Theorizing Impasse: Affect, Agency, Politics

Hanna Antonia Schaefer

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<u>Declaration</u>

I, Hanna Antonia Schaefer, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

Drawing on a variety of theoretical and literary sources, my thesis develops the notion of the 'impasse' to address the affective atmosphere of the present as it unfolds across the Euro-Atlantic world. The impasse points to the experience of living in and through this present—a space of time in which continuity continues, so to speak, but tainted by a sense of socio-economic and ecological fragility. As a conceptual heuristic, the idea of the impasse is conceived as a counterpoint to two interrelated tendencies in political theory: the use of tropes of trauma and catastrophe to describe the crisis-shaped present and an emphasis on rupture and radical discontinuity to think about political change. Through critical comparisons of works by a variety of thinkers, literary authors and artists, I argue the following: (1) realities of intensifying inequalities often emerge in less dramatic ways than scholars drawn to limit events allow for. Rather than focusing on moments of radical negativity, I examine subtler, less acute ways of being and feeling, such as states of drift, irresolution and impassivity. These states, I argue, contribute toward a more comprehensive account of contemporary subjectivity. (2) The impasse calls for a critical framework that in its attention to temporal experiences of ongoingness supplements critical imaginaries bent on scenes of transgression and the sense of change they entail. It asks us to think through the slowness of chronic time, rather than the time of rupture, and the conflicting rhythms of ambivalence, rather than the unambiguous embrace of action. (3) Without renouncing a commitment to social transformation, then, my thesis advances the notion of the impasse as a concept that not only claims descriptive purchase but which also, reflexively, elicits a mode of reading and writing that slows down the movement between interpretive claim and political practice.

Impact statement

This research engages with what it perceives as the troubled persistency of current modes of living and the difficulty of social change. Drawing on a range of political theorists, literary and visual artists, the thesis develops the notion of the impasse to describe this fragile continuity. The impasse intends to evoke the way in which conditions of increasing socio-economic and ecological precarity unsettle people's perception and expectation of the ordinary at the same time as alternatives appear undesirable or unavailable. As such, it may contribute to how scholars working at the intersection of political theory and cultural studies think about the ongoing precarization of livelihoods and may add to debates around what is required to ensure more sustaining and sustainable social infrastructures. The research may also play a small part in shaping interdisciplinary research, advancing a more fluid reading across forms and genres. This impact may be brought about through publishing elements of the thesis in scholarly journals. Another avenue through which impact may be achieved might lie in collaborating with other academics working on related questions to design and teach a module whose themes and syllabus are informed by this thesis. Outside of academia, this research may add to the growing public discourse around the shortfalls of neoliberalism and the perils of climate change and contribute to efforts that aim to rethink the organizing principles by which we determine value and conceive futurity. Its potential impact hereby is to be understood within the context of the wider field of research concerned with questions around socio-political and economic change. One way in which this thesis could contribute to these efforts is by pursuing a campaign of public engagement through mass media publications (newspapers, magazines) and organizing public lectures and discussions to facilitate debate about growing inequalities amidst and across societies and the possibility of a fairer allocation of resources, risks and vulnerabilities.

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Introduction

The impasse is not a punctual event in time. It is a condition, rather, drawn out across different locales and episodes; a condition defined by a sense of 'exitlessness', a formal figure of halting transit: one cannot simply take a *pass* to get somewhere or resolve something. Instead, impasses require us to tarry with the abeyance and delay they connote. To find oneself at an impasse is to be stuck between a no-longer and a not-yet. A period of suspension, the impasse describes a disturbance in one's affective and epistemic habits. To be adrift in this way can feel any number of ways: from joyous uncertainty to puzzled numbness, from detached indifference to anxious curiosity. It is a space of time that defies easy narration. Neither catastrophic (insofar as catastrophe means change) nor trivial, its hazy landscape disorients. The impasse confronts us with the difficult task of learning to reckon with its unclear edges. To describe a period as an impasse rhetorically distends, possibly distorts, its character; it asks us to look around without exactly knowing what it is we are looking for. This stupefying, staggering quality of the impasse troubles critical analysis and may help to account for its relative lack of theoretical attention. If it does make an appearance it usually serves as a rhetorical springboard that directs our attention to what promises to lead us beyond its confines. My project begins with the conviction that critical narratives may be enriched by having a more patient relation to, a more elaborate understanding of the problem/concept of the impasse.[1]

While the condition of the impasse is aporetic in the etymological sense of the term—signalling a state of being at a loss, the absence of a path or way—I want to distinguish it from the prevalent use of the term in critical circles: the deconstructive aporia. The impasse, in this thesis, does not describe a quasi-transcendental condition of im/possibility, but a historically overdetermined period of suspension. In other words, it does not point to structural predicaments of trans-historical standing, but suggests that things cannot move forward *due to circumstance*.[2] Still, the impasse is an elusive object of study. In fact, are we even right to call

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[1] I use the compound term 'problem/concept' to at once indicate the impasse's referential function (as a descriptor for the contemporary historical moment) and to point to its use as a theoretical tool in critical dialogue with other theoretical figures.

[2] For a deconstructive account of the aporia, see, for example, Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law', trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992): 3-67. Where a deconstructive approach focuses on the aporia as a *constitutive* experience of im/possibility, I want to think about the impasse as a context-specific predicament. For what a deconstructive perspective might acknowledge but does not dwell on, are the varying degrees and modalities in which impasses play out or register. That is, it tends to reduce the terms of the analysis to a generative principle of im/possibility that allows for the transformation or reassessment of what is deemed possible or passable, without, however, attending to how experiences of impasse are encountered differently and how a variety of constraints can impede or at least complicate processes of transformation.

it an *object* of study? Where exactly does the impasse reside—is it *in me* or *out there*, so to speak? Is it, in other words, a subjective experience, composite result of somebody or some group's projection, or does its field of emergence lie within the world, instead? Rather than trying to dissolve this ambiguity, I want to suggest that part of the impasse's analytical productivity stems from this very inconclusiveness.[3] As a problem/concept shuttling between the subjective and the objective, the impasse turns our attention both to questions of material (economic, institutional, social) infrastructures for reproducing life as well as to the political imaginaries that mobilize such practices. Without being able to determine its precise location and structural composition, the impasse thus requires us to look in multiple directions and adopt different perspectives.

1. Troubled continuity: neoliberalism, precarity, affect

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the 2008 financial crash, John Lanchester, in an article for the *London Review of Books*, reflects on the crash's socio-political and economic fallout. Its rhetorical management, he argues, is indicative of a shift in the political landscape organising the Euro-Atlantic world. 'In recent decades,' Lanchester writes,

> elites seem to have moved from defending capitalism on moral grounds to defending it on the grounds of realism. They say: this is just the way the world works. This is the reality of modern markets. We have to have a competitive economy. We are competing with China, we are competing with India, we have hungry rivals and we have to be realistic about how hard we have to work, how well we can pay ourselves, how lavish we can afford our welfare states to be, and face facts about what's going to happen to the jobs that are currently done by a local workforce but could be outsourced to a cheaper international one. These are not moral justifications. The ethical defence of capitalism is an important thing to have inadvertently conceded. The moral basis of a society, its sense of its own ethical identity, can't just be: 'This is the way the world is, deal with it'.[4]

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[3] This line of reasoning shares traits with Sianne Ngai's approach in her study of minor dysphoric affects such as paranoia, envy and irritation in her book *Ugly Feelings* (see below for a more detailed description). She argues that a 'systematic problematization of the distinction between subjective and objective enunciation lies at the heart of [these] minor affects' (20). She, too, does not seek to resolve this tension, but instead is interested in it for its 'aesthetic productivity' (28). Yet, unlike Ngai's, my study of impasse is not a study of affect as such. That is, as much as affect plays a role in my analysis, my project is principally concerned with what conceptual registers we use to analyse the present. The language of the impasse, as we will see, unfolds as an effort to counter(balance) certain tendencies within political theory. The analysis of affects forms part of these larger concerns. See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[4] John Lanchester, 'After the Fall', *London Review of Books*, 40, no. 13 (2018), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n13/john-lanchester/after-the-fall, accessed 03 March 2020.

This attenuation of the official discourse that Lanchester notes registers the mounting difficulty of capitalist democracies to narrate people's relation to the social order in a way as to make its experience meaningful or even just manageable. Rising levels of inequality have elicited a variety of responses that have started to challenge the existing terms of social existence, ranging from a newly invigorated populism to anti-austerity, anti-sexist and anti-racist/-xenophobic struggles.[5] Dramatic political speech proffering decisive action framed in the before-and-after trajectory of a redemptive narrative (Trump, Brexit) exists alongside and in tension with efforts that challenge such genres of speech and that give a different expression to the historical sense that an inherited form of life, a persistent set of fantasies and privileges, is no longer working, if it ever did.[6] Yet the present still appears to be waiting for a qualitative or systemic shift. Whatever the repercussions and ongoing momentum of these struggles, so far a sense of stasis or at least suspension prevails. What Mark Fisher has described as 'capitalist realism', that is, the sense that there is no alternative to the austere ordinary of neoliberalism, appears both troubled yet persistent.[7] As the prevalent genre shaping individual and collective lives, it continues to inform people's sense of possibility and expectation even in its attenuated and less-than-legitimating form.

This impression of troubled continuity appears corroborated by the intensifying tensions and anxieties around ecological developments. As Benjamin Kunkel puts it: 'The world today is faced with a pair of contradictory terrors: the economic fear that growth will soon come to an end, and the ecological fear that it will not.'[8] In other words, the unfeasibility of unlimited economic growth comes up against a contemporary ethos that seems impervious to any

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[5] For some of the literature documenting the rise in levels of inequality in both Europe and North America, cf. Joseph E. Stiglitz, 'Globalization and Its New Discontents', *Project Syndicate*, 5 August 2016, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/globalization-new-discontents-by-joseph-e--stiglitz-2016-08 , accessed 03 March 2020; Martin Jacques, 'The Death of Neoliberalism and The Crisis in Western Politics', *The Guardian*, 21 August 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/21/death-of-neoliberalism-crisis-in-western-politics, accessed 03 March 2020; see also Thomas Piketty, *Capital in The Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[6] Martijn Konings points to the way in which capitalist fantasies of the good life have historically been premised on the (disavowed) labour and marginalization of whole sections of society: 'Emotional investment in the idea of the modern economy as a mechanism that lifts all boats has always been deeply bound up with the possibility of limiting its universality, of excluding parts of the population from its benefits in more or less stable ways. Capitalist regimes of relative equality — whether among colonial settlers or unionized workers — function on the basis of an elaborate systems of racial and gendered hierarchy, the organization of society around biopolitical distinctions that rank forms of life.' Martijn Konings, 'Neoliberalism against Democracy? Wendy Brown's "In the Ruins of Neoliberalism" and the Spectre of Fascism', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 22 September 2019, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neoliberalism-against-democracy-wendy-browns-in-the-ruins-of-neoliberalism-and-the-specter-of-fascism/, accessed 18 August 2020.

[7] Cf. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

[8] Herman Daly and Benjamin Kunkel, 'Ecologies of Scale: Interview by Benjamin Kunkel', *New Left Review* 109 (2018): 80.

rationale other than a fidelity to GDP growth. The shifting conditions wrought by anthropogenic climate change thus put pressure on a way of life once (seemingly) unencumbered by material constraint. This raises questions of change that are global in scope and unprecedented in scale. Yet there is no consensus around what this change should entail and what its timeline and manner of implementation should be. Divisions have arisen between those who argue for a reformist, pragmatic approach, largely reliant on technological developments, and those who see the current situation as calling for a far more radical rethinking of our modes of life, involving fundamental changes to our economic and social systems. And then there are those who do not see the need to act or, rather, who act in ways that refuses to admit the detrimental and unevenly distributed effects of our fossil fuel driven lives, casting unwelcome changes (say in the form of dwindling manufacturing) as reversible. As a kaleidoscope of different composures and attitudes, these responses mirror the complexity and divisiveness our present moment confronts us with.

This thesis seeks to develop the notion of the impasse as a means to address this troubled landscape. The impasse points to the experience of living in and through this present—a space of time in which continuity continues, so to speak, but tainted by a sense of socio-economic and ecological frailty. While my thesis pays attention to the conditions under which this situation unfolds, it is not a history, economic or otherwise, of the developments that led to its emergence. Its main contribution is a theoretical one, calling for a mode of critical thinking that tarries with the slowness and complexity of social transformation; it seeks to show how critically attending to the various facets and valences of the impasse is a generative entry point into discussions about our contemporary historical conjuncture, often referred to as neoliberal capitalism.

Raymond Williams's notion of a 'structure of feeling' provides a useful frame for thinking about the impasse. Williams conceived this term in order to describe the way in which social forces shape our affective lives, to describe how what might feel private and idiosyncratic is often a reflection of wider socio-political pressures. At the same time, it is a means of thinking about the present as a process of emergence. Social analyses, Williams argues, are at risk of reducing the continually unfolding and complex shapes of our lives to a series of fixed forms. The 'habitual past tense' that these analyses adopt fails to register the qualitative changes in people's experience of their lives, the ways in which they register and respond to the world that

have not yet crystallized into new systematic beliefs.[9] 'Such changes', Williams writes, 'can be defined as changes in structures of feeling.'

