits can be un-done through lack of utilisation. In the absence of use, habits disappear from the field of involuntary action, no longer producing the unnoticed effortlessness of automatic movement. However, past habits can be reactivated, called to order through an effort of consciousness and wilful action. Ravaisson explains the mutually constitutive relationship between will and habit so:

it is by a succession of imperceptible degrees that inclinations [of habit] take over from acts of will. It is also by an imperceptible degradation that these inclinations, born from custom, often decline if custom comes to be interrupted, and that the movements removed from the will return to its sphere after some time. The transition between these two states cannot be sensed; its dividing line is everywhere and nowhere. Consciousness feels itself expire along with the will, and then come back to life with it. (Ravaisson, 2008, p. 57)

In the absence of ready habits, the body turns to consciousness for decision making, in a recursive oscillation between habit and will that produces action. The accumulation of the past remains

latent, stored in the body; through ‘a succession of imperceptible degrees’, Ravaissou draws a line of continuity between the targets of present will and past habits, identifying that habits can ‘come back to life’ through a conscious act of recall and effort that mobilises past circuits of movement.

For Norm, we might see life after closure carrying on at the transition point between two durations crossing in the present. As the movements associated with work at the mine abruptly dissipate for Norm, a continuity is drawn between pre- and post-mining life. Norm evokes and redeploys past habits of making a living, whose motions remain available for potential utilisation and operation in the present through learned habits. Once synthesised, “habit has no need of memory” (Deleuze, 1991, p. 95); instead, it offers its own prompts towards acting. Competencies and skills learned through past effort are now able to be reactivated with relative ease and speed. Of course, nothing stays static with the passing of time and Norm notes that things *have* changed, that work *has* gotten harder to find. But this is no matter. His familiarity with the ins and outs lubricates the pathway, and, never at rest, his habits and skills continue to develop with the conditions he finds himself in. Most importantly, what he knows is still enough to get by—enough to make it *work*—at least enough to build on for as far ahead as he’s currently looking.

II The shocks of sensation

In Norm’s story, we see a ready re-deployment of habits, drawing on tacit knowledge gleaned, and movements made, from decades of past experience in place. These capacities developed in the past allow Norm to avoid the sense of crisis experienced by other workers in the absence of formal employment. They produce an atmosphere of normality for Norm, which allows everyday life to feel ordinary. In the sections that follow, I discuss what happens when such potentials are *not* available in, or amenable to, the timespaces of life after workplace closure. Firstly, I draw on the story of Xu, a former worker at Mine No. 7 who had spent almost 30 years working in the sales department of the coal mine. Through Xu’s story, I discuss the affectivity of interrupted habit, and the push of thought and reflection it provokes. Then, I turn to my long conversations with miner Scott and his wife Lisa, to think about how melancholy memories of the past are integral to the production of action. Together, the two stories show how the past, present and future are intertwined in habit, offering a conceptualisation of how melancholy, through its role in habit formation, might be considered a productive force in pushing forward life.

Mr Xu, started in coal mining as a teenager straight out of middle school in 1989, a decade after China's opening up. He had no choice, Xu explains, his family was poor, things were difficult at home and he needed to make money. He started on the front-line, in the dirtiest, hardest—and highest paid—work underground. But after an injury underground, he was transferred into the lowest paid job above ground, loading excavated coal into the train wagons. Over the years, he proudly tells me of how he worked his way from the bottom up to a very respectable job as a manager in the sales department of Mine 7.



After several interviews with more reticent former workers, I am pleasantly surprised by the warmth and candour exuded by the talkative Xu. Perhaps he was just glad to have something to help him pass the long lunchbreak; after all, out at the newly built nylon 6 factory where he now works (and where we are now located), there is nothing

for miles—none of the old bustle of street-side restaurants to serve off-duty miners, none of the easy home life facilitated by close proximity to one's workplace.¹²

Xu tells me that the day of the closure was a very emotional event. "It was hard to accept in my state of mind; after all, after 20, 30 years, you've got emotional ties to the place." It was not just Xu who felt emotional; others had similar feelings too. "There were retired former workers who, upon hearing the mine was closing, came to the shaft to watch. They even shed tears." He tells me about the chains of family associated with place, the "many people had fathers who had also worked there, who also passed their lives there." These are histories that endure; "even now, I still live on the road next to the mine."

Alongside these feelings of grief for the past, however, was a concern for the future after the closure. People knew that they'd be reallocated to other work units, *danwei*, within the state-owned enterprise; this was accepted practice for China's state-owned enterprise employees and the 'iron rice bowl' of welfare and care it offered. Although they had few doubts that the reallocation would occur, for months, none of the thousands of stranded workers were informed where they would be going. They were just told to wait patiently at home until they found out. "We were all very worried about the reallocation", Xu explains, because "we were worried about getting a bad one." The miners in front line production were offered work first, as they did the most important work of digging the coal out. But there was nothing they could do but wait for months on end, hoping to hear back from the company.

* * *

As Xu's story demonstrates, the event of closure imprints itself on the affective state of the body through the sensations it engenders. For Xu, whilst the day of the final closure was one of sadness, the time after closure was marked by the feeling of time stilled and capacities made impotent. Rather than referring affective intensities to particular emotional states, Bergson understands affections as the body's internal 'mirror' of the perceptions it receives. As a corollary of perception, affect indexes the body's exposure to external impingements, and, in doing so, demonstrates the limits of the body's capacity to absorb and contain the external stimulus it constantly experiences

¹² 'Nylon 6' is a versatile synthetic polymer that is commonly used in the production of a wide range of everyday items, including household goods, industrial parts and textiles.

(Bergson, 1988, p. 56)(MM 56). That is, the living body “does not merely reflect action received from without; it struggles, and thus absorbs some part of this action” (Bergson, 1988, p. 56). As a result, and in contrast to convention (and commensurate with his forward-looking take on corporeal life), Bergson suggests that the sensation of pain is not so much the *source* of damage to the body, but the body’s *response* to ‘damage’ received. Bergson conceptualises pain as a kind of mechanical response, as “the effort of the damaged element to set things right—a kind of motor tendency in a sensory nerve” (1988, 55-56)—paralleling, for example, inflammatory as a protective response to injury that activates the process of tissue repair. One way to think about the source of such ‘damages’ might be through this chapter’s concept of melancholy as an interruption to habitual ways of being. Pain here could be part of the body’s response to a damaging shock to the anticipations of habit. In the absence of its usual milieus, habitual energies that find no anchor for action in now-changed environments, short-circuiting existing habits of perception. In this context, I suggest that the disquieting character of waiting and stillness partially emerges from this perceptual disruption, in an unconscious ‘struggle’ to recalibrate within new conditions of its familiar environment that emerges in the felt affects of the body.

More than just a source of potential pain, the affective force of the interruption is also an occasion for the intervention of *thought* and *reflection*. That is, in the struggle to absorb unhabituated conditions, bodies re-route energies into making sense of changed conditions. Accordingly, Bissell suggests that an interruption to habits can induce a moment of shock that, although induced from an outside force, can resonate inside to generate thought (2011, p. 2650). As Lapworth (2015) explains, a shock to habitual ways of seeing can directly impact on the compositional forces of the body, changing its receptivity to outside forces. For Dawney, this interruptive interval of potentialised transformation marks the “constant coconstitutive interplay between the affective and subjective registers” (2013, p. 630). Indeed, Dawney suggests that the *movement* between these registers comprises an important but underexamined site for geographical enquiry. By sitting at the interface of representational and non-representational forces, the moment of interruption holds together a notion of the subject as a decentred, surface effect of impersonal forces and relations, whilst also acknowledging it as an active agent in the production and inflection of such forces. Thus, an interruption to habit can be a critical moment forces thought, disrupting the perceived ‘givenness’ or ‘naturalness’ of an experience. By bringing the subject to consciousness and forcing it into the effortful space of the *will*, the breakdown of habit introduces a moment of deliberation. This opens a ‘negative’ moment with the potential to “introduce a moment of reflexive or evaluative judgment, even in its most minimal forms as hesitation or indecision” (Harrison, 2015, p. 292).

The shock, therefore, is a potentially productive moment with the capacity to produce difference. At the same time, however, as the previous paragraph suggested, it is important to remember that the shock also generates exhaustion, frustration and weariness—it not only “transforms the susceptible body, but it also fatigues. It can wear down the body, depleting its capacity to go on forming new relations in the world” (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019, p. 2653).

* * *

In the end, Xu waited four months before being called back to the mine, less than most at Mine No. 7. He ended up drawing his new workplace at random out of a hat, selecting amongst different enterprises owned by the SOE. I am surprised, remarking that this is a very strange way to do things. “Yes”, he chortles, raising an eyebrow, “a Chinese speciality,” a tongue-in-cheek explanation for a young foreigner. “A lot of people hoped to go to Mine 5, and not into the chemicals industry, because they didn’t know anything about chemicals.” But for him, he hoped to get a job at the still-operating Mine No. 7 Washery, the work unit next to the old Mine No. 7 that washes coal and sells it on to power plants and steel mills. The mine and washery were once a single work unit before separating many years ago, but remained located on the same site. “It’s already familiar to you, it’s close to your home.”

In the end, however, Xu ended up pulling the furthest possible workplace out of the hat: the new nylon 6 factory on the far outskirts of the city. The new workplace is about an hour’s drive from home—a world away from the old two-minute walk up the street. Workers commute to the site via buses organised by work; the buses depart every morning at 8am and afternoon at 5pm, running along the two major arterial roads that span the long and skinny city, squeezed between mountains to the north and a large dam to the south.

I ask Xu how he’s finding the new job now. “I’ve been here over a year now,” he says with a nonchalance that surprises me, “I’m basically used to things.” “And, when you started?” I casually probe, tracking backwards in time. At that, his demeanour changes. Xu lets out a weary sigh. “Ah! At the start, I really wasn’t used to it, because I’d never come into contact with this *chemical* thing! When I first got here and looked around, I couldn’t understand a thing.”

Even though he was still technically in a sales position, he was selling a totally different product. “If you asked me to go work at the mine, things would be relaxed and easy, because I’ve done this work before, I’ve got the resources for this in my hands, I’m acquainted with the buyers. Sometimes I didn’t even need to go in to work, I’d just pick up the phone and make the sale!” he says with pride. “While working over there, I was exposed to only coal. I could figure out what was going on with just a sweep of my eye, because I knew all about it. I could grab a handful [of coal], look at it and know what its energy content was, just because I’d worked there for so long.”

With his new position at the nylon 6 factory, Xu needed to find new customers, learn a new product, get used to a new position. He’s gotten used to things, but he concedes that “as I grow older, my memory is not as good anymore. I’ve been learning for a year, but my knowledge is still only superficial. By the time I’ve got a grasp on it, and it’ll already be time for me to retire! Another 6 or 7 years and I’ll be retired.” He’s been working hard, but accepts that “I just don’t *know* this [nylon 6] stuff—I’ve become an amateur.”

* * *

I suggest that Xu’s recollections gesture us towards the fact that, by grace of habit, people are able to resume a sense of normalcy under changed conditions through a process of progressive adaptation and situational learning. Through repetition of—and reflection on—action, Xu has been able to build new competencies at work and realign his orientations to life. Xu’s story highlights that although habits are plastic, this doesn’t mean that the process of modification and adjustment of habits and skills is easy. Producing new habits requires effort, attention and persistence. It can be painful and difficult. It can take time. Moreover, the production of desired habits is never guaranteed. Habits may never eventuate, as bodies redirect their attentions, curtail their ambitions, or circumstances change under their feet once more. For Xu, part of this reconciliation process has been recognising that he is no longer—and likely never will be—the expert he once was in his professional life. Although he has not quite “surmount[ed] ... and endlessly triumph[ed] over” nylon 6, Xu has nonetheless been able to build a quiet kind of rapport with his environment (Ravaissou, 2008, p. 31). Developing new skills and competencies, and adjusting his self-image and expectations of the future, over time Xu has been able to learn to stabilise and balance his self within the unfamiliar and unwilling conditions of his new workplace by folding what was once an external force into intimate relation with his body and being.

III The lessons of memory

The final example in this chapter, that of Lisa and Scott, further builds on the adaptive aspect of Xu's story. Fleshing out the role of memory in habit formation, I investigate the set of actions by which the process of habit development might be seen to occur. In particular, I show how the movements of habit relate to melancholy as an experience that imbricates perceptions of the present with memories of the past to transform relations to the future. In doing so, I suggest a potential mechanism for the re-emergence of the past, accounting for that 'stuckness' in re-emergent images of the (real or imagined) past prominent in conventional understandings of melancholy. Resonating with Xu's story of moderately successful self-modification, this section demonstrates the capacity for reflective thought in the experience of melancholy. As a result, it seeks to underscore how people, through habit, are able to become agents, and not just victims, of their melancholy.

Any lesson, properly learned, is founded on the enablements of habit. As highly complex mechanisms that function with a kind of autonomous intelligence, Bergson recognises that new habits take time to develop. "What", then, he asks, "takes place while they are being *built up*?" (1988, p. 86, emphasis added). If habits take time to form, then what is happening in the interceding interval during which habits are forming? To answer this question, Bergson gives an active and central role to memory. Bergson demonstrates that, in order to learn a lesson, habit memory and image memory are necessarily co-implicated in the process of learning; they "run side by side and lend to each other a mutual support" (1988, p. 86). In my conversations with Lisa and Scott about their experiences of adjusting to life after the closure, it is precisely this recursive relationship between habit memory and image memory in the process of learning that they foreground, describing a multi-stranded process of slow adaptation that unfolds over several years.

* * *

Unlike Xu, Scott finished up at Charbon Mine one day and went to Airly Mine the next, without a break in between. The whirlwind transfer was all carefully planned by the mining company, ensuring that no hours on the clock were wasted. Scott and his partner Lisa tell me this as we are gathered around their dinner table, late one Saturday morning. The dining table is covered with kids' playthings that have been neatly swept to the side. Two of their young children lounge in front of the TV behind us and the smallest, a toddler, is perched on Scott's lap, offering animated background—and sometimes foreground—noise to our conversation.



In the turbulent flow of moving from one thing to the next, the changes set off by the mine closure took a while to come to the fore. For the redeployed men, there was an air of excitement to the move to Airly; they knew Charbon was closing, but for a long time it was uncertain whether Airly—which had closed several years prior, but remained under ‘care and maintenance’ in case economic conditions improved—would be re-opened to redeploy some of the laid off men. When the decision was finally made to reopen, the relief for workers and their families was palpable. The Charbon boys were first onsite, helping the dormant mine back on her feet. The ‘Charbon culture’ was, after all, famous within Centennial—the men were unmatched in their efficiency, co-ordination and output, consistently beating their own production records. As the former mine manager corroborated, the celebrated Charbon culture was a large part of why reopening Airly was given the go-ahead; he convinced Centennial that redeploying the skills of this celebrated workforce would make the operation viable Airly. After the move, it took a while for the dust to settle, before Lisa and Scott could really take stock of what had changed in the family’s life. There was a new commute, new responsibilities, new colleagues and new spaces to navigate, but one cascading chain of difference/s that repeated through our conversations like a refrain was the turbulence introduced into their lives by Scott’s lower pay after the move, specifically due to the fluctuating production bonus. They are unforeseen and ever-changing circumstances triggered by the changing rhythms of cash-in and cash-out that have thrown off Lisa and Scott’s habits, creating durations of acute financial stress with resonating effects.

The production bonus is a bonus paid out to workers alongside their regular pay, based on the total output that week.¹³ Initially, upon moving to Airly, the men’s pay actually went *up* dramatically, as the bonus shot up. “When we first went there, we

¹³ The pay for those involved in coal production, in a structure common across Australia, is made up of two elements: a fixed wage and a production bonus; the latter, the bonus, in Scott’s case, has historically been around half of his total pay. The bonus fluctuates however. It is contingent on how much is produced that week, which is itself contingent on many other factors, such as the quality and integrity of coal in the sections being mined, how fast they move through it, whether the equipment is all available and functioning properly, whether all the shifts are covered and no one’s off sick, how well co-ordinated, dedicated and efficient each of the production crews are that week. The overall bonus, calculated weekly, is divided amongst the men according to their hours worked, based on the total output of coal that week.

were all thinking: ‘how good is this?!’” Scott says. “Of course, we were all getting *whipped like nothing else* also at the same time,” Scott quickly adds, emphasising the intensity of the initial move, “but, you know, you were getting rewarded for it *well and truly*.” As more workers were put on, however, the bonus slid down. Scott speculates, but can’t say for sure why: perhaps it’s because they were no longer getting the ‘easy gains’ from simply having people on, or perhaps because the progressive addition of new employees was resulting in the dilution of the celebrated Charbon culture, as things became less well co-ordinated and efficient. All he knows is that the bonus has “well and truly more than halved.” It’s hard to say why and it’s hard not to look back to the old times at Charbon for possible clues. One reason might be that the attitude of the new guys—mostly from the Lithgow mines an hour south—is different. They seem more interested in overtime (putting in more hours for guaranteed pay, but only for yourself), than working hard for the bonus like they used to do at Charbon (putting in more effort during the hours you’re on, with benefits shared evenly between the workers). Another might be that, in moving only half of the workforce over to Airly, none of the old union guys were offered new jobs by management. The dismantling of what was once a dominant union force at Charbon irrevocably changed the organisation of underground life and the relationships amongst workers, and between workers and management.

In any case, the bonus just doesn’t happen now and seems to be getting lower and lower. It’s not just greed or idle pettiness—the bonus isn’t really a *bonus*, but rather the heart of the bargain in the dangerous, dirty and difficult industry. Scott lays it out: “you come under here, you deal with all the *rubbish* here, the *mud* and *whatever*—and you get the pay for it at the end of the week. But if you’re not getting that, why would you keep doing it?” Through months, years and decades of work, the workers had a well-developed sense of what their bonus should be at Charbon, an intuitive calculation based on the conditions of the coal seam, the output that week and the number of man-hours worked. Lately, though, every time they’ve thought it would be a good week at Airly, the number on their pay slip has been disappointing. It’s becoming a persistent trend, in a way that forces reflection and adjustment. “Everyone sort of thinks, ‘what’s the point of going the extra mile?’ Because there’s no payoff for us.” Scott pauses, and adds, “you start to half get used to it a bit as well. I guess, you know, what you were used to, you know, 4 years ago, 3 years ago, *are those days gone?*”

To add fuel to the volatile situation, Scott's not only pay dropped after moving to Airly, but the family's expenses also rose. A new baby arrived shortly after the move, and for Scott to make the long, hilly commute to the new workplace with four carpooling men in tow, they needed to replace their old small car with a bigger vehicle. Lisa, in charge of the household budget, explains the weary task of getting on top of the family's finances in this changed landscape. "I just found it all really stressful, the financial side. I hated—I *loved* payday, and then the day after payday I *hated* it, because then it was six days of stress, because *are we going to have enough left over? We've got this bill coming in next week, have we got enough left for that?*" Lisa recalls. "It was *horrendous*, the anxiety I think it caused in me."

Throughout our conversations, Lisa and Scott often refer back to the wisdom of their elders. "Scott's dad", also a former miner, "would say things to us as well, like 'only ever borrow money based on your base wage, because if your bonus goes down for some reason, then you're *stuffed*,'" Lisa explains. It's clear, however, that those words took on a new poignance after the closure of Charbon. "And of course, we didn't, totally, kind of, take *enough* notice of what he said," she says with a cathartic laugh. "We learned the hard way."

