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Introduction: Untimely Bodies: Futurity, Resistance, and Non-Normative Embodiment

Joshua St. Pierre and Kristin Rodier

Thinking is most at a loss when it tries to say what time is.
–Christina Schües

If you want academics to write the most abstract thing possible, ask them to write about the body.
–Cressida J. Heyes

This second epigraph picks out a central problematic of our special issue, with equal measures of humour and lucidity. The body is at the same time obvious and perplexing, mundane and enigmatic. This special issue of Feral Feminisms writes towards these challenges through the under-theorized intersection of embodiment, temporality, and resistance. We begin from the thought that time and embodiment are necessarily connected and thus an integral condition of the possibility of meaning, language, community, and resistance politics. Dominant orders of
time structure our social, economic, and political lives in ways that often flatten the complexity and richness of lived experiences, and yet these temporal orders can be resisted and reformulated. Thinking through temporality, then, offers new ways of understanding how bodies resist normativity.

In our call for papers we asked how bodies that move, desire, communicate, fuck, laugh, stim, stutter, jiggle, give birth, and leak are possible openings for more hospitable, generative, and anti-oppressive temporalities. These questions require special attention to how time is lived. In the first place, there is not one time but many, an all-too-obvious fact for those of us dwelling within non-normative embodiments. Fat, for example, slows movement while quickening judgment. The moral imperatives surrounding fat embodiment point to a transient temporality: the “before” picture of a soon-to-lose-weight body. To use another example, a medical stroke resulting in cell death in the brain ruptures the sense of a unified experience—highlighting the differential rates of perception and agency within our bodies. The multiple rhythms within our bodies are only mobilized in immanent, partial, and contingent ways.

The multiplicity of time produces discordant rhythms or frictions. For example, there are frictions between corporeality and the demands of capital or between developmental milestones and neurodiversity. These frictive hesitations may be generative—breaking apart normative paces of meaning. Frictions can nevertheless also be an issue of survival. For a trans* teen seeking reassignment, the temporality of endocrine systems tenses in relation to the temporalities of bureaucracy, the medical-industrial complex, and transphobic violence. We live within and navigate multiple temporal rhythms, while rarely naming them for what they are. In this issue we ask: How can we bear witness to these temporalities while doing justice to those who inhabit them? What should be the goal of theorizing temporality? Undermining dominant temporalities? Fostering new and hospitable ones? Multiplying time? Sharing temporalities? Cultivating presents that are thick enough for non-normative bodies to inhabit?

The reason so much temporal difference and ambiguity is routinely hidden is in one regard simple: the Western social imaginary has been swept up in a myth of singular, linear, and unified time. Although somewhat anachronistic in contemporary theory, this monolithic drive might aptly be described as “progress.” For anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, progress is not a relic of the 19th century but has been “grandfathered” into our contemporary world through dreams of democracy, growth, science, and hope (2015, 21). The logic of improvement—whether manifest in terms of GDP, progressive politics, evolutionary unfolding, or historical materialism—smooths over temporal multiplicity and renders any elements incompatible with its dictates into a distant remainder. As Tsing writes:

Progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms. Without that driving beat, we might notice other temporal patterns. Each living thing remixes the world through seasonal pulses and growth, lifetime reproductive patterns, and geographies of expansion. Within a given species, too, there are multiple time-making projects, as organisms enlist each other and coordinate in making landscapes. (2015, 21)

In this issue we seek to cultivate this type of attention to varied landscapes of temporality. Temporal patterns are indeterminate and patchy; one must be careful with perilous terms such as “timeline” or “the future” to describe the complex and cooperative project of time-making. There is not one time but many, and refusing the dominant march of time enables us to notice—something which the Western philosophical tradition with its love of universals is so often incapable of doing.
Phenomenology is the obvious caveat to the claim that philosophy remains ill-suited to the art of noticing time. This method enters at the level of embodied time in its contrast with clock time and normative temporalities. Temporality is for phenomenology something first lived in our bodies before abstracted and standardized by a clock. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, “In every moment of focusing, my body ties a present, a past, and a future together. It secretes time, or rather it becomes that place in nature where for the first time events, rather than pushing each other into being, project a double horizon of the past and future around the present and acquire an historical orientation” (2012, 249). Phenomenologically speaking, time emerges as singular in experience before it is carved up into meaning (e.g. past, present, and future) by reflective consciousness. Time is a field of presence and we live in a “now” through our bodily engagement with the world. We commonly say that an evening with a friend “flies by” while a hot afternoon class “drags” — yet this is neither a poetical flourish nor a psychological trick. Time is embodied and it is lived. Phenomenology thus provides a means of attending to our most intimate and global experiences of time and the relations between.

Yet while phenomenology is useful as one method of noticing temporality, it is not always the only or even best way to do so. Certain modes of phenomenology have been justly criticized for reproducing a limited and problematic view of the self and agency. The danger of the phenomenological method, which always starts from embodied experience, is subordinating and erasing non-human agency, as well as ignoring pre- and supra-individual elements of our experience.

We thus start with the assumption that temporality always exceeds the human. There is a wild interplay of temporal patterns that construct our feminist worlds, oppressive or enabling, and we will inevitably miss these patterns if we simply focus on “bodily time.” Alison Kafer writes that as a self-identified “crip” (a radical reclamation of a disabled identity), “the future is written on my body” (2013, 1), a statement that is true not because the human body is a bounded canvas, but rather because the lines that inscribe the (lack of) future on disabled bodies arc past the skin. The human body is a meeting, a knotted and unstable junction of temporalities. The act of noticing thus requires a process of unknowing, of watching without expectation and making space for indeterminacy within precarious assemblages of time.

Recognizing that the experience of temporality lived within our bodies is always an unstable junction of heteronomous forces demands careful attention to the temporal make-up of neoliberalism and late-capitalism. More specifically, if “progress” represents one horizon of contemporary time-making projects, “precarity” (a mode of socio-temporal instability) is assuredly another that must be recognized in tandem. These horizons both conflict and collude.

Modernity is predicated upon “the future,” which itself is a project, a projection, a fabrication of continual improvement undertaken by homo faber—“man,” the maker. The future is entangled with globalized capitalism and Western colonization since, as Franco Berardi argues, “as long as spatial colonization was underway, as long as the external machine headed toward new territories, a future was conceivable, because the future is not only a dimension of time, but also of space. The future is the space we do not yet know; we have yet to discover and exploit it” (2011, 24). Modernity promised stability and amelioration on the backs of the lumpenproletariat, women, disabled peoples, the “sexually deviant,” racialized peoples, and other marginalized subjects who could be exploited. Yet, the myth of a brighter future and its continued expansion and accumulation of wealth can only be sustained for so long. “Now that every inch of the planet has been colonized,” continues Berardi, “the colonization of the temporal dimension has begun, i.e., the colonization of mind, of perception, of life. Thus begins the century with no future” (2011, 24). According to Berardi, the future conceived of as a
continued and stable expansion has necessarily begun devouring itself. Marginalized bodies are the first to feel these effects.

The unraveling of progress erodes dominant time orders, which has an important affective dimension: the future was once a clear-sighted (well-earned) reward, but has now given way to a fragment of fears, aporias, complicity, part-time jobs, and debt. Fordism (1920s-70s) promised a stable career and living wage for all; our generation is not sure the air and the oceans will survive 30 more years of this long-abandoned pledge (read: conceit) of continued growth for all. The futures are so multiple that they become noise that we choose to and now habitually ignore.

This unstable temporality—in other words, precarity—is undoubtedly violent; yet it would be a mistake to understand it as an aberrant phenomenon within human history. Globalized capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2000) has created an irregular and temporary shelter from precarity for a small portion of the geopolitical population. To say this shelter was “created” is, of course, duplicitous since the future has only ever been possible by enslaving the lives, bodies, and temporalities of other beings. This includes the temporalities of land,
community, and desire. Precarity is a characteristic feature of cooperative life throughout history. The difference, of course, is that the contemporary stakes of precarity resonate through patterns of globalized crisis. More than ever, we must learn to live and survive within unstable temporalities.

Our futures will thus be precarious, whatever else they may be. As Tsing suggests, “Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible” (2015, 20). The possibility of life within our contemporary world, marked by a time both precarious and hegemonic, demands that we cultivate alternative conceptions of time that foster pockets of collaborative survival and reclamation. As Kafer writes in the context of disability, “The task, then, is not so much to refuse the future as to imagine disability and disability futures otherwise, as part of other, alternate temporalities that do not cast disabled people out of time, as the sign of the future of no future” (2013, 34). This imagining is first and foremost a noticing.

Or better, insofar as our relation to time is never passive, imagining futures otherwise is a type of engaged noticing. Temporality is an immanent site of resistance. If temporalities are rooted in and lived through one’s body then so is the capacity to resist dominant time orders. Reclaiming the possibilities of “untimely bodies” thus requires that we attend to how the multiple and impure ways in which bodies that are cast out of time simultaneously reconstitute these socio-temporal relations. That is, resistance within the state of precarity takes on the impure character of salvaging time and energy from within dominant orders. Bodies are never passive receptacles but have the power to act in concert with other beings. It is from within the various relations that give shape to resistance—for example, public and personal, deliberate and unwilled—that we can find the collective power of untimely bodies to disrupt hegemonic temporalities and carve out radical enclaves.

“Untimely Bodies: Futurity, Resistance, and Non-Normative Embodiment” folds many experiences together in the effort of noticing, reimagining, and salvaging time. Kelly Fritsch opens the issue by calling out the material and discursive practices within neoliberalism that render the future unintelligible for disabled children and disability more generally. What Fritsch terms “neoliberal futurity” reinscribes the hope of a future without disability. Katie Aubrecht creatively layers this discussion through a poetic exploration of disability and parenthood. The experience of disability is located here in the transient yet enduring relations between bodies. Tosha Yingling explores fat embodiment through the discussion of digital avatars and the ways in which embodiment and identity are malleable and communal. How are times and spaces entangled? What is the political character of these entanglements? Ros Murray approaches this cluster of issues through a queer existential reading of Chantal Akerman’s Je tu il elle. Engaging with Simone de Beauvoir and Jack Halberstam, Murray explores a queer existentialism that attends to the personal and the particular and leads towards a “phenomenological generosity, explored through a celebratory opening out onto the world and its queer potential.” Sandra Alland takes the issue of the political entanglement of space and time in a slightly different direction, using stop-motion photography, prompting a reflection on how ability is created through structural barriers and how bodies are made (and made unlivable) by recreating the complex experience of inaccessibility. How, Alland asks us, are mobility and temporality produced and restrained by (in)accessibility? Weaving between these two projects, Sofia Varino highlights the danger of mobility and movement as related to the visibility of queer bodies and spaces through a reading of The Artist is Absent, an exhibition of Marina Abramovic reperformances at CPW25 Gallery in New York. Eunsong Kim closes the issue, exploring not only the production of desire spread through time, but also the gaps of
meaning left open by desire and the dangers and possibilities lurking therein. Lastly, we wish to thank Sarah Allen Eagen for contributing the artwork in this issue that explores the haunting relations between bodies in the twenty-first century.

Works Cited


Joshua St. Pierre is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the University of Alberta. His current research examines the relations between speech, embodiment, and disability, looking specifically at the generative breakdown of speech as a performance of rational human and posthuman identity within political economies.

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Sarah Allen Eagen is a New York-based artist exploring contemporary notions of beauty, obsession, and intimacy. Inspired by bio art, body architecture and biological surrealism, her art practice explores the sensual, vulnerable and alienating aspects of contemporary. Her work quivers on the knife’s edge of seduction and repulsion. Eagen is originally from Toronto Canada. She holds an MFA from Parsons the New School of Design. Her work has been exhibition at The Kitchen, New York and was featured at the Toronto’s 2011 Nuit Blanche Contemporary Art Festival. Her most recent solo exhibitions have been at Vitrina Gallery, Chashama’s 461 Gallery and the Beacon Room in New York. Her artwork can be seen at http://www.saraheagen.com
Crippling Neoliberal Futurity: Marking the Elsewhere and Elsewhen of Desiring Otherwise

Kelly Fritsch

In this article I argue that it is necessary to crip neoliberal futurity so as to enable the flourishing of critical practices of an elsewhere and elsewhen of disability. The withering of some disabled lives and the capacitation of others are a result of neoliberal material and discursive processes that orient and imagine disability as a life without a future unless capacitated through practices of biocapitalism, such as through cure or body/mind enhancement technologies and procedures. I argue that neoliberal futurity organizes disability in such a way as to make disability intelligible through the suffering disabled child that is never imagined or anticipated to grow up or have a life worth living. At the same time, neoliberal futurity also speaks to the difference of the futures imagined for some disabled children: biocapitalist futures, premised on the hope of overcoming disability through cure or body/mind enhancement.

Introduction

“My future is written on my body,” Alison Kafer writes on the opening page of Feminist, Queer, Crip (2013, 1). Resisting the way in which her wheelchair, burn scars, and gnarled hands enable some to mark her future as a life of “pain and isolation,” “a life not worth living,” and “a future no one wants,” Kafer instead offers a “politics of crip futurity” as a way of imagining and orienting to her future otherwise, one that is “ripe with opportunities” (1-3). If, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, disability remains unexpected in our world because we do not imagine disabled people as having tractable futures (2012, 351), then crip futurity becomes an important site to both imagine and materialize tractable disabled futures. Pushing against this lack of future, Kafer yearns for an “elsewhere” and “elsewhen” (3) of crip futurity—of desiring disability otherwise—while remaining aware, following Nirmala Erevelles (2011), of the inequitable social and material conditions under which the desire for crip futurities is produced, circulated, and celebrated. That is, through practices of neoliberal biocapitalism, the lack of tractable futures for some disabled people works alongside the tractable futures of enhanced or capacitated disabled people, embedding crip futurities within the inequitable inclusion practices of neoliberalism. It is precisely at this juncture that I wish to consider the contemporary social, political, and economic constraints of desiring disabled futures otherwise by tracing the ways in which some disabled futures have already gained traction, albeit at the expense of others. In other words, I argue that the material discursive practices of neoliberal biocapitalism have enabled the tractability and flourishing of particular disabled futures while other disabled futures remain unanticipated, unexpected, and undesired.

In this article, then, I argue that it is necessary to crip neoliberal futurity so as to enable the flourishing of critical practices of an elsewhere and elsewhen of disability. The withering of some disabled lives and the capacitation of others result from neoliberal material
and discursive processes that orient and imagine disability as a life without a future unless capacitated through such biocapitalist practices as cures or body/mind enhancement technologies and procedures (see Fritsch 2015). Neoliberal futurity organizes disability in such a way so as to make disability intelligible through the suffering disabled child who is never imagined or anticipated to grow up or have a life worth living. Through neoliberal futurity, this suffering disabled child is figured as the negation of the future, or as a subject with no future. At the same time, however, neoliberal futurity also speaks to the difference of the futures imagined for some disabled children: biocapitalist futures, premised on the hope of overcoming disability through cure or body/mind enhancement.

Building on Lee Edelman’s (2004) critique of “reproductive futurity” that privileges the Child as the image of the future, I contend that neoliberal futurity produces the figure of the disabled child that is productive—as far it creates varied discursive and affective economies aimed at preventing life, ending lives, capacitating some bodies, and re-investing a caring public in biocapitalism—and also re-inscribes the hope for a future without disability or, at least, a future in which disability no longer seems to be a difference that matters. That is, I show that it is at the confluence of this double lack-of-futurity—disabled children without futures and a future without disability—that some disabled adults become unanticipated lives left to wither while others become capacitated as inspirational, hopeful, and progressive success stories of neoliberal inclusion. By reading across a number of discursive and material sites, I show through a breadth of examples the recurring logic of neoliberal futurity in its variance and repetition, marking neoliberal futurity not as a project of homogenous actions and desires, but rather as productively diverse in the ways in which it participates in a double lack-of-futurity for disability. I explicate how some disabled people flourish in the future precisely because their futures gain traction through neoliberal biocapitalist practices and that these tractable futures demand that others have no future.

Reproducing Neoliberal Futurity and the Disabled Child

In No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, Lee Edelman (2004) argues that the contemporary political order privileges heteronormativity by inciting the Child as the image of the future (2-3). Edelman calls this child-centered “ideological limit” and “organizing principle” of social relations “reproductive futurism,” a cultural and political way of investing in a better future for the sake of our children (2). For Edelman, the field of politics is steeped in the figure of the Child, so much so that “the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought” (2) and is the “fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (3). He notes: “We are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child” (11). Thus, within this heteronormative logic, a better future is always a better future for the Child. Edelman comments that refusing this mandate made by political institutions to compel the collective reproduction of the Child must “appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends” (11). The ever “lengthening shadow” of the Child “terroristically holds us all in check and determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must never grow up” (21). While Edelman is largely interested in the ways in which reproductive futurism figures the Child within contemporary American political
discourse, my work builds on Edelman’s critique to mark the ways in which neoliberal futurity mobilizes the suffering disabled child to create a future in which the child never grows up, or only grows up through the practices of biocapitalism.

Thinking through Edelman’s critique of reproductive futurism, it is important to consider how the figure of the suffering disabled child organizes the way in which the future of disability and disabled people are imagined within the ongoing neoliberalization of psychic and material life in North America. That is, it is important to consider the role played by the figure of the suffering disabled child within what can be called neoliberal futurity.

Rather than a temporal direction of time, neoliberal futurity speaks to a shared social imaginary of progress that underwrites capitalist relations, a frame of thinking made possible by the mode of production and the ongoing pursuit of surplus value. Franco Berardi terms this imaginary of progress—that the future will be better than the present—the “myth of the future,” a myth that is not “a natural idea” but rather is “rooted in modern capitalism” and the “bourgeois production model” (2011, 18). Neoliberal futurity—based on an economy of always more surplus value to extract, always new markets to develop, always new ways to download social responsibilities onto individuals, always evermore ways to exploit the many in order to benefit the few—requires a child that will overcome the odds and rise up to meet the new demands of the economy. Neoliberal futurity, then, inspires parents to invest—and go into debt—to produce an entrepreneurial kindergartener that eats the right food, goes to the right school, and has all the right opportunities available to them so as to best prepare them for the hypercompetitive, individualistic future (for example, see Webb 2013).

Turning to Berardi’s myth of a better future highlights the role of biocapitalism in the production of neoliberal futurity. Biocapitalism marks the ways in which, since the 1970s, the neoliberalization of the economy and social relations emerged alongside developments in the life sciences and biotechnological industries, promising a new and healthier future that could overcome the market-growth limitations of both the Earth’s finite resources and Keynesian economic and social policies (Fritsch 2015). As biocapitalism organizes the life sciences, it depends upon neoliberal practices of deregulation, privatization, managing risk, and financial speculation that mobilize hope for a better future. In this way, biocapitalism signifies the ways in which scientific knowledge is co-produced materially and discursively alongside the political and economic practices of neoliberal capitalism (Sunder Rajan 2007).

Biocapitalism invests in life at both the micro and macro levels to produce neoliberal political subjects. Biocapitalism extends Michel Foucault’s concept of biopolitics as a practice of governance that brings “life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations” (1978, 143), engaging not just with individuals or populations, but with all aspects of life itself, including cells, molecules, genomes, and genes (Helmreich 2008). Bringing “life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations” (Foucault 1978, 143), happens in part through ongoing developments in pharmacogenomics, or “personalized medicine.” Pharmacogenomics enables the individualization of “risk” as an embodied biomarker that can be used to target individuals for ongoing therapeutic interventions (Dumit 2012, Fritsch 2015, Sunder Rajan 2007). Children can be enhanced and capacitated not only through an array of extracurricular activities and technologies, but also through individualized forms of pharmacogenomics and risk surveillance that enhances their bodies through, for example, tailored drug regimes that ensure an optimal microbiome and gut health and improved brain performance. These practices are future oriented, for not only does biocapitalism promote technoscientific innovation as a way to overcome the limits of vulnerable bodies, but its material and discursive practices also incite a child that can be enhanced and capacitated in
such a way as to meet the current and future demands of the neoliberal economy.

While Edelman (2004) accounts for the ways in which the Child as the image of the future is central to the notion of progress, what he does not account for is how this Child relies on an economy of disability that is deeply entrenched in neoliberal practices of biocapitalism. That is, neoliberal practices not only produce disability or are complicit in rising rates of disabling conditions through unsafe labour practices, war, and the systematic dismantling of the welfare state, but neoliberal practices also demand that some succeed at the expense of others. In this way, we cannot account for neoliberal futurity without addressing disability.

Thus, while Edelman (2004) is correct in asserting that the contemporary political order favours heteronormativity in the ways in which it incites the heterosexual Child as the image of the future, I argue that this image of the Child as the future also continuously incites compulsory enhanced-bodiedness/mindedness, as the child of reproductive futurism is not only able-bodied, but must also be better than able-bodied or able-minded. As Robert McRuer points out, “everybody,’ after all, or so the saying goes, ‘wants a healthy baby” (2008). Edelman’s sharp and scathing critique of reproductive futurity is important, as is McRuer’s argument that Edelman’s Child is able-bodied. Yet what neither Edelman or McRuer elucidate is how reproductive futurity relies on both a capacitated and enhanced Child and also for some disabled children to grow up at the expense of others whom dominant structures never intend to grow up. While McRuer is right to point out that no child can fully embody the desirable able-bodied and-minded Child and, thus, sets up disability as the impediment to a desirable future, I argue that the better-than-able-bodied-and-minded Child requires some capacitated disabled children to flourish at the expense of other disabled children in order to give meaning to the figure of the Child.

There is, then, an important ambivalent tension within neoliberal futurity; the disabled child is at once a figure with no future while at the same time also a figure of neoliberal futurity mobilized through biocapitalism, cure, and enhancement. Therefore, I argue that we are deeply invested in narratives of suffering children, but some of those children are always supposed to remain children, never growing up, while others are celebrated, enhanced, and capacitated precisely because they can be made to fit into the neoliberal biocapitalist promise of the future.