> The term is difficult, but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology'. […] [W]e are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable) […]. We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: *practical consciousness of a present kind*, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as *a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension.* Yet we are also defining *a social experience which is still in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics.[10]

A structure of feeling, in other words, denotes an ambiguous configuration of social life that has not yet fully emerged and whose trajectory is unclear. Attempting to conceptualize such a configuration is thus a rather difficult and inherently provisional endeavour. Yet it is an important one nonetheless. For it allows us to describe and distil some of the prevalent ways in which the present impresses itself on people's consciousness and sets limits on their experience and action. My project thus aims to advance the impasse as a contemporary structure of feeling in the Euro-Atlantic world. This is not to say that its composition engenders the same feelings and responses in people; there is no mono-affective imaginary attached to it, so to speak. Rather, it is to suggest that what is collective is a sense of the increasingly brittle state of the material and fantasmatic infrastructures holding current forms of the social together.[11]

Still, characterising the present in this way risks homogenizing experience. It is to suggest a shared atmosphere where there might only be divergent sensibilities. The sense of the present-as-impasse might resonate more strongly with younger generations who have yet to build foundations for a secure and fulfilling adulthood in a post-Welfare society troubled by unprecedented levels of socio-economic and ecological uncertainty.[12] At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the material and psychic precarity that my project discusses as a

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[9] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128.

[10] Ibid., 132. Emphasis added.

[11] I use the notion of infrastructure in this thesis to denote any mediation, whether material or imaginary, that organizes the movement of social life.

[12] Cf. William Davies, 'Bloody Furious', Review of *Generation Left*, by Keir Milburn, *London Review of Books* 42, no. 4 (2020), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n04/william-davies/bloody-furious, accessed on 03 March 2020.

dominant feature of our contemporary moment has long been the ordinary for the poor and socially marginalized. To navigate a mounting sense of contingency thus plays out differently depending on people's social location. Issues of citizenship, class, race, gender and sexuality inflect how someone experiences and responds to uncertainty. As Lauren Berlant writes: '[S]tructural inequality is a different drama for the classes who used to benefit from it than for the classes and populations whose very social form involves managing anchors within manifest contingency.'[13] I want to suggest, then, that we understand the impasse as a heterogeneous structure, a 'set', in Williams's words, 'with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension'. Understanding the impasse in this way allows us to heed some of the differences as well as continuities in people's experience of the present. While life under neoliberal capitalism is not a unified thing, there is something shared in the experience of it and the ambition of my project is to understand some of the valences and continuities of that experience across a range of theoretical and literary texts.

While capitalist practices always induce a level of instability, making and unmaking lives according to the imperatives and whims of the market, neoliberal economic activity has mobilized this instability in unprecedented ways. Neoliberalism initially emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a set of economic policies that were designed to implement what David Harvey describes as 'an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'.[14] Its effects have been pronounced and far-reaching: from the erosion of social safety nets to the privatization of public utilities and institutions, from state-enforced constraints on the power of unions and the deregulation of financial markets to the ever more 'flexible' contractual relations shaping the labour market. Yet, as much as neoliberalism has shaped social life by remodelling its institutional composition, central to its emergence has been a corresponding shift in the social expectations placed upon individuals. 'Neoliberalism's emphasis on the necessity of personal initiative, along with its pathologizing of structures of dependence, calls upon subjects to see themselves as entrepreneurial actors in a competitive system', Rachel Greenwald Smith writes.[15] As a psycho-political discourse, neoliberal doxa thus fosters an idea of sovereign-style subjectivity and self-sufficiency that reduces social aspiration to a logic of entrepreneurialism and installs efficiency and profitability

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[13] Lauren Berlant and Dana Luciano, 'Conversation: Lauren Berlant with Dana Luciano', *Social Text online*, 13 January 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/conversation-lauren-berlant-with-dana-luciano/, accessed 3 March 2020.

[14] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

[15] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

as the principal standards of value by which every aspect of society—economic and non-economic alike—is judged.[16] When I use the term 'neoliberal', then, I use it not just as a periodizing tool to denote a discrete historical phase, but in this larger sense, as a structuring fantasy.[17] At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that this fantasy does not operate as a unified principle in the world; it is not, in Lauren Berlant's words, 'a world-homogenizing system whose forces are played out to the same effect, or affect, everywhere'.[18] While acknowledging its structuring power, Berlant's method, instead, is to 'read patterns of adjustment in specific aesthetic and social contexts to derive what's collective about specific modes of sensual activity toward and beyond survival'.[19] Tracing 'patterns of adjustment' in this way thus recognizes the particularities of life under neoliberal capitalism, at the same time as it remains alive to continuities. It also acknowledges the (attenuated) agency that persists under these conditions. My project is mindful of this more nuanced approach, understanding neoliberalism as a cluster of processes that puts pressure on social being, but whose meaning and repercussions play out differently in different contexts.[20]

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[16] Cf. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

[17] Following William Davies, the reign of neoliberalism can be divided into three distinct phases. These phases do not so much differ in terms of the policies and the institutional framework they endorse, but in what Davies calls their 'ethical and philosophical orientations' (124). The first 'combative' period, Davies argues, denotes the span of time between the late 1970s until 1989, during which neoliberalism evolved as a critique and political practice that gained coherence and momentum in opposition to socialism. This was followed by its 'normative' articulation or what was called the Third Way, a time in which neoliberal ideas became the general metric of human worth and fairness. Finally, the third 'punitive' phase, the one following the financial crisis of 2008 and whose ethos we are still in now, is characterized by heavily moralized punishment in which 'economic dependency and moral failure become entangled in the form of debt' (130). Faced with evidence of neoliberalism's malfunctioning, political discourse resorts to 'empty affirmations' that 'lack any epistemological or semiotic aspiration to represent reality.' (132) Davies suggests that underneath this circumvention of critical knowledge, 'there gapes the truth [neoliberalism] is so anxious to avoid—the absence of profitable alternatives to the current, broken model of capitalist accumulation, which it is striving to prop up' (133). It is the experience of this third phase of neoliberalism that my thesis primarily focuses on. Neoliberalism is losing, possibly has lost, its credibility. Nevertheless, it continues to be the organizing fantasy by which social relations and value are determined. William Davies, 'The New Neoliberalism', *New Left Review* 101 (2016); cf. also Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2014).

[18] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 9.

[19] Ibid.

[20] While my thesis is attentive to questions of race in this context, I do not explicitly focus on white supremacy, what George Shulman calls the 'racial impasse' (2). Shulman's engagement with thinkers in the black radical tradition, in particular Fred Moten's work, provides an important supplement in this respect. Yet my use of the term impasse differs from that advanced by Shulman. Shulman suggests that political theory starts in 'the perception and depiction of impasse'. 'Figurations of deadlock, stuckness, or stagnation,' he writes, 'of being imprisoned in ideology, diminished by routinization, or trapped in the past are crucial in political thought' (1). What Shulman calls 'impasse' is thus an umbrella term that is broader than what I take the notion to denote. In his rendition, the impasse comes close to the experience of the historical present at any one time (at least, for particular groups of people) and is thus treated as somewhat synonymously with different power structures. In contrast, I want to reserve the term for a period of time whose contours are drawn through the blurred edges of a no-longer and not-yet, a time in which the governing narrative framework together with the social infrastructures that once appeared to make it work reveal signs of sustained and widespread brittleness, but without an alternative in sight. George Shulman, 'Fred Moten's Refusals and Consents: The Politics of Fugitivity', *Political Theory* (2020). See also Shulman, "Theorizing Life Against Death", in Lewis Gordon, Annie Menzel, George Shulman, et al., 'Afropessimism', *Contemporary Political Theory* 17, no. 1 (2017): 118-128.

I started by describing the impasse as a space of time suspended between a no-longer and a not-yet. To admit that either of these temporal markers may be as fantasized as it may be actual is not to question their reality. Rather, it is to acknowledge the ways in which personal/collective relations are laced with projections and desires. The impasse, then, as a distended in-between, asks us to not only explore social and material circuits of reciprocity and value but also to interrogate the fantasies that keep them afloat. In this way, my project resonates with the account Wendy Brown offers in her book *Politics Out of History* (2001). Brown argues that the slow erosion of modernity's metanarratives has issued into an 'era of profound political disorientation'.[21] The presumption of history as a progressive story of expanding freedom and equality has lost its credibility. Nevertheless, we continue to live in the shadow of the story's purposive allure. '[W]hile many have lost confidence in a historiography bound to a notion of progress or to any other purpose,' Brown writes, 'we have coined no political substitute for progressive understandings of where we have come from and where we are going.'[22] In other words, we remain attached to something whose hold on the collective imagination has lost traction at the same time as alternatives appear undesirable or unavailable. Neither fully upholding nor renouncing patterns of expectation, we appear stuck between a no-longer and not-yet. As an account interested in such states of suspension, my thesis takes inspiration from Brown's account. Where *Politics out of History* reflects on the compromised state of liberal democracies at the turn of the century, the socio-economic and ecological fragility that have marked the subsequent two decades only work to aggravate her account. Like Brown, I argue that the stories we live by appear troubled, yet persistent. Brown, however, is primarily interested in analysing how these developments play out in the register of political theory and praxis. In dialogue with, amongst others, Marx, Nietzsche, Benjamin and Derrida, Brown examines the fate of terms such as power, futurity and morality in the dwindling twilight of a progressive understanding of modernity. As such, her account tends to operate on a rather high level of abstraction that does not consider the ways in which these predicaments are registered in ordinary life. My project, in contrast, represents an effort to do the latter. Approaching the present from the perspective of everyday affective life is not an end in itself, however; instead, it is intended to provide an alternative entry point into discussions about contemporary configurations of power. As a problem that invokes both a subjective predicament and a broader socio-political one, the impasse inhabits different registers. By tracking the links between the

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[21] Wendy Brown, *Politics out of History* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3.
[22] Ibid.

two, my project seeks to attend to and articulate the relation between the micro and macro, the personal and social.

In this respect, my project comes closer to work by feminist scholars and affect theorists, such as Sianne Ngai, Sara Ahmed and Ann Cvetkovich. They each, in distinct ways, discuss scenes of stunned subjectivity and analyse their political subtext. In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), for example, Sara Ahmed looks at the normativity underlying notions of happiness and the ways in which the latter's promissory deployment works to rob negative feelings, such as anger, unhappiness and melancholy, of their political power by construing them as something to be overcome rather than as affective forces that could potentially be harnessed in a challenge to an endlessly deferred and variously constricting promise of happiness.[23] Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2007), in turn, shifts the focus to minor dysphoric feelings, such as paranoia, envy and irritation, to interrogate states of blocked or suspended agency. By exploring the aesthetics of these non-cathartic emotions and the politically ambiguous work they perform, Ngai is able to draw up something like an affective taxonomy of late capitalism.[24] Lastly, Ann Cvetkovich focuses on one particular form of feeling stuck: depression. In her eponymous book, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, she draws on both memoir and academic essay to find ways of writing about depression as a socio-political condition that work as an alternative to its customary representation in medical terms.[25]

Insofar as these scholars examine contemporary configurations of power from the vantage point of everyday affective life, my project takes inspiration from their analyses. My interest lies in gauging the traction 'impasse' has both as a collective and personal marker in relation to the experience of life in contemporary neoliberal Euro-America. Where Cvetkovich singles out depression to make sense of this troubled and troubling landscape, the impasse is designed to capture a broader range of affects and discomposures. Like Ngai, I am interested in exploring a wider and more diffuse range of feelings for their political subtext. As the affective atmosphere of our political moment, the impasse does not give rise to one particular set of feelings, but is encountered differentially depending on people's socio-economic and historical location. While I do not draw a categorical distinction between affects and emotions or feelings and at points use them interchangeably, the language of affect prevails. I follow Ngai in this who treats the difference between affects and emotions as one of degree rather than kind.

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[23] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).
[24] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[25] Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

Affects, she suggests, are more diffuse and vaguer than emotions; they are, as she puts it, 'less narratively structured, in the sense of being less object- or goal-directed', and, as such, are 'better suited to interpreting ongoing states of affairs'.[26] At the same time, construing their difference as one of intensity suggests that affects may transition into emotions and vice versa. Lastly, Ahmed's notion of the stickiness of emotions resonates with my project's interest in the ways in which processes of change are complicated by the tenacity and lagging temporality of people's affective investments. Ahmed tracks how various emotions get 'stuck' to certain kinds of bodies and how this 'stickiness' might upend the temporality of cause and effect: in this manner, subjectivities, such as the 'unhappy queer', the 'melancholic migrant' and the 'feminist killjoy', are taken to be sources of bad feeling rather than expressions of broader social inequality and injustice. Like these scholars, I thus use affect as a means to track how subjects register and navigate unfolding socio-historical pressures, relations which are themselves normatively mediated.