With the closure, Lisa and Scott have become far more attuned to the boom-and-bust cycles of mining, an intuition backed by experience that no amount of verbal warning could generate. Scott reflects on the generational differences between the older and the younger miners—the latter, who have only experienced the good years of the boom, and the former, who have lived through leaner times, knowing they could swing back around at any point:

The guys used to do a lot of overtime at Charbon—the older guys. While they were there, they were up to get the bonus up as well, get right into it ... I think it was because, the highs and lows, losing your job, keeping your job, losing—they'd basically make the hay while the sun shines, you know. While you've got the job, you *get in there* and earn the money because you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. Whereas, I think, you know, I've been in it, what 11 years—or 10 or 11 years—and I've not seen ... any big put-offs because of coal prices or anything like that. So, I think there's that sense of: there's no fear there as such, you know. We're all just 'we'll just keep our job and it'll be right.'



For Scott and Lisa, Charbon's closure has prompted a new sensitivity to their exposure to the fickle and uncontrollable dynamics of the coal market. The process of adjusting to life after the closure has recalibrated their orientations towards the future, with a newfound appreciation for what it would take for them to be able to ride out these waves in the future. Lisa explains that "we're focussing on saving for things a lot more, so, we don't ... live day-to-day. Otherwise, there's no money there if an emergency happens or, you know, something breaks down. So, we've had to get really serious about that and *turn into our parents*," Lisa whispers, laughing, in mock revulsion.

These days, they are getting better at managing their budget, learning the rhythms. Lisa has gone back to work, to boost the family's income. "Fifty-two weeks, this is what's coming in, this is what I'm going to need. You know, we save up for car insurance and rego, say, six months ahead. You calculate how much it's going to take, if you know you need that chunk of money." Even though it has been about four years since the move, they're only "just starting to get our heads around everything a bit more." We joke about finally becoming an adult and Lisa laughs. "It took us a while! It only took us until—we're, what, me, I'm turning 38 this year and Scott's turning 39." And although they are getting the hang of things with the budget, they are wary that the uncertainty hasn't come to an end at work; the changes keep coming. "It's still a transition period for us," Scott explains. Airly is about to start an expansion drive, with plans to increase the workforce from 70 up to around 150. Scott explains that this change gets them thinking about their pay again, bringing up memories from the past. "We're all so nervous about where this bonus thing is going to go, hence why it's a pretty regular thing that gets sort of brought up"—the past returns again and again, to give guidance on how to make sense of the present.

* * *

In this section, I explore the entangled relationship between memory and habit through the vicissitudes of Scott and Lisa's testimony. Habits are the result of "organizing together movements and perceptions" (Bergson, 1988, p. 94), creating circuits of action that laminate movement and images of the past. Habit gives a "sense of familiarity" that emerges from habit's "organized motor reaction", from tacitly knowing what step should come to follow the last (Bergson, 1988, p. 93). However, before habits can exist to be redeployed, they must be developed. In order for people to be capable of particular lines of habit, capacities must be acquired through a process of *learning*.

Linking past and future, Bergson explains the importance of *memory* in the process of constructing a habit.

To explain how the motor-order of habit is formed, Bergson (1988, p. 98) makes a distinction between two types of *memory*—habit memory and image memory—and two types of *perception*—inattentive recognition and attentive recognition. Where memories refer to the accruals of the *past*, perception refers to the body's *present* experience of its environment. Rather than being separate, however, the two forms of memory are understood to 'interpret' perception, meaning that there is no perception in which memory does not already participate. Habit as a chain of movements enabled by the imbrication of perception and inattentive recognition, whereby the first perception "guide[s] the body toward the appropriate mechanical reaction," thereby engendering the next perception, which in turns solicits the next, in a chain of organised action-and-reaction (Bergson, 1988, p. 93). The key here is that Bergson understands memory as *productive* and bodies as problem-solving entities; memory emerges in service of selecting an appropriate path of action in the present. Inattentive and attentive recognition are thus two ways in which the past is 'recognised' in perception in order to guide action in the present.

At the extreme of fully automated habit, there is an instantaneous recognition in which the body selects and undertakes an action without the need to explicitly refer to a memory image, what Bergson calls inattentive recognition. Inattentive recognition is a preconscious action enabled by the learned 'instinct' of habit, one that entirely "consists in action and not in representation", where action is deployed readily and the process of selection and decision never rises to consciousness (Bergson, 1988, p. 93). In the well-organised motor functioning of habit, Bergson suggests that conscious, or 'attentive' perception is essentially useless, as movements are "connected, continuous and called up by one another" spontaneously, without the need for conscious reflection (1988, p. 93). When habits do not exist to guide action, however, we turn to 'attentive' recognition. This form of perception implicates a moment of deliberation, in which image memories are recalled to present consciousness in order to offer guiderails for action and decision-making. This memory emerges in the absence of, or interruption to, habit, "await[ing] the occurrence of a rift between the actual impression and its corresponding movement to slip in its images" (Bergson, 1988, p. 95). This is not a precise operation, but a creative one that is prompted and influenced by the content of our current perception, tendencies towards association and what Bergson calls 'fancy' (and one can presume that not all perceived images will ultimately, upon consideration, be considered helpful). As suggested in Norm's story of returning to past practices of work, bodies prefer what is ready to

hand, moving towards the ease of habit's inattentive recognition. When this is not available, it seeks to fill the gaps in movement and perception through "an appeal ... to the deeper and more distant regions of memory, until other details that are already known come to project themselves upon those details that remain unperceived" (Bergson, 1988, p. 101). In between these two extremes of entirely automated reflexes and effortfully conscious perception are the more common 'mixed' states of attentiveness and co-ordination, ones which alternately call upon the powers of habit and image memory to facilitate action.

In this way, habit and memory are imbricated in all forms of action, with image memories of the past regularly emerging when a novel situation calls for its assistance in making sense of a situation. Tracking this trajectory of change since Charbon's closure, memories of the past link forward to help Lisa and Scott evaluate and adjust to the rhythms and motions of life at the new mine. They are not just melancholic, but also *productive*. As we see in the case of Scott's pay, memories of the past bonus at Charbon are not just nostalgic whims, but useful sources of information and interpretation that emerge when something in present experience orients them to this past, such as when they receive their pay slip or when production is high and Scott can *feel* a good bonus coming. Drawing together the durations of life at Charbon with current experience, memory-images offer analytical resources that help them to make sense of the present. Under changed circumstances, these memories push them to critically reflect on the exigencies of their new circumstances and what might need to shift in light of these realisations. It is not just about looking backward, but something that comes to help them to look forward, drawing a line of continuity between past, present and future duration. It pushes them to think about what might need to *give* so that other things won't need to give.

Crucially, this forward-looking enabled by looking-to-the-past is a movement towards the production of new habits. In order to understand the movement between image and habit memory in the production of habit, it is useful to grasp the way in which Bergson understands the two types of memory as being separate. It is not that accrued image memories eventually blend into habit once a sufficient number is reached, but that every action is already, at the outset, *double*—stored as a recollection in pure memory (image memory) that cannot be altered, and a corporeal action (habit) that, by degrees, modifies and conforms the body to better deploy a movement with each repetition. Habit memory and image memory are usually separate, but interrelate in the process of selecting images for presentation to consciousness: "[t]he only regular and certain service which the second memory [image memory] can render to the first [habit memory] is to bring before it images

of what preceded or followed situations similar to the present situation, so as to guide its choice” (Bergson, 1988, p. 88). Emerging at an interruption to habit, image-memories offer avenues for the progressive transformation of the body. By suggesting an anchor against which to groove out similar actions, returning to particular image memories generates consistent lines along which habits might be progressively developed over time. These memories encourage the consistency of repetition that is necessary to the development of habits, snapping bodies to particular tracks and practices. As a result, the motor-circuits of habit suggest how Lisa and Scott must come to ‘wear’ their debts like a garment—“more about a body’s ‘going through the motions’, more about touch or gesture than about belief or guilt” (Seigworth, 2016, p. 15)—and learn to reproduce themselves as reliable, calculating individuals able to pay their debts, now and into the future (Lazzarato, 2012). These are habits that reshape their subjectivities in new ways, but also enable them to alleviate the anxieties of their changed situation, helping them to find a new rhythm with the lives they are in.

Through their story, Lisa and Scott demonstrate that habits are not blindly produced, but that it is possible to *intervene* in the development of habits. Importantly, this marks an indispensable space for human agency in the production of habit, recognising that although habits, once *developed*, can be deployed automatically, the process of *developing* habits does not unfold according to an automated procedure. Rather than simply being left to the impulses of the body, external objects or chance, the deliberative push of *thought* intervenes in habit formation. As Bissell (2011) emphasises, shocks to habit do not just interrupt bodies, they also force thought. Moments of interruption are not just epiphenomenal to systems but can be linked forwards as moments of genuine change. A shock to habit is ‘ontogenetic;’ it interrupts habitual ways of seeing and acting through a direct impact on the affective forces that compose the body (Lapworth, 2015; Bissell, 2011). In the interval between shock and adaptation, “[t]he periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations [of habit] ... represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being” (Dewsbury and Bissell, 2015, p. 21). As Lisa’s testimony demonstrates, shock is registered in sensibility and feeling; it “transforms the susceptible body, but it also fatigues” (Bissell, 2011, p. 2653). But shock also generates moments of reflection, as an event of impact that resonates to generate thought (Bissell 2011, p. 2650).

Prompted to reflect again and again through the many slow-moving events in the fallout of the closure, Scott and Lisa come to draw on a particular image memory to guide to their actions, one which is repeated throughout our conversations: Scott’s dad’s advice to never borrow off the bonus.

Drawn from memory, Lisa and Scott prioritise this refrain through effortful recollection, recontextualising the memory to give it a new significance, and then draw it forth in action until the refrain becomes its own custom, flowing into habits which can then be deployed without thought. In this way, Lisa and Scott are able to exercise agency in the production of a desired habit, as the capacity for ‘free will’ in the ‘not-yet’ interval of nascent habit that Bergson and Ravaisson emphasise as integral to the human subject. It is a kind of free will possible with time, repeated effort and the collaboration of a hospitable milieu.

In fact, Bergson affirms the tight embrace of perception, image memory and habit, suggesting that “any memory-image that is capable of interpreting our actual perception inserts itself so thoroughly into it that we are no longer able to discern what is perception and what is memory” (103). Attentive perception is a ‘circuit’ (104) that holds habit memory alongside image memory in perception, but its remit is not finite. Attentive perception can *expand* (rather than merely shift) perception’s field of attention, such as by consistently bringing to presence images of the past. There is, then, the possibility of memory-images becoming fused with objects and environments of perception so closely they can no longer be extricated. This is because the image memory does not supplant perception but always *accompanies* it, drawing durations together into a single field. These aspects of habit-formation speak to the intransigence of memories of the past conventionally associated with loss and melancholy, which seem to erupt without warning or hang around like a fog as they become adopted in perception, sometimes emerging at only the smallest slip in the organisation of habit. At the same time, the dual nature of memory simultaneously gestures towards a time when this recourse to image memory may no longer occur. This is, as Bergson notes, the “moment when the recollection thus brought down is capable of blending so well with the present perception that we cannot say where perception ends or where memory begins” (106). This is the point at which perception no longer requires image memory to guide action, but rather, through the effect of repetitions already accrued, can call upon the motor memory of habit, quelling the emergence of images from the past.

Conclusion

This chapter has grounded its discussion of melancholy, habit and memory in the stories of three workers and their families as they adjust to the changing contours of life after workplace closure. Suggesting that the disruptions of loss can be read through the operations of habit, I suggest how the disarming intensities of melancholy can arise in response to an interruption to everyday life.

Instead of locating melancholy in the roots of a past attachment, my suggestion is that its intensities emerge not so much because people loved their lost jobs, but because of how the closures generated chains of interruption to the habituated rhythms of their everyday lives. From here, I explore how memory and melancholy emerge in the impasse of adjustment to changed circumstances of life. Rather than the intense emotional break of psychoanalytical melancholia, melancholy is positioned through habit as part of the same set of forces that produce the exigencies of the everyday. By showing how memory and habit are imbricated, I argue that the stasis induced by melancholy can be seen as a duration of tension and commotion, involving both depletion and effort. It is a period of inertia out of which a virtual arc of difference pulls itself, to rebuild a sense of life as ordinary.

As Stewart suggests, “[t]he ordinary is a moving target” (2007, p. 93). Although geographers have attended to the relational construction of the ordinary—the materials, infrastructure and spaces that make the everyday possible—Stewart’s attention is towards the ‘surge’ of the ordinary: the impressions and sensations engendered by the infrastructures of contemporary everyday life. Rather than being an epiphenomenal effect that arises when the right set of objects clicks into place, the ordinary is a mode of sensibility that emerges through effort, engagement and reconciliation with often indifferent and inflexible circumstances. My argument in this chapter that this *sense* of ‘ordinariness’ is rendered possible only in collaboration with the sheltering modulations of habit, which enables the noise of the world to be backgrounded and guides for action to be carved out in the present. The ordinary here can be thought of as an affective ‘object-target’ of governance that is enabled by the effects—both intended and unintended—of habit (Anderson, 2014). By linking the comforts of habit to the cocooning sense of the everyday it enables, this chapter suggests that a big part of what we lose when we lose things is the sensibilities that they facilitate within us.

Drawing on the stories of Norm, Xu and Lisa and Scott, this chapter suggests that, after an event of interruption, bodies are drawn towards a simple, even conservative, aim: the desire to reproduce the feeling of ordinary life. By highlighting the cocooning comforts of habit, I argue that what is important is *affect*, not form. That is, *transposability* matters. Despite the focus on materials and milieus in relational geographies, habit demonstrates the primacy of feeling, emphasising that the relations that produce an ‘ordinary’ sensibility need not look those that came before. Rather than looking to a particular arrangement of place, particularly one that is static and unchanging, the ordinary affects of habit underscore that bodies can come to reproduce the *feelings* of normalcy associated with habitual life. What comes to the fore, then, is process, time and the *plasticity* of the self. As philosopher William James (1918) defines it, plasticity “means the possession of a structure

weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once” (p. 64). Indeed, the plasticity of habit is what enables the very possibility of the subject to change in the first place; as Malabou suggests, “[w]ith habit, the memory of change is one with the possibility of change in general. If being was able to change once, in the manner of contracting a habit, it can change again” (2008, p. viii). Plasticity refers to the self’s potential to shift and change; however, it emphasises that these transformations must operate within limits, albeit ones that may not be known in advance. The flipside of plasticity’s productivity, then, is to recognise the conditions under which change can take place, as “a spatiality of transformation” that is “necessarily mediated and compromised” (Robinson, 1999, p. 255): taking place within the limits of what already exists, both in bodies and in the world. Subjectivity is not erased or replaced; instead, new and old lines of action are drawn out from within the past and present—often only with great difficulty. These lines gather through effort and repetition into refrains of action that are the basis for everyday life.

After the closure, Norm, Xu and Lisa & Scott, in their own ways, all strive to recreate the consistency of ordinary life through the reproduction of habits with whatever resources circumstance, history and place set at their disposal. These avenues for bodily change are magnetised along the enablements and constraints of the habits that have accrued over time to constitute their being. For Norm, this was about returning to old habits—returning to the kind of piecemeal work that others, in the same situation, would find unbearably anxiogenic. Xu’s testimony demonstrates the intensity of emotion that can be associated with the closure of the mine. He shows that this intensity in the present can co-exist with anxiety about the future, as the melancholy impasse induces a shock that provokes reflection, inducing a slow process of reconciliation with new conditions and a modified sense of self. Between Xu’s story, and that of Lisa and Scott, we begin to see a process of habit formation prompted within the melancholy interval, drawing memories of the past into perception to carve a path in the present back to the operating range of the ordinary. Drawing on Bergson, this chapter has suggested how habit might function to ultimately reorient bodies away from melancholy and towards the future, by producing new lines of deviation that can serve to anchor bodies within changed conditions, producing rhythms of in-synchness with the worlds that each body becomes caught within after workplace closure. By imbricating matter inextricably with memory—linking affect with subject with past—Bergson’s account of perception offers a counterbalance to sensory and material geographies which, by neglecting memory, act as if the subject were ever entirely emergent from, or fully actualised by, their immediate circumstances, giving limited attention to the involvement of the past in producing the present or material encounter. The consequence of this, of course, is a diminished version of the

subject figured by such an analysis—one which is closer to ‘brute matter’ (what Bergson would call ‘pure perception’), than a plastic subject capable of reflective thought and ‘degrees of freedom’ (Bergson, 1988, p. 222). In distinction to the charge that theorists of affect evoke an unmarked, universal subject, habit’s grounding in the repetitions of the past suggest the foundational importance of the histories in whose wake bodies live. As Dawney asserts, the past *matters*; always already marking the self, “history is enfolded in the body’s materiality” (2013, p. 636). Habit’s plasticity is about recognising the conditioning forces of these histories whilst retaining an eye to the latent possibilities for transformation.

The plasticity of habit, then, is cautiously hopeful: it suggests an avenue for melancholic remedy and deintensification, rather than just diagnosis. By conceptualising an account of melancholy that has at its basis the plastic subject of habit rather than the traumatised ego of attachment, I have sought to demonstrate how habits are not just victim to the trauma of the event, but can also suggest resources for moving through melancholy. By suggesting how people might be able to escape the intensity of melancholy’s grasp, habit highlights the latent capacity for repairing an event of loss. The ordinary affects of habit suggest that the productive potential of an event of loss remains dormant, as a virtual excess, and that politics is in finding a way to actualise this potential.

That said, I would like to conclude by dispelling a potential reading of this chapter as tending purely towards productivity, self-directed action and connection. First, although focussing on the corporeal operations of habit, this chapter has suggested the primacy of the *conditions* that people encounter over people’s agency to modify those conditions. This is a point highlighted by Rose (2018), who pithily suggests that habit “presents us with a conception of consciousness that is essentially *responsive*” (p. 1126, original emphasis). Although consciousness emerges and recedes alongside habit, ultimately bodies are understood to be profoundly connected to environments through the sinew of habit, able to reach a state of equilibrium if the right habits could just be developed. As Rose emphasises, however, it is important to recognise that relations between bodies are never just instances of pure coincidence and correspondence. Indeed, as suggested in the previous chapter, the worlds around us are often aloof to our needs, operating to their own rhythms “unaccountable to us or the urgency of our reliance” on them (Rose, 2018, p. 1127). What Rose highlights is that every instance of touch and proximity also holds within it a withdrawal from knowledge or calculation; although we can develop a certain rhythm of rapport within an environment, this achievement of connection cannot erase the fundamentally unknown nature of the future, the ongoing flow of time and the recognition that the worlds around us will keep

changing, whether we keep up or not. That is, no amount of ostensible connection can solve the eternally unsolvable problem of an indifferent other and future. Instead, people must continue to change and to adapt, in an endless chain of action and reaction. The development of habits—and the effort involved in this process—is not just about ‘willing’ habits into existence through the assertions of a sovereign, calculative and knowing self, but also what Rose calls an act of ‘claiming’: a desire to make sense of a withdrawn and enigmatic world, to bring the self into correspondence with what will continue to elude being known. As such, the exertions and efforts that come to populate habit can be prompted just as much by a reflective self-awareness, as best-guess experimentation or blind-eyed bluster about what to do next.