The “End of Suffering” and “No Hope for the Future”

That disabled children have no future and are the denial of the future, as McRuer (2008) argues, is perhaps most evidenced in instances of parents “mercifully” killing their disabled children to end their suffering. Stories of such incidences litter news and blog sites in which parents undergoing significant stress and hardship trying to raise disabled children come to believe that there is “no hope for a future” (Smith 2013). For example, on April 22, 2014, Tania Clarence suffocated to death her three disabled children in a move “to end their suffering” (Davies 2014). Max and Ben, Clarence’s three-year-old twin sons, and Olivia, her four-year-old daughter, all had Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) Type 2, which is described by the media as “a life-limiting progressive disease” that can “cause fatal respiratory problems” (Davies 2014). The children’s nanny, Jadna Coelho, found them dead in their bedrooms of their £2 million family home in New Malden, England (BBC 2014). Tania Clarence’s husband, Gary, an investment banker, and their able-bodied eldest daughter were away on holiday at the time.

In October 2014, murder charges against Tania Clarence were dropped after she
entered a plea of “manslaughter by diminished responsibility.” The Crown Prosecution Service found Clarence to be “suffering from a major depressive episode at the time of the killings which amounted to an ‘abnormality of mind’” (Davies 2014). Zoe Johnson, the Prosecutor in charge of the case, describes Clarence as holding the “firm belief that the quality of her children’s lives was more important than their longevity” (Davies 2014). This belief, the Prosecutor argued, is “entirely understandable” (Davies 2014). Defence attorney Jim Sturman remarked that Clarence “was manifesting stress throughout the life of the children by their suffering, and caring for three children with this condition was exhausting, distressing, debilitating and turned out to be overwhelming” (Davies 2014). As a result, the defence argued that it is “understandable” that Clarence did what she did because she “had no hope for the future” (Smith 2014).

Tania Clarence’s distress and lack of hope for the future for herself and for her children is marked throughout her court appearance and in the media as “understandable” precisely because of the ways in which ableism and neoliberal futurity work together to make intelligible the suffering disabled child with no future. Clarence’s murder is “understandable” despite the financial affluence of the family that enabled them to fully renovate their expensive home, hire both a nanny and a maid, and allowed Clarence to leave her job as a graphic designer to stay home to help care for the children. Indeed, despite Clarence’s financial comfort, in a letter she wrote her husband two days before the killings she noted that, “I cannot face going down this path watching Liv and the boys continue to get weaker […]. No matter what we do, it will never be enough” (Wilkes 2014). Later, in another letter addressed to her husband written after killing her two sons but before killing her daughter, Clarence wrote: “The only thing giving me the motivation to continue is the belief that the boys are already playing up in heaven like they could never play here” (Wilkes 2014).

Only through death can a future be imagined for these disabled children. Despite having financial security, access to healthcare, and domestic help, Clarence could project no future for her disabled children. Further, by killing her disabled children, Tania Clarence produces a future without disability and, thus, fulfills the thinking that disability has no future.

Jerry’s Kids

The cultural logic that there are no disabled futures, one that makes Tania Clarence’s actions “understandable,” rubs up against biomedical advances in care for SMA. As some news stories have noted, “most people with the condition go on to live productive adult lives” (Smith 2014). Clarence was sentenced on November 18, 2014 to a mental-health treatment program. Just days before Clarence’s sentencing, in Southern California, Cure SMA, formally known as Families of Spinal Muscular Atrophy (FSMA), held a “Gala of Hope […] with one goal: To fund a cure for Spinal Muscular Atrophy” (FSMA 2014). Children are the main focus of Cure SMA’s literature and programming and by curing SMA those children will once again have a future that SMA denies them. As Cure SMA’s slogan puts it: “We can see a future without SMA” (Cure SMA 2014). The futureless future of SMA thus comes in many forms, whether through cure or what has elsewhere been deemed “mercy killing” (Evans 2014).

The simultaneous play of no future that mobilizes hope for a cure and also posits no future for disabled people and disability at the same time imagines a future for some disabled children. This dynamic is nowhere more evident than in the Jerry Lewis Labour Day Telethon. Indeed, the Jerry Lewis Labour Day Telethon has popularized cultural understandings of
disabled children as both a site of hope and overcoming disability as well as a site of disabled suffering and tragedy.

The annual 22-hour Jerry Lewis Labour Day Weekend Telethon was first broadcast in 1966 to raise money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA), whose goal is to fight neuromuscular disease. Broadcasting over 1,000 hours of live television hosted by Jerry Lewis and featuring an array of celebrities and entertainers, the telethon has been deemed the “most successful fund raising event in the history of television,” raising over $2 billion over its first 46 years of broadcasting (MDA 2014). In his 45 years hosting the telethon, Lewis worked toward getting “one dollar more” than the previous years so as to get “closer than ever to a cure” for those he called “Jerry’s kids.” As a result of such enormous fundraising efforts, the MDA became the first non-profit organization to receive a “Lifetime Achievement Award” from the American Medical Association “for significant and lasting contributions to the health and welfare of humanity” (MDA 2014). Lewis himself was also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977 as a result of his work with the MDA (Walton 1997, 65).

The MDA telethon produces disability as “a fate worse than death” and disabled people “suffering” from Muscular Dystrophy as people “waiting for a cure, without which their lives are worthless” (Johnson 1992). For example, in the 1973 telethon, Lewis held up a child with Muscular Dystrophy and announced: “God goofed, and it’s up to us to correct His mistakes” (Wiener 2011), affirming the belief that disability is a deviation and a mistake that must be corrected. During the 1992 telethon, Lewis stated: “My kids cannot go into the workplace. There’s nothing they can do. They’ve been attacked by a vicious killer. I’m begging for their survival” (Hershey 1993). Statements such as these reaffirm the popular cultural belief that disability is a “monolithic fact of the body” (Kafer 2013, 3) that stops people from living their lives and that it is disability that needs to be cured rather than dominant social structures or relations.

The MDA telethon seeks to “pry open wallets” through the objectification of suffering children, despite the fact that two-thirds of MDA’s clients are adults (Hershey 1993). The telethon does not represent “the real lives of people” but rather works to “paint a picture of a victim so tragic, and at the same time so cute and appealing, that viewers will be compelled to call in a pledge” (Hershey 1993). While appearing tragic and cute, the “victim” must also appear “utterly unable to help him/herself, so that the giver can gain a personal sense of virtue and superiority from the act of giving” (Hershey 1993). Additionally, the “victim” must display a form of “courage” that results in a depreciation of oneself, an acceptance of “other people’s versions of one’s own reality,” and a rejection of the value of oneself as a disabled person in favour of “an eagerly anticipated cure” (Hershey 1993). All this is done to “encourage the assumption that life with a disability is a life scarcely worth carrying on with, except for the generosity of Jerry Lewis and everyone involved in the telethon” (Hershey 1993). Reviewing hundreds of hours of telethons, disability historian Paul Longmore found few segments featuring disabled adults, reinforcing “the Tiny Tim persona” as “central to framing the cultural, social, and political meaning of disability. The charities depicted the representative disabled person as a vulnerable child, one of ‘the most weak’” (2013, 38).

Starting in 1981, some of “Jerry’s kids” became “renegades” who called themselves “Jerry’s Orphans” and began protesting outside of telethon filming locations with placards calling for an end to telethons, “rights not pity,” and demanding support for universal healthcare and a national research agenda (Walton 1997). Protestor Evan Kemp notes that the telethon “makes disabling conditions seem overwhelmingly destructive,” emphasizing “the desperate helplessness of the most severely disabled. In doing so, it reinforces the public’s
tendency to equate handicap with total hopelessness” (Kemp 1981). As Laura Hershey (1993) notes, “the telethon encourages viewers to project their own worst fears onto people with muscular dystrophy,” encouraging them to “imagine what it would be like if your child couldn’t play baseball.” Further, “families are described as ‘courageous’; and they all seem to bear total responsibility for the care and support of the person with MD,” marking disabled bodies as burdens.

Responding to disability rights activists, in the 1990s the MDA began changing some aspects of its telethon. It began showcasing disabled adults and significantly shortened the programming to just a few hours rather than 22 consecutive hours. On May 16, 2011, Jerry Lewis announced his retirement (MDA 2014). In May 2015, citing the need to adapt to changes in “television viewing and philanthropic giving,” MDA transitioned away from the telethon as a means to raise money and began focusing on “making muscles move” through increasing its direct marketing initiatives, “endurance fundraising” initiatives such as running marathons and “Muscle Walks,” and fostering “personal shows of strength” through online videos and ad campaigns (MDA 2015). MDA President and CEO Steven M. Derks noted, “In the last few years, the show was adjusted to reflect changes in viewership and donor patterns, and last summer’s Ice Bucket Challenge once again affirmed for us that today’s families, donors and sponsors are looking to us for new, creative and organic ways to support our mission” (MDA 2015). The MDA’s slogan “Making Muscles Move” is readily in juxtaposition with the wasting muscles of people with MD that fail to move without the promise of a cure or medical enhancement.

These new initiatives rebrand the suffering child and the adult who overcomes disability as participants in an economy of always more enhancement, always more treatment options, always more adaptive equipment. The suffering child and the overcoming adult are sites of medical consumption, where the goal is not merely to cure so as to have an able-body, but to cure and enhance the body, to end the suffering of muscle disease through enhanced and capacitated strength, through technologies and treatments that create better-than-able-bodies. The MDA telethon produced and promoted the suffering of disabled children as an object of consumption and of pity while also marking these children as having no future. A future only becomes possible for these children through cure and enhancement; without cure and enhancement, or without the possibility of hope for a cure, there is no future for disability.

“Yes, there’s hope for future children”

In the New York Times bestselling memoir, The Still Point of the Turning World (2013), Emily Rapp recounts her experience with her son Ronan, diagnosed at the age of nine months with Tay-Sachs disease, a “rare and always fatal” degenerative genetic condition “with no treatment and no cure” (1). Tay-Sachs “causes a slow developmental regression into paralysis and sensory loss that is irrevocably fatal by the age of about three,” foreshortening “an entire life-course to a chillingly compact arc” (Garland-Thompson 2012, 349). For Rapp, Tay-Sachs is “the shittiest disease of all time” (2013, 33): “There is no cure for Tay-Sachs, no arguing with biology. We understood that our son would gradually regress into a vegetative state within the span of one year, and that this slow fade would progress to his likely death before the age of three” (2013, 24). Before getting Ronan’s official diagnosis, Rapp comments, “I had been worried for some time. Ronan was experiencing development delays, missing important milestones [...] He was the same at nine months old as he had been at six months” (2013, 1). Rapp was concerned because Ronan was not progressing as she expected he would.
Rapp acknowledges that if she had been aware that her son would be born with Tay-Sachs she would have selectively aborted her pregnancy to prevent the suffering of both her son and her family. Ronan’s diagnosis came as a surprise to Rapp as she had been screened for the condition during the early stages of her pregnancy. However, she only had the standard screening test for Tay-Sachs that detects the nine most common mutations rather than testing for the more than 100 known mutations (2013, 3). Unlike most children now born with Tay-Sachs who are “born to parents who didn’t know they had anything to worry about” (2013, 78), Rapp believes that through genetic screening she had done her part to “cover all the bases, get the results, to know” (2013, 78).

As Rapp had taken precautions to manage potential genetic risks, Rapp sees in her son a life that has already failed. On the drive home from the doctor’s office where they received Ronan’s diagnosis, Rapp notes that Ronan, giggling in his car seat, is “oblivious to his wretched future” (2013, 7). She imagines herself untangling his DNA to “restritch it, rebraid it, fix it, make it right, take it back somehow, change the odds” (2013, 88). For without this fix, this re-braiding of Ronan’s DNA, Rapp and her husband find themselves without hope. Rapp asks: “How do you parent without a future[?] Could it even be called parenting, or was it something else, and if so, what?” (2013, 11). She comments that parenting for the sake of parenting contradicted every bit of parenting advice she had ever read, for “parenting advice is, by its very nature, future directed” (2013, 13). With Ronan facing a foreshortened future, Rapp’s understanding of what it is to parent is displaced. Rapp had imagined that Ronan would be “physically fearless,” an “adventurous eater,” “fun but level-headed, loyal and fair and smart” (2013, 15). He would be “generous and gorgeous” (2013, 16). Yet as Rapp comments, whatever she did for Ronan would not matter: “organic or nonorganic food; cloth or disposable diapers; attachment parenting or sleep training; breast milk or formula—all the decisions that mattered so much to me in the first few months of his life, he was going to die” (2013, 16). No matter how much Rapp invested in doing the “right” things to ensure the best future for Ronan (including genetic testing), his foreshortened future left Rapp to confront neoliberal failure. Rapp was promised a particular future if she negotiated it properly and as Ronan failed to meet normative markers of growth and development, the promise was not fulfilled.

Rapp’s neoliberal failure leads her to lament: “I’d never experience with Ronan so much of what I’d been looking forward to as a mom: marveling as he acquired language, teaching him to ski, traveling with him to all of the wonderful places I have lived, helping him learn how to be a unique person in this mad world” (2013, 69). Rapp consoles herself at times by reassuring herself that in dying young Ronan would “never experience shame, regret, fear, self-loathing, worry, anxiety, or stress [...]. Ronan would never wish himself to be different” (2013, 69-70); yet she nonetheless continues to wonder “about all the things” Ronan “might be or become” if it were not for Tay-Sachs (2013, 75). Indeed, that all investment in Ronan can only be temporary—present and not future-oriented—unsettles conventional neoliberal paradigms. That the promises of successful futures that neoliberal futurity offers—through getting a jump on other children in choosing organic food or cloth diapering, or through starting baby sign language or music classes to develop the brain—will never lead to neoliberal success for Ronan is one of the biggest challenges Rapp struggles with throughout her memoir.

Rapp hangs in temporal ambivalence, teetering back and forth between wanting and imagining a future that will not come while also trumpeting living in the moment. Rapp reluctantly comes to face that her “task was not to prepare my son for his future, but to make each day and each moment count” (Rapp 2014a). Battling these feelings, Rapp asserts: “I wasn’t interested in music class or swimming lessons for Ronan because I hoped he would manifest
some fabulous talent that would set him, and therefore me, apart. I wasn’t searching for heaps of praise about what an amazing mom I was. I was interested in creating experiences for Ronan that would make him happy" (Rapp 2013, 20). Making Ronan happy was not about any future potential: “There was nothing he needed to prove or do or become. He could stay a beautiful acorn; he didn’t need to grow into a tree or realize his potential [...] No pressure to be quicker or better or smarter than the other kids” (2013, 75). Garland-Thomson argues that Tay-Sachs provides an example of disability that “demands that we all might imagine a subject without a future life trajectory perpetually managed in the present moment” (2012, 353), echoing Rapp’s position that Ronan could “stay a beautiful acorn” (2013, 75). And yet, while the “we” in Garland-Thomson’s statement is meant to interpellate the non-disabled to live as if they also have no certain and predictable future (echoing again Rapp’s “beautiful acorn” that suggests the same live-in-the-now outlook), cultural artefacts such as Rapp’s memoir re-inscribe disability as having no future while also capacitating some forms of enhanced disabled futures. Rapp’s account marks disability as both “no hope for a future” (Smith 2013) but also the difference of disability: while Tay-Sachs is no future, not all disabilities offer no future. Both iterations work alongside the figure of the Child as the future.

While Rapp desires a future that is not possible for Ronan, Rapp simultaneously reinvests in being the mother of a yet-to-be born child. As Rapp’s friends in the Tay-Sachs’s community assure her, “Yes, there’s hope for future children” (2013, 9), and as Rapp herself comments, “After my son Ronan was diagnosed [...] I immediately wanted another child” (Rapp 2014b). Sharing her desire for another child with another Tay-Sachs mother, that mother approvingly comments, “Of course you want to feel life again” (Rapp 2014c). While Ronan is still alive, Rapp begins investigating fertility treatment options that would ensure she did not have another Tay-Sachs child. Upon the birth of her daughter Charolette in 2014, Rapp cautions that she “can live with the joy of new motherhood without losing the memory of loving my son” (Rapp 2014a). Yet Charolette also clearly signals the hope of a non-disabled life and future that extends, as Rapp comments, “long beyond my own and [Charolette’s] father’s” (Rapp 2014a), even if her daughter will never replace Ronan. Rapp’s memoir reinvests her reader in the figure of the Child as the future.

Rapp’s story is not unique in the sense that there is a broad cultural logic of disabled children positioned as having no or foreshortened futures. Thus, while Ronan’s foreshortened future came as a surprise to Rapp precisely because he was born without any indication of disability and because Rapp had been assured through her genetic testing that Ronan would have nothing short of a full future, culturally it is readily acknowledged that disabled children have no future, or that what future they have is undesirable. Ronan, once diagnosed as disabled, is imagined to not have a future not only because of the biological trajectory of Tay-Sachs, but also because of the futureless-orientation to disability that dominates our shared social, political, and cultural understandings of disability. The New York Times best-selling success of Rapp’s memoir speaks to the already circulating discourses about disability, suffering, and a lack of a future.

Share the Power of a Wish

The way in which disability can signal a lack of futurity rubs up against the non-profit organization Make-A-Wish Foundation of America (MWF), which grants the wishes of children with life-threatening medical conditions in order to “enrich the human experience with hope,
strength and joy” (2014). The wish opens up hope for the future of disabled children or disabled futures made possible through medical capacitation.

The MWF was started in 1980 by Arizona customs agent Tommy Austin and police officers Ron Cox, Frank Shankwitz, and Jim Eaves. These officers wanted to help Chris Greicius, a seven-year-old boy who had terminal leukemia. Greicius yearned to be a police officer, and Cox and Austin, along with help from the Arizona Department of Public Safety (DPS), named Greicius an honorary DPS officer before his death on May 3, 1980. After Greicius’ death, a group of DPS officers and friends gathered together to discuss their experience with Greicius and ended up forming the MWF. By 1981, they had raised $2000 and granted their first official wish to seven-year-old Frank Salazar, who also had leukemia. The MWF was later incorporated in 1983 and opened chapters across the US with a mission statement of granting a wish to any child diagnosed with a life-threatening medical condition. In 2013 alone, the MWF granted 14,003 wishes to children with life-threatening medical conditions and has granted over 240,000 wishes since 1980.

The MWF (2014) states that a “wish experience can be a game-changer. This one belief guides us. It inspires us to grant wishes that change the lives of the kids we serve.” The “game-changer” the MWF describes refers to bringing about a renewed hope to the children and their families that they will beat their life-threatening conditions, a renewed hope that often results in making the MWF children more compliant with their medical treatments. The MWF notes: “Health professionals treating them say the wish experience is an important adjunct to medical treatment, and they observe their patients feel better and comply more readily with treatment protocols when they experience their wish come true” (2014a). Granting a wish makes the children “more willing to comply with difficult, but vital, treatment regimens” and enables them to “take back control of their lives, and to keep up the fight against their life-threatening medical conditions” (2014a). As opposed to being solely premised on a lack of hope for the future, the wish is premised upon a child continuing treatment and continuing to have hope through medical capacitation.

The wish is oriented to the future, even though the premise of eligibility for a wish is that the child has no guaranteed future. Indeed, while marking the importance of treatment compliance and instilling hope in the child and their family, the MWF at the same time notes that granting one wish is never enough. They state:

But for every wish granted, another child is diagnosed with a potentially qualifying condition. A child who needs a wish. We all look forward to the day when no more children have life-threatening medical conditions. Until that time, Make-A-Wish remains committed to a vision of granting a wish to every eligible child. Because wishes make very sick kids feel better—and sometimes, when they feel better, they get better. (2014b)

This statement invokes a future orientation full of hope towards a time when no child will be terminally ill or disabled. And yet that time has not come, so it is important to support the work of the MWF in bringing sick and disabled children hope today, for they may not have a tomorrow. This viewpoint is reflected in the MWF trademarked slogan “Share the Power of a Wish” (MWF 2013). Capacitating a life now opens up the possibility of futures of remission or liveable futures through medical compliance. At the same time, this future is premised on the present reality that there is no future for disability. That is, to be eligible for a wish, the child must face having no future. That the child has no future emphasizes the importance of the MWF’s work and invokes anticipation; as they note, “It’s hard not to get excited about our work” (2014c).
Wish-kids are expected to die and granting wishes to these dying children brings hope, strength, and a renewed commitment to fighting life-threatening illnesses. Both fighting life-threatening illnesses and granting wishes involve large sums of capital that are dependent upon children having no future and, thus, are in need of living their lives to the fullest while they still live. Furthermore, disabled futures require renewed investment in medical treatment even if the hope is that such an investment will only be temporary. Through the MWF, the suffering child becomes the hopeful child that must always remain a child. Sharing the “Power of a Wish” is limited to the disabled child—there are no wishes for adults. The hope is that the future of the wish-child is a future of remission or a future of medical enhancement; it is not a disabled future.

Not Fighting for the Children

Edelman’s contention is that reproductive futurism disavows all that threatens to end the future, particularly emphasizing the role of the queer as that which “names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside of the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (2004, 3). While the Child represents the heteronormative future, the queer can only signify “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (2004, 9) and thereby threatens the social order because the queer “raises the spectre of, not just a worse future, but precisely ‘no future’” (White 2013, 23). Edelman calls on queers to embrace the negative and to “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized” (2004, 29), suggesting that the ethical value of queerness is precisely in “accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social” (2004, 3).