2. Conceptualising the present: crisis, subjectivity and the politics of the event

Yet, the thinker who this thesis is most indebted to is Lauren Berlant. In her book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant deploys the problem/concept of the impasse to describe the way life under neoliberalism feels stuck in a suspended temporality. At the centre of Berlant's work, stands the normative fantasy of 'the good life' — her shorthand for a cluster of desires largely fuelled by a social-democratic imagination: 'upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy'.[27] The book is concerned with what happens when such an imaginary begins to erode together with the social infrastructures that once appeared to make it attainable, while nonetheless retaining a hold on people's sense of expectation and place in the world. Rising levels of economic and political insecurity that increasingly cut across social and geographical divisions have created an atmosphere of 'crisis ordinariness', Berlant argues, in which people's desires are required to subsist in an increasing and increasingly drastic disconnect from reality. The concept of the present as impasse thereby comes to serve as a kind of conceptual placeholder allowing Berlant to track the different ways in which such disturbances are adapted to and lived. Building on Berlant's reflections, I want to advance the problem/concept of the impasse as a way of invoking both the affective atmosphere of our

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[26] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 26f.
[27] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 3.

political present and its underlying socio-economic and ecological conditions.[28] Where Berlant employs the impasse to primarily sketch a socio-cultural landscape worn down by decades of neoliberal policies, it seems pertinent, as I have already suggested, to also read it in relation to climate change. Such an account would understand the impasse not just as a differential index of spreading material and social insecurity across Europe and North America, but also, importantly, as intimately linked to the increasing unsustainability of global modes of consumption and production. The (prospective) consequences of anthropogenic climate change leave us in a present seemingly devoid of a viable future.

In addition to this specific use, I also proffer the impasse as a formal term to denote the present as a period of halting transition; a time in which a sense of exitlessness prevails, in which happenings accumulate but without adding up to form-shifting events. Bringing out these different emphases—that is, understanding the impasse as a contemporary structure of feeling and as a temporal figure of troubled continuity—allows me to bring out the two types of politically engaged critical thought that my thesis is primarily responding to.[29] For the idea of the impasse is conceived as a counterpoint to two interrelated tendencies in political theory: one is the use of tropes of trauma and the state of exception to describe the crisis-shaped present; the other is an emphasis on rupture and radical discontinuity to think about political change.[30] In relation to the first, I argue that realities of intensifying structural inequalities often emerge in less dramatic ways than scholars drawn to limit events and experiences allow for. The political urgency of their writing tends to construe subjectivity in somewhat bifurcated terms of subjection and resistance. Insofar as the problem/concept of the impasse shuttles between the subjective and objective, pointing to both the affective atmosphere of the present and its underlying material conditions, it prompts an analysis that does not turn subjects into symptoms of power, but sees them as involved in navigating and adjusting to compromised and compromising conditions; in other words, subjects, in this analysis, retain a level of (however

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[28] The account of impasse proffered by Chad Shomura also takes Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* as its starting point, but brings it into dialogue with a different set of thinkers. Drawing on writers such as Jane Bennett, Kathleen Stewart and William Connolly, Shomura is interested in developing what could be called an ontology of the impasse. Informed by Deleuzian theories of vitality and becoming, Shomura advances a concept of the impasse attentive to the role of matter and materiality. My thesis, in contrast, is more interested in an approach that focuses on the affective experience of the present, understanding the impasse as the phenomenological condition of life in contemporary Euro-America. Rather than analysing the impasse in its ontological composition, then, I aim to trace how its presence is encountered in everyday life. Chad Shomura, *The Bad Good Life: On the Politics of Impasse* (Doctoral dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2016), available from ProQuest dissertation publishing (ProQuest No. 10302307).

[29] While it is analytically useful to make this distinction in order to bring out the different ambitions informing this thesis, both registers will often be at work simultaneously.

[30] I will discuss some of the most prominent examples in either tradition in the following two sections.

attenuated) agency without this necessarily or most of the time taking the form of resistance. Secondly, the impasse, I argue, acts as a critical tool that allows us to tarry with the slowness and difficulty of social transformation. In its privileging of the moment of rupture, evental theory tends to obscure the also important time before and after the event and to discount what is familiar, ambiguous or subtle about the event and how its impact might unsettle but not necessarily undo people's relation to the ordinary. The simultaneous frailty and persistence of traditional infrastructures for reproducing life, I argue, calls for a critical framework that in its attention to temporal experiences of ongoingness and duration supplements critical imaginaries bent on scenes of transgression and the immediate sense of change they entail. The impasse, in other words, asks us to think through the slowness of chronic time, rather than the time of rupture.

2.1 Giorgio Agamben on bare life, instrumental reason and inoperativity

As a specific category, the impasse stands in contrast to a type of scholarship that evokes the present in stark images of sovereign violence and abjection. Whether bare, creaturely or precarious life, the latter resorts to figures of trauma and emergency to render what it perceives to constitute the dominant categories of lived experience.[31] The work of Giorgio Agamben is exemplary in this regard. For Agamben, the contemporary political arena is marked by a thriving antinomianism that threatens to strip an ever-increasing number of people of their legal rights and protection, reducing them to what he calls 'bare life'.[32] Frequent invocations of national security and emergency, he argues, serve as governmental vehicles to create and then operate within states of exception. Deprived of the rights of citizenship, subjects caught in such states undergo a suspension of their status as subjects, as it were, finding themselves no longer protected by the law yet still exposed to its continuing force in the form of police or military violence – a fate, in Agamben's account, that virtually all of us share today. 'Bare life', for him, is something like the return of the repressed, an originary trauma, that comes to haunt politics in modernity.[33] While in ancient city-states the natural life of the citizen was excluded from

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[31] Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004).

[32] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*; cf. also *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[33] Eric Santner also employs trauma and the state of exception as central heuristics when thinking about the political present. Building on Agamben's reflections and extending their psychoanalytic resonances, Santner develops the notion of 'creaturely life' (mentioned above) to emphasize the psychic and physical turmoil that exposure to legal violence engenders. 'Creaturely life', Santner writes, marks a 'way of understanding how human

matters political, marking, in Agamben's parlance, the 'inclusive exclusion' by which the political realm demarcated itself, modernity, specifically the birth of modern nation-states, witnesses a direct inscription of man's natural life into the political order. As analysed in detail by Michel Foucault, the biological life of individuals and the population as a whole come to be of great concern to calculations of state power, for example, in the form of birth rates, life expectancy and productivity. People's 'natural life', in other words, becomes the principal political object, at once exposed to biopolitical concerns about health and productivity as well as to sovereign fiat. The discriminatory gaze of the nation-state thereby starts to draw and constantly re-draw the line, separating proper from improper, politically qualified life from a life devoid of political value.

In order to challenge this dire dynamic Agamben calls for a paradigmatic shift in our understanding of human life: only if we succeed in understanding, or better experiencing, our lives other than through substantive (often nationalistic) identity formations, which treat our lives as a set of manageable facts, as something that can be appropriated or governed (and sold off or destroyed), will we stand a chance to escape this appropriative logic and its instrumental treatment of our lives.[34] Human life, Agamben maintains, is something that unfolds in the absence of any teleology, something devoid of essential contours. Yet by hypostatising our existence into marketable identities or exclusive communities, the governing rationality, he argues, disavows this 'inoperativity' or purposelessness that is central to man. What is therefore needed is an intervention into, or interruption of, this ingrained labour of misrecognition. It is in the eponymous protagonist of Herman Melville's novella *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853) that Agamben finds an example of such an interruption. Combining an ambiguous radicality with a radical ambiguity, Bartleby's famous 'I-would-prefer-not-to', he argues, eludes the appropriative grasp of power, displaying instead the pure potentiality, the inoperativity central to man.

As an account attentive to the paradoxical democratic practice that sees legal rights suspended in the name of legal freedoms, Agamben's work is certainly important. It draws attention to the

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bodies and psyches register the "states of exception" that punctuate the "normal" run of social and political life.' The drawbacks I see Agamben's thought to hold, which I outline below, largely apply to Santner's work, too. Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life,* xix.

[34] While this argument informs all of Agamben's writing including and after *Means without End*, it is most clearly worked out in the final instalment of his 'Homo Sacer'-series, *The Use of Bodies*. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV, 2*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

ever-present threat of violence that underlies conventions of rights protection, pointing to the constitutive disavowals within liberal legal regimes. Yet his thinking remains confined to such scenes of traumatic suspension, on the one side, and their evasive sabotage (à la Bartleby), on the other. As such, it seems ill-equipped to grapple with the ordinary forces and structures that (dis)organize much of our lives in contemporary democratic/capitalist societies. Most of the time, people inhabit positions as subjects of such societies that are less forlorn than that of bare life; but neither are they Bartleby.[35] Unlike the latter, people do not prefer to perpetually withdraw from scenes of exhaustion, but find ways to stay attached to life. Agamben's account does not make room for such scenarios; his dramatic vocabulary is insensitive to the quotidian rhythms of hegemonic forces and the ways in which life becomes disorganized without being undone by its pressures.

Instead, with the state of exception as the 'hidden paradigm' of modern biopower and the fate of 'bare life' as the collective prospect of entire populations, his writing engenders a picture of the present in the key of catastrophe.[36] But is the state really the only source of power in contemporary capitalist democracies, as Agamben tends to suggest? And does an analysis of 'bare life' really disclose the hidden truth of our historical moment that, if ignored, will issue into a state of exception 'soon extend[ing] itself over the entire planet'?[37] As much as Agamben's concepts provide pertinent tools for analysing certain contemporary problems, such as policies of indefinite detention and other forms of legal violence, the univocal and unambiguous quality of his narrative threatens to undermine the salience and critical capacity of his work. To suggest, as Agamben does, that concentration camps are the 'new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet' does not only diminish the heterogeneous workings of power; it also does not describe well how people encounter the ordinariness of subordination and, importantly, how vulnerability is distributed differentially depending on people's socio-economic and historical location.[38] Bare life, on this account, appears as a rather homogenizing index. That is to say, while bare life might embody a potential dimension of contemporary politics as such, it does not enable us to understand why certain subjects are more likely to personify its actualisation than others. 'Bare life' as an interpretive tool, then, is as powerful as it is limiting. It brings to light familial relations between apparently disparate phenomena – but at the expense of their

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[35] At least, the Bartleby of Agamben's account. Below, I compare Agamben's with Sianne Ngai's reading of Melville's scrivener. The latter, as we will see, does not simply identify Bartleby's negativity with political radicality, but remains alive to the equivocal status of his obstinacy.
[36] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 123.
[37] Ibid., 27.
[38] Ibid., 175.

particularity. What is more, Agamben's monolithic account of power does not allow us to understand the different forces that partake in reproducing forms of collective life. By construing contemporary sociality as an arena of domination, it does not make room for the fact that people—with varying access to power (in both the private and public sphere)—play a role in upholding hegemonic forms of the social.

Rather than describing crisis-shaped subjectivity in terms of bare life, then, my thesis argues that it is more pertinent to heed the ways in which people register and negotiate unfolding pressures of the body politic and the ways in which they manage to nevertheless stay attached to its form despite its often taxing and hostile rhythms. The latter pushes us to attend to the fantasies and promises that anchor people's desires in modes of life that so often fail to be sustaining or sustainable, considering the non-rational at the heart of our social and political lives. Doing so allows us to better understand and reflect the intractability of hegemonic sociality and the slowness and complexity of meaningful transformation. Agamben's dramatic imaginary of emergency and crisis-exceptionality, in contrast, trades nuance for expressive simplicity, turning multifaceted and overdetermined realities into expressions of a singular logic. My thesis, in contrast, emphasizes the ambiguous and heterogenous character of the impasse, the way in which the aporetic conditions of contemporary life cannot be reduced to a single traumatic event, or even a protracted trauma. Traumatic experiences are one facet of the ordinary. My interest lies in an analysis of the present that is not so much focused on one type of event, but that is attentive to the different psychic and material pressures that compromise ordinary living, pressures that are ongoing and whose convergence, I argue, yield an atmosphere of impasse.[39] So rather than focusing on moments of emergency, I examine the ways in which conditions of increasing socio-economic and ecological precarity unsettle people's perception and expectation of the ordinary and engender a sense of the present as a time of troubled continuity. Each chapter thus enters the present from the perspective of impasse, and the thesis as a whole tracks the impasse from a variety of vantage points.

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[39] Emily Apter's *Unexceptional Politics* pursues a similar aim. She is interested in what she calls 'small-p politics' as a counter to the focus on the 'state of exception' embedded in theories of the political. By examining and advancing a vocabulary for the 'microphenomenology of political life' (4), *Unexceptional Politics* seeks ways of approaching the political in its 'messier, everyday guises' (13). In this context, Apter suggests that '*impasse* is perhaps the new watchword for the contemporary state of politics' (16). However, in the end, this watchword makes remarkably few appearances in her study and is not included in the index. While the impasse is thus surely one of her preoccupations, she treats it as a term whose meaning and scope are self-evident and do not require further examination. This thesis, in contrast, is interested in pursuing just such an examination. Emily Apter, *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse and the Impolitic* (London and New York: Verso, 2018).