Second, this chapter’s focus has been on what are the ‘luckier’ stories of people who have, with some effort, been able to re-create the equilibrium of normalcy after the mine’s closure through the acquisition of new habits. For the figures in this chapter, this has been possible due to the presence of relatively stable conditions, from familiar places to secure conditions of employment to supportive home lives. In saying this, however, I do not wish to diminish the very real difficulties within these itineraries—traversing the quiet undercurrent of eroding opportunity for Norm, the existential ache of Xu’s revised self-image and the exhaustions and anxieties of Lisa and Scott’s processes of adaptation. These are undesired corporeal states that emerge in the process of reckoning, throwing up resistance to a purely reparative reading of habit’s incremental drive, and threatening to steer bodies in different directions. As such, although I affirm that the body moves toward habit, it is worth remembering that there is nothing necessarily progressive or virtuous about habit. As Malabou (2008) reinforces in her introduction to Ravaillon’s book, the same forces of habit are at work in producing the *grace* of ease, capacity and skill, and the *addiction* of dependence, obsession and subjection. The affirmation of habit, then, is simply the necessity of *some kind* of adaptation to the circumstances of life after an event of disruption. Although the stories of Xu, Lisa and Scott show how they work towards the promotion of particular lines of habits, it is ultimately not through cognitive intention that habits develop, but the repeated physical action (or inaction) that follows. Just as habits can develop incidentally, rather than intentionally, these lines can implicate undesired habits, alongside desired ones. I conclude, then, by emphasising the *ethical* implications of the understanding of bodies as habitual entities. Recognising a shared desire for the harbour of habit, I highlight the *inevitability* of habit’s emergence in bodies. Foregrounding the primacy of habit’s *responsive* nature, I emphasise that habits are encouraged or discouraged by the composition of particular circumstances. If the inertia of habit suggests the *intransigence* of a habit once contracted, then together these principles suggest a wider political responsibility to assemble

conditions that *productively* channel the irrepressible energetics of habit. Ideally, this would be in the form of affirmable avenues for growth, through types of differences that are desirable to the self. But the tragedy of habit is that, in the absence of affirmable avenues for change, habits are produced *anyway*, flowing into new versions of selves, ones that inhabit altered ordinaries that—whether by neglect or design—alternately produce the ‘grace’ of ease and skill, or the ‘addiction’ of subjection and dependence.

6 Desire: repairing the future

Introduction

Loss makes a demand. The previous chapters argued that the disturbances of loss demand a return to the operating range of the ‘ordinary,’ a feeling-space possible only in collaboration with the deintensifying cocoons of habit. But what is the feeling of the ordinary?

My starting point in this chapter is that the ordinary has a fundamentally forward-moving rhythm. Counter to intuition, Stewart (2007) poetically demonstrates through peering vignettes and veering prose that the ordinary does not, in fact, feel like ‘nothing’. It always contains within it a differentiation, an arc towards the feeling of *more*, a background hum of ordinary as well as extraordinary pleasures. While its constitutive infrastructures may sometimes *look* the same, the ordinary never really *feels* the same, encompassing and oscillating between the highs and lows of experience. Stewart’s contention is that the ordinary is grounded in a structure of feeling that is not that of *nothing much* happening, but rather an ever-fermenting sense of *something* happening.

A desirable ordinary is perhaps the foundation of what we might call well-being. For Michael D. Jackson (2011), the problem of ordinary well-being is grounded “in the mystery of existential discontent—the question as to why human beings, regardless of their external circumstances, are haunted by a sense of insufficiency and loss” (p. xi). As Jackson affirms, to live a human life is to be subject to the ineliminable force of desire, to exist in a ‘world of want’. Understanding human well-being “not as a settled state but as a field of struggle,” Jackson suggests that at the heart of wellbeing is “a hope without which existence would be untenable—that life, for ourselves and those we care about, holds *more* in store for us than less” (2011, p. xi, emphasis added).

The ordinary, then, is a moving target. For it to feel like a space of wellbeing, ordinary life must hold within it the *excesses* of hope and desire that serve to orient lives ahead. Ordinary life cannot be parsimonious; it is never just blind repetition of an already-mastered routine. Reproducing ordinary life requires producing worlds rich and textured enough to hold not just lows, but also highs; not the nothings, but the *somethings* of what it means to live well. Desire is an operator that can turn a

timespace of *crisis* into one of wellbeing. Any attempt to re-create life after loss, then, must be capacious enough to produce worlds able to offer this something *more* to the subject.

Accordingly, this chapter explores the role of desire in re-orienting bodies after loss to reproduce the forward-moving timespaces of ordinary life. It flows from the previous discussions of the plastic subject—the ways in which circumstances after loss can work to alter and produce new subjects, ones which may—even *must*—become different to those that came before. To recap: chapter four, ‘Turbulence’, showed how the abandonments of job loss work to unsecure precarious bodies, by cutting people’s relations to the people, things and places that once secured their being, and exposing bodies to unfamiliar and potentially unaccommodating circumstances of life. Chapter five, ‘Habit’, demonstrated how bodies, by degrees, acquire new capacities in response to melancholy interruptions that work to warp and shift the plastic self. This chapter, ‘Desire’, deepens the discussion of how new connections are made in the body by considering a more explicitly ‘positive’ mode of relation, exploring the transformative and potentially reparative forces of joy, pleasure, desire and love. Though they are interconnected, it is important to note that each of these terms refers to distinct ideas that, if one were to undertake a more fulsome reading of each concept, should not be considered equivalent or interchangeable, at least in any straightforward way. Instead, my aim in corralling this array of concepts under the short-hand rubric of ‘desire’ is to performatively amplify the forward-moving dimensions of each of these ideas, by focussing attention to the overlapping affective terrain that ties these ideas together. My guiding argument in this chapter is that experiences of ‘desire’—both mundane and extraordinary—can reorient bodies towards the future, even as that future remains fundamentally unknown. That is, through the operations of desire, I suggest that the openness of the future can be experienced as something world-*expanding* rather than world-*shrinking*—as something exciting and energising, rather than depleting and exhausting (cf. Hitchen and Shaw, 2019).

In this sense, this chapter sits in line with a recent move in geography to animate enchantment, wonder, and enthusiasm, highlighting how these affects can serve to transform people’s relations to the objects and worlds around them. Woodyer and Geoghegan (2013) suggest that enchantment is a “just perceptible and more-than-rational” experience that can ‘possess’ or ‘capture’ bodies, producing new relations and durations of renewed openness to the world. Dovetailing with discussions of care in feminist literature and a Foucauldian ‘care of the self’, explicitly playful and experimental approaches are offered in a contemporary academic climate where “extant pressures upon academics and the nature of being critical have the potential to leave many geographers

feeling helpless, depressed and defeated” (Woodyer and Geoghegan, 2013, p. 195), providing “an additional source of political nourishment and responsiveness and imagination in a time when so many forces militate against it” (Thrift, 2008, p. 4). As Pyyry and Aiava (2020) suggest, the intensities of enchantment can work to interrupt bodies, uprooting being through the production of new orders of significance and meaning. Indeed, for Relph (1985), this kind of curiosity about the world is the origin of geographical thought itself. Extending this exploration of joy’s productions, this chapter considers how experiences of desire might serve to repair and reorient lifeworlds in the wake of crisis. It explores transformations in subjectivity that can be engendered by joyful affects such as pleasure, desire and love. I argue that these forms of ‘desire’ offer compelling propositions for how we might conceptualise affirmable forms of bodily transformation in the aftermath of loss. Desire, as I shall suggest, cannot be separated from time, and time cannot be disconnected from change.

The leading thinker in this chapter is 20th century French novelist and thinker Marcel Proust, in particular through his best-known work *In Search of Lost Time*. Proust—Bergson’s cousin—was greatly influenced by Bergson’s ideas, sharing similar starting points with Bergson in his similarly influential ideas about memory and time. However, where Bergson looks forward to the productions and problem-solving operations of memory, Proust shows what it is like to dwell in the melancholy impasse, demonstrating how the past continues to inflect our desires and worlds alike. In this chapter, I do not read Proust directly; instead, I turn to the idiosyncratic analyses of the text by queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2012), and philosopher Gilles Deleuze (2000). In contrast to a tendency to read Proust through a melancholic lens on the past, both thinkers look to the role of the *future* in driving forth the novel’s multi-threaded narrative. Ansell-Pearson (2010) explains that Deleuze’s “reading differs markedly from an entire French (and not only French) tradition that traps the Proustian search in a depressive cycle of nostalgia and regression” (p. 173). For Sedgwick, the leitmotif of Proust’s novel is *reincarnation*—the latent possibility of life to surprise and be refreshed, and the characters and encounters that make it possible to get there. For Deleuze, Proust’s search for lost time is not a melancholic exercise, but a search for meaning and *truth* prompted by events in the world. In addition to Sedgwick and Deleuze, I draw on adjacent ideas from Michel Serres, Georges Bataille and Lauren Berlant to explore desire’s capacity to induce affirmable forms of differentiation in the subject.

In this chapter, desire suggests a style of preconscious activity in which bodies move before the self can react, causing situations where the self *loses* the self. But unlike the loss of self associated with

abandonment, this departure from self comes to be evaluated through the lens of desire as a *good* thing. Compared to previous chapters that highlighted the impasse of the *present* (turbulence) and the lines of the *past* (habit), this chapter turns to the open potentials of the *future*. It does so alongside the extended stories of two former coal miners from fieldwork: Robbie in Kandos, and Yang in Pingdingshan, both men in their mid-30s. The lives of both men changed dramatically after the closure of their respective coal mines, in ways that were unexpected and unprecedented. Stylistically, this chapter ricochets between vignettes of my encounters with Robbie and Yang, and theoretical explorations that exist in a relation of resonance to these stories. By tracking the changing contours of these men's lives, I show how desire can come to affect bodies from the outside, resonating within to inflect and inspire new forms of activity, attachment and passion, which can carve out new pathways for the self.

It is here then that I begin this chapter, going back in time to my conversations with Robbie...

* * *

We're seated on the back patio of the home that Robbie shares with his partner Nicolette—Nic for short. The air is heavy and a twilight warmth hangs over us as Nic serves up starters in a summer dress. Their 'kids'—two happy chickens—doze on the hot water heater nearby. It is my first time meeting the couple, both in their mid-30s. A few weeks prior, I had received a beguiling email from Robbie, responding to my ad in the local newsletter.

For many the mine closing had a negative impact. However for myself it had a very positive outcome.

If you are still collecting research for your PhD I am more than happy to provide any information I can.



We start from the beginning, tracking all the way back to Robbie's original move into mining. It was a bit of an accident, he says. He jumped ship in the throes of change at his previous job at national airline Qantas in Sydney, where he had worked and completed his first apprenticeship straight out of school. 'The writing was on the wall for the workshop that I was at,' he explains. Robbie had been there for about four years when the company decided to begin offshoring maintenance. It was clear that grim times were ahead; "towards the end of my time there, we were losing basically a guy a week." Many left the company voluntarily, and "shortly after I left there were 2,000-3,000 people redundancies." Like everyone else, Robbie began looking around, not sure where he would go next. His apprenticeship in Avionics was specific—*too* specific to be easily re-deployed at another company. Then, perhaps providentially, "mum found an ad in the local paper." It was a job as an apprentice electrician at Charbon. Robbie was initially reluctant to return to the country, having moved to the big smoke—"I left that! *I drove off into the sunset!*"—but he reasoned that he had always wanted to be an electrician. Still in his early 20s, he was young, he could re-train. And it's not like he had many options anyway. So, "I went, *well*, I'll start again."



To undertake the apprenticeship, he moved from Sydney to Lithgow, a small city two hours away. There, he joined a small group of apprentices at the local trade school. Despite his trepidations, something unexpected happens. “As soon as I got into the Lithgow area, I noticed a big change in myself,” Robbie recalls. “Which is probably hard to explain, but it was just that—I dunno—a moment of *clarity*.” It is the first time in his life that he has ever had this feeling—an indescribable mix of lucidity and satisfaction, contentment and desire. “I even remember the *exact* moment when I had that bizarre sensation—*that* moment of clarity.” It was an otherwise mundane, ordinary moment. “I think it was, like, walking down the hallway,” Robbie laughs. “And I just went, *hey*, you know what: *this* is where I want to be.”

* * *

I Reincarnation and surprise

In *The Weather in Proust*, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick declares that “[n]o one is better than Proust at giving the sense that the true interest of a psyche, a landscape, or indeed a sentence may actually be inexhaustible” (2012, p. 5). Written in her final years of life, Sedgwick’s draws attention to the underexplored importance of reincarnation in Proust, a theme that appears from the very first paragraph of the novel. Sedgwick explains that Proust’s interest in reincarnation is

inspired by the monist ontology of Neoplatonism, with its belief in a single intelligence or principle from which all souls emerge and return. In contrast to diverse geographies broadly concerned with the maintenance and stability of the relations that carry people and place through time—from resilience (Amin, 2013) to traces (McGeachan, 2018) to infrastructures (Graham and Thrift, 2007; McFarlane, 2011) to identity (Hopkins, 2017)—Sedgwick’s interest here is in the cycles of transformation that are inherent to human life. In this way, Sedgwick’s approach aligns with emerging interests in geography that understand lived space “as topological and emergent, less as a grid than as a bending, folding, stretching surface” that always carries within it the latent potential for differentiation (Cockayne *et al.*, 2019, p. 1).

By evoking reincarnation, Proust’s concern is not so much with a religious sense of rebirth after organic death, but in the cycles of transformation inherent to life as it is lived. Rather than reify the power of supernatural or esoteric forces, Sedgwick explains that Proust’s mysticism serves to emphasise the capacity for worldly encounters to refresh. As a result, what is foregrounded is the “transformative potential of the faculties of attention and perception” in the timespaces of ordinary life (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 4). She offers a range of synonyms for reincarnation—“[r]ebirth, transmigration, metempsychosis, metamorphosis”, emphasising that, “while Proust describes different beings as incarnations of the same soul, he also envisions *an individual’s lifetime* as a narrative encompassing many deaths and many unrecognizable births” (Sedgwick 2012, p. 6, 7, emphasis added). Acknowledging the disconnect between mystical and modern discourses, Sedgwick notes that “[i]t’s been hard for twentieth-century and later readers to know how to take Proust’s irrepressible interest in rebirth” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 6). Indeed, one might read Sedgwick’s own interest through the circumstances of her own life and death—after an early diagnosis of terminal breast cancer, Sedgwick’s works evidence an increasing concern for spiritualist thought. But one might equally read in rebirth and transformation a commitment to the foundational ideas of queer theory, the field she was instrumental in producing, with its emphasis on embodied difference, non-binary thought, and plurality.

Oriented towards an unknown and undesired future, Sedgwick highlights how people can, in the course of life, encounter transitional moments in which they experience a distancing of the self from the self they once were. This ‘death’ can often be intense and painful; presenting transitions that are “self-alienating” and that “the elements of the old self that are condemned to die” might not be capable of desiring or aspiring to (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 7). With this comment, and paralleling Freud’s observation that people never willingly give up a libidinal position, Sedgwick highlights the

tendency of the self towards self-preservation. However, without refuting this tendency, Sedgwick suggests that Proust supplements this approach with a further angle of view: that is, rather than looking to how the *present* self relates to a known past or an unknown future, Proust imagines how the *future* self might look back on the past self they once were. By suggesting that self-transformation might also be approached from the already-changed perspective of the future self, this role reversal draws attention to the vital intervention of processes of *reckoning*, *reconciliation* and *repair* with the passage of time. Quoting Ancient Greek philosopher Plotinus, Sedgwick suggests that the self experiences such transitions as a kind of loss, that, “[w]hen it passes from one inner level to another, *the self always has the impression that it is losing itself*” (Plotinus quoted in Sedgwick 2012, p. 34, emphasis added). Rather than seeing these shifts as aberrations, in Proust such transformations are folded into the natural cycles that form the rhythms of ordinary life.

For Sedgwick, then, life is not just a geography of maintenance, conservation or endurance, but foundationally one of *surprise*. As we see in Robbie’s story of reincarnation, circumstances of life can serve to produce situations unanticipated by our past selves. As a sign of our exposure to the outside, surprise acknowledges the primacy of human non-sovereignty. Surprise “is the mark of reality, insofar as what is real—what surrounds the subject, the weather of the world—has to exceed the will of the subject” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 34). As Simandan (2020) suggests, surprise indexes the limit to human capacities to anticipate the future. For some, this incapacity to know the future can be a source of threat, terror and trauma (Anderson, 2010; Amin, 2013; Rose, 2018). But, as Sedgwick famously put in *Paranoid Reading*: “there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones” (2003, p. 146). Surprise is not inherently undesirable, and instead plays “a significant role ... in shaping the spatialities of both personal and social change” (Simandan, 2019, p. 3). Surprise is what makes possible “celestial nourishment” and an “ever-refreshed internal world” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 32, 33). In Proust, reincarnation becomes another name for the subject’s passage through time. It is a “way to delineate this balance of agency between the internal and the external”, where the surprises of time can work to render the future self different to the selves of the past (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 33).

* * *

Yang’s grandfather came out to Pingdingshan when he was a teenager, as one of the earliest miners in the newly founded coal city. By the time six-year-old Yang and his mother moved

from their village to the small city, Yang's father had already been working at Mine No. 7 for years.

Yang has a gentle manner. He smiles often, quietly and politely. As a child, Yang was scared of the coal-stained miners; "growing up, I never thought I'd go into the mines." It's not that Yang explicitly thought *oh, mining is such hard work*. It was more implicit than that. His parents, both mine workers, "used to always say 'oh, working is *so and so* tough,' but you just don't *know* because you've never experienced it," he recalls. "It's only when you go work yourself that you understand, really."



His parents wanted him to study well, to go to university. But Yang says that he wasn't a good student. Upon finishing middle school, he learned a trade at the local vocational college, as an electro-mechanical technician. China was opening up, and with scores of people rushing to the big cities, Yang was interested in going out for migrant work. But his parents wouldn't allow it. They wanted him to get a 'proper' job like them, something stable with a pension, health insurance, a job for life.

Upon graduating technical school, Yang took up a position at one of the city's state-owned coal mines. His dad was at Mine No. 7, but Yang was allocated to the mine across the road, Mine No. 3.

It was 2002, Yang tells us; he was 20, still young. He didn't think much about what he was doing. A lot of his classmates also ended up in the mines. He started as a machine operator, nothing to do with what he studied. It wasn't up to him: you were allocated a position somewhere on the vast site and you accepted it.

His job at the mine was manning one of the shafts heading underground, "basically the same as operating an elevator." Jianan jokes about the guy at the local hospital who operates the hospital's main elevator. 2,800 yuan a month to watch it go up and down, up and down. To our amusement, Yang nods. Yes, yes. It was *just* like that. "Except that our equipment was maybe..." Yang pauses to find the right word. "More technologically advanced?" Jianan offers. "*Advanced* is probably not the right word for it." "Bigger?" I offer. "Yes," he smiles, "it was just bigger."



Yang operated the shaft for five years. “It was so boring, facing this big machinery every day.” But, then, Yang reminisces, he didn’t have many worries back then. The pay was low, but he didn’t think too much about it. “You could sit, do the work, lie down, read a book, maybe play a video game on your phone—it was up to you, you could do whatever.”