For Edelman, queers who seek gay marriage, military service, or adoption thus “jump on the bandwagon of reproductive futurism” (McRuer 2008) and reproduce “the conditions of queer abjection” (White 2013, 23). Instead, Edelman calls on queers to “acquiesce to the charge that we are society’s worst nightmare and to embrace our figuration as the negative force working against the social order” (McRuer 2008), for “queerness can never define an identity; it can only disturb one” (Edelman 2004, 17). Edelman thus provocatively asks: “while not seeking to refute the lies that pervade […] familiar right-wing diatribes [about our capacity to destroy society], do we also have the courage to acknowledge, and even embrace, their correlative truths?” (2004, 22). While asserting that his anti-social strategy “promises, in more than one sense of the phrase, absolutely nothing” (2004, 5) and further noting that his project is “impossible” (2004, 4), he does argue that embracing queer negativity “can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (2004, 6). For “queerness exposes the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality, alerting us to the fantasies structurally necessary in order to sustain it and engaging those fantasies through the figural logics, the linguistic structures, that shape them” (2004, 6-7). Edelman suggests that queerness is what can challenge “futurism’s unquestioned good” (2004, 7) and also resist the idea that if there is no baby there is no future, but that without a future, social organization, collective reality, and life itself is undone (2004, 13). Edelman asserts “that we do not intend a new politics, a better society, a brighter tomorrow” and choose instead to “not choose the Child” and “insist that the future stop here,” for the future is “is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past” (2004, 31). Commenting on Edelman’s negation of the future, Jose Esteban Muñoz writes in
Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity: “When I negotiate the ever-increasing sidewalk obstacles produced by oversized baby strollers on parade in the city in which I live, the sheer magnitude of the vehicles that flaunt the incredible mandate of reproduction as world-historical virtue, I could not be more hailed” (2009, 92) by the queer imperative to not fight for the children. Yet Muñoz also notes: “As strongly as I reject reproductive futurity, I nonetheless refuse to give up on concepts such as politics, hope, and a future that is not kid stuff” (2009, 92), for “all children are not the privileged white babies to whom contemporary society caters” (2009, 94). Muñoz further elucidates: “Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity. Although Edelman does indicate that the future of the child as futurity is different from the future of actual children, his framing nonetheless accepts and reproduces this monolithic figure of the child that is indeed always already white” (2009, 95). In addition to McRuer’s critique of the Child as always already able-bodied, other queer and disability studies scholars have echoed Munoz’s critique. For example, Kafer writes that “this always already whiteness is a whiteness framed by and understood through regimes of health and hygiene” whereby racialized and queer kids cast out of reproductive futurity “have been and continue to be framed as sick, as pathological, as contagious,” marking the co-constitution of race, class, and disability as delimiting reproductive futurity (2013, 32). This conclusion is also echoed in the work of Mel Chen (2011) and Deborah Cohler (2014).

Kafer and Muñoz agree that “it is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity” (Muñoz 2009, 95), for “[t]he dominant model of futurity is indeed ‘winning,’ but that is all the more reason to call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a ‘not-yet’ where queer youths of colour actually get to grow up” (96). Indeed, Muñoz comments that “[t]he way to deal with the asymmetries and violent frenzies that mark the present is not to forget the future. The here-and-now is simply not enough” (2009, 96), leading Kafer to suggest that the task at hand is to “imagine disability and disability futures otherwise” (2013, 34).

Following Muñoz (2009) and Kafer (2013), it is important to fight for the future, but to do so requires addressing the ways by which neoliberal futurity depends upon both negating the futures of disability while also promoting particular inclusions of disability. Thus, while the ableism that underlies the ways in which Kafer’s future is written on her body and the ways in which disabled lives are not tractable, these accounts do not mark the ways in which neoliberal futurity promotes and capacitates certain disabled lives so as to affirm particular forms of biocapitalism and inclusion that have implications for the way in which disability can become in the world. It is not enough then, to invest in the neoliberal biocapitalist forms of enhanced futures of disabled people. Rather, it is imperative to turn away from the myth of the future that forecloses the possibility of other worlds.

In 2014, Kristin Nelson’s radio documentary told the story of Paige Cunliffe, a 21-year-old woman living in Ontario, Canada who became developmentally disabled after a bout of meningitis at the age of 13 months. For most of Paige’s life her mother Pam was her primary caregiver, but Pam found that she was no longer able to care fulltime for Paige once Paige became an adult. After waiting on a list to be placed in a group home for over 10 years, Paige was instead placed in a long-term nursing care home. Paige was not alone in this placement; between 2008-2012 in Ontario, over 5000 people with developmental disabilities under the age of 65 were admitted to long-term care homes. While long-term care is designed for people who require 24/7 care, most of the residents of long-term care facilities are elderly patients who are not ideal peers for a social and energetic 21-year-old such as Paige. Within the care home, there are few activities available that suit Paige’s needs and interests and, with a caretaker-to-resident
ratio of 1:11, Pam notes that Paige is often left sitting alone in soiled clothing for hours.

The waiting list for a group home in Ontario includes over 12,000 developmentally disabled people. In a group-home setting, Paige would be with peers, engaged in activities, and have a worker-to-resident ratio of 1:3. With such a long list, Nelson notes that Paige may be living with the very sick and the elderly for up to 20 years. However, Paige’s withering, like the withering experienced by many disabled people, is not simply a story about a lack of material resources that would allow for the flourishing of disabled lives. Rather, withering and flourishing are not simply a matter of resources (personal or state) but also invoke forms of futurity that privilege only certain forms of the future for disability and disabled people. Disabled people who can be easily accommodated, included, enhanced, and capacitated by forms of biocapitalism are much more likely to thrive. Such thriving, however, must still contend with the way in which neoliberal futurity is embedded within the logic of the suffering disabled child who is not expected to grow up. Paige’s withering, then, is related to the enhancement of others; simply capacitating Paige within the context of neoliberal futurity does not address the myriad ways in which disability functions within neoliberal economies.

Through the examples traced in this article, neoliberal futurity is deployed slightly differently. For Clarence, there can be no future for her disabled children. For Cure SMA, disability produces only a diminishing and dependent child with no future, so it is imperative to invest in a biocapitalist future that can overcome SMA. Jerry’s Kids are presented as having no future, even when confronted with grown-up renegades. The telethon and contemporary fundraising initiatives encourage a hope and investment in processes of enhancement and cure as the only possible future for disability. For Rapp, there is no future for particular disabled children, but there is hope in having another child. The MWF marks disabled children as having no future, but gives the child hope for life today, which is utilized for medical compliance that might prolong the child’s life. With all this focus on the child, it is no wonder that Paige is an unanticipated adult: while there now exists a vaccine to prevent Paige’s condition, it is too late for Paige to receive the future promised by this vaccine (Nelson 2014). Paige is not asking for anything that the telethon, fundraisers, or the MWF can provide—Paige did not die and Paige cannot overcome her condition.

There are compelling reasons to follow Edelman towards negating the Child and the future when thinking through the forms of neoliberal futurity open to disability. Consider, for example, if embracing the withering of Paige opens possibilities that are not readily apparent when advocating for a future, especially a future that is entrenched in cure and enhancement? Is there a way to read Paige as failure, dysfunction, loss, tragedy, or suffering so as to avoid turning her into a form of difference that can be capacitated or simply left to wither? There are good reasons to embrace Paige’s suffering as a way of affirming that the tractable futures available to some disabled adults are not enough. Suffering can be mobilized as a way to highlight the ways in which not all forms of disability can be easily accommodated or adapted by neoliberal forms of capacitation. Using suffering to draw attention to forms of withering that some disabled people experience can be a helpful political strategy, but must be used with caution given the historical mobilization of suffering as a way to mark disabled lives as those not worth living. A politics of suffering is one way to bridge queer and crip theory to highlight the differential ways in which not all disabled people suffer equally, thus exposing the structural forces at play in the capacitation and withering of disabled bodies. Some disabled people are capacitated in ways that are counterproductive to radically refiguring the world, whereas others
are debilitating through violent processes that should not be celebrated. There is no one way to experience suffering, nor can we reduce or trivialize particular instances of suffering. Although it is not possible to entirely escape the frame in which disability-related suffering has been historically shaped and mobilized to render lives as not worth living, shared social experiences of suffering can push us to think more critically about the ways in which suffering is mobilized and to whose benefit.

However, as this article has shown, disability cannot operate in a full negation of the figure of the Child or unequivocally embrace “no future,” as disability is always already embedded in the production of the future as a future of technological and medical advances—a future to be found through the saving grace of biocapitalism. The future is accessible, happy, hopeful, and inclusive, even when it is not (Fritsch 2013). Disability, through neoliberal biocapitalist processes of capacitation and withering, participates in the formation of the figure of the Child, and is thus an important site of contestation.

In contrast to Edelman (2004), I am interested in negating reproductive futurism not only to reject the social order that relies on the Child, but rather to invest otherwise in social relations that complicate both the horizon of futurity and that of neoliberal biocapitalism that underlies our current interest in the future. The fight then, is not an anti-social turn away from the future entirely, but a negative turn away from the future that currently forecloses the possibility of other worlds. It is a question of struggling for a better world and demanding a better future, not for our individual selves, or for our children, but as an ethical gesture of being of and within the world. Muñoz notes: “The act of accepting no future is dependent on renouncing politics and various principles of hope that are, by their very nature, relational” (2009, 94). If it is indeed within relations that disability emerges, then that is where the fight is to be had. Negating neoliberal reproductive futurity is thus not simply a question of fucking the child, but rather investing otherwise in social relations that complicate this horizon of futurity.

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Startle

Katie Aubrecht

I was given a name with my son’s inheritance;
blood bonds cemented in an unusual startle.

No hostage to fortune,

offices, tests, triggers and dominant traits dislodged traces of exaggerated reflexes.

“Bad nerves” recalled.

- HYPEREKPLEXIA -

It gives perplexing simultaneity,
relief and anxiety now to know.

Who I was when

body tensed, breadth left, stomach dropped, heart skipped

and leapt through skin.

No longer a figment, disability is real. So real it passed.

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Fat Futurity
Tosha Yingling

For fat people, to realize themselves is to defer and evolve from their flesh. Yet, as our culture becomes increasingly digital, users are adopting cyberspace as a form of subversive self-creation. This movement is fat futurity, where fat users employ a process of self-actualization that, instead of relying on corporeal understandings of fat, uses digitization to skew perceptions and challenge the quantitative understanding of fat bodies in a non-linear plane that blurs the empiricisms of stereotype. Progressive embodiment captures the potential of the self beyond the stasis of physicality according to one’s authentic self and thus resists dominant discourse.

We live in the neoliberal moment, an era in which bodies are policed, cultivated, and sculpted in the name of health. Explored by fat scholars and neoliberalism critics such as Kelly Moore and Stefanie Jones, the self-help bootstrap myths of neoliberalism affect our bodies as they affect our economies and politics. In the context of fat studies, these myths combine with and solidify the fallacy of fat bodies as unmanaged pathological flesh that fat scholars for decades have opposed. These tropes are, of course, also racialized and gendered, so that fatness becomes a code of disenfranchisement used to accentuate the lascivious sexuality of women of color, the gluttony of Black welfare queens, and the filth and lack of management of those living in poverty. These images of fatness as lazy, unhygienic, and tragic flesh are perpetuated by capitalist diet culture, making the fat body the emblem of that which must be abandoned: a signal of dystopian disrepair of a body that will not ascend to its more desirable potentiality, thinness. Aside from the biopolitical implications of how neoliberalism’s marriage to capitalism allocates resources for this kind of cultivation, a parcel of bodies are made deviant, the very definitions of lacking health. As explored through fat scholar and activist Samantha Murray’s work, fat people learn that to realize themselves is to idealize the thin and acceptable, and thus actualize themselves away from their fat flesh. Claiming fatness is made taboo, and the overall state of being fat is steeped in a poisonous deferral one must evolve beyond, making fatness a kind of liminality in the quest for the thin ideal. A lack of humanity results from being made deviant, from having to assert one’s existence.

Yet, as our culture becomes increasingly digital, fat users are taking to cyberspace to root themselves in their present fat identities rather than taking hiatus from their flesh. This vast online network of body positivity, probesity, and body-reclamation activism continues to grow in its potential in what Cat Pausé refers to in “Causin’ a Commotion: Queering Fat in Cyberspace” as the “fat-o-sphere.” These spaces become refuge for fat users and their safety inspires users to think about their embodiment in provocative new ways. In these realms, digital identity can serve as a form of self-creation and subversive representation for marginalized bodies, in this case, fat flesh. As a person digitizes their identity, they have the freedom to represent fat as desirable, confident, unapologetic, fierce, fashionable, human. Fat is being reclaimed in the fat-o-sphere on activist tumblr pages, online fashion blogs, and in
smaller-scale personal accounts that use the screen divide to enact and experiment with confident embodiment. This movement of digitizing oneself to claim fatness—manipulating the perceived screen divide between the user and their cyber-self to actualize fatness as part of their embodied identity—is the concept and process of fat futurity. In this movement, fat users can reinstate the future of their bodies, provide stability to claim and experience fatness, and make a process of self-actualization away from the thin-body ideal.

In this paper, I outline the components of fat futurity, a complicated process I am using to describe the calculated images of fatness many fat internet users are employing in radical and provocative ways. This process hinges upon actualizing or refashioning an ideal self using digital media to present the flesh. Employing Hortense Spillers’s concept of the flesh and the body, I argue that the body is a narrativized entity whose ascriptions often precede the sensual reality of the flesh. In fat futurity, the flexible records of digitization are used to challenge notions of fatness applied to the flesh. I will explain the ways in which the flexibility of digitization is optimal for fat users wishing to use digital records to reinstate fat futures through the use of fat avatars, icons predicated on the communal practice of appearing. I will then highlight the importance of Sylvia Wynter’s concept of being human as praxis to the process of fat futurity, noting that the cyborgs invoked in fat futurity are more complex notions of the flesh and its capacities, rather than post-humanist ideals of transorganic fusions of bodies and machines. Fat cyborgs instead are predicated on Michele Stephens’s concept of the invaginated body rather than Donna Haraway’s idea of the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism,” though fat cyborgs are still cyborgian as “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 1). Combining the idea of the invaginated body as one that can project embodiment into digital records and Sylvia Wynter’s analysis of bodies consisting of bios and mythoi, I analyze in the closing section how the fat cyborg is born.

In order to understand fat futurity and its processes, it is first important to think about the manifestation of time in fat flesh, so that the radical process of actualization through digitization can be appreciated especially for fat users. Through this understanding of the radical reclamation of fat, we can appreciate an idea of fat permanence, though “permanence” here is used differently than our linear understanding of permanence in time. As Samantha Murray outlines in her work on the aesthetics and becoming of fatness, this permanence must take fat into account as a “perverse form of embodiment and, in order to be accorded personhood, is expected to engage in a continual process of transformation, of becoming and, indeed, unbecoming” (Murray 2005, 155). (This idea presumes that a body that becomes thin is a body of privilege, though we must acknowledge how bodies are then racialized, gendered, and read as able to understand that thinness is but one norm in a multi-interlocking system of oppression as fatness is often used to enhance and signal other marginalizations. For example, fatness meets race and gender to make the mammy figure asexual and undesirable. Fat bodies in their material reality are in a constant state of disavowal from their lived contours. Often policed because of Puritanical understandings of excess and control that often are heavily racialized to signal the uncontrollable hedonism of lesser races in scientific racism (cf. Sara Baartman) and bolstered by the neoliberal body cultivation aforementioned, this disavowal encourages a liminality in embodiment as “there is a sense of suspension, of deferral, of hiatus. One is waiting to become ‘thin’….” (ibid.). Even if thinness is not a particular fat individual’s desire, the thin imperative is ascribed to their skin, making fat flesh the site of an undesirable reality in the spectrum of control and excess. By intersecting the realities of fat identities as ascriptions of uncultivated flesh with neoliberal, racist, and misogynist ideals of body management, fat identity is made liminal and suspended so that permanence is more
about ownership and stability than a static marker of identity in linear time. It is the reclamation of fat in a faithful representation of the radical polarization of the thin ideal. In cyber spaces, the permanence generated in fat futurity offers stability in self-representation for the creator, who fashions fat in a sense that affirms their creative process both in and out of social ascription (ibid.).

The ownership of fat identity in this way marries the futuristic connotations of digitization to anchor fat realities in an alternative visibility. Fat futurity asks that we think about how time is deployed on fat flesh, particularly with regard to the future due to the deviant expiration coded in fat ascription. Keeping in mind the unhealthy, deviant, and sexually underproductive or lascivious prescriptive identity (as fat bodies are deemed asexual or sexually undesirable outside of fetish or kink), it is important to think about fat futures in conjunction with Alison Kafer’s theory of crying time, a concept responding to and building on Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Though it is problematic to equate fat studies and disability studies as they investigate different intersections of power, elements of Kafer’s theory of crying time can inspire new ways to think about fat futurity, particularly in her call to radicalize our linear perceptions of time in which the future is exclusive to some identities. Similar to the ways in which fat bodies are read pathologically, Kafer exposes a reality where those who read her disabled body “can clearly see the grim future that awaits me: with no hope in sight, my future cannot be anything but bleak” (Kafer 2013, 2). As they are pathologized, bodies are placed on a spectrum of health that is quantitative in its linearity, creating a timeline where bodies deemed unhealthy are left out of the arc of progress. They are also coded as bodies that are pathologized, whether through lack of health or asexual undesirability, as bodies literally incapable of producing the “future”/children. Fat bodies similarly coded as fat are read as a perpetually unhealthy project, a risky and careless existence, where one’s time is fatal or short. Not only does this intersect with the liminality described by Murray to render the fat body as temporary in its poor health but, with regards to Kafer’s crying time, fat bodies then signal a dystopia whose absence indicates a better future.

Understanding that fat bodies are coded in dystopia, body reclamation in cyberspace gains a new powerful meaning. When Kafer challenges us to crip time, she is ultimately asking that our task “is not so much to refuse the future as to imagine disability and disability futures otherwise, as part of other, alternative temporalities that do not cast disabled people out of time, as the sign of the future of no future” (Kafer 2013, 34). Similarly, for fat people fat futurity offers a way to conceptualize a world where fat can be a present reality without being devalued by a constant rhetoric of eradication. In the digital medium, fat identity is claimed in ways that mark it with the brand of permanence outlined in fat futurity so that fat is an ownership denouncing the quest for a thin body, anchoring the body beyond the pathologized limited, and signaling a future where the present realities of fat existence are humanized. Additionally, fat futurity works to move past what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism,” in which the figure of the child is looked to for creating sustainable futures and the utopias free of certain identities that Kafer expands upon. Fat futurism evokes a future where fat bodies are possible but which also allows, through a process of digital self-actualization, the means by which to celebrate and embrace the present self. This is not a future about losing weight to reach an ideal; this is a future where the present contours of a body are legitimized, no matter their expansion or decrease in lifetime. Fat futurity pluralizes and expands upon notions of self as multiplicity, allowing for fatness to be experienced and performed in a myriad of ways. This is the genesis of fat futurity, in which a cyborgian relationship with digitization facilitates self-actualization.
It is this sense of permanence that fat futurity offers us rather than a simpler linear one that suggests being permanently fat as reclamation. Fat futurity is complex in its recognition of the self as multiple. Part of body reclamation’s marriage with the cyber is the digital’s ability to record flexible futures. This is important not just for understanding the self but also staging a radical fatness that online audiences consume. The flexibility of the digital realm allows for the important understanding in which we “experience myself/my body in ways that shift and vary and contradict one another,” to create records that can reflect bodies that become fatter or thinner over time, different performances and ways of embodying fat, and even mourning for a thinner body or a formally fatter body as a lost self all in the same person (Murray 2005, 156). Digitization reflects the multiplicity of self around a shifting core, one which captures fat essence while still conveying the multiplicity of identity. This tension results from the slippage between social construction and material reality, as the body is still ascribed with the products of fat discrimination in its material reality, while adjusting the self through digital self-creation allows a platform for constructing the self with transgressing or undermining social constructs in mind. This idea of both consistently owning fatness while exploring the potential for digitization to portray all identity as unstable, temporal, plural, and refashioning is best exemplified through the fat avatar, the foundational tool for refashioning fat identity through fat futurity.

Online avatars are icons used to navigate digital forums. We typically think of cyber entities fashioned with a user’s idealizations in mind as a means to represent themselves in digital media. Particularly with the fears of phenomena such as catfishing, in which our distrust of the cyber worlds as inauthentic or clandestine manifests, we tend to imagine avatars as separate entities from the physical self. The mysticism of the screen divide (portrayal of self in an online space polarized from the physical self behind the computer screen) makes us believe that on the internet “[t]he body is left behind and the mind released from the mortal limitations of the flesh” (Sundén 2001, 216). However, the fat avatar complicates this idea as many bloggers are embracing their flesh on the internet as a form of re-embodiment that transcends this.

In fig. 1, style blogger Gabi Gregg takes a selfie in the mirror opposite her bed without makeup and in her PJs, a departure from her typical blog content. In fig. 2, Gregg posts a picture of her posing for the photos that will appear on her blog, leaving the image of the person photographing her within the frame.
Take for example, plus-size fatsionista, Gabi Gregg of Gabifresh. Though Gregg’s popularity as an Instagram personality and style blogger centers around using makeup and fashion as an art of transformation, her embodiment and her flesh are integral to the self she presents. The avatar in this instance is enfleshed, though presented in no less calculated and creative ways than the cartoon avatars we imagine: Gregg’s avatar is her enfleshed body but is creatively posed and manipulated for constructed viewing through camera angles, filters, and her use of style and fashion to create the ideal self (fig. 2). She even cheekily shows pictures of herself appearing before the camera, a meta-creation moment highlighting the radical intent behind the portrayal of her social media presence. An image such as fig. 1 would at first appear to make it difficult to differentiate an avatar from the actual person; however, the two are not inseparable as the fat avatar functions as a tool to refashion interpretations of fatness and is presented in very calculated and radical ways. As a tenant of many body reclamation movements, Gregg’s fat avatar is enfleshed and the self is made virtual in an eschewal of the virtual and real as the physical body is presented to an audience rather than a cartoon idealization. Instead of mistaking this avatar as one that is more genuine than performative, the fat avatar acknowledges both the flesh and the ideal so that, instead of disembodiment, the image employs a means of “new constructions and definitions of the self” (Bolter 1996 quoted in Belk 2013, 481). This leads to a kind of re-embodiment, where embodiment is written onto the physical body, though on the terms of their own creation. However, just because the physical self is visible does not mean that it is any less constructed, as “[t]he relative freedom of configuring our avatar bodies has led some to suggest that our avatar represents our ideal self, aspirational self, or a canvas on which we can ‘try out’ various alternative selves,” selves that could foster the existence of fatness in the cyber world in ways that the physical world does not (Belk 2013, 481). The revolutionary idea here is that, rather than using an avatar whose appearance may reinforce harmful ideals that rupture their own physical embodiments, embodying the fat self becomes the presumptive ideal.