The politically urgent and univocal quality of accounts like Agamben's runs the risk of distorting the analysis of subjectivity and agency, turning transgression and resistance into the only values by which a situation is assessed. Take, for example, Agamben's reading of Bartleby and compare it with Sianne Ngai's use of Melville's scrivener in her book *Ugly Feelings*. Agamben, as I indicated earlier, construes Bartleby as a figure of messianic suspension whose preference-not-to creates a zone of indistinction between affirmation and negation that eludes the appropriate grasp of power. Bartleby's deflection, in Agamben's reading, exhibits the absence of any factical vocation of the human, marking him out as a being 'of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust'.[40] Politics, in this context, unfolds as that which corresponds to man's essential inoperativity – a praxis that, instead of involving any historical tasks, lies in the ceaseless affirmation of pure indetermination. Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*, in contrast, does not construe Bartleby's suspension as emancipatory; instead, her analysis stays with the equivocality and ambivalence of the scrivener's unyielding passivity. His affective illegibility, she argues, can be read as part of an aesthetic repertoire of affective gaps and dysphoric feelings that signal states of suspended or blocked agency characteristic of capitalist societies. Indeed, Bartleby's 'powerful powerlessness', she suggests, can be read as an allegory of art's *own* relationship to political action.[41] An awareness of its social inefficaciousness makes the domain of the aesthetic—and, we may add, that of critique itself—a 'prime occasion for ugly feelings'.[42] While such non-cathartic feelings are incapable of resolving or alleviating the sense of social powerlessness, they help to interpret it, Ngai argues. So if Agamben's Bartleby shows a way out, Ngai's Bartleby is more modest, so to speak. Where Agamben writes from a position of self-assured authority that enlists Bartleby's negativity in the service of his political theory of inoperativity, Ngai inhabits a more uncertain position. She advances a mode of criticism that remains on the level of the descriptive and diagnostic, examining the often ugly but minor feelings evoked by conditions of attenuated agency. Such feelings may or may not provide the 'kernel' for change; they remain, she writes, citing Paolo Virno, 'open to radically conflicting developments'.[43] My thesis aligns itself with Ngai's approach. I want to practice a mode of criticism that remains alive to its own ambiguous status and that does not, in turn, seek to resolve the ambiguity it encounters in the objects/scenes it analyses. In respect of Bartleby, this would mean being in tune to the way in which his refusal may not only be read as a political strategy of sabotage, but may also signal what now goes by the name of depression; or it may

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[40] Agamben, *Means without End*, 141.
[41] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 2.
[42] Ibid., 3.
[43] Paolo Virno, 'The Ambivalence of Disenchantment', in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds. *Radical Thought in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), cited in Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 4.

be a coping strategy of sorts, his 'preference not to' constituting the only (paradoxical) way of keeping the viability of his appetite intact.[44] To unequivocally recuperate, as Agamben does, acts or modes of conduct whose negativity or passivity may, in fact, speak of constraint is to proffer an account of agency that in its emphasis on intentionality and efficacy is not far from the neoliberal subject of self-fashioning performativity. My thesis, in contrast, suggests that to counter normative notions of agency, we need to develop analyses of the social that do not always or even usually see subjects as involved in projects of (self-)transformation, including those of dissent.

In addition to its unambiguous and univocal quality that prevents us from seeing clearly the different forces bearing down on life, on a formal level, Agamben's prose seems carried by the belief that only a sensationalist rhetoric is able to garner attention, the belief that only the dramatic carries an efficacy of political impact. Its sweeping style does not afford to admit that critical accounts only ever partially clarify problems and that, whatever redemptive or reparative imaginary they provide, will appear as wishful thinking if it does not grapple with and reflect the slowness, uncertainty and complexity of processes that aim to reinvent idioms for the social. In contrast, in the stretched-out present of 'crisis ordinary', the ineloquence of the impasse decelerates acts of critical judgement. Unlike vocabularies of emergency, it makes room, in critical accounts, for hesitancy and ambivalence. Building on Berlant's reflections, I thus want to employ the impasse as a conceptual heuristic that not only claims descriptive purchase but that also, reflexively, elicits a mode of reading and writing that is willing to shed the confident stride of explanatory conviction in favour of a less assertive gait that reflects the lack of resolution in periods of political uncertainty. Agamben's writing, we might argue, evinces what Wendy Brown has theorized under the notion of 'left melancholy', a notion she borrows from Walter Benjamin, to describe the predicament the Left finds itself in when it refuses to acknowledge the loss of a sense of emancipatory promise, at the same time as it, rather paradoxically, holds onto forms of political analysis and practice that have become outdated. It is a structure of desire, in other words, built around the refusal to let go off a certain confidence—the confidence that is embodied, as Brown writes, in 'the promise that left analysis and left commitment would supply its adherents a clear and certain path toward the good, the right, and the true'.[45] Brown submits that a more self-critical approach is needed to rehabilitate the pertinence of left analyses. Without renouncing a commitment to social transformation,

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[44] For a reading that suggests the latter, cf. Adam Phillips, 'On Eating, and Preferring Not To', in *Promises, Promises: Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000): 282-295.
[45] Wendy Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', *Boundary 2*, 26, no. 3 (1999): 22.

then, my thesis seeks to follow Brown's advice, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging critical theory's own ambiguous status, the sense that its political leverage is unclear, attenuated in and by a present marred by enduring scenes of inequality and injustice.

2.2 Temporal diagnostics: rupture, contingency and social location

As a formal category, the compositional logic of the impasse approaches the present as a time of abeyance, a time in which a sense of frailty and persistence appear interwoven. By thus heeding the slowness and often protracted quality of social change, it aims to counter an aesthetics of rupture and discontinuity at work in many critical accounts—at work, for example, in political theories that centre on the 'event'. From Jean-François Lyotard to Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, from Hannah Arendt to Jacques Rancière, the event is often construed as an experience of radical contingency, a temporal marker of transformative potential. It is described in terms of shattering, rupture and negativity that allows something extraordinary or new to emerge—be it a right, sensibility, or political formation. In Badiou's dramatic rendition, for example, the event marks a form of momentous change, a radical rupture with the established order that demands 'fidelity' from subjects and harbours the potential for a scene of ethical sociality.[46] For Rancière, in turn, the event describes that moment in which a given order of perception, what he calls 'the distribution of the sensible', becomes newly indeterminate. Framed as a transformational scenario in which the coordinates of participation and possibility are reshuffled, the moment of 'dissensus' is at once the moment of political equality in which anyone and anything can count.[47] The time of the event, in other words, is a way of conceptualising the possibility of radical change. Further examples would include Slavoj Žižek's focus on a moment of singular ethico-political praxis—Antigone's suicide serves as one of his principal examples—in an attempt to secure the possibility of a complete refoundation of the social.[48] Or Ernesto Laclau's distinction between the 'social' and the 'political' where the former term encompasses the set of practices and conventions making up existing modes of governance, while the latter is reserved for moments of antagonism that have the potential to reorganize material (economic, institutional, legal) scenes of belonging. Either way, the political is conceived as a function of temporal rupture, a moment or event that interrupts the repetition of the everyday.

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[46] See, for instance, Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001).
[47] See, for instance, Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron, (London: Verso, 2006).
[48] See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek, 'From "Passionate Attachments" to Dis-Identification', *Umbr(a)* 1 (1998): 3-17.

This project shares an interest in such transformational possibilities. However, what is relatively neglected in accounts such as these is the way in which the interruptive quality of most events is more uncertain and forgettable than they suggest; for it unfolds amidst the noise of habituated activity and is easily absorbed by it. I argue that we need to develop a more nuanced account of the ways in which events may or may not amount to transformative experiences. In its attachment to moments of dislocation, evental theories are at risk of treating notions such as contingency and uncertainty as politically emancipatory regardless of their specific context. To stay with Laclau as our exemplary case: in his account, the dislocatory effects associated with contemporary capitalism translate into opportunities for radical politics. '[T]he *possibility* of a radical democracy', he argues, 'is directly linked to the level and extension of structural dislocations operating in contemporary capitalism.'[49] Dislocation, in other words, reveals contingency and as such is an opening up of possibility. It is this equation of contingency with emancipatory possibility that leads him to write: 'The recognition of our […] contingency, of the precarious and pragmatic construction of the universality of our values […] is the very condition for a democratic society.'[50] While I concur with the idea that democratic life can only unfold with and through a sense of the contestability of inherited social conventions and practices, I would challenge the general quality of Laclau's statement. To foreground contingency as a condition of possibility for political change is to discount its contextual specificity; it is to leave unquestioned in which contexts the recognition of contingency actually mobilizes the desire and capacity for change. When, for example, does a disturbance amount to a shift that does not simply reproduce life as it is? When is the encounter with contingency more than the customary reminder of the unequal distribution of precarity? What role does social location play in the way in which people experience uncertainty and the loss of assurance about their place in the world? And how might we extend critical currencies to help us reflect these questions? That is, how might we multiply or complicate the frames through which we process and understand forms of continuity and rupture? The problem/concept of the impasse in this project is an attempt at beginning to answer these questions. I do not seek to challenge the idea that for something new to emerge there has to be some form of break with the existing order. What I want to argue is that such accounts tend to obscure the also important time before and after the event and to discount what about the event is at the same time ordinary, forgettable or inconsequential. By reflecting on the non-event-like event of the impasse, I thus seek to

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[49] Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 45.
[50] Ibid., 83.

supplement theories that centre on the event in an attempt to acknowledge the uncertain and often minor quality of many occurrences without thereby turning the unfolding present into a uniform stretch of continuity.[51] For, crucially, the impasse, in my account, is not a synonym for stuckness, a space of time in which nothing happens. Instead, I want to suggest we understand impasses as heterogeneous spaces in which protracted cycles of adjustment and defence unfold alongside practices, however nascent and scattered, that attempt to reimagine what individual and collective flourishing ought to look like. Yet, such practices are not avenues *out of* the impasse but occurrences *within* it, disturbances that have not (yet) stabilized as form-shifting events. In its attachment to the latter, theory risks depoliticising anything that falls short of having such radical momentum. By devising a conceptual and associative scaffold around the notion of impasse, I aim to counter this tendency.

To the extent that evental theorists are interested in moments of rupture and discontinuity, their work has the tendency to focus on limit events and experiences when thinking about political subjectivity. In this respect, their work comes close to the conceptual imaginary at work in accounts of the political present that revolve around tropes of trauma. Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben constitute two of the most prominent examples in this context. Their accounts—as we have already seen in relation to Agamben—evince an almost exclusive and intransigent investment in moments of radical negativity or excess.[52] The affective landscape they delineate appears confined to experiences of trauma or abjection, on the one hand, and a kind of emancipatory *de*subjectivisation, in the form of jouissance (Žižek) or profane bliss (Agamben), on the other.[53] Attracted to moments of excess, this approach tends to equate intensity with significance and so often does not make enough room, in its account, for all those vaguer, more diffuse experiences and feelings that much of our lives consist of. That is, not enough attention is paid to the ordinary rhythms and (dis)composures of our lives. In her influential essay 'Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading', Eve Sedgwick makes a similar point when she writes: 'A disturbingly large amount of theory seems explicitly to undertake the proliferation of only one affect or maybe two, of whatever kind—whether ecstasy, sublimity, self-shattering,

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[51] I borrow the phrase 'non-event-like event' from Sianne Ngai who uses it in a discussion of Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*. Sianne Ngai, 'On Cruel Optimism', *Social Text online*, 15 January 2015, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/on-cruel-optimism/, accessed 3 March 2020.

[52] For a further example of this tendency, see Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen, eds., *Radical Democracy: Politics between Abundance and Lack* (Manchester: MUP, 2005). This edited collection assembles a wide variety of scholars who engage this limit aesthetics.

[53] See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek, 'Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence', in Slavoj Žižek, Eric Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 134-190, and Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

jouissance, suspicion, abjection, knowingness, horror, grim satisfaction, or righteous indignation.'[54] As a result, a whole variety of affects gets neglected, especially ones that lack the dramatic urgency and apparent significance of their 'louder' counterparts. What this thesis develops through the term impasse is thus partly meant as a corrective. By engaging a series of theoretical and literary texts in relation to the impasse, I seek to not only pay heed to a wider range of affects, but also to explore those subtler, less acute states of being and feeling that are relatively neglected by prevalent critical registers. For example, reading with Zadie Smith, Rachel Cusk and Ben Lerner, I focus on lingering atmospheres of suspension and drift, feelings of apprehension and uncertainty, of hesitancy, irresolution and ambivalence. These sensibilities, I hope to show over the course of this project, contribute, in their diagnostic nature, to devising more comprehensive accounts of contemporary subjectivity and agency and allow me to track the ways in which feelings of impasse are not simply private or idiosyncratic but circulate between singular personal stories and the impersonality of social structures. Making room for them in our critical accounts is thus of political significance.

3. A Note on Method

Crucially, I do not want to resort to one (meta-)theoretical paradigm in this examination of impasses. Critical accounts that understand particular predicaments as expressions of transhistorical, if not transcendental laws—to remain with Žižek and Agamben as our examples, reading phenomena through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis or Western metaphysics, respectively—illustrate what with Sedgwick we might call a 'strong theory': wide-ranging, yet reductive. That is, their extensive explanatory reach disregard what in a situation is singular, incommensurate, overdetermined; they, in other words, explain a lot and a little at the same time. While this project does not intend to simply discard the insights to be gained from such 'strong theories' and might itself make recourse to their paradigms where it appears instructive, I am more interested in attending to impasses in their overdetermination, to consider their messy, intractable quality. I take inspiration from Emily Apter in this respect, whose ambition in her book *Unexceptional Politics* is to promote 'a way of thinking concepts not just as freestanding, transhistorical monoliths, but as time-sensitive and site-specific units of language'.[55] My project thus unfolds as a series of reflections—discrete scenes that, each

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[54] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You' in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003): 146.
[55] Apter, *Unexceptional Politics*, 12.

time, think with and respond to a text, whether literary or theoretical—loosely strung together that neither claim to be necessarily compatible in their assembly nor exhaustive in their scope. The impasse, after all, is not a uniform thing, but a space of time that sends our attention in diverse and distinct directions.