The work was so relaxed that he even worked a side gig at a local *Maidanglao*. My brain snaps to attention at those familiar sounds—*Mai-dang-lao*—McDonalds—the American fast-food chain, in three Chinese symbols. His wage at the mine went to his parents and the extra job gave him some money for himself. But mostly, he says, it was just another thing to do. It was at McDonalds that he met his now-wife, who worked full-time at the store.

After five years by the shaft elevator, Yang requests a transfer. “It was time I got married,” Yang explains. Marriage meant that it was time to start moving up, to take on more responsibility, to become a provider for his forthcoming family. Yang’s request for a new position nets him a job in the mine’s Servicing and Maintenance Unit.

Pushing away the tedium, Yang restlessly moves around the mine. Two years in Servicing and Maintenance, two more years in Risk and Safety, two years in Quality and Inspections. By the time Mine No. 3

announces it is shutting, he is an underground quality inspector. The pay hadn't changed much, but the hours aren't too long, the work is simple. He still finds the work boring, but life has settled down and he explains that, all in all, it's not a bad gig.

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"Despite what people say, everything's production" in a coal mine," Robbie asserts, debunking the idea that because the dangers of mining foster a strong sense of camaraderie, mining was somehow directly about generating community spirit, as an elaborate team-building exercise, rather than multi-billion dollar global industry. No, "*you* are there to make money; *the company* is there to make money; *everyone* is there to make money." At Charbon, Robbie always felt different to most of the other guys. He was younger; single, he liked learning, wasn't into sports, didn't drink a lot, and, perhaps most importantly, he was *not* a local, having grown up an hour north of the town.

After finishing his apprenticeship and starting full-time at Charbon, Robbie got into the groove of things. "I went about my daily, did my thing for a couple of years. And then, I suppose it started to get to the point where it was, like..." he lets out a weary sigh. "*Yeah*. You're just going through the motions."



Robbie was on night shift maintenance; his job was to maintain the machinery. “Night shift is just awful. Everyone’s tired, everyone’s grumpy. Guys have all got young kids. There were one or two guys who were just ‘undesirables’. So, I was kind of stuck in a loop. I’m single; I live here, I don’t really like the area.” With his enthusiasm flagging, so does his physical and mental health. In turn, it becomes increasingly difficult to find a path out of his slow spiral.

* * *

II Re-evaluation and repair

Chiming with Sedgwick’s discussions of reincarnation and refreshment, Robbie and Yang’s stories begin with the background of life at the mine prior to the closures. Rather than painting nostalgic images of the past, both journeys relay the ambivalence of life before closure, showing how cycles of excitement and stagnation accompany the onflow of life and time. As a result, Robbie and Yang’s pre-closure biographies emphasise that the intensities of the event of mine closure should not be painted against the backdrop of an otherwise stable and harmonious life, but as a part of the flux of circumstances that are always already changing. These shifting conditions continually alter people’s relations to their personal lives, threatening to tip bodies over thresholds of change. This is evident even under conditions of job security experienced by the men at the former mines. For Robbie, the shock of the closure was preceded by past experiences of retrenchment—the closure of Charbon was not his first rodeo—and the subsequent years of work at the mine were gearing towards an increasing and unplaceable malaise. For Yang, antipathy towards his job had long been balanced by changing expectations, both internal and external, throughout the life-course, tracking his journey

from graduation, to young adulthood, to marriage. By giving these earlier histories of the men's lives, my aim is to prefigure the cycles of transformation and rebirth that will come to define their lives after the mine closures, suggesting that they must be situated as part of a greater flux of unsettled human life that began before—and will continue after—particular events of life and loss.

To conceptualise the vicissitudes of the subject caught in incessant cycles of loss and rebirth, Sedgwick continues her long-standing engagement with the psychoanalytic work of object-relations theorist Melanie Klein. Showing how people's evaluations of objects and events can change over time, Sedgwick demonstrates how the experience of surprise can come to interrupt the self, throwing open the boundaries of what once appeared to be a closed system of possibility. Rather than thinking of psychic life as fixed, for Klein, "mental life is creative in essence" (Likierman, 2002, p. 79). Through Klein's concepts of the 'schizoid/paranoid' and the 'depressive' position, Sedgwick describes how the narrator in Proust comes to variously experience his encounters as positive or negative, desirable or threatening, and how these evaluations can come to change over time through internal processes of reckoning and repair.

It is worth understanding the basic concepts in Klein's theory to grasp why Sedgwick finds it illuminating. "For Klein, the depressive position is one of only two positions—two modes of relationality—available to human creatures" (Sedgwick, 2006, p. 2)—these are the paranoid/schizoid position and the depressive/reparative position. Despite the use of the term 'position', neither is a "permanent achievement but part of a fluid, back-and-forth process" that is never static (Sedgwick, 2006, p. 2). The 'fragile' and 'defensive' paranoid/schizoid position—marked by "the ego's inability to tolerate anxiety or ambivalence" (Sedgwick, 2006, p. 2)—generates a process of 'splitting', in which objects come to be evaluated as good or bad. In this understanding of subjectivity, the threatened self is prone to produce 'part-objects' that can become the target of wholesale *ressentiment* or desire. The depressive position, in contrast, is "a developmental achievement" that involves "the foundational, authentically difficult understanding that good and bad tend to be inseparable at every level" (Sedgwick, 2006, p. 2). The depressive position is associated with "remorse, shame, confusion, depression itself, mourning for the lost ideal", but also, perhaps more sombrely, the "sad understanding of the inexorable laws of unintended consequences" (Sedgwick, 2006, p. 2). It marks a level of psychic and emotional maturity in which the subject is able to integrate fragmented perceptions, producing a mixed, compromised whole. As Sedgwick explains, the depressive position suggests a *reparative* stance

towards an object or situation, producing “more realistic, durable, and in that sense satisfying objects” to identify with and derive nourishment (Sedgwick, 2006, p. 2).

The journey through the depressive and the paranoid/schizoid positions is not static, nor are they settled. Representing ongoing processes of reckoning, the positions alter relations between self and other, heralding shifts in subjectivity and experience. Despite the name, then, processes of ‘repair’ are not about returning objects to some past state of wholeness, but in re-evaluating the possibility of once foregone objects and conclusions. As a result, repair “does not assume that the “repaired” object will resemble a pre-existing object—there is nothing intrinsically conservative about the impulse of reparation” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 36). Instead, the *ambivalence* of the depressive position opens up “the whole world of creative possibility” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 25), and the potential for change. The perspective of the resulting self, then, is one that can emerge as unrecognisable to the previous self, through the production of new sensibilities and perceptions of the self’s surrounds by way of the positions.

Through this creative understanding of the subject’s capacity for change, Sedgwick notes a crucial difference between the psychoanalytic theories of Klein and Freud. She writes that “in Klein, what these primary defence mechanisms have to defend *against* is not prohibitive external impingement, as in Freud, but instead the devastating force of a largely endogenous anxiety” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 130). That is, the self’s primary defences are not against the demands of external forces, but rather against yearnings that the individual *already* has for difference. That is, one’s “intrinsic impulses conflict with one another even more drastically than they conflict with the claims of her environment” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 130). In Klein, the subject is seldom coherent, understood as she is to be caught up in her own internal conflicts. This lack of sovereignty is not necessarily a bad thing. Unlike Freud, who sees people as desiring omnipotence, Klein suggests a more contradictory experience of sovereignty. One’s own power-seeking drives are perceived by the Kleinian subject as “a fear at least as much as it is a wish”, “as posing a mortal threat both to her loved and needed objects and to herself” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 130). I suggest that it is this ambivalence that is evident in Robbie and Yang’s stories of work at the mine—Robbie, in his dislike of the mundane rhythms of his work and the unhealthy life they enable, and Yang, in his incapacity to leave his self-avowedly tedious working life. Despite these adverse evaluations, the ties that bind are as much internal as external, through commitments made to past selves and others, and the inertia of life in place. The central conflict of these stories is not between self and other, but rather between self and self—caught the desire to remain the same, and the desire to become different.

Accordingly, Sedgwick's suggestion is that, for Proust, the devastations of loss must be understood within this ever-shifting background of psychic life, where compulsions to change remain immanent. Upon experiencing the loss of his grandmother, the narrator *is* seen experience attacks of grief and guilt, but he acknowledges that these represent "the heart's intermittences"; for Sedgwick, the narrator "uses this phrase not to trivialize [the intermittent attacks of grief and guilt], but to acknowledge, however sadly or guilty, that the grandmother in this aspect is a presence among other internal presences—an object, however riveting, or even a family of objects, that comes and goes" (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 31). As a result, the narrator's version of "mourning ... is not a failed Oedipalized mourning", but rather "a stubbornly successful version of an animistic, Kleinian dynamic" that recognises the "foundational, authentically difficult understanding that good and bad tend to be inseparable at every level" (Sedgwick, 2006, p. 2). No longer stuck in an Oedipal cycle of melancholia and return, Proust's narrator then has "room to realize that the future may be different from the present", to that selves can change and ultimately to entertain "such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities" that the future may once again be different too (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 146).

For me, Klein's distinctions are discerning. I offer that both Yang and Robbie's narrations of their past lives suggest a reckoning by way of the depressive position, a realisation and re-evaluation made with the passing of time. In our discussions, neither romanticises or idealises their former workplaces, recognising the concurrent presence of good and bad dimensions to the lives those livelihoods made possible. And yet, the stories told by both men suggest that while they were still at the operating mines, living their former lives, both were inextricably attached to their work, not interested in severing their ties for the 'good' object. This difference does not, to me, suggest inconsistency or incoherence, any more than the subject itself is necessarily inconsistent and incoherent with itself and its past selves over time. Nor do I think that it represents my failure as an interviewer to triangulate *exactly* what the disposition each of the men was to their former work, as if such an unswerving singularity of evaluation and attachment were typical. Instead, this divergence suggests the intervening work of a process of reckoning and repair, of collecting different objects to nurture and be nurtured by, of the tragic recognition of the transience, and ambivalence, of all things. Repair is as much about repairing relations to the outside, as it is about reconfiguring the self's internal conflict with other parts of itself. Through this "back-and-forth process between the two positions" (Sedgwick, 2006, p. 2) and in response to the push of the world, bodies are offered the possibility of surprising the selves we once were and becoming, in the course of things, someone they didn't know they might become.

* * *

By now, we're on to our mains. The story keeps moving forward, as Robbie explains that "the writing starts being on the wall" again: Charbon has finally run out of coal. Robbie knew this was coming at some point; they all knew this was coming. "I was told in the interview that 'we *will* be shutting'," but Robbie jokes that his response at the time was to flippant wave it off—that's future-Robbie's problem. When the end does come, it happens quickly. After years of digging in, they begin pulling out of the mine. "It's now just full extraction, it's just rip-tear-bust," and, then, all of a sudden, "we are done."



People responded differently. "A lot of the guys were like, *"okay, that'll be me, I'll move to the coast,"* Robbie mimics, putting on a relaxed voice. Younger guys were more hopeful, *"oh, I'll see if I can get a gig at [the mines in nearby] Mudgee."* And a few other guys were noticeably stressed, in denial: *"no this, won't happen; we'll be right. we'll be right, we'll be right."*

Robbie is ultimately saved from another retrenchment when the announcement is

made that Airly mine is re-opening. Robbie is offered a new contract and accepts it.

In the meantime, however, a stressed-out Robbie had been working on a contingency plan. “While Charbon was ramping down, I started to apply for jobs, because there’s no guarantee.” Knowing that he might be left without work, he looks all over, in mining, fly-in fly-out work, he even applies for the Australian Antarctic Division. I laugh and ask how the latter application came about and Robbie explains that his sister had sent him a newspaper cutting. “A mate of mine had joked about it—he’s like ‘well, you know, you’re single, why not?’”

When things work out with Airly, Robbie is relieved. All else falls by the wayside. Robbie is in the first group of workers to move across. The men dedicatedly work to get the mine up and running, extra grateful for the employment.

Then, something surprising happens. Several months into the job, Robbie finds a voicemail on his phone. He rings back during his lunch break. It’s the Australian Antarctic Division. They would like him to come in for an interview. Even years later, recounting this story on his back patio, Robbie can barely believe what he is hearing. Robbie goes promptly into meltdown mode.



Robbie is invited to a two-day selection centre interview and the days there prove to be transformative. He is flown to Adelaide and introduced to the other candidates. “I went through it—trade interview was great, selection centre was amazing—and I just went ‘these people are *fantastic*.’” Robbie loves the people he meets there, the staff, the other candidates, the activities they undertake. He returns to Airly and slips back into work, but after the horizon-expanding experience, his focus has shifted. No longer fixated by the job at hand, the next few weeks are spent excitedly, and impatiently, anticipating another call.

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“Mining jobs are very stable, every day you go to work, you finish work, you get your pay, you have your leisure time.” Yang admits that “when you’ve done something for a long enough time, you *do* start to find it boring ...

But,” he says, clicking his tongue in resignation, “there just isn’t that kind of *necessity* for you to give up your job.” Perhaps it’s a matter of reaching a threshold, Jianan proposes, that “you hadn’t gotten to the *degree* where you might abandon something.” “*Yes,*” Yang nods. That’s it — “you have a *secure* job, what are you going out to look for *other* things for?”

When the mine announces its imminent closure, Yang stops showing up to work. It is the final push. There are months of work before things finally close, but Yang sees no point anymore. He takes sick leave and doesn’t go back.



“The closure of the mine—what effect did it have? Actually, for younger people, the effect isn’t very big because they can go out and find another job. But, for older people, those who have not yet reached retirement, it is extremely difficult. Why?” Yang asks rhetorically.

“Because they’ve spent their entire lives at the mine. They *only* know how to do this work.” But “for young people, it doesn’t matter. If you want to close, then close. If not, then don’t close, right? Because, if you shut, it’s not like I’m going to *starve* from the closure,” he

reasons. “I have a lot of other things—open a shop, for example—that I might aspire to do.”

After leaving the mine, Yang decides to start doing food deliveries full time, as a gig worker on mobile platforms. He rides an electric scooter. It’s not exactly new for him. “Even when I was still working at the mine, I sometimes used to do this on the side,” harking back to his old side gig at McDonalds. But now, upon finishing at the mine, he does it all day, mixing it in with other kinds of casual work where it pops up

He speaks nostalgically of the period. “I did so many different things,” he recalls, because “you have *time* again. You didn’t have to go to work at the mine, so you have *time*. One day, 24 hours—*it all belongs to you*.” With his words, I can almost feel the wind in his hair, riding through the streets, hot summer breeze billowing through the smoky coal city. Free from the subterranean loops of the dark coal mine. Free to pick up a job if it suited, and say no if he wanted. “It was nice,” Yang reminisces.

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After weeks of anxious waiting, Robbie eventually receives a letter in the mail. “Ah, bummer!” It’s a rejection letter. Robbie is disappointed. Back to everyday life. “Back to reality.”



Behind the scenes, the wheels keep on turning. Life at the mine keeps on churning. And, as Robbie is to find out, life is a rollercoaster that keeps on returning. Robbie is out running errands when he receives a call, about a month later. Another private number. Robbie considers ignoring it but decides to pick it up. It's someone from the Australian Antarctic Division. "Would you still be interested?"



Robbie is offered a 12-month deployment to Mawson Station, one of Australia's three permanent research stations on Antarctica, as an electrician. Robbie has another meltdown, this time in the shop. "I'm walking around like a drunk guy," he remembers, "bamboozled." Robbie barely makes it back to his car. "I've crashed into a power pole before in a car, and that didn't compare to how I was."

I ask what felt so shocking and Robbie's mouth opens, before pausing, like a deer, or

goldfish, in headlights. “It was just... I don’t know!” Finding words, Robbie explains that, “it was just—*what?* Because I’ve gone from the *same mundane crap* to, like, just being told that you’re going to leave the *continent*, and someone actually *wants you* for your skills.”

“So, yeah. I got a 12-month deployment,” Robbie grins, and “*instantly* forgot what coalmining was.”

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III Displacement and the senses

Through Klein’s creative understanding of the subject, Sedgwick contrasts Proust’s complex time with Freud’s Oedipal time. The latter is based on a closed and cyclical economy of rebirth where nothing much really changes, a return of the same with its “perpetual recycling of elements, lives, positions, structures, and desires that honors the conservation of matter and energy, that operates according to law” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 3). In contrast, Proust’s text highlights that such systems, social or otherwise, are never truly closed, that they constantly go “wastefully, farcically off-course” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 3). For Proust, what is more interesting than the question of order and succession is the question of how transformations big and small occur, “of how open systems relate to closed ones”, of how humans can have “continuing access to a psychology of surprise and refreshment” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 4).

What can act as such an engine of alteration? Sedgwick identifies several instigators of change in Proust: love, of course. And loss. Also sleep, and dreams. And, perhaps more surprisingly, the weather. Not just the hot and cold of temperature, but the enveloping happenstance of air and atmosphere. The weather, “a constant force of fascination, regeneration, and even transmigration” (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 35), becomes an unceasing source of renewal and variation. A cool breeze. A thunderstorm. As Ingold (2010) puts it, “The *experience of weather* lies at the root of our moods and motivations ... critical to the relation between bodily movement and the formation of knowledge” (p. 122). The changeability of something as ineffable, and without origin, as the local weather is part of what safeguards the inexhaustibility of surprise in Proust’s world.

Linking the contingencies of weather systems to theories of complexity and chaos, Sedgwick's aim is to show how closed loops—zero-sum energy transfers, tight eddies, fast-flowing currents—open up into the “irreducibly contingent” world of change (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 35). Harking back to the chapter on turbulence, the mutually dependent (rather than oppositional) relation between ordered and disordered systems is an idea that evokes Serres' understanding of the swerving and fluid laws of nature that order the local, singular, historical—and changing—relations between things in the world. By drawing attention to the minute and fickle changes of the weather, Sedgwick suggests that *any* encounter become a catalyst for change, even ones that may seem trivial or mundane. Linking to the *internal* conflicts of the self, what is foregrounded is the interplay of interior and exterior forces, how a seemingly small external trigger can resonate inside to generate change.

On the renewing potentials of atmospheric change, Serres (2009) puts forth a related view when he writes of the joys of the senses as they interface with the weather-world. Serres speaks of bodies “set ablaze by the sun”, nourished “in a warm room”, invigorated by “diving into an ice-cold swimming pool” (2009, p. p. 311, 313). Plunged into the weather-world, the body is drawn to movement. Heat inspires circulation. Speaking to the pleasures of movement—of swimming, breathing, jumping and feeling light in the air—Serres describes the sensations of bodies shot through with experiences of cold, wind, snow, sun. Linking the movements inspired by weather-worlds to movement's joys, Serres shows how the intensities of sensation become converted folded into energies of action that give vitality to life.

Serres immediate target of critique is the dominance given to the forces of language, techne and abstraction in modern times. But his denunciation is to be read in the context of a lament for what such abstractions relegate. That is, his critique aims to revive a sensitivity to corporeal joys, ones that can only be accessed through the senses. The body is intimately connected to its surroundings; rather than peripheral or epiphenomenal, the senses are the precursor to thought. For Serres, who thinks that modern thinkers often move too quickly from sense to thought, it is dwelling in the feeling-space before thought that excites. As Serres observes in the chapter ‘Tables’—set at a banquet reminiscent of Plato's symposium—one cannot truly savour the exquisite *taste* of one's food if one is also *talking*. By moving straight to discourse and thought, one misses the joys of the senses, overlooking the wide field of pleasure and possibility set off by sensory experience in the world.