People then actualize themselves digitally as their ideal fat person rather than as an aspiration to thinness. By using the fat avatar, fat futurity then allows users a process in which “with designing our avatar...and becoming comfortable with it, we gradually not only become re-embodied but increasingly identify as our avatar” (ibid.). This avatar becomes one of our selves, an aspect that transcends the screen to sync with our physical bodies. This is a different process for those who do not use flesh avatars as fat bloggers do, as using a non-flesh avatar is a deferral tactic from the physical body; however, as fat people are conditioned to defer from their physical flesh, the avatar becomes an anchor with which to explore and construct the fat self.

Claiming fat flesh and recording it in digital records is a radical move as fat people are often reduced to their flesh. They are looked upon as meaty and thick, corporeal, and carnal in ways that tie them to connotations of the body, particularly making them a synecdoche for the sensual flesh. Fat scholarship has centered the ways in which fatness is connected to the body, as many oppressed groups are Othered in binaric opposition to the mind, so that fatness connotes the unhygienic, corporeal, excessive, and the fleshy body. These are bodies that are constantly placed out of time through future utopias and are situated as failures in a binary of control and excess. Particularly when looking through historic understandings of fatness, it is often the colonial and Puritanical that look upon bodies brutalized by conquest and use fatness to bolster racialized stereotypes of gluttony, excess, and deviant sexuality to absolve colonizers of their brutalities. These stereotypes further anchor fatness in the fleshy carnality of the body. However, in the digital plane, “the viral can instigate a panic around measure or measuring that
takes us beyond human perception, consciousness, and cognition...” thereby offering the potential for fat bodies to be interpreted beyond their fleshy contours (Clough and Puar 2012, 15). The digitization of fat bodies can skew our perceptions, both in representing fatness in ways that we are not used to comprehending and in challenging the quantitative understanding (fatness is measured in weight) of fat bodies in the non-linear plane of cyberspace. It is in this plane where the time of fat bodies (usually perceived as sloth) and the empiricisms of weight and stereotype can be blurred and subverted.

The fat body is always hypervisible, taking up too much visual space. Through digitization, this claimed hypervisibility is subverted “in relationship to the viral, [as] measure becomes speculative in its aim; it activates, if it does not preempt, futurity and potentiality in probing for the not-yet-calculated, the excess incalculability in calculation” (Clough and Puar 2012, 15). This hypervisibility reverses the gaze of fat bodies and creates space for their staging rather than hiding behind an avatar and eliciting stereotypes of fat shame. The fat body becomes immaterial in its digitization, a revolution for bodies reduced down to their flesh. This cyborgian relationship also works to give flesh to the disembodied in cyberspace as flesh is being acknowledged and recoded in digitization.

Given the foregoing, these digital records are not post-human cyborgs. Building on the idea that race is forgotten in post-humanism in the denial of the ways in which Black flesh has been made inhuman through slavery and colonialism, in Habeas Viscus Alexander Weheylie reminds us of the importance of the body, which cannot be abandoned in the quest for humanity, and also evokes Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers’s concept of captive flesh and the flesh/body differentiation. Post-humanism in this reading is a fallacy because it focuses on the narratives of the body rather than the site of the flesh where the horrible atrocities of racist patriarchy have manifested in white slave master’s whips and colonial conquest and rape. As fat futurity is inspired by Sylvia Wynter’s concept of being human as praxis, we must keep in mind categories of the human and the ways in which those who do not fit neatly into the category of “Man” must think of new ways of being human.

This means claiming the flesh rather than using machine fusions to try to abandon it. Weheylie argues that if “racialization is understood not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans, then blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status” (3). Thus we must keep in mind the ways in which humanity is denied to marginalized groups before attempting to transcend the post-human. Fat futurity cannot abandon the quest for humanity for those who have been greatly dehumanized because of their fatness and whose fatness has been used to bolster their racial and sexual oppression. A project such as fat futurity is not post-human for exactly this reason.

Fat futurity is rooted in the body, partially defined by embodiment that is not separate from the abstract or cyber, and a part of fleshes too marginalized in their fatness (and often their other identities) to ever be considered the fully human capital-M “Man.” Consequently, it is Wynter’s work that still appeals to the cyborgian sense of the human (and the invaginated cyborg) when she urges us to “initiate the exploration of the new reconceptualized form of knowledge that would be called for by Fanon’s redefinition of the human being as that of skins (phylogeny/ontogeny) and masks (sociogeny). Therefore bios and mythoi” (Wynter 2015, 23). This understanding of the body addresses both the organic matter of our flesh (bios) and the narratives of our bodies (mythoi), combining into a science of the Word in which a body can be examined in its complicated completeness as a human hybrid, a structure reminiscent of the
cyborg in its transorganic fusions with meaning and matter. It is through this understanding of the human hybrid/the fat cyborg that Wynter’s work pushes us to think of being human as praxis, a process by which we as marginalized people come to understand and perform our humanity—the very essence of fat futurity. It is in itself a process of being human as praxis, as performing and living fat with a sense of humanity.

The fat avatar, then, is a tool to record digital futures that exemplify being human as praxis and that uses the avatar to highlight the ways in which the self can be realized with digitization. We must complicate the idea that the cyber self and the physical self are exclusively divided in order to understand cyberspace as a space of self-actualization. We tend to demonize the use of avatars as a fallacy or trick because of the screen divide, but the perceived polarization of the cyber self and the physical self can also be attributed to a kind of confessional culture in which people are more comfortable being themselves or who they fashion themselves to be in cyber media. The “somatic flexibility” offered “through online communication afford[es] individuals the opportunity to present and ultimately embrace their ideal self...” in ways that they may not be able to in their physical realities (Whitty and Young 2011, 544). For fat people in the context of fat futurity, this means embracing and stabilizing a sense of self in their fatness through digitization in a physical world where the expectation of fatness calls for its constant deferral and disavowal. Through the digital medium, users can discover a more transgressive sense of self with the screen divide to shelter them.

This opens fat users to experiment which is difficult to do in a physical world inhibited by capitalist and Puritanical body management: to actualize themselves while considering their present fatness rather than filtering their realities through a thin ideal that further defers them from their realities, stunting their potential realization of self. The avatar is intrinsic to this pursuit because of its function of “appearing,” gesturing to Hannah Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind*, which analyzes the ways in which being and appearing are symbiotic. Arendt’s work effectively explains the appeal of using the fat avatar as the process of appearing “always means to seem to others...,” so that the avatar is as much a narrative of the self as it is a calculated representation of fat to be recorded in flexible digital futures (Arendt 1978, 21). The process of appearing is never a singular one as it predicates on the idea of appearing and existing before a spectator. The author’s creation and the audience’s spectatorship meld into a sea of perspectives that color a fat avatar. However, because of the confessional culture created by the screen divide, one is often more comfortable presenting one’s online self in a way that filters out negativity and builds community between similar users/consumers. Through this lens, the fat avatar concerns appearances that “expose, and [...] also protect from exposure, and, as far as what lies beneath is concerned, this protections may even be their most important function” (Arendt 1978, 25). The fat avatar becomes a tool through which fat users can refashion and re-embody their ideal self while simultaneously making fat visible to spectators in provocative ways and protecting themselves from harmful fat stereotypes that would contort their avatar-representation.

To understand how digitization becomes enfleshed, it is important to acknowledge the process of self creation and its complexities as it works to connect the digital persona and material reality. Beyond the opportunity to realize oneself away from the thin ideal, digitization also offers a mode by which one can create oneself in one’s chosen image. This is a complex process that involves realizing how the body is coded, creating the self as art with these codes in mind, and reclaiming, deferring, and anchoring one’s flesh reality in one’s digital image (the fat avatar). In this process, we see how the fat avatar is created and then becomes a tool for self-actualization in a cyborgian manner; because this process is cyborgian, the emphasis lies not
only in the digital but in the importance of embodiment in the flesh, highlighting that in fat-
futurist projects these two entities are not independent or oppositional.

While the image of the cyborg is being invoked here, it is within a challenge to post-
humanism that I use the term. It is integral not to fall into the realm of post-humanism when
thinking through fat futurity for precisely the importance of the role that the flesh and
humanity play in the project. Consequently, fat cyborgs are not reduced to fusions of the
machine and the human, but rather employ an understanding of the body as able to influence
the digital because of its invaginated nature. In her book Skin Acts, Michele Stephens analyzes
our contemporary understanding of the body as phallic (this body greatly complements
neoliberal self-help and possessive-individual narratives, though the concept of the phallic body
precedes these ideas) presenting a body that is hard, closed, a container, and an impermeable
indicator of racial and sexual difference through physiology on the outside. It is through this
understanding of phallic bodies that sex and gender are differentiated, as the female and male
bodies are binarily opposed, with the female body as the container that envelopes the male body.
Protrusions can also signal a grotesque body: uncontrollable fat bellies that stick out,
hypersexual large penises of Black men, and Sara Baartman’s lascivious fleshy behind.

Complicating the notion of the phallic body, Michele Stephens introduces us to the
idea of the invaginated body, one that is integral to understanding fat futurity and its
complication of the cyborg ideal. The invaginated body is an understanding that negates the
individualistic, closed impermeability of the phallic body and its privileging of sexual
protrusions over “lacks.” Instead, the invaginated body is molecular, porous, fluid, and
relational. The skin of the invaginated body “functions psychically as both ‘shell’ and ‘kernal,’ a
‘matter of relations between surfaces, inserted one inside another,’” premised around the idea
of the body’s orifices rather than phallic protrusions (Anzieu 1989 qtd in Stephens 2014, 16). If
we understand an orifice as skin folding onto itself rather than a hole which must be filled, we
can displace the idea of phallic objects filling holes and view desire and the body as open,
relational, and interacting with other skin.

The invaginated body is the actuality of the cyborg that fat futurity invokes. Rather
than thinking of the cyborg as using the digital to bolster the limitations of the body, fat
futurity’s invaginated cyborg highlights the power of the fluid and porous body and the ways in
which it is then imprinted on the digital record as an extension of self and skin. It is “these
chiasmic, fleshy relations [that provoke] an intercorporeity involving ‘reciprocal insertion and
intertwining in one another....’” that allow us to understand the cyborg not as an appendage to
the lacking semi-human body, but as the flesh mingling with its own refashioning online
(Merleau-Ponty 1968 qtd in Stephens 2014, 16). This pares the body down to Hortense
Spillers’ concept of flesh, highlighting an intercorporeality that interacts with the sentient body
rather than acting as its signifier. Narrative fuses with sensation in fat futurity, so that the
cyborg is a calculated image of self that resides within the invaginated body and can be
projected into cyborgian communities of flexible digital record that imprint the invaginated fat
body in cyberspace. The cyborg is not a fusion with machine but rather an understanding of the
skin and body as entities unbound, components that cannot be lost in the quest for post-
humanism as they are the basis of scientific racism and biological determinism that define who
has access to humanity and who does not. The dependence on so-called biology then lived
entirely in the phallic body, a concentration on the outside rather than the fleshy folding reality
of our invaginated bodies.

Fat users thus manifest a cyborg that is an extension of the body rather than the
limited body and its plus-one. The fat cyborg in this sense allows for a process of self-
actualization that exhibits an ongoing refashioning according to one's own ideals and pushes back against dominant discourse recorded into flexible digital futures for themselves and their audience. This often means that fat users are talking back to fat stereotypes to craft digital personas to disprove lazy, unsexy, asexual, unhygienic, shameful, and shy tropes of fat embodiment. Using radical frameworks, one can acknowledge their prescriptive traits and, in the process “enable a means of overturning dominant discourses around the fat body that relate to the perceived neglect of bodily maintenance and the failure of will ...” (Murray 2004, 237). These prescriptive traits often dovetail with a capitalist imperative in our recent culture, in which a culture industry of a mythical fat norm emerges centered around femininity, hetero-cisgenderism, whiteness, and ablism. Fat futurity is then expanded to encompass the ways in which fat users talk back to the ways in which fat is accepted in certain realms and used to highlight disenfranchised identity (poverty, colonial perceptions of Blackness such as Sara Baartman, asexuality) in other contexts. With this knowledge, users can make their marginalized bodies visible in bold, empowering ways. Rather than seeing the fat as “a symbol of the failed body, and as an aesthetic affront,” fat users can make fat a desirable location rather than a deferrable one (ibid., 239). In making fat more desirable, one does so not only for oneself but for one’s fellow fat users in their digital communities (ibid., 240).

In consistently employing fat futurity in companion with one’s self-actualization, cyber communities are built in which users feel validated by other users, who then deploy a kind of fat futurity themselves. In the fat-o-sphere, fat users can turn to cyber communities to actualize themselves through reclamation of their fatness. In contrast to the physical world that restricts fatness and sees it as temporal, fat futurity builds communities where fat people can embrace and own their present size. The screen divide fosters “[t]he sharing of information about the self online facilitated by the disinhibition and confessional effects means that it is now far easier to present our selves in ways that would have been awkward...,” and in building fat community, these representations of self feel less awkward as they are affirmed by other users (Belk 2013, 481). As some fat performance scholars—such as Stefani Jones in “The Performance of Fat: The Spectre Outside the House of Desire”—remind us, the performance of fatness, indeed the performance of any identity, is two-pronged. In fusion with Hannah Arendt’s concept of appearing, the performance of fatness involves both the performer and the audience. The intentions of the fat author and the fat community blend and meld into an assemblage of meaning-making and subversive knowledge. In these spaces, fat shame is slowly eroded, so one can feel pride in and love for one’s current skin. A community which supports a fat user is created in a digitization that greatly contrasts the policing expectations of the physical world.

Cyberspace gives the user the tools to capture the potential and the fluidity of the self beyond the stasis of their supposed phallic physicality in an embrace of the body as invaginated and able to be recorded in digital futures for an audience. It offers a kind of progressive embodiment where one can “present oneself in a manner that corresponds to the potential afforded within a given environment/space to be what one has the potential to be” (Whitty and Young 2011, 544). Pixelated cyberspace with its flexible records allows for digitization to become a kind of identity management, one that records multiple sides of an individual’s self and their multiple selves for an audience whose stereotypes of fatness are being challenged. This “fresh arena for the staging of the body, upon which new dramas are to be enacted” is particularly important to fat people, whose quantitative bodies are often reduced down to the flesh, as invaginated embodiment in cyberspace makes way for users to “exploit somatic flexibility so as to extend the boundaries of their own embodiment...,” and show us images of fatness that are challenging (Whitty and Young 2011, 537-8). It is in this space that one can not
only acknowledge the oppression of physical ascription but also challenge it in making one’s self in one’s own image.

For fat futurists, these images of self reclaim fatness as a desirable position and aim to change our conceptions of bodies. Fat is flesh, reduced to its contours, but cyberspace has no linearity and digitization has no physical space. “With the viral, aesthetic measure goes beyond human perception, consciousness, and cognition, drawn to a futurity or potentiality that today is an object of political, cultural, economic, and technical contention,” and our ideas of fatness are challenged, so that fat is moved away from the quantitative spectrum and into a more complex and flexible plane in which humanity is claimed and enacted beyond our physical understandings (Clough and Puar 2012, 15). Cyberspace lends us a stage in which the invaginated cyborg skews the presumptive physicality of the phallic body to allow us to make the ways in which our bodies are truly invaginated. In many ways, the internet allows users, fat and thin alike, to re-inscribe their embodiment with digital self-actualization and use the process of appearing to record fat futures that resist fat norms.

However, we must be careful not to subscribe to the idea that the internet is a vast expanse of potential without limitations. It is ironic that our view of bodies is phallic and limited while our view of the cyber is not, as the cyber does in fact have limitations. While the anonymity of the screen divide allows the possibility of redirecting or transgressing the gaze, it is not a refuge space where material realities of embodiment can be escaped. This idea would lend itself to the phallic body, suggesting that the hard contours of the body cannot be imprinted on the digital and that digital machines have a sentience to rival humanity. The understanding of the invaginated cyborg is an important idea here, as it complicates Donna Haraway’s idea that cyborgs can blur the lines between the mind and body to create new terms of embodiment. Understanding the invaginated cyborg means that neither the body nor old terms can be escaped and, by using the act of appearing in the digital realm, invaginated cyborgs forward the body onto the digital plane to interact with audience and flexible records. These cyborgs can allow us to meld digitization into our physical self-actualization but, as seen in the ways that self creation takes bodily ascription into account, they can never transcend the old discourses and their hegemonic fluidity. Colonizers and colonizing ideas still use the internet; they still colonize cyberspace. Despite this, fat digitization is revolutionary in its appeal as, though fat people cannot transcend their ascribed flesh, they can create and present a new cyber skin that actively manages their identity through perceived ascription, material reality, and digital potentiality.

This new cyber skin is a molecule of the invaginated body, making sense of the self through digital representation to further anchor the self in the fluid material body. In this process, the user filters their fat avatar through the ways they conduct themselves, which “produces the lens through which we understand ourselves, and our world” (Murray 2004, 240). No matter how the cyber skin is designed in any instance, it is affected by the ascription that fashions their lived reality; the cyber skin and the cyborg are functions of the porous invaginated body. The only bounds of the fat avatar are the knowledge of its creator, a knowledge that is moulded by the user’s material experience. While the avatar is created through a lens of the user’s lived reality and material responses to oppression that are politicized even in their resistance, the use of the fat avatar is more about creating a form of self in one’s own image. This avatar takes both material reality and its transgression into account. The lines between the physical and the cyber are not so much blurred as the cyborg is an extension of the body used in the digital realm as “a creative means of connecting oneself to one’s body” (ibid.). The flexible digital record signals revolution in its play on old discourses
and in its ability to help users realize their selves in and out of their ascribed phallic physicality. For fat users, this means embracing their fat physical bodies and manipulating their codes in digital space (ibid.).

In fig. 3 and 4., blogger Jesamyn Stanley flexibly poses for the Body Positive Yoga website. Stanley is a fat woman who often dresses, as pictured, in form-fitting sports bras and yoga pants that do not hide her figure. Even with the potentiality digitization offers, the avatar is still a component of the invaginated body, highlighting the need for flesh and its radical grasp in claiming humanity. As the old discourses can never truly be transcended because they can never be uncreated, we must recognize revolution as calling out and subverting the old discourses rather than transgressing them. Subverting fat stereotypes has a number of manifestations, a kind of physical cinema of the flesh. Fat avatars often move between restricted or calculated images of the self, so as not to reinforce stereotypes and the acknowledgement of the carnal fleshy and excessive stereotypes associated with fat flesh. In our current neoliberal climate where the body is situated in a capitalist machine of management and control, this can mean fat bloggers posting pictures of eating, a cardinal sin for fat people, and of their exercise routines, a supposed fat taboo, all in the same space. As pictured above, Jessamyn Stanley of Body Positive Yoga does just that, crafting her social-media presence around challenging fat stereotypes showing the active fat body that still maintains its fatness while combatting ideas about fat as the absence of health. This fluidity between expectations challenges how we authenticate identity, acknowledging ascription in calculated measures that both affirm and deny its sustainability. The fluidity of digital fat representation is really only affirmed in the stability of fat ownership, but the representation of fatness is flexible and changing, even in a single person. For example, on their tumblr blog, Marfmellow, shows a multitude of gender representations (below) using a myriad of names including marf, Tatiana, and Trent. Marfmellow is also an outspoken blogger about issues of fat weight loss and change, highlighting the ways in which the contours of fat bodies can move and change in the fluidity of fat futurity. This use of the digital record is revolutionary in that it captures the performance of fatness through time rather than simply supplying viewers with a snapshot of what fatness means in a particular moment.
In fig. 5, Trent poses for the camera wearing more identifiably masculine style and declares their use of “they” pronouns, working in tandem with fig. 6, in which the same blogger presents a more femme image as Marfmellow in a dress and full traditionally feminine makeup.

These fluid representations of fatness go beyond the fat avatar, making it important to understand that the invaginated cyborg as the avatar is the foundational tool by which the audience can read fat futures in the digital record, and that the cyborg is a molecule of the invaginated body living both within and outside of the digital realm. Only acknowledging the fat avatar would suggest that this process of self-actualization through digitization remains in the digital realm; however, fat futurity relies on the fat cyborg, a creature whose existence is both digital and flesh. While the screen divide breeds a presumptive polarization between the cyber as immaterial and futuristic and the physical as organic mortal materiality, the cyborg encapsulates contradiction, creating an entity that houses both. The cyborg in this instance does merge with the cyber, but it is important to note that because of the invaginated nature of the body, the cyber is only made material through the self and the flesh. For fat people, digitization is a process to fashion “a fusion of the organic human body and ... a transorganic personality construct where the human mind is preserved on computer software,” by which a cyborg is created through imprinting the invaginated body in cyberspaces to create a calculated digital record (Sundén 2001, 215). This cyborg is a kind of extended self, one that melds with the digital and its potential to produce a more multiple and complex understanding of the self. The fat cyborg allows fat-body contradictions, multiplicities of self, and a blurriness that is still anchored in fat stability, not requiring a fat user to defer their fatness to experience their self as complex and varied. This presents a process of self-actualization that “can and should reflect not the truth of the body through its measured contours, but the imaginative, affective, anxious truth of continual self-making” (Sastre 2014, 941). The physical experiences fat users take with them and to their spaces of digitization and the molecularity of their invaginated bodies, as well as the narratives/mythoi used to reimagine their body, meld the physical and the digital to advance the cyber skin of a fat cyborg.