In tracing the various facets and articulations of impasse, this thesis seeks to be patient with the moods and temporalities associated with it, not advancing too readily to recuperate them. Instead, I seek to tarry with experiences of drift and irresolution, with temporal forms of ongoingness and duration without immediately turning such states into transformative possibilities. I use the term 'tarrying' as it provides a useful link between my object of analysis and my approach to that object. As a discursive mode, 'tarrying' echoes the protracted time of the impasse. But more than just an inhibition, this thesis sees it as an active gesture of inquiry that allows me to slow down the transition from interpretative claim to political practice. For part of the effort is to recognize the place of constraint, both psychic and material, in the movement of everyday life, seeking to be sensitive to the way in which people are involved in navigating and adjusting to compromised and compromising conditions. I ask what it might mean to think through the slowness of chronic time, rather than the time of rupture, the feeling of 'within' rather than 'beyond'. At the same time, I also consider the impasse as a space of time that creates room for rethinking the terms and practices through which we organize our lives. I develop a conceptual scaffold around the impasse, then, with the aim of both better understanding the difficulty of change, but also of discerning what imaginative and political resources are opened up by naming the present as one marked by a sense of halting suspension. The movement created in doing so is not a movement forward so much as it is a looking around, a testing out of different directions, adopting various registers each one of which enters the scene of impasse with a certain patience that does not claim to know the 'way out', but that, instead, tarries with the difficulty of dishabituation and acknowledges the partial quality of its own assertions.

4. The Chapters

The theoretical and literary texts that provide the material for this thesis each hold some articulation of impasse. What the theoretical voices share and what has drawn me to them in the first place, is an approach attentive to the affective and material rhythms of everyday life that offers a thoughtful engagement with the troubled persistency of current modes of living

without abnegating their historicity and thus their contingent character. They prompt me to advance the impasse as a conceptual heuristic that circumscribes and analyses problems of psychic and structural discord from a variety of vantage points, including that of attachment, subjectivity, time and politics. These reflections take the form of monographs; as such, they tend to address the problem/concept of the impasse mainly on the level of argument.[56] The literary and (one) artistic articulations of impasse, in contrast, speak to experiences of impasse as much through their content as they do through their form. In so doing, they counterbalance the conceptual order and coherence that mark the theoretical accounts. The latter run the risk of converting the impasse into something other than itself by lending its confounding nature an all too certain quality. Instead of turning experiences of impasse into passageways for analytical transparency, the literary texts make palpable their weight and uncertainty. As aesthetically mediated scenarios, they evoke and engage a present of infrastructural brittleness. Formally, they share a lack of forward momentum. None of the narratives unfold as linear or developmental story lines. Instead, they all show a pronounced, if not uniform, attention to laterality as a mode of aesthetic mediation and address. This lateral orientation, as we will see, both serves as an index of spatial and temporal suspension that captures some of the contemporary uncertainty around inherited genres of both life and art, at the same time as it also harbours, at least in some of its articulations, a propitious orientation.

The following four chapters, then, each illuminate a related but distinct set of concerns in relation to the impasse. The first chapter begins to develop a conceptual register for the problem/concept of the impasse through a critical reading of Judith Butler's work. While my thesis ultimately seeks to advance a more contextually grounded understanding of this figure, Butler's work, I argue, nevertheless provides a useful starting point for reflecting on the broader questions of my thesis. For it at once provides an opportunity to further analyse the drawbacks of a fixation on the traumatic in critical discourses about the present, at the same time as her focus on the way in which attachments tether us to damaging forms of sociality allows me to address the slowness and difficulty of meaningful transformation. Chapter 2 looks at recent economic developments and their effects on our sense of subjectivity and experience of social belonging. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's work, I argue that tarrying with the drawn-out meanwhile of the impasse allows us to elaborate a more comprehensive vocabulary of life in capitalist/democratic societies. Chapter 3, in turn, explores the temporal qualities of the

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[56] Lauren Berlant's work might be seen as an exception to this; her writing arguably enacts a sense of exitlessness through the tone and pace of her sentences. Cf. Heather Love, 'What does Lauren Berlant Teach Us about X?' *Communications and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 4 (2012): 333f.

impasse, specifically in relation to the unsettling presence of climate change, and begins to address questions of response by examining the pertinence of different ethico-political imaginaries through a reading of Lisa Baraitser and Maggie Nelson's work. Chapter 4 uses the political thought of Bonnie Honig and the art of Mierle Laderman Ukeles to consider questions of repair and the complex task of developing more sustaining and sustainable infrastructures of sociality. Overall, this project's aim, then, is twofold: By approaching the predicaments sketched above through the conceptual heuristic of the impasse I hope to provide a constructive frame of analysis that can claim descriptive purchase, raise pertinent questions and offer circumspect, if tentative and incomplete, answers or terms of transition. Conversely, understanding the impasse through these referents, my ambition is to lend this perplexing yet analytically productive condition a place in the critical imagination.

Approaching Questions of Impasse: Stubborn Attachments, Precariousness, Irresolution

To begin thinking in more detail about impasses, the first chapter starts by approaching their experiential make-up as affective predicaments that call into question people's attachments to normative worlds. Insofar as these attachments have organized people's relation to themselves and others as well as to the social as such, they will not be discarded readily or without ambivalence. To start thinking about impasses thus means acknowledging the affective intelligence and lagging temporality of our attachments. This concern features prominently in Judith Butler's work. From *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) to *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), Butler's analysis examines the relation between forms of attachment, dependency and subordination. On her account, people grow up affectively beholden to a set of normative principles by which they come to understand themselves and the world around them. While their attachments to such frameworks may feel necessary, they are often both damaging (to others as well as to themselves) and contingent. This chapter tracks the different ways in which Butler engages this conundrum across her work. I argue that Butler's early account enables us to think a certain intractability at the heart of the subject's relation to normativity; the fact that people are somewhat prepared for or accustomed to the inequality of hegemonic forms of sociality insofar as their own desire and sense of self have been shaped by this very context.

Yet, in the end, these predicaments, I will argue, are not analysed in their specific texture and context so much as they are turned into paradigmatic instances that lead Butler to promote an

ethics of universal precariousness and grievability. An account of the impasse, in contrast, seeks to be both more ambivalent about the transparency and political trajectory of our emotional expressions and also less certain of its own conceptual aesthetic. That is, I want to advance the problem/concept of the impasse as a reflexive tool that makes room for the irresolution and ambivalence processes of change will naturally entail; the fact that people's fantasies form an affective cushion of continuity and coherence in their lives, not given up and replaced easily. The solution, in other words, is not so much to promote abstract idioms of acknowledgment, as Butler's account suggests, but to slow down the movement between diagnostic claim and emancipatory political practice. So while Butler's work allows us to begin thinking about the impasse, it does not, I argue, attend to and develop ways of representing the irresolution and ambivalence experiences of impasse will naturally entail.

Moving Sideways in the Impasse: Subjectivity, Crisis Ordinary, Lateral Aesthetics

Chapter 2 takes up and further complicates Chapter 1's initial reading of impasses by considering the role of socio-economic pressures. As a site of attenuated or obstructed agency, impasses raise questions about constraints. How do we think about subjectivity not just in relation to normative attachments, but also in relation to the temporality of the economy, that is, to cycles of work, consumption, and debt? What happens to personal/collective fantasies in times of lasting socio-economic and political brittleness? And how can we learn to register possible alternative openings from within these scenes of forced adjustment and adaptation? To answer these questions, Chapter 2 argues that we need to complicate how we think and talk about subjectivity and agency. Critical projects often invest in representations of subjects as involved in projects and/or strategies of subversion or resistance. At least invoking its possibility, their rhetorical drift is one of 'beyond'.[57] While sharing an interest in such commitments, I fear that we pay insufficient attention to, or misconstrue, types of activity that lack this directionality. In this attachment to the intentional subject, habits or compulsions can start to appear unduly expressive, taken as signs of resistance to or affirmation of something. This is not to say that they do not evince those aspects. Yet, we should not presume, either, that people are continually involved in practices of (self-)transformation and world-building.[58] By focusing on the staggering, roundabout movement of the impasse, I aim to shift the emphasis from the performative subject of subversive agency to an understanding of agency and

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[57] Cf. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, especially the Introduction.
[58] Cf. Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), see also Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, especially Chapter 3.

subjectivity in relation to moments or periods of drift, irresolution and hesitancy, but also of attentiveness and experimentation. These modes of comportment contribute to a more capacious understanding of subjectivities, one attentive to the rhythms and structures that (dis)organize modes of living in contemporary democratic/capitalist societies.

I begin to approach these issues through a discussion of Berlant's notion of 'lateral agency', before bringing the latter into dialogue with three novels, Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), Rachel Cusk's *Outline* (2014) and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014). The term lateral agency, as we will see, has a double valence in Berlant's work. It is at once a register for attenuated forms of agency in contemporary Euro-America, denoting modes of self-abeyance and -interruption that provide a temporary reprieve from an exhausting ordinary. At the same time, Berlant's language of laterality also gestures towards the possibility that such 'sideways drifting', at least in some of its variants, may not only be a reprieve from but also an interference with hegemonic rationalities. My discussion of the three novels allows me to both test out and supplement these ideas as well as to interrupt the theoretical abstraction that has governed my argument so far. If Berlant is largely interested in the figure of the cruel optimist, emphasising the attachments that continue to exert a holding power over us, Smith, Cusk and Lerner each offer further ways in which the pressures and demands of contemporary life are adapted to and lived. Together, then, these writers allow us to understand the impasse as a predicament that elicits a variety of responses that vary depending on people's social location: from the affective (dis)composures exemplified by Smith and Cusk's protagonists to the propitious sense of ambient contingency in Lerner's *10:04*. What, in the end, unites these disparate scenes, forming a recurrent theme throughout, is the sense of the increasingly brittle state of the material and fantasmatic infrastructures holding current forms of the social together.

On Time and Narrative in the Impasse

Chapter 3 raises questions about the temporal qualities of the impasse. The impasse, I suggest, marks a time of troubled continuity, a time in which customary frames of expectation and futurity are fraying. As the future becomes destabilized through a mounting sense of socio-economic and ecological precarity, the present impresses itself on consciousness as a time of halting transition. This chapter is interested in tracing the affective and temporal valences of this moment and in asking what possible responses might look like. If the first two chapters are primarily concerned with examining the composition and different manifestations of the

impasse, Chapter 3 builds on these reflections, but also invokes an ethical register, reflecting on what it might mean to consciously inhabit the time of the impasse. To do so, I turn to Baraitser's *Enduring Time* and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, one a monograph, the other a memoir. Both works, I argue, allow us to be reflexive about the contemporary moment and contribute to the terms and fantasies available through which we understand and (re)negotiate better forms for the social. Instead of appealing to critical registers of rupture and transgression, their writing suggests that it is the experience of living in and through the present-as-impasse itself, that can (paradoxically) teach us something about change. With Baraitser we will see that staying attuned to temporal forms of suspension pushes us to think about care and that to think about care is to think about a form of work *on* the social that is not reducible to acts of mere reproduction. Like Baraitser's vocabulary of endurance, Nelson's reflections invoke care and its temporality of persistence. I argue that these valences are of timely significance; for they come at a moment in which the simultaneous frailty and persistence of affective and material infrastructures calls for a conceptual framework that in its attention to temporal experiences of ongoingness and duration supplements critical imaginaries bent on scenes of transgression and the sense of change they entail. Rather than appealing to ideas of radical transformation or envisioning alternative temporal imaginaries, both Baraitser and Nelson remain immersed in the present. In doing so, they reclaim the time of the chronic and the pedagogy of ambivalence for thinking about processes of social transformation.

From Adjustment to Contestation: Public Things and the Art of Maintenance

Finally, I explore the question of what it is people may become attached to and gather around in the halting transition of the impasse. For the task for makers of critical political form is not simply to expose, reveal or demystify the costliness of existing modes of life as if all that is needed are more or new information or facts. Part of my argument, after all, concerns the obduracy of our visceral attachments to organizing narratives or fantasies—affective anchoring points that are not replaced simply by evidence of their malfunctioning. While gathering knowledge and offering judgement are thus surely part of the endeavour, we also need practices that help us to rethink what a good life might be, that act as goads to reimagine notions of value and well-being.

I turn to Bonnie Honig's theory of 'public things' and Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 'maintenance art' to think about these concerns. At stake, for both Honig and Ukeles, are questions about

attachment, repair, democratic collectivity and equality in times of crisis ordinariness. After decades of neoliberal deregulation and privatization, invoking vocabularies of public things and their maintenance may seem anachronistic, an appeal to a bygone era. Possibly. We may equally hold, however, that calling such practices anachronistic is to *prematurely* give up on the democratic project of public things as a set of historical accomplishments as well as still ongoing struggles asking to be extended further. Reading Ukeles's work together with Honig's account, I will argue, persuasively brings this out. For their work points to the importance of sustaining and renewing worldly points of anchorage without which political life is at risk of going astray. What is more, they show that it is not only public things that require care; importantly, it is also the angry impulse in the face of their decimation that is in need of renewal and maintenance. Such anger forms part of any repertoire of resilience, a political posture that does not give in to despair or indifference, but that holds onto the possibility of more democratic formations. In the extended meanwhile of the impasse, this is a difficult stance to maintain; but it is a stance that keeps alive a trace of the desire to reimagine the common world collaboratively.