To demonstrate his point, Serres gives the example of jumping: of bouncing on a trampoline, of flying through the air—“the second bodily pleasure after breathing” (2009, p. 314). Jumping is a

simple pleasure known by children, but cast aside by rational adult life. Serres writes of the joys of “jumping on a hard, bouncy bed”, or the pleasures of the animal that “crouches, ready to spring”: the build-up, the anticipation, the feeling of “the force of the potential”, the exhilaration (2009, p. 316). Referencing another key theme of his work, *angels*, Serres refers to the western tradition that “defines an angel as a body that can instantaneously do everything that the mind conceives, projects or desires” (2009, p. 315). Joy is the *lightness* and *ease* of the body when it is carried by angels. It is thus in the relation of the body to its senses and movement that Serres finds the origins of joy. Joy comes from movement, but joy also “inspires, quivers, dances”, propelling the body back into the world—where “desire dances, indifference sleeps” (Serres, 2009, p. 321).

By placing the self *beside* the body, the assault of the senses offers the self a means of *exceeding* itself, swept up in the momentum of movement, the flurry of forces, the currents of circumstance. The standing and static body is grounded by gravity, stable, imposed with a centred and “axial symmetry” in relation to its surrounds (Serres, 2009, p. 321). The moving body, on the other hand, constantly displaces this centre through a contortion of limbs, no longer grounded to a single place. “The point leaves me and goes to seek its fortune in the world”, pulling on the body, plastic and elastic, prone to deformation (Serres, 2009, p. 322). In movement, the body discovers its capacities, develops new capacities, produces effects that are otherwise impossible for the stationary self. Likening this axial dis-placement to a ball game, Serres explains that it is the agile, not the rigid, players that “will be able to learn everything because they have abandoned their own law and given up controlling things in order to adapt” (Serres, 2009, p. 322). A body’s capacity for the joys of ease and ability emerge only through a dance with its milieu, by learning to move in concert.

By recognising the self’s exposure to the outside, Sedgwick and Serres show the positive or reparative side of vulnerability, beyond its typical characterisation as a negative trait of existence (see Harrison, 2008). Thought can move bodies—but so too do the senses. Serres describes this process of becoming receptive to the senses as a kind of rebirth, “a place of schizogenesis” (2009, p. 323) in the body. “Incarnation is”, as Hardt (2002) writes, “all about abandonment—abandonment to the flesh” (p. 78). Through sensation, the body reorganises the subject through a kind of distancing, where the self is displaced from the self by chasing the joys of movement, conforming in relation to an external object. It is through this displacement from one’s received self—“my inner core suddenly taking up position a certain distance away, absenting itself”, that transitions in the self can occur, where “the totally alien and remote can, when it wishes, also receive shelter and lurk nearby and inside” the vacated space (Serres, 2009, p. 323). Through the externally exposed nature of the

senses, the body is always already transforming itself, turning from sensitivity to sensibility “in a perpetual exchange, turbulence, whirlwind, circumstance” (Serres, 2009, p. 307).

For Yang, we might glimpse something of this more-than-representational sensory exchange in the movement inspired by gig work on his scooter, trading the heavy air of the dim coal mine for the breezy loops of the streets. For Robbie, we might sense the new joys encountered in the new sensory experiences hinted at in the interview journey, trading the monotony of the mine for the adventure of interstate travel, fresh faces and new activities, all with the prospect of unimagined explorations in the extraordinary white plains of Antarctica. Through the senses, Serres suggests that “[t]he body exceeds the body, the I surpasses the I, identity delivers itself from belonging” (Connor, 1999 n.p.). The joys of movement and the movements inspired by joy suggests a subject that lags behind its body, working to keep up with the twists and turns of its senses as atmospheric changes come to resonate within.

* * *

After three months training together in Hobart, the crew have become close. “I met some of the most amazing people I have ever come across,” Robbie says, still awestruck. The vegan doctor, the animal activist with dreadlocks. One of the fitters was a hard-rock miner. Another guy worked in the gas fields in Queensland. The chef had taught refugees how to bake bread.

Despite all this adventure, Robbie doesn’t know that the biggest moment of the breathless journey is yet to come.



A month into their deployment to Antarctica, Robbie receives an email out of the blue. “Hi, my name is Nicolette, Nic for short.”

Thinking it’s a joke, maybe someone in the crew pulling his leg, Robbie doesn’t try too hard with his reply. “I sent back an *appalling* email.” Nic smiles and nods, agreeing.

The pair have been set up through Robbie’s sister and brother-in-law, an old colleague of Nic’s. But no one remembers to tell Robbie. Nic was initially hesitant—she wasn’t exactly in the mood for love—but figures there is nothing to lose by saying hi. “I just thought, ‘well, now I’ve got a pen pal in Antarctica’. That’s kind of novel isn’t it?”



After the shaky start, the pair quickly start exchanging emails regularly. Robbie tells Nic of day-to-day life in Antarctica and Nic tells Robbie about her new job, about how the kids at the school are driving her crazy. After a few months, they have their first phone conversation. Soon, it’s clear that there’s something more there, that it might be serious.

Robbie compares the feel of meeting Nic to his first move to Lithgow all those years ago,

to the big life changes that were set off when he had first trained to become an electrician at Charbon. “It was *that* sensation again that I hadn’t had for years. And I’m going, *hold on*, I know this feeling. *Times are changing.*”

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When Yang is eventually called back in to claim his new job, he barely spends half a day there before calling it quits. He has been moved to Mine No. 1. The underground position he has been allocated is physically demanding, “more laborious than any job I’ve ever done.” Most importantly, though, “I just didn’t want to do it anymore,” he says with a shrug. His time off has done its work: it has exposed him to new sensations and pleasures, engendered new thoughts, cemented his resolve. He decides that he’d rather keep doing the gig work.



“When I used to work at the mine, I accepted this reasoning that I was kind of just sitting there, *waiting*—waiting for my retirement. There was no real driving force. You just had no emotions, no real passion. You went to work every day.” You wake up, and suddenly

you're in the middle of your life, no idea how you got there.

Yang seems to differ from his elders—and many of his peers—in his idea of a desirable job. The elders all fetishise the stable job, the iron rice bowl, of the state-owned enterprise; indeed, he once did too. But Yang is not so sure anymore. Since leaving the mine, his ideas have changed.



“What is ‘stable’ anyway?” he ponders. “You go out to do a job. If you’ve worked there for a longer time, then isn’t that ‘stable’?” Yang gestures instead to the other edge of stability, one where unbounded repetition has darker resonances. Everything is fixed at the mine. It’s boring. Enclosed. “You pass *every day* there. But what have you *really* got to pass?” Yang asks. “How many years can you just *pass*? You’re there until you’re 60. That’s decades. Are you going to just *pass* all that time?”

“In actuality, there’s isn’t really much particular advantage to stability,” Yang concludes. “It might even mean you lose that motivation for life,” Jianan summarises. “Exactly,” Yang says.

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IV Transgression and desire

Connor notes that there is something oppressively affirmative, even thoughtlessly optimistic, about Serres's writing on the gifts of the senses. By revelling in their additive and constantly displacing nature, Serres produces an "abundant and all-inclusive celebration of the senses" that refuses "loss, depletion, mortality, omission" (Connor, 1999, n.p.). The superabundance of the senses, however, must be understood in the context of Serres's global ontology of mixed bodies, caught in the constant knitting and reknitting that constitutes the energetic flux of the world. Following the conservation of matter, everything exists not in relation to production and destruction, but *order* and *disorder*, to decaying forces of entropy and negentropic preservations of information (Watkin, 2020, p. 132). In this sense, Serres's philosophical vitalism should not be equated with an unbounded positivity, but an image of time that 'percolates': "changing not in a linear way but moving stochastically, often unpredictably, running in eddies, slowing down, speeding up, changing direction abruptly like the fly", tracking the same atmospheric contingencies that lead "Bergson to define weather (*le temps*) as 'uninterrupted gushing forth of unpredictable novelties'" (Watkin, 2020, p. 137).

Folding the intensities of decomposition and disorder into his ontology, Serres' position on the vital sensations that suffuse life can be paralleled with philosopher and novelist Georges Bataille's vitalism, one that, as suggested in the literature review, takes on darker shades than the more joyful canon prominent in human geography. As Rose (2019) notes, "[f]or Bataille, the overflowing energies that service life equally service death" (p. 323). Like Serres, Bataille seeks a more cosmic imaginary for understanding the flux of energies that drive life. Where Serres speaks of the everyday joys of movement, suggesting a progressive style of displacement that mirrors the style of habit, Bataille emphasises the transformational possibilities of acute encounters to alienate the self from its former self, as events of *transgression*. The texts in which Bataille deals with transgression are inextricably linked with his writings on eroticism, but as Noys (2000) writes, Bataille's understanding of eroticism can be developed "beyond the domain of sexuality" to conceptualise how bodies can encounter an irreducible outside that, although evoking a pleasant experience, pierces the self, producing an upwelling of intensities that can rupture the self's ostensible boundaries (p. 82).

In order to understand Bataille's eroticism, it is useful to situate its intensities within his broader theory of the 'general economy' in *The Accursed Share* (1988). In the general economy, 'expenditure' (what might usually be called consumption) of wealth is seen as the primary process

driving society. Bataille positions the general economy against what he sees as the artificially constrained world of the ‘restricted economy’ (what one conventionally associates with the term ‘economy’). Whereas restricted economies are founded on the primacy of production, the general economy prioritises consumption, understanding the world to be an excessive place of over-abundant energies. Restricted economies assume that societies tending towards the maximisation of ‘utility’, through production, growth and use-values. In contrast, by understanding the general economy’s prodigious energies to come from the magnanimity of the sun, Bataille rearticulates life as a world of overflowing energies that perpetuates a “relentless process of unmitigated waste and death” (Rose, 2019, p. 323). Living systems, animated by the sun’s unremitting gifts, must find a way to dispose of the excess energies that cannot be used for a system’s growth, what Bataille calls ‘the accursed share’. Given this super-abundance, Bataille understands *consumption* as “the sovereign principle of activity” (1991, p. 16), rather than a logic of production based on utility and value. Importantly, the general economy exists without a teleology; “ontologically wired to produce and expend energy, it does so without direction, purpose or cause” (Rose, 2019, p. 323). In the general economy, expenditure, loss and waste are the primary driving forces of life.

In Vol. II of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille turns to ‘eroticism’ as a—perhaps *the* paradigmatic—form of useless expenditure upon which societies are organised. In fact, Bataille recognises eroticism as the ultimate basis for not only useless expenditures, but even useful ones: “all answer in the first instance to the demands of eroticism” (1991, p. 16). Even ‘useful’ forms of work come initially not from utility but desire, with “work and eroticism ... draw from the same fund of energy resources”—the desires that drive human expenditures of energy (Bataille, 1991, p. 17). Eroticism is not just sexuality—more expansively, “eroticism” is the practice of expenditure and futile enjoyment” (Hartmann, 2016, p. 141). Instead, eroticism is about *wasting* energy, insofar as the energies gifted by the general economy *must* be expended. Pleasure, for Bataille, is perhaps unsurprisingly related to an outpouring expenditure of energy. Put pithily, “[e]rotic activity ... illustrates a principle of human behavior in the clearest way: what we want is what uses up our strength and our resources” (Bataille, 1991, p. 104). Unlike Freud’s pleasure principle whose aim is to protect the subject from pain and too much pleasure, Bataille’s eroticism is not founded on restriction (which Bataille considers utilitarian). For Bataille, living beings do not act just to be useful, but rather to list into intensities of feeling, to experience the exhilaration of life at the edge of our capacities, to use up the meaningless energies gifted to us.

Underlying Bataille's concept of eroticism is a distinction between two states of being: discontinuous and continuous. The discontinuous state refers to a state in which beings are separate from one another, existing as stand-alone entities; in a continuous state, being are connected to each other. Reproduction involves the transition from a discontinuous to a continuous state, where what were once two separate entities experience a state of continuity, producing a 'violent' act that, if momentary, dissolves the boundaries of the body. For Bataille, the pleasure of eroticism is produced in the play of difference between these states (Noys, 2000). At heart, then, Bataille's eroticism describes the "tormenting desire" that people have to "substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity" (Bataille, 1986, p. 15). Consequently, the transition from discontinuity to continuity in erotic experience comes to "destroy the self-contained character of the participants as they are in their normal lives" (Bataille, 1986, p. 17). It is in the excessive moment of erotic transgression that a new kind of intersubjectivity becomes possible, one which lacerates the subject, opening up a discontinuity with self and continuity with the other. "[D]emand[ing] that one give oneself away and abolish[ing] the imaginary wholeness of the being", eroticism is "a process which demands a great deal of violence" (Hartmann, 2016, p. 140). It is an experience in which one loses the 'feeling of self' that distinguishes the discontinuous being, a loss that induces a kind of 'death' in the subject. In contrast with the painful loss of self explored in 'Turbulence', eroticism implicates an *affirmable* form of loss, producing a break that institutes a desirable version of self.

Bataille's discussion of love is helpful for characterising the nature of the relations inaugurated by eroticism, producing the continuity of what he calls a 'totality'. Bataille declares that love, "in its essence", is nothing more than "the coincidence of two desires" whereby "I awaken in [the object of my desire] a desire equal to mine (1991, p. 113). In love, we become reduced to nothing but the "immense and anguished desire for the other desire" (Bataille, 1991, p. 113). In the moment of reciprocated desire we become a continuous 'totality' with another. Although the other here is usually assumed to be another human, this is not necessarily the case. Alongside the more transgressive 'perversions' of Bataille's writings, we might look to more ordinary forms of desire circulating in contemporary societies, such as the pleasure of the text that 'desires' the reader (Barthes, 1975), or the 'fetishistic' commodity form whose soul Walter Benjamin once described as being "the most empathetic ever encountered ... for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle" (quoted in Ngai, 2012, p. 4). Rather than emphasise the fusion or unity associated usually with the "two-as-one intimacy of the couple form" (Berlant,

2012, p. 6), Bataille's erotic 'totality' suggests the moment where the subject loses its integrity, dissolving into a continuity with another.

The totality is formed in the embrace of two desiring bodies. Looking beyond the ordered world of the intellect, Bataille foregrounds the disordering force of sensation in erotic experience. In desire, thought falls away, clearing a space for the abyss of sensation. Bataille uses the metaphor of 'drowning' to describe what happens to the thinking subject in the embrace, in which the mental operations of the body are sidelined by material forces (1991, p. 115). The impressions received from sensation are vague, in the sense that they "reveal to us nothing clear or distinct", but the "high-pitched intensity" of these sensations "overruns us" (Bataille, 1991, p. 119). Connection and continuity, then, comes "at the price of a sacrifice" of the existing self (Bataille, 1991, p. 119). It has a "doubled-edged character": rather than "an unambiguously joyous escape from discontinuity", eroticism "places one beyond comfort and comprehension" in an experience of disorientation (Shilling and Mellor, 2010, p. 441). This change, however, is not a 'positive' one in the sense of a straight-forward transition into some other regime of meaning. Although "I am no longer myself", I am not yet something else either—rather, in the interval, I am "an infinity in which I am lost" (Bataille, 1991, p. 115).

By detouring through these principles of Bataille's thought, my suggestion is that encounters with reciprocated desire can work to induce a moment of interruption in the experiences and evaluations of the self, carving a path to different regimes of being. Although I cannot say for sure what the inner experience of these events might have been for Robbie and Yang, I suggest that the animated tone of our discussions and the significance they ascribe to resonating events of desire suggest the evidence the dis- and re-orienting forces of 'erotic' experience in re-invigorating the lives of these men. For Robbie, the effects were cumulative, with a chain of linked but surprising encounters with desire—from the thrill of a new vocation, new friends and a new love—serving to distance himself from anxieties and concerns that occupied him in the past. For Yang, desire's capacity to accompany movement and sensation swims to the fore. In contrast to the deadening loops of his former job at the coal mine, he speaks of his experiences of gig work at a kind of emancipation, where the surging demand for workers enables him to attain a freedom of movement he has never experienced before. Awaking him from the corporeal slumber of his former life, the inviting new activities are accompanied by the upsurge of energies that accompanies pleasure, compelling him to re-evaluate his former priorities, alienating him from his past self and inducing attachments to new worlds.

* * *

Upon his return from Antarctica, Robbie and Nic finally meet in person at the airport. After months and months of slow correspondence, things start moving fast. Robbie moves up to Queensland where Nic is living and they move in together. On the outside, things might not look like they have shifted much—Robbie finds a job back in mining—but, on the inside, big changes are afoot.



Nic is a worldly soul—a social worker who has done humanitarian work internationally—and through his time overseas and his time with Nic, Robbie develops a new outlook on life too. By the time I meet them, they are back in Kandos, Nic for the first time. Robbie is back at his old job at Airly, the one he left to go to Antarctica. But they are back in Kandos not to settle down, but to *uproot*.

I enter their home amid renovations, as they put the final pieces together so that they can sell Robbie's house in Kandos to go travelling, to see where life's adventures might take them. Their dream is to go on an international trip every year and they excitedly tell me about an

upcoming housesitting gig in a wildlife reserve in Tasmania.

Robbie talks about the disorientation of going back to his old workplace, back on night shift maintenance, back with all the old guys. He was on the same job, he even got his old locker again. “It was like a very creepy time warp,” Robbie says with a laugh. Everything seems to have come to a standstill, except “*Robbie*,” Nic says emphatically. “All that’s changed is *Robbie*.”



After hours of conversation, the warm night finally draws to an end. We are saying goodbyes on the front veranda, when Nic makes a remark that catches me off guard. As an afterthought, Nic comments that, if Charbon hadn't have shut, she doesn't think that Robbie would *ever* have left his job at the coal mine. “He would have kept going on and on until *some* big thing happened to him,” Nic says. Robbie’s past self would never have given up the job, not in a million years. He would have held on to what he knew, never knowing the parallel lives that might be in store for him. Robbie, standing beside Nic at their front door, agrees. “So, for us”, Robbie affirms, “Charbon closing was a good thing.”

* * *

* * *

Yang is on the long afternoon break between lunch and dinner shifts. We are chatting in a booth at the busy restaurant where Yang has been working for the past year, a western-style local chain named 'Zoo,' set in a shiny new shopping mall in Pingdingshan. On the wall beside us is a hand-painted safari mural, replete with colourful lions, rhinos and zebras grazing on a grassy savannah. By the front entrance is a worker dressed in a giant panda suit, hawking flyers.



“How did you end up working here?” I finally have the opportunity to ask, filling the gap between the life as a gig worker he has told us about, and the life he is now living. Yang smiles and tracks back to pick up another thread in time. He had originally started working at the restaurant casually, doing a few hours here and there. He had stopped doing deliveries but wasn’t really in the market for a full-time job. With the family’s car paid off and no mortgage, Yang didn’t really have a lot of financial pressure. Instead, what mattered was that he could enjoy his freedom while still

working, still doing his bit. “So long as you know that you *are* earning some money, it’s enough.”