This idea is particularly revolutionary when considering how fat people are represented as a synecdoche for the flesh. As “virality is a specific mode of action that is crossing institutions, contexts, and scales and is “inherently connected to the complex, non-
linear order of a network society,” there is a component of cyberspace that resists the quantitative empiricisms of the flesh (Parrika 2007, 288). This applies not only to the stereotypes or oppressive power ascribed onto the body, but also to the literal quantity of fat flesh, how fleshed is scaled. The internet complicates our notions of space, and in a world where fat bodies are seen as taking up too much of it, cyberspace creates a platform for fat expression in non-linear modes. As fat bodies are constructed as lacking in some way, either because of grief or shame of their fatness or through a sickness narrative or a lack of control, the invaginated cyborg offers a contradiction which refuses to see the fat flesh as lacking and imprints the realities of fat bodies before spectators in digital record. The fusion of the digital and the flesh does not function to create a whole being from using the cyber to fill a void, but rather works to synchronize an acknowledgement of the flesh’s existence and a manipulation of the body narrative in a hybrid human being.

The seeming boundlessness of digitization in the cyber landscape means that a user can control their cyborg in a way that challenges stereotypes portraying fat people as uncultivated and undisciplined flesh. Digitization changes “how the body is performed and recorded” as one can create one’s own codes for how one’s body is perceived and archived (Sastre 2014, 932). This recoding of fat is a complex and contradictory project fitting for a cyborg, one that acknowledges fat identity and anchors it in the embodied flesh, as well as a project that allows one an authorship of one’s bodily contours and ascriptions to create a deeper sense of self beyond societal expectation. The cyborg is “premised not on particular visual and discursive formations, but on a critical and conscientious engagement with the ways we are expected to understand, perform, and be our bodies,” so that digitization becomes a project that is always conscious and subversive (Sastre 2014, 941). The fat cyborg is an assemblage of personal, interpersonal, social, and institutional meaning, as well as viewer spectatorship, in a marriage of radical potentiality that creates an understanding of embodiment beyond the body through communal knowledge-making. This assemblage is then blended with the flesh, with a stability of fatness, to create an authentic image of the self. This idea calls for us to complicate our notions of the authenticity of the self, as “[w]ith the help of Photoshop and purchased ‘skins’ and accessories, we have considerable leeway in our visual self presentations online, despite a fairly high degree of similarity to our physical appearance,” so that these tools create fat avatars that, though similar to their users, might not be exact copies of the physical flesh (Belk 2013, 481). As evidenced by Gabi Gregg in figures 1 and 2, controlling camera angles by which the body is captured, manipulating lighting and filters, and regulating the behaviors and personality of blog posts are all ways in which physical reality is acknowledged but designed with full control of the user. The fat cyborg moves us beyond simple fat acceptance to a plane in which we have “imagined a more radical alternative to [body] ideals, not by merely broadening the rubric of what bodies are included, but by dismantling and reimagining the very way bodies are allowed to be performed” (Sastre 2014, 939-40). This potential and imagination allows one to cultivate one’s embodiment to realize distance between one’s lived flesh and one’s signified body.

The digitized self then portrays a flexible record of how the invaginated flesh is lived in the physical world. The fat avatar represents an individual ideal in which “you are not assuming that identity, you are that identity,” in a cyborg process where the cyber puts forth for display the boundlessness of the invaginated flesh (Belk 2013, 482). It is the romance of the cyborg that one can claim ownership of a body, from which society demands deferral, in the confines of the physical self. Though these are separate processes for some, fat futurity does not separate the physical and the digital as they coexist in an invaginated body.
It is important to discuss the tension of the screen divide to legitimate the validity of fat digital representations, which could be read as inauthentic or a kind of play as a consequence of the tendency to see the cyber as immaterial or unreal. Embodiment and the flesh are forever important to fat futurity as a process. As the body is invaginated, it can affect the cyber which remains immaterial and non-sentient, but the cyber is not a material reality used to fuse a lacking body with a more fully realized human subject. The mistake we make “[i]n the discourse of virtual worlds as scenes for disembodied performances” is leaving out the “heterogeneities, variations, different and maybe marginalized versions” that digital potentialities further when we understand cyber representation as part of the invaginated body and cyborgs as a function of embodiment (Sundén 2001, 222). The cyber is anything from disembodied. It is an extension of the invaginated body which is not contained within the impermeable confines of skin alone. As discussed above, “the ultimate purpose of employing cyber-technology as a tool in the realization of one’s ideal body-image is to transfer this body-image into the offline world...,” so that the physical self is realized through the digital in a blend of cyber and skin that moves beyond the merely digital (Whitty and Young 2011, 555). There is also a muddling of the physical in the cyber world: if we truly left our bodies behind in the virtual world, we would not part with our experiences and understandings gained in the world. We see this when examining the crossing-over of popular fat bloggers and personalities when they stage in-person meet and greets with their fans, events that solidify the use of the fat cyborg to exist beyond the digital realm. Exemplified below in plus-size blogger Kellie Brown’s promotional work, the constructed online image becomes a fat futurity project when it becomes enfleshed, and moves with someone through their actualization of self. These movements beyond digital and physical boundaries give the cyber a materiality we do not usually associate with the digital.

On top: fig. 7, an Outfit of the Day post on Kellie Brown’s style blog, and adjacent fig. 8, showing Brown posing for cameras at a red carpet event. On bottom: fig. 9, where Brown poses with fans at a meet and greet.
Thus, fat futurity in its entirety is a tool to reconceptualize fat as bodies with a present/presence and future, a guideline for self-actualization and representation, and community of appearance and flexible record that offers the support and courage one needs to live as fat in a world adverse to fatness. Still, we must examine fat futurity further to recognize a number of its complexities and intersections. It is difficult to imagine a more progressive cyborg than the one detailed through fat futurity; however, we are in danger of affirming old ascriptions any time we relate back to the body. Our bodies and identities are always politicized in an intersectional and complex manner, raising the question of whether our bodies could ever really be the precultural and historical organic objects that are beyond our contemporary imagination. Could we possibly portray our cyborgs in more effective ways than the corporeal? Furthermore, could we do this in a way that still lets us claim our sizes, races, and genders in a way that does not make our world colorblind? A cyborg like this is almost impossible to imagine as, in trying to move beyond ascription, we discursively reinforce it. Yet part of the radicalism of fat futurity is that one can claim and own one’s identity while challenging its physical confines. For those of us who find pride in the richness of our identities, even or especially in our marginalized ones, this kind of ownership is unapologetic, radical, and progressive.

Works Cited


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The Radical Politics of Possibility: 
Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through 
Chantal Akerman’s *Je tu il elle* (1975)

Ros Murray

This article explores the temporalities at work in Chantal Akerman’s *Je tu il elle* (1975) using the prism of a Beauvoirian existential and phenomenological approach to queer embodiment. It argues that an existentialist approach to the queer focuses on doing rather than being. Through a comparison of Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics with Halberstam’s analysis of queer failure, the essay explores how *Je tu il elle* stages the tension between two differing versions of failure: one emerging from the anti-social thesis, resting on negativity, refusal, and passivity; the other from an existentialist ethics, engaging in a more positive politics of phenomenological generosity.

Shifting Pronouns

Chantal Akerman’s films, particularly those from the 1970s, explore the densities of cinematic temporality and its relationship to subjectivity and non-normative bodily experience. Often cited as a pioneer of “slow cinema,” Akerman’s films sketch potential connections between slowness and queer forms of resistance, embodiment, and intersubjective encounters. This article focuses on her 1975 film *Je tu il elle* as an in-depth exploration of the intersubjective temporalities of sexual acts and their political potential, asking: what mode of futurity is at stake in *Je tu il elle*, and how might this be understood as queer? In approaching this question, I return to a perhaps unlikely philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir, to examine how a Beauvoirian existentialist and phenomenological methodology might offer a useful antidote to the anti-social while maintaining the political necessity of resistance to dominant, heteronormative temporal frameworks.

One particular moment in *Je tu il elle* displaces the complex temporal structures of the entire film, uncomfortably drawing us into a recognition of our own presence as spectators. The trucker with whom Julie, the “je” of the film, has hitched a lift reaches climax following a hand job from the off-screen Julie and says, as he lowers his head onto the steering wheel, “I am putting my head on the steering wheel.” On one level, the viewer might share a sense of relief, coinciding with the trucker’s climax, that this uncomfortable few minutes is over, the camera having been aligned just to one side of Julie, watching the trucker and listening to his directions as he tells her what to do. Yet this moment also implies a sense of profound unease by drawing attention to the artificiality of the situation and by blurring the lines between “I,” “you,” and “he.” Is the viewer aligned with Julie, whose perspective we may share, but who is pointedly absent from the screen? With the trucker, who has just described in minute detail the physical sensations he undergoes, thus potentially evoking our bodily senses? Or with Akerman, the filmmaker and script-writer who directs the directions that the trucker seems to be dictating to Julie? The answer is more complex than any one or all of those potential spectatorial positions. By evoking our embodied position and simultaneously reminding us of the artificiality of the filmic encounter, Akerman deftly displaces the relationship between an unusual and highly
Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chantal Akerman’s Je tu il elle (1975)

Ros Murray

particular encounter and the general feeling of unease and relief that a viewer may experience, recognise, and process as embodied spectator.

Akerman’s complex explorations of the relationship between the particular and the general have been explored from a feminist perspective (see for example Ivone Margulies’s analysis of Je tu il elle, Margulies 1996, 100-127). Yet Akerman herself has often refused to label her films as “feminist” or “lesbian” and her films exist in an indeterminate realm between experimentalism and narrative film, documentary and fiction. Her manifest resistance to predefined genres, categories, or identities enables an ambiguous exploration of sexuality, gender, embodiment, and performance, and Akerman’s films explore unusual situations that refuse to present us with something representative. A summary of the events in Je tu il elle might look something like this: Julie (“je”) stays in her room for an extended period of time moving the furniture around, writing a long, repetitive letter, taking her clothes off and putting them back on again, pacing around and eating an entire packet of sugar by the spoonful. Once the sugar runs out and it begins to snow, she leaves the apartment, goes out to the motorway and hitches a lift with a trucker. She eats some food and drinks beers at truck-stops, watches the trucker shave, gets back in the truck, masturbates him, and then listens to him talking about his wife. Eventually she arrives at the flat of her ex-lover who lets her in but tells her she isn’t allowed to stay, she then devours several Nutella sandwiches, has sex with her ex, and leaves. We are given no information about Julie that might explain her circumstances or psychology; we are simply exposed to her actions. In fact, the only character who provides us with any insight into psychological motivations is the trucker, who is so much of a cliché that he paradoxically fails to resemble anything recognisable. Yet it is clearly not on the level of narrative or psychology that this film operates, and it is impossible to ignore the extra-diegetic treatment of time, space, embodiment, gesture, and relation; it is perhaps more than anything a film about how bodies occupy space and how film itself becomes a form of complex choreography. As Margulies notes, Akerman was deeply influenced by New York experimentalism at this stage of her career, making films that explore temporality and spatial aesthetics in ways akin to the work of Michael Snow and Andy Warhol, as well as to her European avant-garde contemporaries (Margulies 1996, 11).

It is significant that the trucker’s monologue takes place soon after what Akerman, in an interview with Camera Obscura from 1976, identifies as the only subjective shot in her early films (Bergstrom 1977, 120). In this interview Akerman explains that she shoots her films from her own perspective, never resorting to shot-reverse-shot or attempting to show a character’s point-of-view. The moment when Julie surveys the back of the trucker’s neck thus collapses the already threatened distinction between Akerman the filmmaker and the character she plays. Margulies responds to Akerman’s assertion by calling the merging of character and director at this moment “Chantal” rather than the fictional “Julie” named in the credits. She writes:

The important moment when Chantal masturbates the trucker marks the complexity of her position between performer and director. This is the single instance in the film in which she is entirely outside the frame; it is also the one moment where the trucker looks directly at the camera, briefly confirming her double status as both character and director. (Margulies 1996, 119)

Within a discussion of the difficulties of negotiating the relationship between the particular and the general, Margulies argues that, rather than disrupting the subject, Akerman’s
complex directorial and performative corporeal manoeuvres “stage the representation of subjectivity as inherently relational” (Margulies 1996, 121). This raises crucial questions regarding the status of the “I” in the film—particularly given that structurally the film moves from “I” (the first part of the first section), to “you” (the second part of the first section), to “he” (in the second section), and eventually to “she” (in the final section). Beginning by focusing on a body in self-imposed isolation, the film initially posits subjectivity from a distinctly individualist perspective, only opening up to the possibilities of relation once the film is well under way. In a catalogue produced on the occasion of a major retrospective of Akerman’s work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Akerman reflects briefly on this film, stating: “I no longer have anything in common with that anti-social, desperate character who nonetheless carries out gesture after gesture, with a kind of secret determination, a silent despair close to a scream” (Akerman 2004, 226). Akerman seems to be suggesting here that the character is profoundly anti-social and unable to relate to others. Yet the trajectory Julie undergoes, taking place on a road-trip inspired by Akerman’s own frequent hitchhiking journeys between Paris and Brussels in the early 1970s, seems to suggest otherwise, as do the pronouns in the title of the film, which do not exist in isolation but seem, after this initial section, to feed into one another.

Kaja Silverman’s article on La Captive—Akerman’s adaptation of Proust’s La Prisonnière, to which I will return later—also draws attention to the shifting pronouns (she too follows Margulies’ example by calling the character “Chantal” rather than “Julie”). She writes, “Chantal is the only character who appears in every scene, which might seem to entitle her to the ‘je’, but there are also two other claimants to this position, and there are times when she seems more closely aligned with one of the other pronouns” (Silverman 2007, 465). The two moments where this subjective shift happens, according to Silverman, are the scene with the trucker and the love-making scene between Julie and “elle,” her former lover. These two pivotal scenes have inspired a number of different interpretations, the most prevalent being the view of the film as an “experimentation with sexual identities” (Schmid 2010, 26).

The notion of identity as fluid may well bring us closer to a queer reading of the film where the subject’s unity and identity is troubled; more specifically, this essay aims to explore, from the perspective of a queer existentialism, the relationship between the particular and the general that arises at the very moment where identity indicators fail.

This reading is in part motivated by a certain sense of dissatisfaction with the ways in which the existing criticism interprets Je tu il elle. Approaches to the film seem to be limited by implied psychoanalytic undertones. Marion Schmid mentions the “parent-child trope,” drawing on Maureen Turim’s analysis of the protagonist’s actions as motivated by a “desire for nurturance” (quoted in Foster 2003, 15). Schmid writes: “Julie’s grabbing and unclothing of the lover’s breast indexes a desire for the mother” (2010, 30). This runs the risk of becoming a pathologizing move which seems at odds with her otherwise generous and insightful reading of the film as a “quintessential example” of a Deleuzian “cinema of bodies” (ibid., 27). Schmid also describes Je tu il elle as “an ambitious study of a young woman’s depression and experimentation with sexual identities” (ibid., 26). Yet one might equally contend that there are no identity markers other than “je” “tu” “il” and “elle,” which perform shifting functions, questioning the boundaries between self and other. The film is less about sexual identities than sexual acts, which is perhaps where its politics lie. Again, a view of the film as an exploration of adolescent crisis might cohere to the idea of sexual relations between women as forming part of the adolescent phase of female sexuality (informed by Freud and at times Beauvoir, albeit for different reasons).
To view the film from a queer and existentialist perspective opens up a series of different possibilities. On an immediate level, the film explores many of the (negative) affective states with which existentialism is often associated, notably nausea, anxiety, and boredom. It explores these states in phenomenological terms in its treatment and use of unconventional cinematic temporalities by inviting the viewer to experience them through affective identification with the body onscreen: through long shots where nothing much happens; through nauseous sequences where copious amounts of sugar or Nutella sandwiches are consumed; and through the long, drawn-out sex scenes. The film could be defined, in relation to the narrative, as a text about existential crisis: how to reconcile one’s existence as a “subject” (“je”) or as body in the world with the desires of others whose experience we can never fully inhabit, an experience that simultaneously seems to evoke the cinematic encounter between spectator and film. By focusing on the subject’s relationship to objects around her as well as to other subjects, Je tu il elle seems to posit consciousness as intentional while also posing the problem of how to transcend one’s bodily immanence by moving towards others. This would coincide with Akerman’s own comments on the structure of the film, which she defines in terms of temporality: “The time of subjectivity,” “the time of the other or report,” and “the time of relation” (quoted in Margulies 1996, 110). In the first part, exploring the time of subjectivity, the subject is in crisis, refusing to leave the room and speaking only in the first-person singular. The first mention of “tu” seems only to emphasise her solitude and bad faith, as the voiceover reads the letter she writes to her lover: “I waited […] for something to happen—for me to believe in God or for you to send me some gloves to go out in the cold.” The second part of the film follows Julie’s decision to leave, based on the arbitrary arrival of snow and the realisation that there are others in the world. This other, initially embodied in the trucker whom the subject (“je”) desires and treats as object, in turn also desires, problematizing Julie’s relation to herself and highlighting her fundamental ambiguity (both “je,” subject, and “elle,” object). The third time, the time of relation, comprises the second sex scene, where the possibility of reciprocal relation is opened up yet maintained as profoundly ambivalent.

Ambiguity, Failure, and Resistance

How might we view these themes of temporality, ambiguity, and a phenomenologically inflected approach towards embodiment as both queer and existentialist? Phenomenological approaches to queer and feminist embodiment have been well established through, for example, the work of Sara Ahmed (Queer Phenomenology), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Touching Feeling), Elizabeth Grosz (Volatile Bodies), Laura Marks (The Skin of the Film), and Vivian Sobchack (The Address of the Eye). Ambiguity and temporality are recurrent topics in queer and feminist takes on embodiment (Elizabeth Freeman’s Time Binds being perhaps the most obvious example). This discussion also develops from the genealogy of feminist and queer perspectives on Beauvoirian existentialism, beginning with Monique Wittig’s “One is not born a woman,” in which she argues, leaning heavily on Beauvoir and taking a materialist feminist approach, for the “destruction of heterosexuality as a social system” (1992, 20). More recently, Megan Burke writes that Beauvoir’s existentialism provides a “valuable phenomenology of lesbian existence that is liberatory and novel for our time” (2012, 75). Also relevant here is Meryl Altman’s analysis of what Beauvoir means to different generations of feminists, lesbians, and queers, how she inspires and simultaneously fails to provide a coherent account of a queer subjectivity that would be liveable, recognisable, and political (2007, 209). Kristin Rodier, Kyoo Lee, and Emily
Anne Parker have also explored potential expansions of Beauvoir’s thought that connect it to intersectional feminism and the queer (Rodier 2014, Lee 2012, Parker 2009).

As many of these theorists point out, Beauvoir’s take on lesbian sexuality as discussed in *The Second Sex* is ambivalent and often confused; yet all suggest that it is nonetheless still important, if not essential, to read Beauvoir. If Beauvoir, as Altman argues, means different things to different generations of feminists and queers, how might we situate her thought, and more importantly put her ethics to use, within contemporary debates in queer scholarship? Rather than focusing on *The Second Sex*, in which Beauvoir writes explicitly about lesbian sexuality, this essay considers the importance of an existentialist ethics, as explored in her 1947 work *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. By turning to what Beauvoir writes about failure and bringing her work into conversation with recent queer takes on failure, we can begin to think about how differing modes of queer negativity and positivity operate in *Je tu il elle*.

Beauvoir’s approach to existentialism can be defined, as Sonia Kruks argues, as an “existential phenomenology,” concerned with social and political phenomena and lived experience (Kruks 2001, 7; see also O’Brien 2001). Kruks writes that Beauvoir’s philosophy deals with the problem of how to theorise a subject that has agency and choice but is not the classical subject of enlightenment freedom and reason (2001, 13). *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is a response to accusations that there could be no ethics based on existentialist methodology. Beauvoir founds the ethics of existentialism on the notion of ambiguity: the individual must determine how to come to terms with the fact that s/he is both subject and object, freed from and facticity. From the moment we come to face our own freedom, we must assume but not attempt to reconcile the contradictions it brings. Beauvoir’s writing on failure comes at a pivotal moment in her argument, in a section on “the positive aspect of ambiguity,” exploring the contradictions and difficulties of ethical existence. Her question in this section is how ambiguity can be lived and how it can inspire positive political change.

According to Beauvoir, failure is an absolutely necessary facet of ethical existence: “Without failure, no ethics” (1948, 10). In fact, for Beauvoir the failure/success dichotomy is another facet of the ambiguity of the human condition: “So it is with any activity; failure and success are two aspects of reality which at the start are not distinguishable” (ibid., 129). She uses the example of painting to make the point that art is in continual process, never able to achieve totality in a single instance, so that painting becomes the “movement toward its own reality” (ibid.). She writes: “human transcendence must cope with the same problem: it has to found itself, though it is prohibited from ever fulfilling itself” (ibid., 130). By continually failing to reach a conclusion, our actions may seem futile; on the contrary, Beauvoir argues, “freedom is achieved absolutely in the very fact of aiming at itself” (ibid., 131). In other words, we should understand each of our actions as finite or absolute while also acknowledging that they reflect the infinite; freedom is infinite yet it must be accomplished in definite acts. The relationship between means and ends is troubled and we must assume this contradiction in order to make positive change by reflecting on the best action to take in each possible situation.