On Attachment, Precariousness and Style: The Limits of Judith Butler's Ethical Solicitations

> We live out deep visceral attachment to the organizing fictions we inherit by which we make sense of the world to define justice, conceive futurity, mobilize action. In certain moments we may know the inchoate ways that our frame of reference is no longer credible, but we lack politically salient ways to acknowledge what we know and we cannot conceive of the possibility of living otherwise.
> — George Shulman

As set out in the Introduction, the impasse is not a punctual event in time. Rather, it is a condition drawn out across different locales and episodes; a condition defined by a sense of 'exitlessness', a formal figure of halting transit: one cannot simply take a *pass* to get somewhere or resolve something. Instead, impasses require us to tarry with the suspension and delay they connote. To begin thinking in more detail about these distended rhythms this chapter approaches their composition as affective predicaments that arise when people's attachments to normative fantasies are damaging and/or threatened. Insofar as these attachments have structured people's sense of reciprocity with the world, their relation to themselves and others as well as to the social as such, they will not be abandoned easily or without ambivalence. That is to say, even people for whom the world is not an accommodating place and who have an interest in or commitment to living otherwise will not only feel excited by the prospect of discontinuity and change but also ambivalent and apprehensive about it. As such, impasses pose predicaments that go beyond conflicting interests and irresolute contentions—they do not await argumentative solution but threaten to unsettle people's relation to the ordinary, to a sense of world they have organized their affective compass around.

To start thinking about impasses thus means attending to the affective intelligence and lagging temporality of people's attachments. This concern features prominently in Judith Butler's work. From *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) to her most recent book *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), Butler's analysis examines the role of social attachments in relation to structures of inequality and the normative fantasies that mobilize them. While my thesis ultimately seeks to advance a more contextually grounded notion of the impasse—proffering the impasse as a way of invoking both the affective atmosphere of our political present and its underlying socio-economic and ecological conditions—Butler's work nevertheless provides a useful starting

point for reflecting on the broader questions of my thesis. For it at once provides an opportunity to further analyse the drawbacks of a fixation on the traumatic in critical discourse about the present, at the same time as it allows me to begin developing a conceptual register around the notion of the impasse. That is, while her writing circles around tropes of trauma and melancholy when thinking about political subjectivity, her focus on the way in which attachments tether us to damaging forms of sociality is nevertheless a useful entry point to start theorizing the impasse as a problem/concept that reflects the slowness and complexity of social transformation.

On Butler's account, people grow up affectively beholden to a world, whether the latter threatens well-being or, instead, provides an ostensibly neutral or facilitating environment to flourish in. The world, in other words, and the normative fantasies that keep it afloat are *in* us, so to speak, shaping our affective ties and sensibilities. This chapter tracks the different ways in which Butler engages these questions across her work. I argue that Butler's early account that depicts the heterosexual subject as a gender melancholic has a polemical force. It affords a way of conceiving a certain intractability at the heart of the subject's affective relation to normativity. However, insofar as melancholia comes to function as an inaugurating trope for *all* subjectivity, and not just as a depiction of (rigid) heterosexual identity, the incisive power behind Butler's account appears compromised. Her later work on precarious and ungrievable life reveals a continued investment in melancholia as a heuristic key, while also reflecting a shift in her thought on the political valences of grief and loss. A politics of subversion gives way to an ethics of compassionate emotion. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's account, I argue that Butler reads hegemonic life-worlds too narrowly as sites of subordination. Rather than construing attachments to normative fantasies as only punitive and constraining, they may also be seen as an expression of a desire for social belonging.

Subsequently, I address the abstract and at times sentimental propensity of Butler's work. As concerned as her work might be with providing critical purchase on realities mired in social inequalities, the predicaments that form the focus of her writing, I argue, are not analysed in their specific texture and context so much as they are turned into paradigmatic instances that signal an ethics of universal precariousness and grievability. The preponderance of tropes of trauma and loss, moreover, further compromises her account by narrowing the range of phenomena her criticism is sensitive to. In this respect, Butler's writing, I suggest, shares traits with accounts, such as that of Giorgio Agamben, whose thought I outlined in the Introduction. The tendency, evident in both Agamben and Butler's work, is an intransigent investment in

limit events or situations. Time and again, their accounts turn on the ways in which discursive practices produce an abject remainder, a traumatic remnant that attests to the violence at work in representational regimes at the same time as it signals a certain gap or excess that may come to haunt and thus unsettle the political sphere. The political urgency of their accounts thereby tends to construe subjectivity in somewhat bifurcated terms of subjection and resistance that do not make room for middle ranges of agency. Instead, their criticism invokes abstract idioms of acknowledgment—in Agamben's case, the political remedy lies in learning to acknowledge the inoperativity that is at the heart of human life, and in Butler's case, it means affirming life's essential vulnerability and interdependency.

An account of the impasse, on the other hand—as an account more attentive to the slowness and difficulty of social transformation—refrains from sketching alternative ontologies of putative emancipatory impact. Instead, it aims to make room in its conceptual architecture for the irresolution and ambivalence processes of change will naturally evoke; the fact that most people find themselves ambivalently attached to a world that is also wearing them down and that the prospect of change may not only be exhilarating, but also frightening. Unlike Butler's unifying projection of precarity (or, for that matter, Agamben's inoperativity), the perspective I adopt is thus more tentative. It tarries with the conflicting rhythms of impasse, as I outlined in the Introduction, seeking to pay greater attention to the persistency of psychic and structural discord that gets bypassed in the attempt to articulate collective imaginaries of emancipation. The solution, in other words, is not so much to promote decontextualized ideas of acknowledgment but to slow down the movement between interpretation and political practice. So while Butler's work allows us to begin thinking about the impasse, it does not, I argue, attend to and develop ways of representing the irresolution and uncertainty experiences of impasse will likely entail. I find resources for this in Berlant's writing (something I explore in more detail in Chapter 2). But for now, let me turn to Butler.

1.1 Judith Butler's melancholy subjects

Of Judith Butler's work, *The Psychic Life of Power* offers the most sustained engagement with questions surrounding the subject's affective attachment to normativity. The book takes as its starting point the paradoxical equivocation that marks the notion of the subject. At once evoking agency and subordination, the subject troubles any clear binary between emancipatory potential and structural determination. 'Subjection', Butler writes, consists in a 'fundamental

dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency.'[59] Discourse, then, assumes a curious double valence, at once subordinating and productive—we might say, productive in its very subordination. It is this dynamic that Butler explores in her book. The subject, for her, emerges through a figure of turning. It is desire doubled back upon itself; a movement of recoil inaugurating the reflexivity constitutive of the subject. But this is to get ahead of ourselves. Butler's account starts from what she calls the child's 'passionate attachments'[60] to his or her environment, to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent. While Butler makes sure to not simply equate the child's dependency with political subordination, she accords the former a central role when thinking about the latter. The child's formation in dependency is seen as both condition of and analogy for the political subject who arises affectively bound to a normative, possibly punitive culture. No one, in this account, emerges without being affectively beholden to those/that on whom/which one depends in order to survive. Passionate attachments form the very means through which subjection takes place. Better to attach to something, so to speak, even if that something is negative, than to attach to nothing at all. 'To desire the conditions of one's own subordination', Butler writes, 'is […] required to persist as oneself [such that we] embrace the very form of power—regulation, prohibition, suppression—that threatens one with dissolution in an effort, precisely, to persist in one's own existence'.[61] Curiously, the initial scene of dependency turns here into a scene of subordination, an attachment to something *potentially* or *partially* punitive becomes an attachment to punishment itself. This tendency to enmesh different phenomena coupled with a somewhat overly severe language set the tone for the work as a whole—something I will come back to shortly.

For now, I want to stay with Butler's claim that we come to desire our own subjection. Our fundamental dependency, our reliance on powers radically not of our own making leads Butler to ask how we should imagine the process of political subject formation, the very process through which we come to claim agency and autonomy. Hegel, Nietzsche, as well as Freud aid her answer to this question. All three, in Butler's reading, engage a trope of a body in recoil to trace a movement of a force, be it desire or the will, turning against itself, producing a reflexivity that over time consolidates as conscience. Crucially to Butler's narrative, this movement, in turn, creates another order of desire: the desire for that very reflexivity itself. Taking her cue from Freud, Butler reads acts of conscience as the displaced site of satisfaction for a desire met

[59] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: SUP, 1997), 2.
[60] Ibid., 7.
[61] Ibid., 9.

by prohibition. '[L]ibido is not absolutely negated through repression,' Butler writes, 'but rather becomes the instrument of its own subjection.'[62] That is, the subject not only becomes an object for itself as the effect of a recurrent self-beratement, it also ends up finding pleasure in this very movement. Subjection, in other words, is both the consequence of thwarted libidinal gratification, and the site of its displaced satisfaction. Just as, according to Butler, the adult's desire for autonomy is based on partially disavowing his or her earliest, uncritical forms of attachment in dependency, the political subject only emerges against the backdrop of a desire in recoil.[63]

How are we to understand this recoiling desire? What are the means by which it can be said to turn back on itself? In asking these questions, Butler traces the valences of reflexivity for their latent political connotation, seeking to understand how acts of self-reproach might be bound up with mechanisms of social regulation. Foreclosure, this most elusive of prohibitions, provides the analytic lever in Butler's analysis, prompting her to rethink the process of gender formation. By circumscribing acceptable forms of sociality, foreclosed desire, for Butler, pre-empts the possibility of homosexual love. It produces, she writes, 'a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss'.[64] The gendered subject, in this provocative and deliberately hyperbolic account[65], is formed on the basis of the double disavowal of a never-having-loved and never-having-lost someone of the same gender. Gender thus becomes one of melancholy's effects if we understand the latter as a site of unresolved grief. Butler finds support for this reading in Freud's *The Ego and the Id* where what he calls the 'character of the ego' appears as the sedimented trace of objects loved and lost.[66] Unlike his account of mourning in the earlier essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' that assumes that grief can be resolved through libidinal substitution, *The Ego and the Id* advances the idea that melancholic identification may be a *precondition* for letting the object go. That is, attachments are not broken and, subsequently, new ones formed. Rather, attachments are internalized *as* identifications. Identifications resulting from unfinished grief thereby provide the way through which the lost object is psychically preserved in and as part of the ego. Homosexual desire is thus not abolished; instead, it is preserved and reasserted yet only in the form of its renunciation. The

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[62] Ibid., 79.
[63] See Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 8ff.; see also Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 26f.
[64] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 135.
[65] Cf. ibid., 136.
[66] Cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), Vol 19, 28f.

prohibition on homosexuality therefore effectively works to turn homosexual desire back upon itself, prompting the emergence of a melancholic superego. Disavowed desire, in other words, finds its displaced site of satisfaction in scenes of heightened conscience and self-reproach, binding psychic life into scenes of melancholic ambivalence. Indeed, melancholy, for Butler—especially in the last chapter of her book—comes to mark the limit constitutive of *all* subjectivity. An 'archaeological remainder […] of unresolved grief',[67] the ego emerges in a melancholic turn that institutes it as a substitute for the lost object. Our very ability to picture the psyche as a mental landscape, according to Butler, is itself an effect of melancholic ambivalence. By reading melancholy not as an effect but as the cause of the super-ego in its distinction from the ego, Butler reverses explanatory expectations. It is only on condition of ungrieved loss that the psyche first becomes interiorized. 'Melancholia produces a set of spatializing tropes for psychic life, domiciles of preservation and shelter as well as arenas for struggle and persecution. Such tropes do not "explain" melancholia: they constitute some of its fabular discursive effects.'[68] Reflexivity, in other words, most emblematically in the form of self-reproach, is a reaction formation against a wounded desire.

Butler stresses that the reproaches the subject levels against itself must not be understood as simply a mental theatre of mimesis, that is, the emulation of acts of judgement and prohibition perceived in social life and then re-staged internally. This mimetic process would presuppose a preformed subject who subsequently internalizes a set of norms and laws by mirroring its social environment. Given that the subject, in Butler's reading, only emerges in and as a melancholy effect, it is, rather, in the circumscription of forms of sociality and hence in the regulation of what losses may or may not be grieved that power surfaces. 'A loss in the world that cannot be declared enrages, generates ambivalence, and becomes the loss "in" the ego that is nameless, diffuse and that prompts public rituals of self-beratement.'[69] Contained within the foreclosure of grief, the latent social text works its powers of indirection, revealing the melancholic self-reproach to be at once a psychic and social instrument. As Butler writes:

> Social power vanishes, becoming the object lost; or social power makes vanish, effecting a mandatory set of losses. Thus, it effects a melancholia that reproduces power as the psychic voice of judgement addressed to (turned upon) oneself, thus modelling reflexivity on subjection.[70]

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[67] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 133.
[68] Ibid., 171.
[69] Ibid., 185.
[70] Ibid., 198.

Social regulations thereby exploit our desire for desire, so to speak, our desire to be something rather than nothing at all. Being at once renounced and preserved in and as this very renunciation, desire lives on as a form of negative narcissism. Conscience, in other words, comes to be the stabilized posture of a narcissistically nourished self-reproach. At the same time, Butler insists on the possibility of personal and social transformation. 'The subject', she writes, 'is compelled to repeat the norms by which it is produced, but that repetition establishes a domain of risk, for if one fails to reinstate the norm "in the right way", one becomes subject to further sanctions.' But, Butler asks: 'without a repetition that risks life—in its current organization—how might we begin to imagine the contingency of that organization, and performatively reconfigure the contours of the conditions of life?'[71] The norm's existence in time, in other words, opens it up to the possibility of resignification and subversion. For repetitions are imperfect and such imperfections may generate new and liberating possibilities.