He started out at the restaurant casually, but he says management saw that he was a good worker and wanted him to stay on. He was initially reluctant to formally commit, but they asked again and again and, in the end, he agreed.

“So, you’re currently quite satisfied with working here?” I ask, extrapolating from his response. Yang pauses. “How do I put it? It’s not so much ‘*satisfied*’ or ‘*not satisfied*’, but more that you still haven’t *learnt* everything there is to learn here,” he says. “When a person does something for an extended time, it’s always going to become bothersome ... If you were just to act according to your feelings, you probably wouldn’t keep doing it.”

The key is that compared to the old mining job, working at the restaurant is stimulating for Yang; there’s a sense of novelty, of something more, of something that—at least now for now—remains to be discovered. It’s not just about money. What’s more important is that you are always compelled to want to know more, that “you’re learning lots of things.” Learning about how to organise a commercial kitchen, how to prepare meals and beverages, how to manage a restaurant, how to handle customers. “In all respects, there are things you need to learn.”



“It could be that, one day, there’s nothing more you can learn.” Yang reflects. “Well, then you could change workplaces again, right? Go to a different place and continue learning there.”

* * *

V Learning and signs

Bataille opens *The History of Eroticism* by suggesting that worlds can coexist with each other in space and time without being sensed—incommensurate, distant, illegible. Material worlds are read differently not only by differently positioned subjects, but also between the different *subject* positions one might inhabit at different points in time. This is because worlds are not just material, but also *immaterial*; universes are not just constellations of matter, but also worlds of *signs*. As Deleuze explains, “worlds are unified by their formation of sign systems emitted by persons, objects, substances” (2000, p. 4).

Deleuze explores these themes in his book *Proust and Signs*. Like Sedgwick, Deleuze finds in Proust’s multi-volume novel a rich source of material for exploring the flux of the subject, through changing orientations, inclinations and dispositions over time. Combining literary with philosophical analysis, his approach similarly avoids trapping Proust’s narrative in a cycle of melancholy, by situating traces of the past in the flux of the present and showing how encounters can lead life into the future. Both thinkers are interested in conceptualising the way that bodies are exposed to external conditions that come to shape them from without, but where Sedgwick emphasises how this impact resonates to produce interior shifts using psychoanalytic theories, Deleuze stays with the moment of impact to show how the sensory world can work to involuntarily mobilise bodies, leading people on a ‘search’ for meaning that comes to generate new worlds of possibility. By emphasising the expressive dimensions of matter, Deleuze not only emphasises the

communications of sense and sensation, but also the process of *learning* that accompanies sensory experience. For Deleuze, the task of Proust's narrator is to be involved in an 'apprenticeship' to the signs emitted by the world. Worlds, in this theory, are not pre-given to consciousness; instead, they are made through a process of explication and development.

Deleuze's discussion of signs in Proust enables exploration of how the impacts of sensation and desire can be the opening to an embodied process of learning. Where Bataille's experience of eroticism dissolves the subject into the abyss, Deleuze's discussion demonstrates how sense-worlds are entangled with processes of meaning-making, in turn showing how the sensuous propulsions of desire can work to reconstruct worlds. "Learning is essentially concerned with signs," Deleuze argues. This is because to "learn is first of all to consider a substance, an object, as if it emitted signs to be deciphered, interpreted" (Deleuze, 2000, p. 4). Signs are not objects of abstract knowledge; signs are sensations, intensities and feelings that move the body. They are "sensations that force us to think, that give rise to thought" (Smith, 2012, p. 90). Compared to the cognitive nature of thought, the "sign riots the soul, renders it perplexed, as if the encountered sign were the bearer of a problem" (Smith, 2012, p. 92). This means that signs are experienced as *sense* before their significations are *made sense of*.

Deleuze identifies the four worlds of signs in Proust's novel: worldly signs, signs of love, sensuous signs, and signs of art. What interests me here, are the middle two signs: the sensuous signs and the signs of love. Sensuous signs refer to impressions and qualities associated with sensory experience. Upon being encountered, sensuous signs have an immediate effect on bodies, releasing an intensity of feeling that leads sensation to thought. The sensuous sign "gives us a strange joy at the same time that it transmits a kind of imperative" to seek out the sensation's meaning or origin (Deleuze, 2000, p. 8). This communication between bearer and receiver transforms the object that is seen to emit the sign, suggesting to the recipient that the object holds unknown dimensions "that we must try to decipher" (Deleuze, 2000, p. 8). Although an object is understood to *bear* and *express* signs, Deleuze recognises that it is not the object itself that has "the secret" of the signs it emits (2000, p. 18). Instead, this moment of recognition is borne of a collaboration between the material and the immaterial, between the 'two sides' of our impressions: "[h]alf sheathed in the object, extended in ourselves by another half that we alone can recognize' (III, 891)" (Proust quoted in Deleuze, 2000, p. 19).

To demonstrate the activity of the sensuous sign, Deleuze uses the famous example of Proust's madeleine, a small shell-shaped cake that, when soaked in lime-blossom tea, solicits for the narrator

the forgotten memory of his childhood, alongside a great feeling of joy. The search provoked by the sign—in this case, the taste of the tea-dipped madeleine—does not end at the involuntary memory of the scene. As Deleuze notes, this development is but a stage in a greater apprenticeship, as the question of *why* the sign holds such joys still remains. The sensuous sign thus becomes the catalyst for a wider search for meaning, “open[ing] a new path” for the subject by prompting the activity of reflection (Deleuze, 2000, p. 58).

The second world of signs, the signs of love, act as the driving force of Proust’s narrator and novel. For Deleuze, love transforms the subject, inducing an apprenticeship in the signs of another. Falling in love instigates a process of individualisation in which one becomes sensitive to the signs emitted by the other, signs that express “a possible world unknown to us” but enwound in the other (Deleuze, 2000, p. 6). Like the sensuous signs, the signs of love orient the self outwards, finding within the other a foreign world that one is compelled to decipher. As Laurie and Stark (2017) suggest, this encounter involves something of a *hope*. By instigating an apprenticeship that we enter into before we know much of the other, at best, love denotes a “hope for the depth of signs in worlds that we cannot always control and cannot completely know” (Laurie and Stark, 2017, p. 75). In fact, the unknown nature of the other need not be a hindrance to love; it may indeed be its condition. For Chul-Han (2017), it is precisely the atopia—the negativity and otherness—of the other that makes eros possible, as it is the profanity of the *known*—the correspondence of the same—that eliminates desire. Like Bataille’s erotic totality, “[l]ove is, therefore, not about recognition either of the Other or by the Other, but it is instead ... concerned with the eradication of the stable and self-identical subject, the person, the organism” (Stark, 2012, p. 107). The apprenticeship inaugurated by the signs of love holds the promise of an ethics in which “difference is not merely enabled but affirmed”; in which difference is not only encountered, but also desired (Stark, 2012, p. 109).

For Robbie and Yang, I suggest that the sensations and feeling brought about by their new experiences in place evidence the intervention of signs in producing changing dispositions towards their circumstances. For Yang, these are the sensuous signs of experience; for Robbie, the signs of love. Yang speaks with energy of the joys of his new work, from the feeling of freedom in motion, the pleasures of successfully learning new skills and the satisfactions of progressing in his unexpected trade. The sudden intervention of these intensities compels him to stay with the activity, returning again and again to draw out further dimensions of meaning within those worlds of endeavour. With his thoughtful demeanour, he reflects on the process of learning that accompanied his search,

propelling him to continue exploring the new environment that has brought about these unexpected feelings of joy. For Robbie, the chain of unexpected events sparks a long and deepening reorientation away from his past preoccupations. First, the sensuous signs uprooting him from his attachments to mining, and even though he eventually stays in the industry for pragmatic reasons, his disposition has changed. Eventually, the signs of love work to uproot him entirely, overturning his relations to place in a demonstration of the old maxim that ‘home is where the heart is’.

Through the idea of ‘explication’, Deleuze suggests that the search or apprenticeship refers *forward* rather than backward, to “the development of the sign in itself” through its mixing, morphing and alteration in the subject’s encounters over time (Deleuze, 2000, p. 12). That is, to explicate the world of the other is not to search for something that *already* exists prior to the search. Deleuze’s signs are not semiotic signs in the Saussurean linguistic sense, referring back to an existing system or structure of knowledge. This is why signs are ‘explicated’ not discovered: explication suggests a process of development, of compilation. This process is not immediate; it “is an apprenticeship that in simple but vital terms takes *time*” (Ansell-Pearson, 2010, p. 162 emphasis added). The complex timespace of Proust’s novel centres on the fundamental idea that “time forms different series and contains more dimensions than space” (Ansell-Pearson, 2010, p. 163), proliferating the potential of the present for difference through the picking up and letting go of different threads developed throughout one’s lifetime.

It is through an apprenticeship with signs over time—though encounters that force bodies to think—that bodies learn to decipher and interpret signs and the meanings and truths they hold. By suggesting that the signs emerge involuntarily from the encounter, Deleuze underscores the primacy of the expressions of the other over the self. For Yang and Robbie, iterative encounters with signs form ‘associative series’ that push bodies towards new lines of becoming. The process of sign-interpreting is an interplay of sensation and thought—through sensation, the sign works a disturbance upon the subject, forcing the intellect to respond. By bringing the shock of disturbance together with the joys of sensation, the process of explication generates an experience in which the unknown nature of the future becomes a good thing, rolling into an energised process of interpretation, explication and learning that push at the limits of existing regimes of sensibility. This affirmation does not mean that the search is without disappointments, or that each apprenticeship is felt as an experience unmitigated of joy and desire. The unknown dimension of signs and worlds mean that disappointment remains a latent possibility of each subsequent development or encounter, as a fundamental moment in each search for meaning. Indeed, “the world vacillates in

the course of the apprenticeship” (Deleuze, 2000, p. 18); each disappointment opens a moment of hesitation, opening the possibility that the subject propelled into the search may give up the pursuit. But these disappointments are also moments that can inflect the search. For each “objective disappointment”, the subject can find a “subjective compensation” (Deleuze, 2000, p. 23) that finds meaning not in the object itself, but the world in which the sign circulates. Through this process, “we reconstruct associative series”, producing new chains of sensation and desire that link object, world and subject (Deleuze, 2000, p. 24). Taken together, the process of explication engendered by signs functions to re-orient the subject, proliferating lines of learning to offer the subject new worlds of affirmable change and meaning.

VI Normativity and comfort

Through an exploration of the back-tracing narratives offered by Robbie and Yang in our interviews, this chapter has explored the potential for experiences of desire to reorient bodies towards new worlds of meaning in ways that enable people to experience the unknown nature of the future as a hopeful and exciting, rather than distressing and precarious, timespace. Tracking turns of theory, I explore the resonance between the shifts in Robbie and Yang’s testimonies and the transformative capacities attributed to the workings of desire. Through the concept of reincarnation, I begin by addressing the potential for life to be refreshed and renewed, suggesting the potential of surprising encounters to pull the subject out of the trappings of melancholy. Exploring the flux of the subject’s internal life, I showed how even small external changes, such as those of the weather, can resonate within to produce changing subject positions. Understanding bodies not as inherently meta-stable entities, but as holding conflicting desires for growth and difference, I showed how impingements from the outside can resonate with latent (or virtual) tendencies subsisting in the unconscious to produce displacements of the self. When these sensations are married with the feeling of joy and desire, these intensities instigate a transgressive process of becoming in which the subject becomes open to difference. Racing to catch up with the displacing intensities of sensation’s signs, the subject is compelled to undertake a ‘search’ for meaning, inaugurating a process of learning about the worlds of an other.

In this final section, I inflect this conceptual story in a different direction to suggest some of the limits to desire’s capacities that may be less visible in this forward-looking view. Rather than negating the previous discussion, I aim to balance this account with a more critical reading of desire. Where the previous discussion has fallen on the reparative and reorienting side of sensation, I

turn here to the ideological critique of queer theorist Lauren Berlant to emphasise the normative dimensions of desire's feeling-space. Berlant is interested in the broader patternings of identity evident in a contemporary western context where "modern ideologies and institutions of intimacy that have installed sexuality as the truth of what a person is" (2012, p. 17). Having explored the potentials of progressive desire in the biographies of Robbie and Yang, I turn here to the more conservative impulses latent in their accounts, exploring how desire and normativity intersect to produce the timespace of *feeling normal*. Compared to the more emancipatory takes on desire prominent in geography, Berlant explores registers of experience that are generated by in-common and collective structurings of desire. Her writing acts as a check on the more progressive reading of signs and sensation by showing how the intensities of desire do not just flow into *new* lines of endeavour, but also into the 'associative series' of *existing* desires, drawing on accrued timelines of habit and memory suggested in the previous chapter.

For Berlant, the pleasures of desire can be a holding space, a space simply for self-*interruption* rather than self-*differentiation*. Berlant, like other queer, critical and feminist theorists, offers trenchant critiques of normativity, especially heteronormativity, emphasising the way desire and love are captured in disciplining and governing structures. Berlant identifies, for example, the 'Love Plot' that organises much of western social life, suggesting a structure of desire by which we can measure our lives and through which normative worlds are reproduced. But Berlant is equally sensitive to the *pleasures* that feeling normal offers, including in norms of love and desire. Her chapter 'Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal' discusses the affective life of normalcy and the desire to simply *feel* normal (Berlant, 2011, p. 161). Here, Berlant is not interested in seeing normativity as "a synonym for privilege", the way it is often—implicitly or explicitly—mobilised; nor is it simply the result of an "authoritarian desire" imposed upon the (infantile) subject (2011, pp. 167, 186). Through examples of precarious working-class youth for whom the objects of normativity are elusive, Berlant shows how the cushioning promises of normalcy—of the family unit, of love, of a job, of the "normative promises of capital and intimacy under capital" (2011, p. 170)—offer enduring objects of desire that present a holding ground for stability, one that is particularly potent in the impassive time of crisis. Translating this discussion into the conceptual language of this thesis, we might understand normative desires through the inertia of habit. For Berlant, desire is the result of repetition. Like the progressive desire associated with habit, desire emerges in relation to what has previously been experienced as desirable. It is this past resonance of repetition that "enables you to recognize, even unconsciously, your desire as a quality of yours" (Berlant, 2012, p. 20). Each repetition of desire refers back to the series, even as each 'repetition' inflects the series in new ways,

drawing in childhood memories, past encounters, previous loves, all of which have shaped—and continue to shape—the subject (see Deleuze 2000).

The point here is that the compelling roots of normative desires run deep, and drifting in the wake of established desires feels good. As the ambient weather of social formations, the signs of normativity are pervasive, unshakably etched into the nervous systems of bodies. For Robbie, we might see these cushioning instincts at work in the comforting timespaces of love, and the stability and security of self this bond offers him. For Yang, we might read these impulses in his insistence on the importance of holding down paid work, and the satisfactions of being repeatedly asked to stay on in his new role at the restaurant. The impact of gender is explicit here, through roles as lovers, partners, breadwinners and providers. These desires—the desire to inhabit successful masculinity, the desire for reciprocated romantic love and the desire to be a successful working subject—are not new, but the deeply engrained, capacious and elastic norms of social life. As a result, what I wish to amplify here is the capacity for normalised forms of desire to offer a *holding space* for sensation. Normative desires cushion *because of*, not despite, their conventional and repeated nature. Through the temporal depth of their attachments, norms can cradle and stabilise bodies against external shocks, as ballast against unaffirmable versions of difference.

Presenting boundaries that are expansive and inviting, but also rigid and regulated, I suggest that Robbie and Yang's stories paradoxically suggest a more reparative angle to the desiring institutions of normativity in a time of crisis. Desire, when it finds a stable scene for its repetition and encounter, turns into what might be called 'love', in turn offering a scene to which subjects can return to re-encounter desire. Drawing on Laplanche and Pontalis, Berlant locates this transmutation from desire to love in the workings of *fantasy*. Their argument is that love always has its roots in fantasy, for it is only with fantasy that an attachment might be reliable and coherent enough to smooth out the flux of experience, "to generate a secure psychotic enclave and to maintain the subject's openness to the ordinary disturbances of experience" (Berlant, 2012, p. 75). The incoherence of fantasy is understood to produce an ambivalent scene. But this is precisely the strength of fantasy: its ability to produce a scene that does not need to *add up*. In this sense, fantasy is integral to the security of any human subject, to its stability and continuity. It is for this reason that Berlant argues that the things you desire do not so much reflect who you "are", but rather "*something* about what it takes for you to anchor yourself in space and time", turning "the story of your life" into "the story of the detours your desire takes" (2012, pp. 76-77, original emphasis).

By demonstrating the vital importance of joys in the timespaces of crisis, Robbie and Yang's stories complicate a straightforwardly repressive reading of normativity, instead emphasising how it facilitates a feeling-space of desire, pleasure and comfort. Normative attachments can put "pressure on the infrastructure of the social world to be maintained despite its distributions of violence and negation", maintaining the status quo in order to protect the self (Berlant, 2011, p. 170). However, in Robbie and Yang's stories, another arrangement of subjectivity emerges alongside the normative propulsions of desire. Drawing together the different threads that populate this chapter, their desires evident in their stories mix the normative with the transgressive, the conservative with the progressive. They sketch complex and ambivalent landscapes of desire, ones that cannot be reduced to a regressive or an emancipatory paradigm. Together, their trajectories emphasise that desire, like life, is directed towards an incalculable mix of the known and the unknown. The time of the cosmos flows forward, producing novel rearrangements of matter that carry the inexhaustible potential to startle and surprise, to transform existing circumstances of life. By compelling people to willingly dive head-first into unknown worlds, the energetics of even normative desires can repair and transmute the ambivalence of scenes through processes of learning and change.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the potential of life after loss to be a timespace of affirmable transformation through the capacious operations of desire. It has aimed to stay close to the corporeal sensations of desire, tracking desire's plastic operations on the subject through surprise, pleasure, joy, love, dissolution and even disappointment. Proust provides the backbone of this story, through forward-oriented readings of life's vicissitudes by Sedgwick and Deleuze that emphasise how cycles of death and rebirth throughout a single lifetime mark the "elastic, permeable boundaries of individuation" (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 14). Alongside these touchstones, I have drawn on theorists of desire, tracing a line through Serres, Bataille and Berlant, to flesh out affirmable conduits for how personal change might be made possible in the course of everyday life. Desire suggests a mode exchange between internal worlds and external conditions in which outside impingements come to resonate within bodies, compelling displacements of subjectivity that are accompanied by intensities of pleasure and joy. Spinning webs of fantasy and association across spaces, objects and sensations, desire acts as a transmuter of signs. It bears the burden of anchoring the restless subject, aiming to produce worlds adequate to desire. And even if this does not happen, "even if desire fails to find objects adequate to its aim, its errors can still produce pleasure" (Berlant, 2012, p. 43). Rather than being characterised by its destination, desire is understood through its

“fundamental ruthlessness”, through its offering of conduits for “new optimism” and “new narratives of possibility” (Berlant, 2012, p. 43). As Berlant suggests, “[a]ll attachments are optimistic, if we describe optimism as the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene” (2011, pp. 1-2). For bodies thrust into crisis, the radial pleasures of desire—normative or otherwise—suggest a lever for lightening the crushing weight of loss. By directing selves towards new and more hopeful horizons of the future, desire draws out the latent potential for life after workplace closure to be a world-expanding experience, thrusting people into transformation environments that induce forms of difference that can be enlivening and energising, rather than traumatic and tiring.