This emphasis on existence as continual process in some respects chimes with a queer approach to subjectivity as a process, as a continual doing or becoming. An insistence on troubling the relationship between means and end is central to an understanding of non-normative bodily experience and how it inflects or is reflected in disruptive cinematic temporalities, bringing us to the question of how queerer “failures” relate to the existential. If Beauvoir’s view of failure here comes from a markedly positive approach, a rather different version of failure emerges in Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*, one which nonetheless is useful in bringing out the difficulties and complexities of Beauvoir’s approach.
and in thinking of how in turn failure functions in *Je tu il elle*. Halberstam’s project in arguing for a queer and feminist politics of failure aims to dismantle and challenge the logic of success that defines reproductive capitalism. She argues that “failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well” and that “from the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success” (Halberstam 2011, 3, 4). Halberstam refers to “shadow feminisms,” such as the works of Monique Wittig and Valerie Solanas, which “take the form not of becoming, being and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and violating” (ibid., 4). Whereas for Halbertsam, failure is an “undoing,” for Beauvoir it is always a doing. Halberstam advocates a feminist politics that issues from “a refusal to be or become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy […] a feminism grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence” (ibid., 124). This anti-social form of masochistic passivity entails “subjects who unravel, refuse to cohere,” whose very existence challenges the terms on which freedom is offered (ibid., 145). Halberstam’s issue is, of course, that some people are more free than others, and by incorporating postcolonial critiques of a feminism that seeks to save others for its own benefit, she discerns the potential problems of a freedom that wills the freedom of others. By refusing to speak for others, and even for oneself, however, this queer art of failure states itself squarely as a politics of refusal, negation, and critique.

Beauvoir also writes that sometimes there is no solution other than refusal and that negation is at times the only necessary action to take. She gives the example of the Resistance, writing that it “did not aspire to a positive effectiveness; it was a negation, a revolt,” yet she also writes that “in this negative movement freedom was positively and absolutely confirmed” (1948, 131). While recognising the potential value of failure, negativity, and refusal, Beauvoir again insists on positive action. She argues that it is easy to remain within a stance of refusal, critique, and negation, but that genuine freedom lies in the recognition and acceptance of failure: “it is the abortive movement of man toward being which is his very existence, it is through the failure which he has assumed that he asserts himself as a freedom” (ibid., 137). This ethics is, for Beauvoir, social rather than anti-social. To remain indefinitely within the negative, at least in Beauvoirian terms, would be nihilistic, which is why she can never be described (on Halberstam’s terms) as a shadow feminist.

Halberstam’s failure remains within a radical negativity, unlike Beauvoir’s which is about the opening up of possibilities, about, conversely, succeeding through failure. While both argue that we should embrace failure as part of our fundamental condition, in Halberstam’s version it seems that queerness is always already doomed to failure, whereas Beauvoir suggests that failure entails and arises from our choices and positive actions. Why are these discussions around failure, ambiguity, and refusal relevant to *Je tu il elle*? Returning to the film through the prism of Beauvoir and queer failure, we see that it operates not only an intricate staging of the ambiguity of existence, but also that it enacts the tensions between these two different versions of failure—skirting the boundaries between the contrasting realms of anti-social negativity, full of aborted attempts to relate to the other, and exultant freedom and positivity where sexual acts are carried out in the spirit of liberation and generosity.

The anti-social thesis certainly allows us to interpret *Je tu il elle* as a refusal of heteronormative temporalities. Julie’s movements might be seen as a series of refusals of basic human duties and functions and the temporalities implied in these (non)activities, realised in a refusal to eat, a refusal to work, a refusal of relation, a refusal to leave her room, and, eventually, a refusal to stay with her lover. A phenomenological perspective, however, allows for a far more productive viewing, particularly given that the film revels in haptic imagery, rustling sheets and
nauseous gobbling. Rather than taking the easy option and focusing on the negative, we might consider what a Beauvoirian-inflected queer positivity looks like.

In Beauvoirian existentialist terms, *Je tu il elle* recalls the difficulties posed by the ambiguity of existence arising from the issue that I am both subject for myself and object for others. *Je tu il elle* is concerned with assuming the ambivalence of the self and of any form of relation. This ambivalence becomes ethical in Beauvoirian terms if we view the end of the film not as a refusal but as an opening out, or a celebratory movement, whereby the “je” has been realised in its relation to the other (“elle”). The opening words of the film, “et je suis partie” (“and I set off”) announces not only the beginning of the film and the protagonist’s journey, but also a simple yet suspended action which is completed at the end through the other, who wakes to find her lover gone. The *chanson de jeu* that resonates alongside the closing credits—“Join the dance / see how we dance / jump, dance / kiss who you like”—points towards the opening up of possibilities, echoing the beautiful frankness of the choreographed yet intensely emotional love-making sequence that precedes it. If we read this moment as a queer refusal of narrative closure and of sexual identities, it is also a celebration of the “je” of the film’s capacity to transcend fixity and to create herself through her acts in relation to others, without seeking justification through the other’s perspective. The film explores sexuality as a doing, not a being, in continual process, which is relevant to accounts of existential freedom and transcendence such as Beauvoir’s (and Jean-Paul Sartre) as well as to a phenomenological focus on embodied experience (where Beauvoir draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty).

Jenny Chamarette argues that Akerman’s work might be described as “resistant” through the ways in which their “formal and aesthetic structures shift and self-shape,” in turn “self-reflexively reaching outwards towards an acknowledgement of, and elision of, the signifying hierarchies of the intersubjective relationships between the filmic, pro-filmic and spectatoral” (2012, 151). “Resistance,” taken from a phenomenological perspective, is given a distinctly positive twist. This act of transcending bodily immanence refers as much to the body of film and the ways it engages with the spectator’s bodily responses as it does to the body of the protagonist, a movement which we may well read as queer.

The queer politics of *Je tu il elle* reside equally in its formal innovations as in its frank portrayal of sexual acts. Not only is there a queering of cinematic convention in the two scenes due to their excessive length, but also in terms of the camera angles and framing. For while in the first scene with the trucker we may shift between Akerman the filmmaker, Julie the character, and “il” the character, the masturbation scene occurs within a single shot that almost, but not quite, coincides with Julie’s perspective, operating a subtle displacement of what initially appears to be a point-of-view shot. The second sex scene is filmed in medium-long shots in three very long takes; here we are reminded of our uncomfortable position as viewer by being exposed head-on to the two intertwined bodies wrestling within the frame, shot from three different angles, but never aligned with a character’s (or the “Chantal,” as director/performer that Margulies posits) perspective. While the scene with the trucker is accompanied by the sound of the engine running, here the sound is an amplified rustling of sheets. In the scene with the trucker the viewer only has access to what is happening through the trucker’s monologue, as the trucker is fully clothed and the action occurs off camera. There is a very different focus on the characters’ embodiment in the second sex scene through the inclusion of both naked bodies entirely within the frame. The choreography of their movements, the amplified soundtrack, and the viewer’s sense of her/his own embodiment situates this scene as phenomenologically inflected, and again, to borrow Chamarette’s term, “resistant” in terms
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of the “modalities of subjectivity that emerge” (Chamarette 2012, 151)—the modalities here being explicitly queer as well as operating a queering of convention.

**Queer Choreography**

Choreography and dance occupy a central position in Akerman’s work. Indeed, *Je tu il elle* is carefully choreographed right from the start, as Akerman’s body moves in and out of shot, crawling across the floor, moving around in relation to the objects surrounding her such as the mattress, the sheets of paper and the bag of sugar. The position of objects and the body in the frame as well as the camera movements seem to shift between still life, or photography, and slow, minimal dance. The body is framed amongst furniture, blank or painted walls, corridors, and between door and window frames, as so often in Akerman’s films. The use of lighting in *Je tu il elle* is reduced to a minimum, with the gradual closing of the aperture in order to create the sense of night falling, marking the passing of time—echoing, but slightly out of time, the voiceover which arbitrarily counts the days. The slow camera movements also form a part of this strangely sensuous choreography, performing slow pans that follow the body as it shuffles in and out of shot. The voiceover speaks of being attentive, with heightened senses, and the lack of effects such as artificial lighting or music creates a feeling of overall sparseness, focusing on ambient noise and the bare body enacting its creative processes, writing, moving, eating sugar, or spilling it on the floor.

The encounter between Julie and her ex-lover thus becomes an explicit culmination of a quietly queer choreography that runs throughout the whole film. Kaja Silverman writes of this final scene: “each exercises power, and then has it wrested away from her by the other. The ‘I’ and the ‘you’ swift positions at a dizzying rate, both literally and metaphorically, and the surprising frank way in which Akerman films their lovemaking marks both of them as ‘she’” (2007, 451). This form of resistance is more convincingly aligned with a radical positivity rather than negativity. The problem with negativity as it emerges in the anti-social thesis in queer theory might be that it so often falls within a psychoanalytic framework (see, for example, Lee Edelman’s *No Future* and Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*). Rather than threatening us with psychic inundation, as Berlant and Edelman argue in their recent work *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2014, xii), a focus on sex might more productively suggest a phenomenological approach that takes us beyond discourse and beyond the (Lacanian) psychoanalytic subject. Again, we might turn to Beauvoir for such an approach, looking this time at what she writes at the end of the polemical section on lesbianism in *The Second Sex*, where she concludes that it can be “the source of fruitful experiences, depending on whether it is lived in bad faith, laziness and inauthenticity, or in lucidity, generosity and freedom” (2009, 448). A focus on the latter, in both phenomenological and existential terms, might transform how our interpretation of the final scene of *Je tu il elle*.

In critical accounts of *Je tu il elle*, the tendency to fall back, however tentatively, on psychoanalysis (the mother-daughter relation), as I have argued, reveals a stifling set of limitations. If, as in Turim’s accounts, the breast becomes a symbol of motherhood, collapsing the female anatomy back into its reproductive function and ignoring its potentiality as a site of pleasure, Silverman offers an alternative approach. Her reading of Akerman’s *La Captive* relates the two bodies pressing up against each other back to Proust and the moment when Cottard and Marcel watch Andréé and Albertine dancing together. In this passage Cottard reveals to Marcel: “Women derive most of their excitement through their breasts” (Proust 2003,
The pressing of bodies against each other, as in *La prisonnière* and *La captive*, becomes a destabilizing of the “je,” the “tu,” and the “elle.” Rather than confronting their limits, the bodies in *Je tu il elle*'s celebratory final scene are discovering new ways of being in the world, which then enable the protagonist to do what she set out to do at the beginning—that is, to leave, or to go out into the world, with the film ending with “elle” waking up to find “je” gone.

It is through bodily sexual acts rather than subjective identities that the film operates its queer resistance. Beauvoir’s emphasis on action makes her existentialist vision so relevant for a reading of Akerman's film; less relevant for a queer reading is perhaps that existentialist ethics require a subject, which may be the very subject that post-structuralist approaches to the queer so carefully dismantle. Yet what defines the subject according to Beauvoir is her capacity to act. The Beauvoirian subject is not the same as the subject of psychoanalysis or as the subject of discourse, but rather it is a subject continually creating herself through her actions, capable of shifting to “you,” to “he,” or to “she” (always in relation to the “I” that she never ceases to be) through affective relations and without collapsing into a formless mass. This subject assumes her ambiguity as both subject and object and her failure not as radical negativity but as radical potentiality. In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam writes about queerness as the “potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (2005, 1). Akerman’s body of work explores these alternative relations to time and space in great detail, and, through attention to the personal and the particular, she offers us a space from which politics might begin. The next stage is getting from the singular “I, you, he, she” to the plural “we” while also incorporating an intersectional approach that might well find the highly personal queerness of *Je tu il elle* lacking. If existentialist methodology utilises “a perfectly deliberate and intentional use of the concrete as a way of approaching the abstract, the particular as a way of approaching the general” (Warnock 1970, 133), this is echoed in Akerman’s approach to her own work: “I haven’t tried to find a compromise between myself and others. I have thought that the more particular I am the more I address in general” (quoted in Margulies 1996, 1). This peculiarly particular generality is not a politics of refusal, but rather of phenomenological generosity, explored through a celebratory opening out onto the world and its queer potential.
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Works Cited


Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chantal Akerman’s Je tu il elle (1975)

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In “Able,” Sandra Alland uses stop-motion photography and recorded voice to create a metaphoric and literal vision of barriers to access. The text mixes Alland’s poetry with benefits/welfare applications, border control terminology, and medical and blood donor questionnaires. The hundreds of photographs feature thousands of steps and hills throughout Alland’s current home of Edinburgh, Scotland. The piece examines how disabled bodies move (or don’t move) through non-disabled space and time. Notions of race, class, gender identity and sexuality also intersect to ask the question: Who gets to be “able”? Featured in Tracey Moberly’s Tweet-Me-Up 2012 at Tate Modern (London). To watch this video, please visit: https://vimeo.com/72506820

Notes on “Able” and Accessible Filmmaking

As a disabled and low-income artist, I work diligently to make my artworks as accessible as possible to as many people as possible. My own physical and financial limitations have been a challenge in relation to filmmaking, and it is also sometimes difficult to balance the artistic intention of a work with various (and sometimes competing) forms of access. There has definitely been a learning curve during my collaborations with other disabled and/or D/deaf artists over the past 15 years.

“Able,” my fifth short, is an example of my earliest film work. The audio is audible but rough, recorded in 2005 with a $10 microphone that I used with early-stage dictation software I bought to help with chronic pain. I shot the photos in 2010 on a fairly crap non-SLR digital camera. I was just learning how to use film-editing software, and because of lack of money I only had access to the most basic of programs. I had not studied filmmaking, and pretty much had no idea what I was doing. Editing hundreds of photos into “Able” was a painstaking, and painful, endeavour.

So the process was, and still is, slow.

There are many ways in which this film is not accessible. Although blind people can listen to the audio track of the poem, there is no audio description (AD) of the visuals in the piece. This accessibility issue could be potentially remedied with a voice-over at the beginning describing the action of the film, as well as descriptions during parts when there is no other important sound. Arguably, this addition might detract from the piece artistically (for example, by overshadowing the sound of breathing in the non-speaking sections). Then again, had I included a voiceover from the inception of the work, it probably would not have detracted much at all. I am working towards this kind of fully-integrated access in my current projects.

For a cinema screening, though, I usually create separate AD soundtracks, so blind and visually impaired people can listen to them through headsets (in cinemas thus equipped). Online it is more common to offer two versions of a film, one with AD and one without. I have
this option for some of my films, and I could potentially work to create an AD soundtrack for this film, should my health and financial situation allow at some point.

“Able” also does not have closed captioning. Instead, I created basic subtitles (or open captioning) for the piece. When I made “Able,” I was starting to learn about the conventions of captioning, so I did manage to include some descriptions of sounds, instead of merely subtitling speech in the film. However, I failed to format the descriptions properly. For example, I put the description of the sound of breathing in parentheses, using “(breathing)” instead of “[BREATHING].” There are different formatting conventions in different countries (varying somewhat between Canada and the United Kingdom), but usually descriptions of sounds are in italics or are in capital letters or bracketed capital letters. Most D/deaf viewers who are familiar with English would be able to follow along regardless, but my captions are less clear. Also, all the captions of spoken text should be in italics to represent that the voice is coming from off-camera (though this is fairly obvious because there is no recognizable “speaker” onscreen). To be honest, it is a miracle I figured out how to make captions at all back then, but I would definitely change them now if I could.

I also did not phonetically or textually describe the parts of the poem that are abstract or more sound-based. For example, I wrote “(strange rhythmic vowel sounds)” instead of, for example, “Ah. Eee-ay. Ah-oo.” I have struggled with this decision at screenings of the film, still unsure how I feel about it. Many D/deaf and/or neurodivergent viewers might in fact find the second (more accurate) choice less useful than the first. Users of sign language in particular would not necessarily be familiar with the concept of onomatopoeic words, with which hearing or hard-of-hearing viewers would likely be familiar.

I made this decision for two reasons: I wanted to avoid the potential confusion of spelled-out sound poetry for a D/deaf audience, and I also did not necessarily want to give away or spell out how the abstracted sounds of the poem were constructed. I wanted the viewer/listener to struggle (along with me) to figure it out and to experience the sound collage cumulatively throughout the piece. For example, writing out “Hv y bn t Wst frc” after the viewer has seen the words “Have you been to West Africa?” is more obvious than when you only hear the consonants without the vowels (it is more difficult and abstract in sound than in writing).

This sound aspect of the piece can arguably be best experienced by hearing viewers, as abstract sound is perhaps inherently inaccessible to profoundly deaf people. There are times when artistic “vision” and full accessibility are at odds with one another, and I have had many productive discussions with other disabled and D/deaf artists about how to best achieve the desired result when this tension occurs. I feel I could improve the captioned descriptions of my sound poetry, but I am not yet sure precisely how.

I am sadly also unable to make any visual changes at all. I no longer have the original file without captions. This film stands instead as a testament to my development as a disabled artist and activist, at a point when ideas were first starting to come together for me. Fail better next time!

What else? In this film the subtitles are large, and white with a black outline. I now make all my captions slightly smaller so they are less distracting, and in pale yellow with a black outline. Yellow stands out far better and is also preferred by some people with different visual needs.

Of course, captioning is not a solution for many D/deaf people. There are D/deaf people who use only sign language. Whenever I host or perform at events, I have interpreters present for live performances and discussions. In addition, I have made two films with a Deaf poet, Alison Smith, that feature sign language, captions and some lip-speaking. However, “Able”
unfortunately does not yet have sign language or lip-speaking versions available.

I am thrilled to engage in dialogue with people knowledgeable and passionate about access. These are exciting times, as creating disabled and D/deaf access in film is becoming more accessible to broke and disabled filmmakers like me, indeed to everyone. There are more and more brilliant projects that involve integrated and creative access from their inception.

Below I have included an in-progress transcript of the film/poem, for those who are interested, including D/deaf and/or neurodivergent viewers who may want a text version. It contains a more detailed account of the sound poetry, in which I give some clues to the source of the sounds, but try not to give too many. Perhaps these descriptions would make for better captions; making them has certainly helped me think through how a sound piece might be transcribed for D/deaf and/or neurodivergent viewers in the future. Thanks for watching and/or listening.

—Sandra Alland, Edinburgh, August 2015

The film features stop-motion colour photography from the filmmaker’s perspective behind the camera, climbing and descending many stairs and hills throughout the city of Edinburgh, Scotland. The cuts between photos are rhythmic, and often in time to the recorded poem. Most photos are visible for a second or less. There are many people in the photos; most overtake the filmmaker as the camera goes up and down hills. Some moments stand out: someone leans down to give money to a person sitting on the ground; a musician plays guitar all alone high up on a staircase; shadows and tourists’ feet land on dirty streets with mostly gorgeous architecture. At one point in the middle of the film, when the voice says “Escucha,” (subtitled onscreen as “Escucha/Listen”), the screen goes black for several seconds of silence. The images
resume with the sound of breathing, and the spoken poem continues to move along with photos of stairs, hills and people. Near the end of the film, the voice speaks faster and the images change faster. With the final spoken word, "Respira" (subtitled onscreen as "Respira/Breathe"), the final image appears: a blue sky with white clouds. It fades to black in silence.

1/

(This part of the poem is a sort of sound poetry: it features seemingly abstract sounds, in this case using only vowels. Later in the poem there are parts with only consonants, as well as more vowel-only sections. The sounds are rhythmic, fairly staccato, and of variable speed. But first, the sound of slow, rhythmic breathing. This breathing continues for the entire poem, except during the blackout, and despite never changing it gives the impression of being more and more tired.)

Aw. Oo-ay. Ah-oo.
Aw. Oo-ay.
Aw. Oh-I. Aw-eh-uh.
Oo-ee. Oh. Ah. Ih.
Ay-eh-ih. Ow. Oh.

(Breathing.)
2/

Are you able?
Can you?
Are you able?

Are your eyes strong enough?
Can you see?
Can't you see?

I meant without glasses.
Hmmm.

Can't you?
Make a fist.
Run run run. And jump.
Hmmm.

I don't see a problem.
Are you eating well?
Do you smoke?
Have you ever smoked?
Ah.

(Breathing.)
3/

Do you have any of the following symptoms?
- sadness
- nausea
- irritability
- fear
- indigestion
- embarrassment

Do you feel tired? Horny? Hungry? Do you eat to feel better? Do you eat?
How much do you weigh?
Really.

Are you currently or have you ever been depressed?
Attracted to women?
Hmm.
Do you have piercings? Tattoos?
Have you ever slept with a man who slept with another man?
Have you ever had sex with a West African?
Have you been to West Africa? Are you African?
Ah.

(Breathing.)

Respira. Respira, mi amor.
(Breathe. Breathe, my love.)
Respira. (Breathe.)
Escucha. (Listen.)

(Silence.)

4/

Is anyone in your family
- dying of cancer
- prone to accidents
- a communist?

Have you ever been on welfare?
Where did you get those shoes? Do your feet hurt?
How tall are you? Can you orgasm?

And lift. Reach up. And down.
Circle the one that does not belong.
Can you?

(Breathing.)

5/

Do you hear voices?

T-t-t-tr. Cc-t. D-t. Wmn?
Hmmmm-ah.

Hv. Yi. Vr. Slpt. Wth mn

Respira, mi amor. Respira.
(Breathe, my love. Breathe.)

Respira. Escucha.
(Breathe. Listen.)

Hv y vr hd ss-kkk-sss wth Wst frcn?

Drink? Hmmm. Drugs? Really. Suicide?
Ah.
Take two of these in the morning
and ten of these at night.

Regular heart rate
periods
bowels
church?

(Breathing.)

6/

Where do you think the pain is?
Does this hurt? This?
Hmmm.

Have you ever had an STD? an RRSP?
been to a protest?
declared bankruptcy?

Male or female?
Married or single?
On the pill?
I suggest the pill.
Do you eat meat?
I suggest meat.