Before turning to Butler's more recent work, let us pause for a moment to take stock. I would argue that to the extent that *The Psychic Life of Power* brings out the critical importance of attachments for understanding subjectivity it enables us to think a certain intractability at the heart of the subject's relation to normativity—a perspective that usefully complicates (without discounting) Butler's own insistence on the possibility of normative resignification. That is, people are somewhat prepared for or accustomed to the inequality of hegemonic forms of sociality insofar as their own desire and sense of self have been shaped by this very context. Whether they have provided an enabling or threatening set of conditions, normative life-worlds are *in* us, so to speak, shaping our affective ties and sensibilities. As a (hyperbolic) story about gender formation, moreover, Butler's melancholic subject has a polemical force. It suggests that rigid forms of gender and sexual identity are somewhat closest to the 'other' they are so keen to differentiate themselves from.[72] Yet insofar as melancholy comes to function as an inaugurating trope for *all* subjectivity, and not just as a depiction of rigid heterosexual identity, the incisive power behind Butler's account appears compromised. The story of the emergence and unfolding of subjectivities seems to invariably unfold as a drama of (primary) loss, relived in acts of psychic suffering and traumatic repetition. As Dominick LaCapra aptly remarks: 'This account would seem to be in some sense yet another secular displacement of the fall or original

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[71] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 28f.
[72] As Butler writes: 'The straight man *becomes* (mimes, cites, appropriates, assumes the status of) the man he "never" loved and "never" grieved; the straight woman *becomes* the woman she "never" loved and "never" grieved' (147).

sin […] [postulating] a constitutive or originary loss (of social power or homosexual desire) as an unexamined presupposition.'[73] Instead, melancholy should be seen as one of various forms of subjectivity. Even if it was granted a privileged role, this assertion would have to be interrogated in historical terms rather than from the universalistic perspective from which Butler explores the question. As such, her analysis threatens to lose its critical force, turning concrete losses into a sequence of instances of an ineluctable melancholia that is construed as the wounded core of subjectivity. Besides, while it is surely important to recognize the constitutive influence social power has in the formation of the subject, Butler's account appears to lack conceptual rigour and nuance. Its one-sided depiction of the super-ego, for example, does not allow us to distinguish between a regular sense of guilt and the endless self-beratement of a melancholic superego. In Butler's account, conscience *necessarily* takes the form of a cruel agency of control and regulation. Yet, as McIvor notes, Freud himself identified two distinct articulations of the superego. While the latter can develop into a persecutory voice of prohibition, its regular development offers prohibitions alongside enticements that help to steer the child's libido away from the parental dyad and into constructive love relationships.[74] Yet Butler's investment in melancholy that reads all subjective life as predicated on a disavowed loss does not make room for this distinction. In a similar vein, she takes the fact of the subject's dependency, as I already noted earlier, not only as a condition that *may* be exploited, but as something inevitably oppressive. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

> no subject emerges without a passionate attachment to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent […]. Although the dependency of the child is not *political* subordination in any usual sense, the formation of primary passion in dependency renders the child vulnerable to subordination and exploitation […]. Moreover, this situation of primary dependency conditions the political formation and regulation of subjects and becomes the means of their subjection. If there is no formation of the subject without a passionate attachment to those by whom he or she is subordinated, then subordination proves central to the becoming of the subject.[75]

Note how Butler in this passage slides from a vulnerability to subordination that is inherent to situations of dependency to subordination itself. An attachment to something *potentially* or *partially* punitive becomes an attachment to punishment itself. While it makes sense to argue that the fact of our primary dependency renders us susceptible to manipulation and abuse, it does not follow that subjectivation is always subordinating. Butler, however, construes the

[73] Dominick LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 719.
[74] David McIvor, 'Bringing Ourselves to Grief: Judith Butler and The Politics of Mourning', *Political Theory* 40, no. 4 (2012): 413ff.
[75] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 7.

context for the emergence of the subject as necessarily oppressive. '[W]ithin subjection', she writes, 'the price of existence is subordination.'[76] Or again: '[S]ubjection is the paradoxical effect of a regime of power in which the very "conditions of existence," the possibility of continuing as a recognizable social being, requires the formation and maintenance of the subject in subordination.'[77] This rather stern picture is corroborated by the liberal use of terminology that characterizes *The Psychic Life of Power*: dependency does not only slide into subordination; juridical power, norms and other regulatory mechanisms are also all treated somewhat interchangeably as means of domination[78]—a concern we will return to when considering Lauren Berlant's criticism of Butler's account. Indeed, Butler herself has come to question her previous account of subjection for its overly punitive character.[79] As we will see, her more recent work on precarious and ungrievable life reflects this reservation.

1.2 'Loss has made a tenuous "we" of us all'

Precarious Life (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009) continue to engage questions of affect and attachment in relation to structures of inequality and the normative fantasies that mobilize them. Both books are written against the backdrop of a post-09/11 political landscape with a US government instituting heightened levels of biopolitical control domestically and militaristic interventions abroad. At first glance, this historical frame might be seen to somewhat redress the decontextualized, universalizing quality of *The Psychic Life of Power*. Yet, it soon becomes evident that these reflections evince a similar (if not more pronounced) tone of abstraction. Butler uses the historical reality of US-American attempts that seek to secure a position and image of invulnerability as an occasion to reflect on the multiple valences of vulnerability, or what she synonymously calls life's 'precariousness'. She underscores the ambivalent nature of vulnerability, countering a predominantly negative understanding of it. Vulnerability, she remarks, is not reducible to injurability.[80] Our openness to one another is the condition for both our desirous as well as our harmful relations. 'Each of us', Butler writes, 'is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed.'[81] Accentuating its

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[76] Ibid., 20.
[77] Ibid., 27.
[78] That is, depending on her imaginary interlocutor (be it Althusser, Foucault, Freud or Nietzsche), her vocabulary shifts; yet, the (punitive) message remains the same.
[79] Cf. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 15.
[80] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 34, 61.
[81] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

inevitably shared character, Butler construes vulnerability, moreover, as a spectrum on which we all take up different positions at different points in time. This understanding, Butler contends, may help alter the frame through which we think our interdependency and beholdenness to one another. 'Precarity', she writes, 'cuts across identity categories as well as multicultural maps, thus forming the basis for an alliance focused on opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit and distribute precarity for the purposes of profit and territorial defense.'[82] These reflections on precariousness are closely interwoven with Butler's use of 'grievability' as a critical frame of analysis. Grievability, she argues, or, rather, its differential distribution within and across populations, affects the way in which we react to injury and loss. Whether we feel anger and horror or indifference if not righteous sadism is conditioned (without being determined) by the, for example, nationalist frames that craft our perceptual reality. Our affective habits and responses, in other words, carry within them certain acts of interpretation and judgement. As a conceptual heuristic then, grievability seeks to draw attention to the differential power of norms and the ways in which the latter mediate our affective and moral responsiveness. Crucially, it also points to the material effects this perceptual bias has: those whose lives fail to be regarded as potentially 'grievable', and thus valuable, are disproportionately exposed to forces of disenfranchisement, detention, surveillance or termination.[83]

As much as this analysis unfolds against a different background and introduces a different set of terms, the central question at stake is still how to understand people's affective attachment to normative life-worlds and imaginaries. It is a question, in other words, that attends to the non-rational at the heart of our socio-political lives. In Butler's case, answering this means engaging tropes of disavowal and melancholy. Take, for instance, the adult subject who, her earlier writing argued, emerges only on condition of partially denying its dependency on and uncritical forms of attachment to its primary others. She or he achieves a sense of autonomy,

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[82] Butler, *Frames of War*, 32. She distinguishes between precariousness to describe the generalized condition of life and precarity to designate politically induced vulnerabilities. Yet, her reflections leave undertheorized the relationship between and the ways in which to distinguish various kinds of vulnerability. Ultimately, it is the abstract logic of universal precariousness that governs most of her reflections. Furthermore, when we mistreat the most vulnerable is this primarily out of a failure to acknowledge our shared precariousness? Or do we support or, at least, turn a blind eye to unjust practices and conditions because of our own investment in structures of power and material benefits? In other words, the issue is not simply, or primarily, the disavowal of the extra-political fact of our own finitude but also, crucially, the various and variously conflicting attachments to questions of (self-)continuity and change. See below for a more detailed analysis. For related critiques, cf. George Shulman, 'Acknowledgment and Disavowal as An Idiom for Theorizing Politics', *Theory and Event* 14, no. 1 (2011); Alyson Cole, 'All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique', *Critical Horizons* 17, no. 2 (2016): 260-277.
[83] Cf. Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

on this account, only against the backdrop of a disavowal. *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* echo these ideas. In their analyses of normative fantasies of (defensive) sovereignty, they, too, invoke repudiations of interdependency and vulnerability as interpretative keys. Here is a version of the argument: 'The task', Butler writes in *Precarious Life*, 'is doubtless to think through this primary impressionability and vulnerability with a theory of power and recognition.'

> The 'I' cannot come into being without a 'you'. What is prematurely, or belatedly, called the 'I' is, at the outset, enthralled, even if it is to a violence, an abandonment, a mechanism; doubtless it seems better at that point to be enthralled with what is impoverished or abusive than not to be enthralled at all and so to lose the condition of one's own being and becoming. […] So the question of primary support for primary vulnerability is an ethical one for the infant and for the child. But there are broader ethical consequences from this situation, ones that pertain not only to the adult world but to the sphere of politics and its implicit ethical dimension.[84]

Butler, in other words, is interested in tracing different ethico-political trajectories from within a psychoanalytically informed account of dependency. Acknowledgement of one's primary dependency and vulnerability, she suggests, might form the basis for a progressive, non-violent political alliance. 'This way of imagining community', she writes, 'affirms relationality not only as a descriptive or historical fact of our formation, but also as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence.'[85] The repudiation of this interdependence, on the other hand, fuels fantasies of self-sufficient sovereignty.[86] The other central heuristic Butler enlists to explore affects and their relation to normativity is the notion of foreclosed mourning. The love that was rendered abject in Butler's account of the formation of the gendered subject resurfaces in her more recent work in the form of lives deemed ungrievable by the nation-state. 'I am as much constituted by those I do grieve for', she writes in *Precarious Life*, 'as those whose deaths I disavow, whose nameless and faceless deaths form the melancholic background for my social world.'[87] The gender melancholic of her previous account thus reappears here in the form of a melancholic national subject. Each time, melancholy is the mode of attachment that comes to both haunt and hold together public worlds of belonging.[88]

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[84] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 45f.
[85] Ibid., 27.
[86] Ibid., 29, 41.
[87] Ibid., 46.
[88] Butler's account here resonates with Sara Ahmed's notion of 'melancholic universalism'. Universalism, for both Butler and Ahmed, necessarily takes particular shape, which means that ideas, such as the nation or citizen, are not inclusive categories, only narrowed in exceptional circumstances or times, but are defined by constitutive foreclosures. Social recognition, in other words, comes at a cost—a cost that, in Butler and Ahmed's account, does

1.3 Attachments, Precariousness, Sentimentality

As a story about attachments and their work as affective anchors in people's lives, Butler's reflections come under attack by Lauren Berlant. Berlant takes issue with the developmental element of Butler's account. By depicting the subject's desire for autonomy and sovereignty as a reaction formation, a response, that is, to having been tricked as infants into uncritical love relations, Butler reads normativity too narrowly, Berlant argues, equating 'infantile dependency with normative attachments and normative attachments with attachments to power and privilege'.[89] Berlant, in response, sketches a subtler picture of infantile attachment and desire, arguing that rather than being attached to subordinated dependency as such, the child becomes beholden to a scene where she or he 'negotiates an overdetermined set of promises and potentials for recognition and even thriving. It is more like an environment where the subject is trained to cathect with optimism, a relational affect whose practices and objects are themselves normatively mediated'.[90] Attachments to normative fantasies, in consequence, must not be understood as a kind of sadism, an enjoyment of authoritarian pleasure that compensates for a wounded narcissism, but as a desire to stay close to the promises and potentials engendered by those fantasies and the scenes of unconflictedness and self-continuity they entail. 'The hegemonic is, after all, not merely domination dressed more becomingly—it is a metastructure of consent', Berlant writes. 'To see hegemony as domination and subordination is to disavow how much of dependable life relies on the sheerly optimistic formalism of attachment.'[91] Butler, rather too glibly, derives a scene of social inequality and our problematical affective investments therein from infantile dependency and attachment. Berlant, in contrast, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter, is interested in understanding our attachments as

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not only affect those whose lives do not easily fit the terms and conditions that underwrite hegemonic sociality and who have to give up part of who they are in order to approximate normative expectations, but also those whose sense of self and world more readily matches social conventions. As Ahmed writes: 'Melancholic universalism [does] not just or only [describe] the affective state of those who are required to identify with what repudiates them but those who insist on the universal that repudiates others' (n.p.). Identity, in other words, is relational and is defined as much by what it includes as by the difference it cannot bear. But rather than an 'affective state', I would argue that melancholy, here, would be more accurately described as what Lauren Berlant calls a 'structure of relationality'. A structure of relationality is not the same as the feeling of inhabiting that structure. As Berlant writes: '[T]he experience of affect and emotion that attaches to those relations is as extremely varied as the contexts of life in which they emerge' (13). Melancholy, in other words, does not have to *feel* melancholic; it can feel any number of ways, from enraging to indifferent; and it will vary depending on one's position within political economies of entitlement. Sara Ahmed, 'Melancholic Universalism', *feministkilljoys*, 15 December, 2015, https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/12/15/melancholic-universalism/, accessed 26 June 2020; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

[89] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 182f.
[90] Ibid., 184.
[91] Ibid., 185.

aspirational. That is, rather than conceiving normative life-worlds as above all restrictive in its effects, she seeks to heed their function as affective promises about social belonging and well-being. By not collapsing this stance of non-contempt for people's objects of desire into a naïve endorsement of these objects, Berlant is able to remain critical while also developing a more nuanced account of the ways in which hegemonic promises may act as magnetizing clusters that can provide people with, in her own words, 'the affective pre-experience of a potential site of rest, even if one has known it only as at best a mirage of solidity and stability'.[92] In this vein, we might argue that to uphold fantasies of sovereignty is not so much or not primarily to invest in oppressive structures as it is to cultivate or hold onto an optimism that may serve as a strategy for ameliorating experiences of powerlessness and unfreedom. Sovereignty, in other words, understood as a mode of unencumbered agency, may work as an aspirational horizon for people whose ordinary life is marred by experiences of political disenfranchisement and economic hardship. This is not to condone acts of violence and aggression, far from it. But it is to complicate our understanding of the differential appeal and the various functions that invocations of sovereign freedom may have.[93] Butler, in contrast, advances a somewhat narrow understanding of normativity. By construing norms as univocally on the side of privilege and by rendering their activity as principally constraining, she underdescribes the incoherent set of promises (of freedom, protection, acknowledgment, flourishing) that their activity performs. What is more, her recent emphasis on the avowal of one's vulnerability as a step towards more inclusive, less violent communities seems, to return to Berlant's criticism, to conceive 'subjects as ethical intentionalists who can make cognitive decisions to short-circuit foundational attachments'.[94] This last point of Berlant's reservations refers to a shift in Butler's work from an emphasis on political subversion towards a cultivation of compassionate emotion.