To open this chapter, I suggested that the excesses of hope generated by the forward-looking rhythms of desire are integral to the feeling of ordinary wellbeing, offering “a hope without which existence would be untenable—that life, for ourselves and those we care about, holds more in store for us than less” (Jackson, 2011, p. xi). As geographers affirm, the subjective evaluations suggested by the concept of wellbeing have long complicated attempts to define wellbeing’s nature. “[A]ll-to-often conceived in terms of a static, articulate and abstracted individual”, geographers have begun to move towards a more processual, localized understanding of wellbeing as relational and emergent—as “the emergent and fluctuating effects of materiality, discourse, practices, techniques and affective intensities” (Schwanen and Atkinson, 2015, p. 99; Smith and Reid, 2018). By situating desire at the heart of human wellbeing, this chapter similarly underscores the futility of any attempt to conclusively pin down wellbeing’s determinants. However, in contrast to a materialist reading of wellbeing that emphasises the ‘intra-action’ of many elements (e.g. Smith and Reid, 2018), desire suggests that the possibility of stabilising wellbeing is dissolved at the outset by desire’s internal conflicts: by its restless drive, its radical singularity, its transgressive impulse, its surprising productions. The forward-looking operations of desire suggest that wellbeing is *more-than*-relational in the sense that it is constantly pushing forward, as a creative force that continually activates and unfolds virtual lines of becoming. Desires are oriented towards futures that incessantly *deny* the possibility of relation through the inherently unknown nature of their worlds and the “utterly unaccountable” forces of their energies and agencies (Rose, 2018, p. 1129). This is perhaps why Jackson suggests that wellbeing is experienced as something “elusive, transitory, and unevenly distributed ... by the rich as well as the poor, and in all societies” (2011, p. xi).

Consequently, I argue that this approach to desire and the ordinary also contributes to geographies interested in processes of repair and maintenance in everyday life. As Graham and Thrift (2007) demonstrate, processes of maintenance and repair are integral to reproducing worlds in the face of the material world's endemic destruction and decay. This chapter expands the remit of this conceptual lens by pushing it beyond concerns with material and socio-technical production, to instead consider its role in the rhythms of *affective* life. It argues that ordinary affects are infrastructural, constituting the everyday through capacities, attachments and habits. In this context, I argue that desire must be similarly understood as an infrastructural force that maintains and repairs the everyday subject. This suggests that productions of joys, pleasures and desires are as integral to the maintenance of everyday life as more materially oriented understandings of infrastructure. Accordingly, I argue that it is *rhythm*, not form, that defines the ordinary. Repairing human existence is not about restoring a subject to the past, but about reproducing an affirmable sense of the present and future. Although repair exists in a feedback loop with disruption, it is important to note that repair "does not have to mean exact restoration" (Graham and Thrift, 2007, p. 6). "Disconnection produces learning, adaptation and improvisation"; repair can produce 'upgrades' and 'downgrades', continuity or redefinition (Graham and Thrift, 2007, p. 5). As a plastic feeling-space, ordinary life remains receptive to encounters that deform and alter its contours, whilst holding on to its scene of feeling.

The ordinary, then, is the theatre of desire and its contradictions. As Berlant asserts, "[t]he ordinary is, after all, a porous zone that absorbs lots of incoherence and contradiction, and people make their ways through it at once tipped over awkwardly, half-conscious, and confident" (2011, p. 53).

Wellbeing cannot be stabilised because bodies cannot be stabilised, caught up as they always are in processes of differentiation and dispossessing events of encounter. Rather than assuming that bodies are stable, this chapter suggests that desire and sensation constantly precede evaluation and identity; in fact, their productions are what come to anchor identity as, following Deleuze (1991), relations are prior to their terms (see Roberts, 2018). But the origin of desire in repetition also suggests a resolutely personal genealogy of desire, one that is conditioned, but not determined, by collective imaginaries or personal histories, in chains of desire without origin. This repetitive nature suggests a check upon a 'revolutionary' reading of desire as inducing a radical break from what came before. But it also demonstrates how the displacements of joy, movement, fantasy and explication can suggest non-linear but incremental forms of desire, showing how bodies can pick up silent or buried desire lines developed in the past. By corralling energies of existence and spilling across domains of

work, life and love, desire's scenographic vision offers an ongoing capacity to redirect bodies and renew circumstances of life.

Despite the volatile bent of the embodied theories—and, indeed, stories—that bead this chapter, it is important to underscore that the work of adjustment made possible through desire does not always happen in explosive scenes of encounter. Adjustment can also involve a slow working out in an episodic manner, through the progressive transgression of thresholds. Every actualised release is preceded by a virtual build, one that can, unknowingly, implicate a lifetime of experimentation and exploration. This is why, for Deleuze, the narrator's search for meaning and truth is an apprenticeship that is only possible with *time*—through time recovered and regained, but also time wasted and lost. Through realisations only reached later and re-evaluations that breathe new life into old scenes. Signs are associated with *objects* and *spaces* that we can choose to return to in the hope of re-experiencing a particular feeling, but the *intensities* themselves exist only as impingements from the outside—we do not produce them; we can only encounter them. As a result, the ability to encounter desire suggests the need for a process of experimentation, drawing attention to the importance of time in providing the breathing space necessary to seek out desire's signs. As Berlant suggests, “[i]nterruption and self-extension are not opposites” (2011, pp. 116–117); they are pairs. ‘Time out’ is what makes possible ‘time in’. Without the presence of time to *waste* through open-ended processes of exploring, drifting, speculating and failing—acts that be conscious and directed, or unconscious and incidental—the possibility of encountering desire can be quickly sidelined to the pressing exigencies of living, or entrusted to the lottery of luck.

Ultimately, this chapter suggests that desire is a renewing force that can work to reorient subjects, sending bodies on processes of learning and explication that open up new fields of endeavour. If, having meandered through desire, I were asked to give a practical prescription, it would be this: the repetitious origin of desire suggests that the time of loss or crisis may not be the ideal time to attempt to transform the subject through risky experimentation with new practices. Contrary to the examples in this chapter, the transgressions of desire do not just produce docile, resilient, self-correcting subjects that conform to normative institutions of desire. Its productions can be more ‘monstrous’, directing the frisson of desire into unpredictable lines of becoming (Dixon, 2011). Given the limits that all bodies must work within—energy, will, capacities, resources—the time of loss suggests the importance of finding solace in the repetition of established joys and desires, rather than an opportunity to harness the potential for difference. As the flowing demands that organise contemporary subjects continue to exert their downward pressures, the danger is that the growing

burdens can, in the absence of mitigating reprieves, push bodies already under strain into deeper states of crisis. It bears repeating that joys do not need greater meaning to be vital to endurance and existence—instead, its intensities bleed across domains of life and work to, if momentarily, lighten moods and unburden bodies. Like enchantment, with the right conditions, desires offer to “foster a generosity of spirit that renders the self more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies” (Woodyer and Geoghegan, 2013, p. 208).

And yet, a profound tension exists at the heart of desire, mirroring desire’s internal conflict and the plastic limits of desire’s operations on the subject. As evident in the stories in this chapter, the shock of the unfamiliar can resonate to produce vivid encounters with unexpected desire, engendering processes of reckoning and repair. Given the tendency of the body’s *conatus* towards self-preservation, the shock to habits may actually be the rare time in which the subject is confronted with a window of exposure to unfamiliar environments, priming the potential for electrifying new desire lines to unfold. The interruption of changing conditions can thus come to present opportunity rather than crisis. In the absence of concrete scenarios, blanket prescriptions for managing desire become impossible. Instead, it seems instructive to take on desire’s scenographic lens, considering in each instance the whole scene of one’s circumstances. The singular histories and deep ambivalences of the desires with which we each live suggest that rather than prioritising a single variety of desire, more apposite would be a situational sensitivity that acknowledges the absence of a pre-given answer, and instead demonstrates the humility to ask: What scenes might be compatible with each person’s often-submerged history of desire? How might conforming scenes of affirmable difference then be made available to each individual? The non-sovereign nature of desire suggests that to prioritise wellbeing in the time of loss, people should not be pressured to participate in parsimonious worlds that can further stretch and tear being. Instead, wellbeing’s impasse calls for the importance of unburdened time and space (and the resources that enable it) in giving people the opportunity to seek out spaces of desire, to explicate the worlds of joy, hope and *something more* that might turn a life into a *good* life.

7 Conclusion: in the afterlife

This thesis has explored the timespaces of life after job loss in places of industrial change. Combining geographical and social theory with fieldwork at two recently closed coal mines in Australia and China, it has explored how people differently navigate the disconnections, absences and exposures that emerge in the impasse of life after industrial closure. Rather than emphasising the returning-to-*presence* of the past, as is usual in studies of loss, this thesis has amplified the moments of disconnection inherent to loss's *absencing-of-presence*. I have shown how the disconnective forces of loss can open into inherently unknown futures. Situated several years after the closures, the analysis in this thesis looks beyond the more immediately interruptive intensities of the event to track the diverse trajectories that people's lives have taken in the aftermath of loss.

Correspondingly, the three empirical chapters have tracked the bodily experience of workers as they reckon with the changing circumstances of life after industrial closure.

The first chapter, 'Turbulence: abandoning the present', explored the impasse of disconnected life after loss. It has shown how the abandonments of loss return bodies to a dark state of precariousness, as the subject loses the anchors that once secured experience. Simultaneously, the absenting of everyday anchors also means that precarious bodies are pushed into to unfamiliar conditions after loss. As a result, I explored how this exposure leads to volatile experiences of turbulence and intrusion for people drawn into precarious forms of work, bringing bodies into uncomfortable relations with unknown and often accommodating others.

The second chapter, 'Habit: interrupting the past', explored how people might begin to build a rapport with these new environments. It explored how experiences of melancholy can emerge in the unfamiliar timespaces of life after loss. Although drawing its concept of melancholy from a psychoanalytic approach, melancholy is recast in a materialist idiom by suggesting that it can also emerge in the impasse of interrupted habits. With habit, this chapter then began its pivot from the past to the present, drawing on habit's progressive achievements to show how bodies might emerge from the midst of melancholy.

The third and final chapter, 'Desire: repairing the future', pushed this potential for impact and transformation further by exploring how unexpected encounters with desire can re-orient

subjectivity away from the lost past and towards the future. Situating the event of loss within the broader cycles of life, loss and learning that characterise human existence, it affirmed the body's latent potential for repair after events of destruction. It showed how the new relations that emerge after loss can be accompanied by surprising experiences of displacement and renewal after loss and ultimately suggested mechanisms for how people might get there.

Taken together, the thesis shows how the timespaces of life after loss can catalyse diverse forms of bodily transformation. By emphasising the vulnerability of bodies to the outside, and the resonating effects of these impacts in the present, it ultimately pushes an understanding of human subjectivity as vulnerable and exposed, but also plastic and changeable. This final concluding chapter brings the diverse empirical discussions together to suggest what they collectively contribute to geographies of subjectivity, affect, embodiment and loss.

* * *

I begin by returning to the timespaces of industrial mourning and loss.

Grief is an inherent bodily response to the bereavements of loss. It is an involuntary, deeply felt intensity. It induces experiences of sorrow, regret and pain in response to the dispossession of relations to the people, places, and things for which they care. These intensities do not just disappear from bodies; they *move* bodies. Mourning gives new spatial and temporal dimensions to life, as losses become etched into embodied memory, and folded into practices of remembrance.

The losses of industrial closure are many, and they cascade. Closures cause the loss of employment, income and livelihood, inability to pay rent and to service debt. Especially in regions already caught in loops of decline, unemployment can force people to leave places they once loved in pursuit of more liveable worlds. Closures can tip circumstances over thresholds: into a loss of home, a ruptured sense of place, a fracturing of community, hollowed atmospheres of place. Farewelled friends and neighbours, closed-down shops and services, unmaintained and abandoned infrastructures produce material spaces of rubble and ruin that can feed into ongoing process of mourning and loss, over time and intergenerationally. This is perhaps nowhere truer than in the spaces of 'ruination', where industrial decline has vacated places, removing them from circulations of capital without offering alternative hopes for the future. The weight of these layered losses demands the irreplaceable, and ongoing, work of mourning.

The tragedy of ruination is real, and urgent attention must be paid to the lives of people caught in its loops. Alongside these intensities, however, it is important to recognise that spaces of

deindustrialisation and industrial closure are not *just* sites of ruination. Post-industrial sites are places of “tensions between the industrial past, a deindustrialized present, and an uncertain or contested future” (High, 2013, p. 143; Linkon, 2013). They are places where continuity sits alongside rupture, where lines between past, present and future are blurred, where intensities of life and loss can co-exist. They are entangled in landscapes of maintenance, endurance and care (Dawney, 2020).

Scholars of deindustrialisation have consistently drawn attention to the aesthetic pull of the industrial ruin in a seemingly post-industrial era. Writing on both the romanticising insider imagery of ‘smokestack nostalgia’ and the voyeuristic outsider gaze of ‘ruin porn’ or ‘dereliction tourism’, scholars have warned of the dangers of these highly aestheticised representations, which can at turns sentimentalise, fetishise or trivialise passing ways of industrial life (High, 2013; Strangleman, 2013; Mah, 2014; Emery, 2019).

Sensitive to these critiques, this thesis has attempted to approach industrial closure through a different lens than that of ‘ruination’. I argue that populating a more plural landscape of contemporary deindustrialisation requires going beyond the worst cases of ruin, and beyond the Anglo-American core on which knowledge-making practices have historically centred. On this point, geographic variation is particularly useful. As High suggests, “[n]owhere has the past overshadowed the present quite so much as in the former coalfields of the United Kingdom”, and, yet, the UK has also been the very same place that has “long formed the bedrock of discussions of class and place” in the deindustrialisation literature (Strangleman, 2001, p. 253; High, 2013, p. 144). An outsized attention to particular sites—and generalisations of that experience—can return a narrow geography of deindustrialisation and loss, exacerbating a tendency in the post-industrial ‘ruination’ literature to predominantly focus on places “where the worst ruination has taken place” (Emery, 2019, p. 5).

Rather than seeking out the sites of worst ruination, I have chosen two sites of industrial closure set in contrasting contexts. Charbon was the last big employer in a small town beset by industrial decline; Mine No. 7 was one of several large coal mines run by a heavily indebted state-owned enterprise in a small city undergoing industrial change. By staying close to the event of mine closure, speaking to people only a few years after the event, my analysis is situated in an afterlife that is still unfolding, where the lives of people and place are still unstable, not yet settling—if ever—into the corroded rhythms of what might be called ‘ruination.’ The fates of both of these places are presently unclear. By bringing together fieldwork with these diverse figures at two disparate sites,

arguing that the resonant combinations facilitated a move from pre-given ideas of difference (such as assumptions that the two sites should be analysed in isolation or opposition) in favour of the generative and immanent differences that are sensed in the staging of diverse scenes side by side (see Latham and McCormack, 2009).

Accordingly, the gaze in this thesis has not been on dereliction or decay. Adding to literature on deindustrialisation, this thesis has not only affirmed that spaces of post-industrial ruin can be vital spaces of life, but it has also argued that ruination is not the *only* experience of industrial decline. As Mah (2010) suggests, people in deindustrialising places are predominantly oriented by desire for “imminent regeneration” (p. 398). Although interested in exploring memories and past, my objective in doing so has been to understand such forces that have shaped people’s trajectories into the present, how the past has been “constitutive of presents” (Emery, 2019, p. 8). By moving towards the ‘middle ranges’ of industrial change, this thesis has shown how more hopeful narratives for people and place might be made visible in the *afterlife* of industrial loss. Indeed, at many points, the event of closure itself recedes from view, in favour of a focus on the ever-unfolding situations that people find themselves in.

Contra ruination, this thesis has shown how the fates of *people* are not synonymous with the fates of *place*. It does so by opening a gap between the two terms, showing how a wider affective realm of experience is at play in the shifting zone of people’s relationships to past, present and place. Against the tendency in the geographical literature to emphasise the past’s *materiality* through traces and remains, this thesis has highlighted the *potentiality* of past as it emerges in the durative present. By demonstrating how the changing circumstances of life after loss can draw bodies to act, react and think, I showed how affective forces can work to transform people’s relations to the shifting worlds around them.

In turning to the *durations* of life after loss, this thesis has mobilised a Bergsonian understanding of time, including Bergson’s ideas of time as they have been taken up by Deleuze (Bergson, 1988; Deleuze, 1989). For Bergson, time is experienced as the lived time of ‘duration’ in which past memory and present perception co-exist in present experience. Time is not situated within consciousness, but, rather, consciousness in time; in fact, consciousness is situated *multiply* in time. The present and past return at each moment: the past is not an event in prior time, but a fragment that returns virtually in the present. The felt time of duration is then produced from this circuit between past memories and present perception, creating the feeling of a subject’s continuity through time as a succession of presents.

With this understanding of time-as-duration, I show how the timespace of ruin and decay is not the only line of time that exists in the afterlife of industrial loss. By demonstrating how bodies become exposed to the push and pull of shifting circumstances after industrial closure, this thesis has shown how different lines of the past continue to exist as resources for life in the present. Bringing together the virtuality of the past with the actuality of the present, the past emerges to guide action and reaction in the present. Encounters with diverse others can reactivate threads of past time to open lines of becoming in the present. This is evident in the redeployment of habits and skills, and in the re-emergence of joys and desires. Together, they enact lines of duration that continue to be developed in the present, accruing new pasts and actualising different presents.

As such, the timespaces represented by the three empirical chapters relate in complex ways. Rather than presenting three separate trajectories of life after loss, they exist in virtual relation to each other. In this thesis' chapter progression, these trajectories are laid out as a kind of 'map' of the forces for change in the subject over time, running from the most conservation to greatest transformation of the past self. Each trajectory, then, is characterised by its prevailing direction. But each direction should be understood to have detoured through the others at different points in time, each having experienced the exposing shock of abandonment, the enabling contractions of habit, and the reorienting transgressions of desire that, together, populate the virtual past that accompanies present experience. Indeed, the combinational potential of encounters continues to pull bodies between these lines of time (and, indeed, others too) in the developing afterlife of loss, with the exposed circumstances of turbulence folding into the progressive achievements of habit with the right rhythm, or the monotony of habit become the quickening of desire in the presence of the right other. Similarly, as time passes from the event of closure, intervening encounters produce and extend lines of memory that bear the potential to explicate altered relations to worlds.

Taken together, then, I argue that this thesis makes three main disciplinary contributions to geographies of affect and embodiment.

This thesis' first contribution is an approach to life after loss that acknowledges the disconnective dimensions of absence. Rather than approaching loss through the endurance of the absent *presences* it leaves, this thesis begins by foregrounding the nature of loss's absence as *absence*. That is, it highlights a facet of loss that exists not as an operator that transforms a given relation into another style of relation, but as a force of disassembly that induces gaps, tears and breaks between former relations and present experience. This interruption to relation is central to what Harrison (2007) describes as a "nonrelational" or "aporetic" understanding of relationality, where experiences of

“distance, withdrawal, and disappearance” exist not as another variety of relation, but as a decaying and unworking of relation (pp. 591, 592). Rather than producing a different version of connection, a non-relation “dispossesses the self of itself, of its having been and its futurity” (Harrison 2007, p. 595). As Philo (2017) reflects, despite Harrison’s prescient warnings, these moments of ‘violence’ have largely remained outside of the orbit of non-representational geographies, which have preferred to revel in the additive “and, and, and” of lively existence (p. 258).