Acne?
Headaches?
Menstrual pain?
Jewish?

(Breathing.)

7/

Tell me what this is.

Uh-uh-uh. Ah-uh.
Ay-oh-ee-ah-aw-uh.
Ah. Oo-eheh-oh. Oo-eheh-oh.
Ah.

And this.

Dd yy hv ny pr ccce ngs.

Really. Do you have insurance?

(Breathing.)

8/


Respira. (Breathe.)

Notes

1. "Neurodivergent, sometimes abbreviated as ND, means having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal.” Neurodivergent is quite a broad term. Neurodivergence can be largely or entirely genetic and innate, or it can be largely or entirely produced by brain-altering experience, or some combination of the two (autism and dyslexia are examples of innate forms of neurodivergence, while alterations in brain functioning caused by such things as trauma, long-term meditation practice, or heavy usage of psychedelic drugs are examples of forms of neurodivergence produced through experience)." -Nick Walker

2. "D/deaf" is an abbreviation for “Deaf and deaf.” The adjective or noun, “deaf” usually refers to the physical state of “not-hearing.” It can include people who are “hard of hearing,” a term used to describe those who do not hear well or who have lost some or all hearing later in life. When capitalized, “Deaf” is a cultural (and often political) indicator. BSL/ASL-users, and people who view themselves as part of a Deaf community and distinct language-based culture, are more likely to use “Deaf.” Such people do not equate deafness with disability.
Moving Dangers: Motion, Danger and the Queer Body in Performance

Sofia Varino

“Moving Dangers: Motion, Danger, and the Queer Body in Performance” is a transdisciplinary analysis of The Artist is Absent, an exhibition of Marina Abramović reperformances at 25 CPW Gallery in New York, presented as a queer alternative to the Museum of Modern Art’s 2010 retrospective The Artist is Present. Unlike MoMA, 25 CPW featured live re-enactments of Abramović’s movement pieces, including some of her more physically dangerous stunts. By contrast, the MoMA retrospective relegated these works to video documentation, sculptural installations, or archival photography. In my paper I am interested in pursuing questions about movement and danger; how a body’s mobility across space (and specifically the gallery space) entices risk inherently, and under what conditions; and how the specificity of the gallery site might bring these dangers to the fore. I analyze in detail four key works presented at 25 CPW (Imponderabilia; Breathing in/Breathing out; Relation in Space; and Rhythm 10) and consider how these reperformances use physical movement and/or mobility across space to produce risk and danger through a queer aesthetics of the performer’s body.

Introduction

On a Saturday morning in May 2010, I made my way to 25 CPW Gallery in Central Park West Avenue in New York City to participate as a performer in a one-day showcase of reperformances of Marina Abramović’s works. The event had been conceptualized as an alternative to the MoMA retrospective The Artist is Present, which had opened in February earlier that year. The curators highlighted two key factors of The Artist is Absent to justify the alternative exhibition, which centered on Abramović’s “physically and emotionally intense performance pieces.” First, the works selected would include some of Abramović’s more physically dangerous work, unlike the pieces selected for MoMA that consisted of endurance performances of immobility supplemented by media and print documentation alongside sculptures and installations replicating original props and sets (like 1997’s Balkan Baroque or 1974’s Rhythm 0). Second, those selected to perform the works would not have to comply with mainstream body expectations regarding gender, ability, fitness, or heteronormative “beauty,” but would instead incorporate a broader variety of contrasting looks and body types to include queer, transgender, and (dis)abled bodies. These two key differences were formulated in terms of inclusion/exclusion, specifically in the selection of which Abramović works would be showcased and which bodies would be chosen to perform them.

I will argue in this paper that there is a relationship between the two fundamental differences highlighted by the curators of The Artist is Absent: mobility/movement/motion (in the performance works) on the one hand, and the visibility of queer bodies (performing the works) on the other. This paper is therefore a comparative analysis of the two exhibitions of Abramović reperformances in New York City, one a major retrospective presented over the course of several months at a major modern art institution, the other a one-day experimental queer production at an independent art gallery. My aim is not to provide a queer critical analysis of Abramović’s performance works, but rather to examine how The Artist is Absent
mobilized aesthetic and political strategies to enact queer modalities of movement and mobility, embodied relations of temporality and spatiality, corporeal vulnerability, danger, vitality, and precarity.

For the purposes of my argument, I will be using Tim Cresswell’s tentative definition of mobility in *On the Move* as any act of movement between point A and point B, involving a displacement (of something or someone) and a shift in location that “may be towns or cities, or ... may be points a few centimeters apart” (Cresswell 2006, 2). By encompassing movement across space, as well as the minimal movements and motions made by living bodies, this definition is immensely useful for a mobility-based approach to performance analysis, as well as to an understanding of queer corporealities in relation to internal and external forms of motion and mobility. Cresswell elaborates:

Mobility is linked to a world of practice, of anti-essentialism, anti-foundationalism, and resistance to established forms of ordering and discipline. Often mobility is said to be nonrepresentational or even against representation. Linking all of these, perhaps, is the idea that by focusing on mobility, flux, flow and dynamism we can emphasize the importance of *becoming* at the expense of the already achieved—the stable and static. (Cresswell 2006, 47, italics in the original) Mobility is linked to a world of practice, of anti-essentialism, anti-foundationalism, and resistance to established forms of ordering and discipline. Often mobility is said to be nonrepresentational or even against representation. Linking all of these, perhaps, is the idea that by focusing on mobility, flux, flow and dynamism we can emphasize the importance of *becoming* at the expense of the already achieved—the stable and static. (Cresswell 2006, 47, italics in the original)

Cresswell thus emphasizes “becoming at the expense of the already achieved,” pointing to an understanding of mobility that undoes, opens, and breaks down, through *practice*, the closed narratives and finished products of representation, order, and discipline. By resisting universal and essentialist models of knowledge, the “becoming” of mobility replaces the “stable and static” with the fluid temporality and spatiality that moving bodies carry and enact. The concepts of fluidity, becoming and practice are key for the development of my argument in relation to the inclusion of Abramović’s movement pieces, reperformed in a queer context. Importantly, Cresswell draws some degree of distinction between movement and mobility, whereby all mobility implies motion (across space-time) but where movement does not necessarily imply any degree of mobility. It would then follow that we may detect a distinction between the external (visible) and internal (invisible and/or unseen) movements of the body. For example, blood circulation would be one case of internal motion, while the movements of facial muscles may or may not be perceptible to the human eye. Similarly, certain movements/mobilities may be more or less conscious, unconscious, habitual, unusual, or unexpected. On the other hand, *motion* may be applied towards internal or external movements, observable through a variety of means and not necessarily visible without technological mediation. I employ the terms mobility, movement, and motion throughout in different contexts according to the circumstances of the reperformances.

I propose the term “queer corporeal” to refer to the multiple corporealities of trans-, cis-, androgynous, intersex, and genderqueer bodies; “over-” and “under-” weight bodies; (dis)abled, healthy, ill, strong, vulnerable, vital bodies; ordinary and extraordinary bodies; the bodies of sex workers and the bodies of BDSM, leather, and kinky sexualities; bodies that cross heteronormative boundaries and bodies that maintain them; the everyday bodies of lesbian, gay,
b bisexual, trans, queer folks. The queer corporeal encompasses what queer bodies in motion can activate and what they enact and invoke in terms of instability, indeterminacy, liminality; the potential for not knowing, for risk, danger, harm; for hybridity, duplicity, ambiguity; for failure, abjection, and “binary terrorism,” a term I borrow from Rebecca Schneider’s *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997), in which the author uses the notion of binary terrorism in the context of gendered, and specifically female, bodies in performance art. Using the example of artists like Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle, Karen Finley, and Ana Mendieta, Schneider looks at instances in performance art when the body is used to collapse the distance between sign and signified. According to Schneider, the body made explicit in performance interrupts the act of representation that permits mimetic equivalences to occur between the object and its image. For Schneider, “the collapse of sign and signified onto the literal space of the body employs a binary terrorism that similarly makes evident and interrogates the social ramifications of the gap” (Schneider 1997, 32). As such, a way out of sexual difference is proposed where we can rethink the possibilities of embodiment through/against gender heteronormativity and beyond it. Similarly, when Elizabeth Grosz offers that “the body is what it is capable of doing, and what anybody is capable of doing is well beyond the tolerance of any given culture,” and wonders “Isn’t it even more threatening to show, not that gender can be at variance with sex ... but that there is an instability at the very heart of sex and bodies” (Grosz 1994, 140), she is in fact enunciating her own argument about what bodies are and what we can do with them. The tangible body is unstable and indeterminate, constantly in the making through time and in space, in the same sense that Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) identifies the construction of gender as an imitation of an original that can never be historically located because it has never taken place in an actual past but is rather continually (re)produced through social relations in the present.

These familiar concepts from now nearly canonical queer and feminist theories of embodiment would suggest then that there is a liminal border zone between genders/bodies, where through movement and mobility, practice, and becoming they are enacted/actualized. Mobility and movement become implicated in a series of considerations about perception, visibility, and sensation, and continuously negotiate the borders between inside/outside, conscious and unconscious, occupying transitional positions among social, political, and biological frames, according to how we prefer to analyze them and for what specific purposes. I will be looking at instances of mobility and immobility in four key performance works originally conceived and performed by Abramović and Ulay in the 1970s, and reperformed in 2010 at two very different spaces, with different audiences and diverse aims. For the purpose of my argument, which looks at how mobility and movement become a source of anxiety and even danger within specific contexts and spaces, (in this case, two urban sites symbolic of contemporary modernity: the space of a major modern art institution in the case of MoMA versus the space of an abandoned commercial space turned into an independent art gallery in the case of 25 CPW), I will be looking at the differences between the two exhibitions. This is by no means to suggest that they have nothing in common—certainly, the two events overlap, geographically and chronologically (the museum and gallery being physically only a few blocks apart, and the one-day exhibition at 25 CPW occurring during the closing weekend of the MoMA retrospective), suggesting contiguity in aesthetics, theme, audience, and even the methodology of reperformance. If anything, *The Artist is Absent* curators sought to replicate many of the key elements of the MoMA retrospective, even details such as the lab coats provided for performers to wear before and after the reperformances. In fact, both the preliminary emails sent to the performers and the print and online materials describing the
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project, including the outline for the planned publication of an exhibition catalogue with Daylight Books, display genuine engagement with Abramović’s oeuvre, especially regarding her reperformance methodology. The Artist is Absent curators seemed primarily invested in showcasing a more diverse and inclusive group of performers and in addressing why certain pieces, and certain bodies, had been selected, while others had been left out of the reperformances at MoMA. In the next section, I look into reperformance as method for a queer analysis of mobility in performance.

Reperforming

It seems important to note that although Marina Abramović’s performances have reached iconic status in the contemporary art world, they retain an ambivalent position as artworks, since they cannot be purchased, collected, or auctioned, but are rather preserved, documented, archived through various media (video, photography, text, artifacts, etc.) in museum collections across the world. The “scores,” that is, the short written instructions describing the physical movements and/or situation of the performance, constitute in themselves an important element of this documentation. While the texts themselves remain copyrighted works, authored by Abramović and Ulay, they are available for (re)performance without legal permission.

If we reconsider each initial performance of the written “score” as one of many possible variations, actualized in real time in different contexts/spaces and for a range of purposes/audiences, then the Abramović-Ulay performances can no longer hold as the “original” or even as referential, but rather as one of many parts in a process, a continuum of reenactments distributed over decades among various locations. Similarly, to follow Butler’s influential and much contested concept of gender performativity as the imitation of an original that has never taken place, the Abramović-Ulay rendition becomes one of many possible sexed, gendered variations among a multiplicity of others—not an “original” gender binary in confrontation, or a virtuoso performance of unique avant-garde genius, but rather a particular gendered, sexed encounter in a specific context, permeable to a potentially infinite number of possible permutations across a continuum of bodies, genders, and sexualities.

It may be useful here to briefly consider the meaning of the term “reperformance.” In the context of Abramović’s MoMA retrospective, it refers to the history of performance art’s ephemerality, where pieces are often developed by the artist as author/performer and presented only once before a live audience in galleries, public spaces, or less frequently in conventional theaters. Thus we use the term “reperformance,” rather than “restaging,” which would refer to a theater play, or “adaptation,” normally reserved for novels adapted to the stage or cinema or for a reworking of a film script into a different film. The generally uneasy relationship between writing and performance is brought to the fore in the plethora of terms to designate how the same text can be rendered in different formats for different audiences according to multiple genres, markets, methods, and aesthetics. In the case of performance art, yet another layer is added to this already complex web, given its historically ambiguous relationship with language and representation, as well as the general tendency not to perform a specific piece more than once. This tendency, however, has as much to do with artistic choices as with limited means of production that make each performance unique because the (usually solo) performer may (and often will) lack the (physical, financial) means and resources to replicate a particular work.

In Abramović’s case, the term reperformance thus refers both to the history of performance art and to her position as the co-author of her collaborations with Ulay. By shifting
the focus from her (physical) labour (of mobility and/or of immobility) as performer to her (intellectual) labour (of creating, writing) as author/artist, there is an exponential increase in cultural capital. Whereas performers’ bodies are replaceable and expendable (there is no lack of well-trained, technically proficient professionals capable of performing the pieces in real time), the author’s work is considered original, unique, and irreplaceable in the best Platonic tradition, capable of withstanding the test of time into “immortality” as writing, work of genius, literary document, (in)material object. Thus the term *reperformance* highlights Abramović’s author function, to borrow the concept from Foucault’s influential 1969 lecture “What Is an Author?, where he highlights how the discursive function of the author as the individual originator and legal proprietor of a text is historically embedded and socially constructed. The implicit temporality of reperforming indicates a potential futurity that repeats, preserves, and perpetuates the original written text of the score, whereas the performer’s body must operate within the material confines of place and space, dependent on physical presence and reliant on the actual embodied present time of the live performance.

These considerations are relevant for a comparative analysis of the reperformances at 25 CPW and at MoMA, as they insert the elements of exhibition practice, spectatorship, and performativity within broader historical contexts. On the other hand, I will not be attempting a comparative analysis between the Abramović-Ulay performances of the 1970s with their renditions in 2010. The contexts are clearly very different, but they may also in fact be more similar than we would be able to articulate. Although much has been said about the commodification of the avant-garde, certainly in relation to Abramović’s unusual status as a performance artist in contemporary art, it is likely that to assign a naïve or disinterested role to the artists, exhibitors, and audiences who participated in pioneering art movements during the 20th century in Europe and North America is to project a romanticized fantasy of an “innocent” avant-garde that has probably never existed.

Reperformace also points to the uneasy relationship in terms of temporality between performance art and its preservation, or between its duration as live format and its future longevity as artwork and cultural artifact. Peggy Phelan observes how, “[d]efined by its ephemeral nature, performance art cannot be documented (when it is, it turns into that document—a photograph, a stage design, a video tape—and ceases to be performance art)” (1993, 78). In this sense, documenting performance art is made nearly impossible except in the live labour of performance and spectatorship, and it is partly with the intention to document/preserve this body of performance works that Abramović has articulated her intention for the reperformances at MoMA as well as her pedagogical aims with her students and other artists (Obrist 2010, 89).

**Motion & Stillness**

In order to substantiate my argument in more detail, I will turn to *Imponderabilia*, an endurance stillness piece included in both exhibitions, and to three movement pieces that were reperformed only at 25 CPW. *The Artist Is Absent* reperformances were structured in rotating shifts undertaken by bodies with a broad rage of genders and sexualities, including trans, cis, and genderqueer bodies; various types of physical impairments and special needs; kinky and BDSM sexualities; sex workers and sex-work activists; and many others, in a heterogeneous ensemble distributed across a gallery space of two floors, over a total of 15 hours of exhibition time, from 10am on Saturday to 1am on Sunday. According to *The Artist Is Absent* exhibition
statement on the Daylight Books website, “[t]he group of performers draws heavily from the queer, transgender, and BDSM/leather/kink communities, whose connections to Abramović’s work are frequently alluded to but rarely made explicit.” Over the duration of the exhibition, performers became spectators between, before, or after their shifts, and audiences were free to move through the gallery space at whim, creating a mobile, fluid corpus that surrounded, passed through, observed, or ignored the various live pieces taking place at any time. Significantly, the identities of some of the performers, and the genders and sexualities their bodies enacted, were not necessarily recognizable except by those who might be part of, or have participated in, a particular subculture, activist group, or artistic community. For example, those well-known and active in the leather or sex-work communities might have been easily recognizable to others also within these communities and their adjacent subcultures. Similarly, those suffering from chronic conditions and/or (dis)abilities might have been only visible in the enactment of their embodied difference by those part of health, crip, or disability activism movements. The curators’ urge and capacity to accommodate special needs, the accessibility of the (upper floor) of the venue, and the experimental, DIY approach allowed for the inclusion of embodied differences across such a broad spectrum. However, the tension between corporeal visibility and invisibility animated the exhibition throughout its duration, functioning both as its flaw and as its strength: when free from the duty of “representing” or “standing for” a group, community, subculture, or category, the legibility of one’s difference might also have been erased or compromised.

In order to analyze these works in terms of the types of mobility and of the queer corporealities they enact, I will use my own first-hand observations as both performer and spectator. Since the retrospective has been sparsely documented, aside from the project website (no longer available online) and the Daylight Books webpage, only scattered announcements in blogs and art listings seem to remain. My highly personal, eye-witness account, based on the notes and impressions I collected throughout the day, forms a relevant archive of affective, physical, and social experiences. As performer and spectator, I found the intensity of the project in terms of its raw energy, force, and vitality to be at times alternately breathtaking, humbling, unbearable, and numbing. I cannot verify the reliability of this archive or attest to its objectivity in any sense. I can only attempt to demonstrate its relevance for documenting and preserving a collective project of queer performance and for articulating, from my immersive position as observer, some of the body dynamics, politics, and aesthetics at stake.

One characteristic the four pieces I discuss below have in common is repetition—there is a cumulative effect at work, whereby the motion involved produces experiences of embodiment for both audience and performer(s), as well as visible, audible, and tactile effects that continuously increase in intensity over time. This cumulative effect is foundational for endurance performance, as is(are) the breaking point(s) where a limit is reached (pain, suffocation, exhaustion) and the performance is either paused momentarily or brought to a halt altogether. In this sense, again, Abramović’s works bear a close resemblance to BDSM play, where a range of activities may be engaged in until a physical or psychological limit is reached, and perhaps a safe word uttered, or a physiological emergency occurs, or any number of developments may bring the play scene more or less abruptly to an end. We could contrast this repetition—which includes moments of rupture, pause, and restart—with the continuous immobility of the works at MoMA, even in the case of Imponderabilia, the only work presented at both exhibitions and one of the best known Abramović/Ulay collaborations. First performed in 1977 at the doorway of the Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna in Bologna, this work positions the two performers face-to-face obstructing the entrance to the exhibition space, forcing each
patron to pass between them sideways, choosing which performer to face. The mobility of the spectator and the collective mobilities of the audience become the focus of this piece, where the performers remain immobile for hours until breaking point. By randomly shifting the male/female combinations of cisgender performers, the retrospective at MoMA modified the heteronormative binary gender dynamic of the 1977 performance and generated a vaster range of interactions and possibilities. At 25 CPW, the broader range of genders present (cisgender alongside trans, queer, androgynous, intersex, and multigendered bodies), and the wider diversity of sexualities and body types, amplified considerably the possible permutations of gendered relations among sexed bodies.

Since at 25 CPW Imponderabilia was presented at the entrance, as in the first Abramović-Ulay performance, it became the introductory scene, whereas at MoMA the work was showcased inside the museum space along with other works. At 25 CPW, the performers’ bodies, facing each other, obstructed the passage by the entrance and forced visitors to go through sideways, facing one performer only, while pressing against the naked bodies of the other performers in order to pass through into the exhibition space. The work thus demanded physical contact, and in some cases eye contact, and a proximity whose degree of intimacy had to be negotiated in the moment. In some cases, the difficulty in determining the genders of the performers engendered puzzlement, confusion, amusement, and discomfort among random passers-by in the audience, whose comments and reactions revealed a lack of familiarity with non-cisgender bodies. The nudity of the performers made their (un)doing of gender even more explicit, and the inability to make genitals, bodies, and facial features correspond neatly according a cisgender model enhanced the effect of estrangement that Imponderabilia already provokes. On the other hand, among several visitors there seemed to be moments closer to recognition, elation, and perhaps even relief at encountering a scene of queer corporeality in the white cube of the contemporary art gallery. There were moments of laughter, playfulness, and flirtation, as spectator bodies participated, even if briefly, in the piece by transposing the space held by the performers. Throughout the duration of reperformance, as its energy rose and fell and as the tempo shifted according to the number of visitors entering the space, these bodily encounters displayed the staggering diversity of New York’s population, from tourists and passers-by, to friends of the performers and curators, from LGBT press and activists, Abramović followers and contemporary art aficionados.

The first performance of Relation in Space began later, in a separate, less-exposed and dimly lit section of the gallery. Reminiscent of the studies of human motion by Edward Muybridge, the piece was first performed at the Venice Biennial in 1976. To watch it reperformed by Ariel “Speedwagon”—one of the exhibition co-curators and a well-known gender-bending queer performance artist, familiar to many within the downtown performance scene in New York—radically disrupts the physical dynamic of the work as initially performed by Abramović and Ulay. Ariel, whose movements display the elegance, grandeur, and expressivity of a trained performer, is white with a tall, full figure. She crosses the gallery space several times until her body collides against her performance partner, a black man of medium build and height. With each crossing, their bodies gather weight and speed and the thump of their collisions increases in sound, tempo, intensity, and frequency. Both race and gender come to the fore in these negotiations between rest, motion, vulnerability, and force, between the slightest strokes of skin, flesh brushing against flesh, to brutal frontal contact, the full weight of bones, muscles, and internal organs colliding against another body in motion in a loud thump. Then come brief cyclic pauses, demanded by the sensations of pain, heat, and exhaustion, only to be brought to a halt by another cycle of rising clashes and bruised skin. The tension between
them is almost unbearable. No one in the audience can take their eyes away from their spectacular, cyclical clashes for well over an hour. The impact of the two bodies reverberates over and over across the room as a thumping sound that increases in intensity with each collision, as the thin walls of the gallery reveal their own material frailty, and the floor shakes under our feet at the stronger collisions, reminding everyone in the room that the spectacle of motion is also a matter of gravity. The collisions of the two bodies rise to a crescendo of force and violence, only to end in an anti-climax of vulnerability, tears, and a candid hug between the two performers.