What is revealed in the disconnective impasse of nonrelation is the *passivity* of bodies, describing an openness and exposure to the outside that precedes being, from which the subject is called into existence. This “negative condition” of vulnerability is not an incapacity imposed upon bodies, but a primordial precariousness and susceptibility inherent to living beings (Harrison, 2008; Rose, 2014, p. 215). This emphasis on the passivity of the self before the other goes against the “pervasive assumption” across much of geography and the social sciences “of the primarily active, synthetic, and purposive role of embodiment in the genesis and maintenance of meaning”, including in the phenomenological tradition that implicitly continues to dominate geographical accounts of embodiment (Harrison 2008, p. 427). Recognising the non-relations of loss and the vulnerability it subsequently entails, this thesis has explored the paired affectivity of *disconnection* and *exposure* after an event of industrial closure. It has shown how these impassive durations are not smooth moments of transition from one relation to another, but turbulent planes of chaos, darkness, vulnerability and exposure. By avowing the cut of non-relation, the disconnections of absence impel geographers of loss to look beyond people’s transformed relations to a narrow set of terms that are already known in advance, to consider a broader circumstantial imaginary in which unexpected relations to a modified and potentially different set of terms might emerge after loss.

Consequently, whereas geographies of absence and loss have maintained focused on “a certain bringing-to-presence” of absence (Wylie, 2009, p. 279), this thesis has maintained an attention to the altered conditions to which bodies are exposed after industrial closure. In doing so, it has given equal importance to *past memories* and *present circumstances* in shaping trajectories of life after loss, including those circumstances and relations that might lead bodies *away* from memories of loss. By centring its analysis on the temporal envelope of loss’s afterlife, this thesis has moved beyond absence-as-presence to consider the distinctive style of disturbance and interruption that might be assigned to absence-as-*absence*. I ultimately suggest that it is this heightened exposure to the outside brought about by absence that brings the possibility of another world.

This thesis' second contribution, then, has been to show how the impasse of the present combines with memories of the past to render different trajectories into the future possible. Life after industrial closure is not a vacuum; as the stories in this thesis show, the afterlife of closure is marked by the commotion and turbulence of altered surroundings, changed demands and often difficult efforts towards wayfinding and adaptation. All of these situations require the orienting participation of embodied pasts, even as those presents edge bodies towards altered lines of the future.

This thesis thus develops geographies of affect by demonstrating the ongoing importance of the past in making sense of the unfolding present. By centring the productive interventions of the past in the present, this thesis responds to a charge often levelled at non-representational geographers that the situational imaginary of affect mobilises a universalising and unmarked subject, favouring the vital play of the present over the sedimented accruals of the past.

In this thesis, the past constantly returns to the present and indelibly inflects the future. In order to appreciate the interventions of the past as conceptualised in this thesis, however, one must consider the scene of memory a little differently than usual. In addition to the phenomenological past of spectral images and haunting recollections, this thesis shows how an *embodied* past also continues to affect bodies in the present through habits, competencies, attachments and desires developed over time. These embodied memories are difficult to perceive from the surfaces of actions and representations, as they are *pre-conscious* intensities that arise and operate prior to awareness. Despite this, their emergence is not arbitrary. The anticipations of embodied memory have been formed through the contraction of the experiential past into the capacities and instincts of bodies, which are then activated by the spatial contingencies of the encounter. Although these forces of the past can, and do, sometimes correspond to the habituated pull of identity categories and visible axes of difference, it is important to recognise that they are not *only* bound to these forms of coded sociality. Instead, the past encompasses a wider terrain of personal experience in which accrued lines of desire and time subsist virtually, and, although conditioned by the enduring affectivity of past performances and identifications, necessarily exceed the boundaries of any such category.

To make this argument, this thesis has mobilised a Deleuzian ontology of time (as developed from Bergson) to show how the present is always accompanied by a virtual and embodied archive of the lived past, one that is integral to a body's capacity to make sense of its current experience. This approach sits in contrast to existing geographies inspired by Deleuzian thought, which have tended to draw on Deleuze's understandings of space (particularly in his collaborations with Guattari) over his ideas on time. However, as Rose (2009b) has remarked, "in many ways it is odd that this

question of time has not been a central concern for geographers interested in Deleuze” given that “Deleuze’s concept of time is a far more central and necessary component of his ontology than space” (p. 345). Understanding memory as an embodied force that interprets and guides perception, this thesis has drawn on an embodied conceptualisation of memory to show how the hauntings of the experiential past do not exist in “supplementary relation to the present” but as *requisite* companions to affective life’s unfolding (Maddern and Adey, 2008, p. 292). In this thesis, the past, present and future co-exist in the durations of lived time.

In pulling together its approach to affect, I also wish to acknowledge that this thesis has gathered together a broad array of ideas that have origins in both psychoanalytic and poststructuralist thought. I note that these theories are not usually combined in geographic approaches to affect—indeed, for some they are antithetical (but see Secor and Linz, 2017; Rose, 2018; Hitchen, 2019 for exceptions). My approach has been inspired by the broader field of interdisciplinary affect studies, which has long been informed by strands of both psychoanalytic and poststructuralist genealogies of thought (see Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). Here, the emphasis is on making ‘more’ of affect—of drawing out new ways to attune to, recognise and create affect in motion, of opening up affect’s capaciousness. In this spirit, the combinations of ideas presented in this thesis have aimed to produce queer combinations to force thought, producing points of resonance between otherwise disparate concepts to try to make *sense* of affect’s ceaseless to-and-fro of life.

This brings me to the third contribution of this thesis to geographies of embodiment: its advancement of an understanding of bodies and subjects as *plastic* and liable to change. Although recognising the enduring importance of an expanded version of memory to living, by bringing the past together with the present, this thesis underscores how “the affective work of memory is just one among many forces that together constitute what gets refracted as the present” (Berlant, 2011, p. 52). As non-representational theorists have shown, subjectivity and selfhood are not synonymous with identity. Where identities name relative stable subject positions that are understood as the dominant traits of bodies, non-representational theorists prefer to approach embodiment through the notion of ‘subjectivity’, recognising that a sense of self is an emergent process that unfolds in the lived durations of experiential time (Simpson, 2017). Subjectivity, in this imaginary, is not a closed ‘achievement’ of continuous bodies, but a site of exposure that is susceptible to fragmentation, incoherence and rupture.

This thesis has thus underscored the interplay of affective and subjective registers in modifying the subject. It has been attentive to the micropolitics of bodily transitions in compelling this alterity: of

the sensibilities and capacities of bodies brought to their limits by resounding events of impact (Abrahamsson and Simpson, 2011; Jellis and Gerlach, 2017). Bodies are affected from the outside and these intrusions resonate inside to produce sensation, action and thought. Approaching industrial closure as a disconnective experience, I have shown how the abandonments of closure collaborate to expose bodies to new circumstances. Looking to the surrounds of life and the differences already at play in every encounter “sensitises us to how circumstances become conditions and constraints for thinking life otherwise” (McCormack, 2017, p. 11). This is not to suggest that processes of transformation are *easy*, but to affirm that they are *possible*—that bodies are never fixed and that change is happening to us all the time, whether we like it or not. These processes of differentiation should not be understood through the abrupt logics of breaks and ruptures, but rather through the graduated language of degrees and thresholds: as non-linear productions that follow from the addition of another operator in a divergent series, rather than changes in kind. Correspondingly, through logics of habit and desire, I have shown how subjectivity is not just about maintaining what already exists, but also about chasing avenues for incipient transformation.

By suggesting that it is others that call subjects into being, this thesis has argued that a body’s vulnerability to the outside should ultimately be understood as not just a *weakness* of, but also an *opportunity* for, bodies. Building on an understanding of bodies as exposed and passive, I have shown how transformations in subjectivity can come about through the absorption and conversion of externally imposed conditions. This is not to suggest that these are ‘efficient’ productions—that “there is exchange and transformation without expenditure or loss” (Harrison, 2009a, p. 1003)—but to suggest that productive dimensions of life can be gleaned alongside the more difficult intensities of post-closure timespaces.

Where geographers of affect and relation have tended to focus on the inherently additive nature of existence, this thesis has thus sought to situate loss within this dynamic, to illustrate an affective economy marked by *destruction* as well as production. By considering the disconnective dimensions of existence, it affirms that there is not just addition and assembly in life, but also dissolution and decay. Questions of reincarnation and repair suggest that it is not just organic death that needs to be mourned, but also the melancholy death of past selves no longer possible with the changes of time and space. Indeed, even for Deleuze, bodies are not mobilised solely by the pursuit of joys; Deleuze’s stoicism and *amor fati*—love of fate—also recognises that “*pain* forces the intelligence to seek” (Deleuze, 2000, p. 16 emphasis added). A body’s *conatus*—what Braidotti describes as its desire for “self-preservation” (2009, p. 235)—exists not just as a drive to expand its powers of

existing. Aware that forces from the outside can also function to destroy the self, it exists also as “an effort to avert sadness, [and] to imagine and find that which destroys the cause of sadness”

(Deleuze, 1988, p. 101).

Consequently, this thesis has put forward a plastic notion of the human subject, suggesting that it is inherently malleable and changeable. But it has done so recognising that bodies must work within conditions and capacities that are historically and circumstantially given. Although asserting the processual nature of time’s forward movement, this thesis thus makes its connective arguments in the context of a broader, and more sober, acknowledgment of limits. As Rose et al. (forthcoming) argue, “the relational thinking that has come to characterize cultural geography does not sufficiently consider the question of limits: the limits of capacities, powers and relations” (n.p.). These limits mean that life is not just a forward-moving narrative of extension and potential; it is also wracked by subtraction, by impotentiality, by warps, wounds and withdrawals. These are limits that recognise that it is the non-relational tears of existence that “silently called for, provoked, and continues to disturb and set in motion the relational” (Harrison, 2007, p. 593). Recognising the nature of human bodies as inherently precarious, the version of life offered by this thesis exists in a universe in which vulnerability and precariousness cannot be eradicated, where the pain of loss can only ever be worked with, endured and managed, but never eradicated (Harrison, 2008; Rose, 2014).

By evoking a process of repair in the subject, this thesis touches on geographies interested in the maintenance and repair of everyday life. As Graham and Thrift (2007) suggest, the under-appreciated processes of maintenance and repair are “are the main means by which the constant decay of the world is held off”, allowing worlds to continue functioning (1). By conceptualising repair beyond a material or technological domain, this thesis expands the remit of this approach by suggesting that the intimate sphere of *affective* life must also be considered a site of maintenance and repair. Unlike maintain material infrastructures, however, I argue that maintaining the affective infrastructures of everyday life is not just about re-producing what existed the day before. Instead, human life is excessive—always-already driven by a forward-moving rhythm that arcs towards a desire for *more*. Ordinary wellbeing must be considered from the perspective of potential and desire rather than a plateau of sameness or stasis. Repair is not about returning the present self to an image of the past, but about folding in a renewed belief that the future holds more, rather than less, for the subject.

As a result, I argue that rebuilding life in the wake of loss should not just be reduced to an economic sufficiency argument concerned only with income and livelihood. Alongside these more material concerns, recreating a sense of everyday life after job loss also entails reckoning with a hinterland of immaterial affective forces, including the feeling of abandonment and insecurity caused by the workplace closures and the habits, desires and attachments that give ordinary life its forward-moving rhythm. By highlighting the latent capacity for *repairing* an event of loss, this thesis has emphasised the plastic operating range of bodies, arguing that the potential for people to learn, to grow, to adapt and to thrive always exists, and that the politics of repairing a situation is in finding a way to actualise this potential.

At the same time, I wish to suggest that the rhythms of ordinary wellbeing must also involve embracing the endurance of people's attachments to the past. As Freud famously stated, "people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them" (1957, p. 244). The eros of memory functions to ground bodies and hold subjects together through the flux of time, and is not something that should—or could—be eradicated for its own sake. As geographies of remembrance show, memories of the past can serve as the basis of vital practices and rituals that drive life and living.

A tension thus exists at the heart of this thesis, a tension perhaps formed by the divergent preoccupations and intersecting blind spots of the theories I have used to explore the experiential world. For thinkers such as Levinas, a different time emerges to that of the Bergsonian time of the present's potential. Time is also the time of responsibility to the others that precede us and call us into singular being; time is also the time of vulnerability in the face of an unknown and dispossessing future (Rose, 2009b). Holding these disparate timespaces together, this thesis has argued that an affirmation of the radically relational construction of the self as open and becoming *already* contains an acknowledgement of the utter passivity of the self to the others around it. Life is not just about our 'own' being, but also what we owe to others. Subjectivity can be understood through potential and flight, but also through "severance and responsibility" (Harrison, 2007, p. 592). Speech, thought and action do not only address others; they are already addressed by others. Selves are not just sovereign and intentional agents, but beings already set in motion by relations of obligation and response. Sensation is not a power of intuition or incipient action, but an intensity of exposure prior to consciousness or intention.

With these ontological tensions in mind, I argue that there remains further scope in geographies of embodiment and relationality to further interrogate its imaginaries of life and the 'good life', to

“attempt to think ‘good’ relationality otherwise than in terms of ‘health’ and the maximisation of *my* powers and the persistence—however becoming and differential—of *my* being” (Harrison, 2007, p. 592 emphasis added). For this reason, although this thesis takes the rhythmic patterning of the ‘ordinary’ as its “object-target” for affect in the wake of loss, it does not prescribe an image for this good life, what figures might populate it, or how it might be best achieved (Anderson, 2014). Instead, it aims to respect the singularity of the other we address, a singularity emerges at the circumstantial juncture of attachments and desires contracted in the past, and receptivity and exposure to the dispossessing other and an enigmatic future. A singularity that can only ever encounter for itself what a good life might be.

There are, of course, limits to the approach taken in this thesis. By foregrounding processes of dissolution and disassembly, this thesis has enacted what might be called an atomising narrative of change, turning from the collectives of community and place to the ‘smaller’ units of family, household and self. By remaining at the site of the subject, it has correspondingly mobilised what might more scathingly be described as a “passive individualism” that affirms a responsibility to the wellbeing of the self over other kinds of obligation to diverse others (Popke, 2003, p. 309). This focus perhaps reflects the empirically acknowledged difficulty of holding communities together after industrial losses, producing closures that undo the ties that bind people to each other and place (Walkerdine, 2010; Robertson and Blackwell, 2015). But it also draws attention to a blind spot in the (non)relational landscape that this thesis has sketched. Focussing its analysis of loss’s afterlife at the site of the sensate body, this thesis has interrogated questions of *relation*, nonrelation and sensation, but in choosing this focus, it has not had the scope to more thoroughly explore the *terms* to which such relations might extend: to important and unanswered questions such as those about the constitution of the diverse others that bodies encounter after loss; to how the site of otherness can be a zone of political intervention; to the altered role for hospitality, community and being-in-common after the cut in relationality.

By moving towards life, this thesis has enacted what might be called a ‘vitalist’ approach to loss, mirroring the “ascendancy” of the vitalist and more-than-human approaches common to geographies inspired by Deleuze’s philosophy (Harrison, 2015; Philo, 2017, p. 257). Geographers have suggested that this vitalism is one that appears to celebrate the additive and capacitating forces of life, while seemingly neglecting, even forgetting, the violences that suffuse it. As Harrison (2015) reminds us, however, ‘Life’ can only be experienced by human bodies as the interval of *surviving*. In life qua survival, “life is never given without also being taken”, be it “the dead from which we live”,

the spectres of “paths not taken, alternative futures never actualized” or the others and selves abandoned by the present and future (Harrison 2015, p. 296). In this economy, “to live on, to survive, is intrinsically bound up in and to a sacrificial structure” (Harrison 2015, p. 296). To truly celebrate life, we must learn to forget the myriad and accumulating losses that enable *us* to keep living.

With the sombre acknowledgment that survival cannot evade sacrifice, Harrison duly asks: “[b]ecause one must burn, how to burn well?” (2015, p. 300). For Harrison, the answer lies in the incessant proximity of life to remembrance, of the need to mourn the losses accrued and bodies buried in the past, the ones that have enabled one’s singular existence. Although agreeing with Harrison’s diagnosis, I have nonetheless found myself, throughout the course of this thesis, increasingly drawn to the flames of life, to the desire for new worlds after loss. As Harrison also writes, the sacrificial fire of life, by “deciding what can be dispatched without consequence”, is also what allows “the subject ... to begin” again—to forget the pains of the past in favour of an open future (2015, p. 297). For me, this chance at another beginning, at another line of time, is compelling. It is not a global stance that comes from ideology or belief. It does not seek life for life’s sake, nor does it desire difference for difference’s sake. Instead, it comes in local recognition of the already too heavy and haunting burdens of loss, of a space in which mourning is already given and escape often prohibited. In the difficult time of loss, I argue that the ability to love life again can be something worth celebrating, something worth sacrificing for.

All that is left, then, is to conclude this thesis by way of a return to the empirical worlds of mining and work. I argue that this thesis’s approach to embodied capacities for relation, reorientation and repair contributes new avenues for intervening in discourses on the micropolitics of energy transitions in which the lives of coal mine workers are so intimately involved. In the context of Australia’s political inertia on decarbonisation, dominant conservative narratives have indelibly—and conveniently—sought to identify coal miners with their extant vocation, inhibiting progressive action on energy transition by suggesting an all-or-nothing binary in which the alternatives for people and places reliant are *either* continued mining *or* inevitable ruination. This thesis suggests that this binary, identitarian approach obscures an appreciation of people’s latent abilities to change and adapt, of how the diverse skills and capacities of people can be redeployed and developed in other places and contexts (see Carr, 2017), and of how embodied lines of habit and desire might be a springboard for alternative, and indeed more hopeful, versions of everyday life. Conversely, although China has not been similarly hamstrung by domestic politics on climate policy (having

pledged to reach carbon neutrality by 2060), it nonetheless faces parallel challenges in transitioning its workers, given its heavy reliance on coal to fuel its currently coal-dominant energy mix.

Although, nationally, it may be able to guarantee a successful *energy* transition, this thesis suggests that such a shift will not entail a ‘just’ *social* transition unless active consideration is given to the compatibility of post-closure lives with the histories and trajectories of former workers, their families and the communities once enabled by coal (on ‘just transition’, see Newell and Mulvaney, 2013; Johnstone and Hielscher, 2017; Heffron and McCauley, 2018; Weller, 2019).

By attending to real-life experiences of adaptation, modification and change in deindustrialising places, this thesis has aimed to produce conceptual approaches and representational narratives that might inform efforts to manage and mitigate the negative impacts of industrial closure and job loss elsewhere. As High (2013) reminds us, the stories we tell of deindustrialisation have ethical and political implications. By presenting alternatives to ruination for people in places of industrial change, this thesis argues for the importance of being able to imagine and articulate pathways for how people might flourish after world-shattering events, even as it acknowledges that these pathways might—even must—diverge from those that came before. This is an imaginary that is implicit in social justice movements such as ‘just transition’ and a ‘Green New Deal’: it’s a belief that life can not only be returned to people or place, but that those people and places might even be *better off* for those changes. By exploring the micropolitics of embodied transitions for people caught up in industrial change, I hope that this thesis might contribute to efforts to turn such beliefs into realities.

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