Since the Abramović/Ulay collaborative works were purposefully designed by the artists with the objective of exploring ways of relating intimately through the body, these pieces often bring to the fore matters of sexual difference. In particular, the more physical pieces draw their power in part from presumed biological differentiation between two opposite sexes. In *Body Art*, Amelia Jones comments on how “[Abramović and Ulay’s] relationship to each other and the audience aligns their body art works with a universalizing conception of sexuality and gender that ultimately veils the privileging of masculinity on what is in effect experienced as a bipolar model of gender” (Jones 1998, 141). At 25 CPW, with less polarized heteronormative gender relations and with variables other than a cisgender, binary sex model, the two performers’ bodies seemed over time to transform from gendered, sexed, human, animal, to plain organic matter, weight, mass, crossing a room and colliding, each repeated trajectory bringing to the fore the nonhuman and even the nonliving aspects of embodied life.

In *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, two performers breathe out into each others’ mouths and breathe in again through their mouths, the toxic air exhaled until they approach suffocation. The circulation of carbon dioxide reaches toxic levels and the precariousness of life comes to the fore, as do the limits of lungs, blood vessels, and the vital organs whose labour supports the continuance of physical life. Unlike *Relation in Space*, the biological process of breathing neutralizes gender considerably, as both Abramović and Ulay struggled with suffocation and oxygen deprivation in ways that are not explicitly sex- or gender-specific. On the contrary, the spectacle afforded was of the living body, the spectacle of the respiratory system, of heart rates and body temperature and blood pressure, of metabolic and endocrine functions hard at work, blood pumping. At 25 CPW, with various teams of cis-, trans- and genderqueer performers took their places to reperform the score in multiple combinations of gender/sex, the conflict between the labour of performance and the limitations of the body, diligently enacted in this scene of breath, exposed all that cannot be maintained within binary models of male/female or mind/body dichotomies. The extremes to which a trans, queer visual artist and their partner take this performance brings them both to tears and causes them to choke on several occasions. The labour of exhaling into each other’s mouths is interrupted several times, until they have breathed in enough fresh air to resume. The scene provokes a sense of collective air shortage; the gallery space is not especially ventilated and the temperature rises as more visitors and performers arrive. The space begins to feel crowded and sticky. The agency of these two bodies, bodies that manage to stay alive in spite of this self-imposed ordeal, brings to the fore how we are collectively limited by and constituted through and alongside the bio-logic of the body. Again, as the work progresses, the duration of the endurance stunt forces the performing bodies to come undone as gendered, sexed, recognizably human, living entities, and to acquire an opaque quality as brute matter, struggling to stay alive, much more internal organs (lungs, throat) and physiological functions (metabolic activity, respiration, circulation) than the more external gendered features of face, hair, genitals, or secondary sexual characteristics. Even the skin and flesh of these bodies seem to fall away to expose an interior organic body pulsing to
remain alive through the increasing levels of toxicity of carbon dioxide.

Rhythm 10 (1973) remains possibly Abramović’s most difficult performance to watch, even in its videotaped version. There is something so plain and familiar about cutting one’s fingers against the blade of a knife that to see it repeated over and over becomes nearly unbearable. The score of the performance, Abramović’s first, is longer and more elaborate than most and includes the following instructions:

I turn on the tape recorder. I take the first knife and stab in between the fingers of my left hand as fast as possible. Every time I cut myself, I change the knife. When I’ve used all of the knives (all of the rhythms), I rewind the tape recorder. I listen to the tape recording of the first part of the performance. I concentrate... (The Artist is Absent website, 2015)

The motion this time is closely bound to hand-eye coordination, to the sounds made through motion and replicated via motion. At 25 CPW, even before the performer assigned for Rhythm 10 could begin, I was already outside the gallery accompanied by a friend who had come to see the show, enacting our own self-protection, our own censoring and selecting of which Abramović scenes we were indeed willing not simply to watch (I had viewed various videos of this performance several times, as possibly her most iconic work), but rather to be with, to be in the presence/present of, witnessing and experiencing in the same space at the same time. Although my friend justified her refusal to watch in terms of concern for the health, safety, and especially psychological wellbeing of the performer, I was well aware that it was my body, my vulnerability, and my flesh and fingers and bones I was concerned with, not those of the person who had shown up fully equipped with first-aid supplies and who is an experienced BDSM player. Returning now to my recollection of the moment, I realize it was never the cuts or the blood that terrified me, but rather the live sound of repeated stabbing echoing through the gallery walls, followed by hissed gasps each and every time a blade cut through flesh. The production of live sound, closely bound to motion, is what this work emphasizes, and it is precisely the live audible element of the work that becomes unbearable, as it makes its way into a tape recorder and is then replicated—conflating temporalities in the binary of live/recorded and converging kinetic and aural impressions. Flesh wounds and dripping blood, on the other hand, are bound to associations of abjection and contagion, and when performed in such closely controlled circumstances, destabilize medicalized accounts of an “ill/abnormal” body and mind against a “healthy/normal” one—another form of “binary terrorism” that possibly provoked stronger responses for other spectators.

The High Cost of Motion

Throughout Western modern art history, the gallery space has tended to be conceived as one of fixity, immobility, and stability, where nonliving objects and materials are displayed to a spectator whose movement and behavior are closely surveilled and regulated. Exhibition, preservation, and documentation are the traditional functions of the museum as institution, closely linked to practices of cultural/social selection and dissemination. In fact, the static tendencies of visual art contained within the museum space are precisely what Abramović and other visual artists, especially in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, aimed to disturb through movements such as action painting, kinetic art, live sculpture, and what would later come to be known as
“performance art,” or in British English “live art,” a term perhaps more indicative of the historical development of the genre as it refers to the “live” aspects inherent in all visual art practices. Cresswell argues throughout On the Move that the very transience of moving, its precariousness and ephemerality, places moving subjects necessarily closer to relations of indeterminacy and instability. In a similar manner, the enlivenment of motion opens up the potential for vulnerability and failure necessary to foment and arrive at the queer corporeal in its utopian and dystopian dimensions.

In a 2010 interview with the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Abramović speaks of the close restrictions, both legally and institutionally, of the museum/gallery space and how these restrictions make it nearly impossible to do any type of live work, from performance art to dance or even live sound (Obrist 2010, 57). Thus, the regulations distinctively affect certain types of art-making more than others, specifically those forms that are ephemeral, time-based, and leave no record other than possibly an archive of documentation. Significantly, these are also the types of art that are the least profitable, precisely because no art object is produced that can be later commodified and circulated within the circuits of contemporary art in a neoliberal global market. I find it relevant to note here that although Abramović is indeed an exception within the field of performance art in terms of the financial value and marketability of her works, part of the reason for this exception is precisely her constant emphasis on the plasticity of her performances, the preservation of archival documentation, and the material value of artifacts like props and scores. Although performance is an ephemeral medium, Abramović has been able to counteract this ephemerality with the solid remains of a broad range of highly profitable end-products, including books, films, and memorabilia.

What, then, is the danger of live performance? What threat does it pose, what violence can it commit, that makes the museum/gallery space so insistent on containing, preventing, and minimizing it, through legal restrictions and regulations? And finally, what are the dangers inherently posed by a group of untrained, unfit bodies enacting movement/mobility in a neoliberal, commodified art space? I argue that it is the imminent danger of failure, and a queer failure at that, that holds bodies in place and favors stillness and silence instead. Movement and mobility bring to the fore the vulnerability of biological embodiment in its staggering multiplicity—the body that falls, hurts, fails, bleeds, bruises, and breaks; the body that makes sounds; a loud unpredictable body—thumping, breathing, running, hissing. It is a body that secretes viscous fluids, a contagious body, wholly unreliable. The controlled silence of the gallery site at MoMA, the white cube filled with still, silent bodies, projected images, texts, and props, would have been brutally disrupted with the scenes I describe in the section above. Both prolonged stillness and silence are immensely demanding on the body’s resources and an endurance performance of immobility is indeed a dangerous feat. Without technique, practice, and a well-functioning body, the repercussions can be fatal, or otherwise damaging, with possible heart failure, brain damage, and even internal bleeding. Therefore, it is evident that MoMA’s anxieties in terms of danger or risk were related to the performers’ bodies. These bodies, in fact, had been recruited among well-trained dance and performance professionals, whose physical schema includes a range of techniques and resources at their disposal. Importantly, these performers could easily be replaced by other, equally well-trained bodies, hired for the labor of performing stillness in the museum space at their own risk, their own peril, their own cost, and financially compensated for their skill, training, experience, energy, and time. As such, the model of their engagement in these reperformances is perfectly aligned with the model of late neoliberal capitalism, in which biological bodies are always replaceable as highly profitable entities, producing, making, delivering.
I therefore contend that the concern over the “dangerous mobilities” enacted in the Abramović pieces not selected for reperformance at MoMA was not based on any genuine concern for the performers’ bodies, their safety, or well-being—on the contrary, since immobility is extremely taxing and dangerous for performers. The risk, then, lies somewhere else. For the remainder of this paper, I argue that the potential danger resides in how these mobilities might have put both museum visitors and the museum space at risk through exposure to the live, tangible, living bodies engaged in motion, in mobile activity across space and time. These mobilities may have included running, colliding, breathing, suffocating, stabbing, and cutting. It was to protect the spectator (visitor/consumer/patron) present, in real time, at the museum site, from the contagion, damage, and harm of such performances that they were not selected. By ensuring that the performing bodies were immobile, not only was the space of the museum left untouched and pristine, clean and tidy, but time remained still, paused, halted. Preventing movement thus cancelled the actual duration of the live performance, and the spectral bodies at MoMA appeared as if frozen or embalmed. By becoming a-temporal, through the suppression of movement, the MoMA reperformances became little more than museum objects, a permanent collection of white, slim, fit, cisgender bodies, marble-like sculptures fixed in space and time for the audience to marvel and puzzle at, isolated specimens in a spectacle of immobility, suspended in time.

Utopian Motions, or a Queer Sort of Failure

I will conclude this paper with a section on failure as theory and practice operating across a broader queer ethics and aesthetics. In 2011’s *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam argues that “[u]nder certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam 2011, 15). In a brilliantly successful demonstration, Halberstam enunciates the many links between queer failure and illness, stupidity, ignorance, loss, loneliness, awkwardness, alienation, and pain, rather than the neoliberal capitalist ideals of health, progress, success, and accumulation. The impending outcomes of multiple failures, of not reaching the desired effect, the correct result, the best possible outcome, are precisely along the lines of what we aimed to do at 25 CPW. In making an open call to the queer, sex-positive, and BDSM/leather/kinky communities in NYC and beyond to come and participate in an alternative to the Abramović retrospective at MoMA, the curators of *The Artist is Absent* were consciously courting, or at least flirting with, disaster. Many of the performers (myself included) never auditioned for the piece we signed up to perform, nor did we rehearse or prepare in any particular way, or participate in any of the preliminary information meetings organized by the curators. At least some of us were not familiar with Abramović’s work, nor were we particularly interested in the cultural or artistic value of her oeuvre. Some of the performers I spoke with were there, first and foremost, because this was an event by queers for queers, where so many ways of doing embodiment, gender, sexuality, would come into contact, play, and interact while collaborating on a collective project. Others came for the opportunity to participate in an unusual event, and others, like myself, were personally interested in reperforming a particular Abramović piece (I did *Cleaning the Mirror*, scrubbing a plastic skeleton replica for an hour). The very “absence” of the artist indicated in the title referred already precisely to the achievement of failure: not here, no show, vanished, gone, missing—no icon of avant-garde performance on display. Absence might then be read here as already a sign
of failure in and of itself, and in this case highlighted the possibility of embodied physical presence—a utopian performative of queer, anti-normative relations among living bodies.

For Jill Dolan, the utopian in performance is made possible precisely through the coming together in one place of a group of people to explore and experience new possibilities: “The politics lie in our willingness to attend or to create performance at all, to come together in real places [...] to explore in imaginary spaces the potential of the ‘not yet’ and the ‘not here’” (Dolan 2005, 20). Similarly, José Muñoz locates in indeterminacy and potentiality the workings of a utopian temporality for the production of queerness: “The utopian function is enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here” (Muñoz 2009, 45). In assigning a queer utopian function to certain artistic and literary works, I am not claiming, and neither are Dolan or Muñoz, that in order to be queer a work must demonstrate a capacity for utopia, but rather that the futurity of certain queer works points towards the potential of utopia. Or, as Muñoz phrases it, “Queerness is utopian, and there is something queer about the utopian” (Muñoz 2009, 56).

In *The Artist is Absent*, we attempted, succeeding and failing, to enact the utopia of a queer corporeal in motion, activating living, biological bodies to disrupt pre-established notions of safety, health, sanity, and normalcy. We failed often, and in different ways, at 25 CPW. The lack of publicity or visibility and the ensuing erasure of the exhibition from public access, cultural memory, the archives of queer/trans/leather/BDSM histories, and performance-or contemporary-art repositories, is itself an enactment of queer failure, as are the unsuccessful attempts at publishing the exhibition catalogue, the disappearance of the project website, the slow but steady gradual obliteration of all vestiges of this one-day event. We succeeded at this failure, at this unmarking, this erasure. Yet there is an enduring quality to the labour of that day, subsisting, refusing to be shut down. There is still a webpage available online describing the project, some faint references across obscure articles in publications, and even a brief mention in a note in an *Artforum* article, in which David Deitcher regards the exhibition as one of his favorite examples of alternative art shows “commenting critically on big-budget mainstream exhibitions” (Deitcher 2010). Our multiple successes and failures, our ensuing mobilities and immobilities, our more-or-less awkward movements across the gallery space, the harm inflicted and witnessed, and our many pleasures came to constitute the queer corporeal we enacted that day, reperformed with and against the avant-garde aesthetics of Marina Abramović.

**Notes**

1. From the Daylight Books webpage outlining *The Artist is Absent* project, accessed October 2015.

2. The planned publication of an exhibition catalogue, including essays and prose by the performers, has not happened at the time of writing.

3. With acknowledgements to Jasnira Zuniga for pointing out the potential applicability of the term for an analysis of queer mobility in performance.

5. For ethical reasons, I will refrain from including any identifying details regarding specific gender (dis)identifications, sexual orientations, sexual practices, except in the case of Ariel “Speedwagon,” a well-known queer performer and The Artist is Absent curator.

6. At The Artist Is Absent, there was discursive space for (dis)abling conditions to come forth alongside a vast range of possible morphologies engaged in the physical labour of reperformance. Specific arrangements were made to accommodate for special needs and CPW was wheelchair accessible.

Works Cited

Deitcher, David. *Artforum* Summer 2010, accessed online in March 2015.
   http://artforum.com/inprint/id=25762
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Dear Machines

Eunsong Kim

Hence dear narration. Watch me shine
--Don Mee Choi

The Morning News is Exciting

Dear Machines,

be afraid of small tasks

Dear Machines,

bereaved
i spend all my minutes
lurching at harnesses guised as lingerie
bereaved—

Dear Machines,

eyelashes won’t stop falling out
need them all so badly

Dear Machines,

stayed so long skin grew over
stayed so long muscles digested
stayed so long a cure was invented
stayed so long they decided some would love
Dear Machines,

We twiddle to it
Round and round
Faster
And turn into machines

Till the sun
Subsides in shining

— Mina Loy, Songs to Joannes

Dear Machines,

plant me plant me plant me plant me—

Dear Machines,

Surrender.
I surrender.

Dear Machines,

I want them but they want something else
hidden from me
oh well.

Dear Machines,

Mina was wrong—don’t you think?
We write to you.
We long for you.
We plead & grip harder but you remain alive.

Dear Machines,

I wish I could find a bookstore & read a book on the train. 
I wish to read on the train.
Please let me find one bookstore & one book to read.
Amen.
Dear Machines,

already spent it all

Dear Machines,

deared secrets you are not
flushed with shame
but with longing

Dear Machines,

my commitment to your happiness is
apolitical
self-defiant
castrating

Dear Machines,

yesterday i marched in a protest where the signs read:
care for injured workers, all you greedy fucks all we want is 15 bucks,
they took them alive we want them back alive

& i thought of the sign

죽음의 시간은 여기까지아길

*Let this be the end for the time of death*

Let this be the end for the time of death

Dear Machine,

days where i do nothing but pout that you don’t love me
Dear Machines,

thieves:
my chosen clan

Dear Machines,

watching girls grow up
to watch them undress

Dear Machines,

No blue
Never blue
Filled with servant bones
Potato sack dreams
Darker darker
Past life this life next life

Dear Machines,

paranoid & alive

Dear Machine,

didn’t forget about our picture
just refused to ask

Dear Machines,

don’t celebrate the bruise—it cannot heal
Dear Machines,

jesus died for our sins our debt

he died because you couldn’t figure out what a variable apr rate was & purchased that 2000 bag anyway. it wasn’t even the right color but it was on sale

jesus died because she couldn’t let you go another week without being waxed pure

that’s right bitch, add it to the bill.

he died he died he died

Dear Machines,

i wonder what she reads when nudes are sent
are there extra xssss
soft squished osss
does she sigh a little
does she have that folder open
does she lift her eyebrows & close her eyes
tell me about her sounds
show me what she saves

Dear Machines,

where nothing fades
sunlight only to make it shine
bright from the beginning
burning till we die

Dear Machines,

don’t need someone to make me feel unwanted when i’m so filled with desire

Dear Machines,

you do what you want
i’ll tell you when I feel betrayed
Dear Machines,

please dream of giving your money to someone else

Dear Machines,

cut potatoes & think of you
fry them & think of you
spill all of my coffee & there you are
gathering my laundry
checking on the wet towels
counting the missing pieces
—you
sit down & read four articles
you
edit a paragraph, open a poem
you
wash my face & draw the skinniest black lines near the edges of my eyes
a soft brown near my bottom lash
you
brush my hair & gather the shirts i did not choose
you
when i forget my keys when i walk back up the stairs
there you are
all space every command
even inch of any inside

—I'll tell you when I feel betrayed

Dear Machine,

is the police your friend
do you now feel safe
tell me tell me tell me
Mina:

“Is it true
That I have set you apart”

“Or are you
Only the other half”

Dear Machines,

already spent it all

Dear Machines,

look
don't want to save money
i just want pretty lingerie
swiss silk
french lace
made for mermaids
by red hat ladies who work for espresso breaks
want strategically placed string
things
don't want new clothes
don't need chocolates or cuddling or dinners & moonlight
want the matching suspender garter belt
want to take it off slowly
want them naked
want that silk draped
then i want it ripped
—fuck everything else

Dear Machines,

didn't expect you to be interested forever
am obsessed
not stupid
Dear Machines,
suspicious & alive

Dear Machines,
when you disappear this way
everything seems like a myth
this wonderful story
i made up
to keep you

Dear Machines,
can’t continue this porous

Dear Machines,
I love a clean poem
I am a cleaned poem
But tonight I need something more

Dear Machines,
I recover on my own

Dear Machines,
Lately I’ve been waking up two times
One: while dreaming about you
One: to remind me to dream about you

Dear Machines,
please
let there not be 2 girls waiting for text messages for more than 72 hours
let there just be one
amen
Dear Machines,

awake at all hours
doing things without aim
stabbing things endlessly

Dear Machines,

waiting for the time when it’s no longer possible to hear from you
to begin my day

Dear Machines,

you were sick & you didn’t tell me
you got better & you didn’t tell me
so we are strangers yes
this is absolute—yes

Dear Machines,

wish to make you cute lunch boxes
this is such bullshit

Mina, Mina:
“Let us be very jealous
Very suspicious”

Dear Machines,

speak of self as an expiration date
think of self as nearing expiration
will i be happier
will my breathing be different
will i be lonely
can you say a little in advance?
Dear Machines,

help me until we cannot sleep apart

Dear Learning Machine (Machine Trainee?),

do some algorithms see us as together
or have they not yet been taught

Dear Machines,

the time has come to cut me out of your life completely.

Dear Machines,

Mina:

“Crucifixion
Of a busy-body
Longing to interfere so
With the intimacies
Of your insolent isolation”

sometimes she’s right. sometimes she knows.

Dear Machines,

all vulnerabilities relocated here

Dear Machines,

You could’ve been ulzzang. What happened?
Dear Machines,

Instructions on how to hold on to someone imaginary

what I propose cannot be replaced by other types of potions, spells, cards—I cannot replace your youngest shaman

multiple types of attachments to the imaginary: deeply recommended

they after all, hunger to flee

1. I promise that even the imaginary cannot resist decorations that promise to be fluffy. Release this item only amidst crisis.

2. practice... (in different positions, in different places)

3. the option to keep a diary, with a lock.

Dear Machines,

starting over forever
starting over until
my dreams free me

Dear Dear,

security camera record of stolen kisses
favorite pile of nudes
who did you make out with on the street
did you look up say hi
who did you hold hands with walking into that store
who is looking into your collarbone
your thighs
what did you say next
& how did it all end

—evidenced, filed & waiting
for you before coffee—

Dear Machines,

Mina concludes: “Love — — — the preeminent literateur”

Do you agree?

* All Mina Loy quotes are from “Songs to Joannes”
Works Cited


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