Seemingly dissatisfied with her earlier topography that saw itself confined to an insistence on the possibility of the norm changing by virtue of its reliance on continual re-enactment, and possibly as a reaction to her overly punitive account of subjectivation, Butler contemplates our

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[92] Ibid., 185.

[93] Support for state sovereignty, in this context, might be a (displaced) mechanism of trying to revive individual agency. Cf. Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and The Politics of Freedom*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014) Anker argues that people's support for heightened forms of state sovereignty, including its militarized and violent expression, do not signal attachments to conditions of subjection as much as they present a way for some to rehabilitate the promise of freedom in response to longstanding yet ordinary experiences of powerlessness. '[E]ven in one of the more unliberatory eras in contemporary politics', she asks, 'when political subjects do not just acquiesce to but often actively support policies that sanction large-scale violence and murder […] — is there a glimmer of a desire to challenge unfreedom, an intent to undo the oppressions that individuals seem so willing to uphold' (19)?

[94] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 182.

commonality in grief and loss. Mourning is no longer cast as potentially subversive and, hence, divisive (grieving for 'ungrievable' lives), but, instead, is reworked as an experience of dispossession familiar to every one of us. 'Loss,' Butler writes, 'has made a tenuous "we" of us all.'[95] For her, the primary susceptibility to which grief attests can become the fragile basis for both a heightened sense of ethical responsibility as well as the ground for re-imagining political communities. Acknowledging the ek-static structure of subjectivity, 'that', in Butler's words, 'the "I", first comes into being as a "me" through being acted upon by an other'[96], means avowing our ethical and social interdependency and precariousness. She draws on Levinas and Adorno to develop these reflections. Levinas' notion of the moral claim that the face of the Other makes on us is coupled with an Adornian insistence to engage in an unyielding self-criticism.[97] Mourning, in this account, becomes a means to develop ethical dispositions, such as generosity and humility, that remain open to our 'constitutive sociality'. Yet, to the extent that these remarks appear to promote an abstract humanism they obscure the complex ethical and political relations that shape our communities. The difficulty with Butler's reflections does not lie in the fact that we can sensibly oppose our exposure to and imprint by the other but that we are responsive to multiple others with competing and contradictory demands. As such, her account evinces a binary perspective in which the only two alternatives seem to either be an ethico-political narcissism that disavows its 'constitutive sociality' or an openness riveted to the Other that comes at the cost of acknowledging responsibility to different claims of plural others.[98] Additionally, Butler's subject seems to have shifted from being bound to its overly cruel superego only to now find itself ineluctably beholden to the excessively demanding voice of the Other. McIvor perceptively remarks: 'The dictatorial "Though shalt" that emerges from Butler's reading of Levinas and Adorno imitates a super-moral demand that, in its singularity and irreplaceability replicates the cruel persecution of the melancholic superego.'[99] What Berlant calls Butler's 'ethical intentionalism' thus appears, at least partly, to be an effect of the latter's continued but somewhat displaced investment in melancholia. As such, her account reads as an implicit admission of the need for a melancholic admonition to enable political movements to thrive non-violently.[100]

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[95] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.
[96] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 89.
[97] Alongside *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, see Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*.
[98] Cf. David McIvor, 'Bringing Ourselves to Grief', 421ff.; see also Shulman, 'Acknowledgement and Disavowal as an Idiom for Theorizing Politics'.
[99] McIvor, 'Bringing Ourselves to Grief', 422.
[100] This is somewhat ironic given that the impetus behind Butler's reflections has previously been to work towards abating, not strengthening the melancholic refrain (cf. *The Psychic Life of Power*).

Butler's recalibration of experiences of loss and precariousness to serve as the basis for an ethics of compassionate recognition attests to the sentimental propensity of her work. As sentimental I take the presumption of emotional universality and intelligibility. Sentimentality turns emotions into transparent signs of affective kinship and belonging. Take, for example, the following statement by Butler:

> Suffering can yield an experience of humility, of vulnerability, of impressionability and dependence, and these can become resources, if we do not 'resolve' them too quickly; they can move us beyond and against the vocation of the paranoid victim who justifies infinitely the justifications of war.[101]

Or again: 'To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics […] may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself.'[102] Loss, in her account, is thus elevated into a universal language of human experience that is able to transcend what otherwise divides people. Yet what constitutes loss and how it is experienced will hinge on what section of the population someone belongs to. The same holds for encounters with precarity. Rather than construing precarity as a sentimental universal, it is better understood as a register for structural inequality that is experienced differently depending on people's social location. As such, it is a differential index, not the beginning of a 'sensate democracy'.[103] Butler, however, wants it to be the latter. Melodramatic in their narrative trajectory, *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* conceive and foreground scenes of vulnerability and loss in a way that turns them into a normative ground and affective conduit for a nonviolent politics. Yet to appeal to people's empathic capacities in such a way risks conflating emotional and material (institutional, economic) types of recognition and reciprocity. 'Recognition all too often becomes an experiential end in itself,' Berlant notes, 'an emotional event that protects what is unconscious, impersonal, and unrelated to anyone's intentions about maintaining political privilege.'[104] The postulation of the possibility of overcoming perceptual and material biases by holding onto experiences of vulnerability and dispossession thus distracts attention from the complexity and obduracy of our attachments.[105] By invoking the possibility of affective alliances across socio-economic fault lines, Butler extricates herself from the convoluted scene of people's different encounters with and histories of managing contingency

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[101] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 149.
[102] Ibid., 30.
[103] A term Butler employs at various points in *Frames of War*. Also cf. Judith Butler, 'Can one lead a good life in a bad life?', *Radical Philosophy* 176 (2012): 14.
[104] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 182.
[105] The role and functioning of empathy will be further problematized in subsequent chapters. Reading novels by Zadie Smith and Rachel Cusk will alert us especially to its racial and gendered implications.

and risk. In her account, a common 'vulnerability to loss' turns into 'a basis for community'. The 'experience of loss and fragility' presents 'the possibility of making different kinds of ties […], [of] effect[ing] a transformation in our sense of international ties that would crucially rearticulate the possibility of democratic political culture here and elsewhere'.[106] Possibly for reasons of political exigency, Butler thus advances an ethico-political imaginary that divests scenes of their particularity and complexity. Experiences of intensified emotion are read as politically transformative vehicles that may cultivate progressive alliances. In contrast, the position I adopt by developing a conceptual scaffold around the notion of the impasse is more sceptical about the possibility of mobilising dysphoric feelings and adverse conditions, at least in any such straightforward way. The difficult task of unlearning attachments, to be open to processes that engage the thorny issue of redistributing resources, uncertainty and vulnerability, presents a challenge of a magnitude and complexity that critical accounts like Butler's misconstrue when they (all too quickly) turn adverse conditions into emancipatory possibilities.

While Butler's latest book, *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), is more cautious about the liberating potential of shared affects, it still tends to skim over the impasse(s) surrounding socio-political change insofar as it continues to promote a binary ethics that construes interdependency as something to be either denied or affirmed.[107] Unlike *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, it refrains from promoting grief and vulnerability as a unifying ground for political action. Instead, Butler emphasizes the pivotal role ambivalence plays in negotiating our exposure to and imbrication with each other. Arguing that nonviolence is too often understood as issuing from a peaceful region of the soul, *The Force of Nonviolence* contends that a commitment to nonviolence very much accepts hostility as part of our constitution, but embraces the oscillating rhythms of ambivalence as a control against the conversion of aggression into violence. Thus, rather than construing experiences of loss and vulnerability as an affective conduit for a nonviolent politics, here the emphasis is on solidarity and on the uncertainty and difficulty of remaining committed to a nonviolent political struggle amidst enduring scenes of injustice. 'The emergence of a critical faculty, of critique itself', Butler writes, 'is bound up with the vexed and precious relationship of solidarity, where our "sentiments" navigate the ambivalence by which they are constituted.'[108] However, insofar as her account remains invested in ideas of the equal grievability and interdependency of life to envisage ethics, my earlier reservations still hold. In order to imagine an ethos of nonviolence,

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[106] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 19, 40.
[107] Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London and New York: Verso, 2020).
[108] Ibid., 203.

grievability, Butler argues, must be connected to social and political equality. Only if all lives are perceived as equally grievable, do we stand a chance to push back against violent practices that rest on demographic biases. Nonviolence, moreover, should not be perceived as a matter of individual deliberation so much as a social obligation. When I act violently, Butler suggests, I do not only inflict harm on the other; I inflict harm on myself, or, more precisely, on the social bond that conjoins us and that implicates the other in me and myself in the other. Yet this logic of equal grievability and the avowal of interdependency elides the complexity of the socio-political sphere we find ourselves inhabiting. Once again, the only two alternatives, in Butler's account, seem to either be an ethico-political narcissism that disavows its 'constitutive sociality' or an openness tethered to an abstract 'you'. Such an account, as I already suggested above, does not make enough room for the fact that our social existence confronts us with various and variously conflicting claims of multiple others. Further, it risks levelling emotional and material forms of recognition by treating the task of unlearning attachments to damaging forms of sociality as something that can be tackled through the cultivation of compassionate emotion and the avowal of interdependency.

1.4 Writing (in) the impasse: a note on method and style

So far I have suggested that Butler's work shows an alertness to questions of attachment and their significance when thinking about processes of transformation. At the same time, I argued that the generalizing and at times sentimental propensity of her work belies this conceptual patience. As concerned as her work might be with providing critical purchase on realities mired in social inequalities, the predicaments that form the focus of her writing are not analysed in their specific texture and context so much as they are turned into paradigmatic instances that signal an ethics of universal precariousness and grievability. Alongside this overly abstract quality, the preponderance of tropes of trauma and loss, I want to argue, further compromises her account by narrowing the range of phenomena her criticism is sensitive to. In this respect, Butler's writing, especially her later work, shares traits with accounts, such as that of Giorgio Agamben, whose thought I outlined in the Introduction. Like Agamben, Butler focuses on the constitutive foreclosures that undergird the socio-political sphere. The discriminatory gaze of the nation-state, she argues, circumscribes who counts as someone, whose lives merit categorical entitlement and protection. Admittedly, Butler's account offers a somewhat more nuanced analysis of power. Unlike Agamben, she is intent on emphasizing the differential distribution of these entitlements and attends to the way in which subjects play a role in

upholding these structures. By the same token, her use of the notion of precarity signals a more socio-historical orientation than Agamben's account of bare life whose formalism is blind to contextual variation. However, in the end, the tendency, evident in both Agamben and Butler's work, is an intransigent investment in limit events or situations. Time and again, their accounts turn on the ways in which discursive practices produce an abject remainder, a traumatic remnant that attests to the violence at work in representational regimes at the same time as it signals a certain gap or excess that may come to haunt and thus unsettle the political sphere. As important as such analyses are, pointing us to the foundational disavowals within democratic practice, one may nevertheless question accounts that fixate on it. By not attempting to relate their ideas about sovereignty to other contending forces involved in reproducing modes of collective life, Butler and Agamben threaten to reinforce in their own discourse the sovereign self-sufficiency that they criticize. The univocal and unambiguous quality of their narratives, in other words, threatens to undermine the salience and critical capacity of their work, its political urgency tending to construe subjectivity in somewhat bifurcated terms of subjection and resistance. As such, it appears ill-equipped to grapple with pervasive, if less drastic, realities of inequality and injustice that traverse contemporary democratic/capitalist societies. For, most of the time, people inhabit positions as subjects of such societies that are less forlorn or at least more differentiated than that of bare or ungrievable life; but neither are they continually involved in projects of defiance or (self-)transformation. In other words, to understand hegemonic life-worlds through one form of subjectivity elides crucial differences about people's position within political economies of entitlement. Unlike Agamben and Butler, I thus do not want to advance only one or two subject positions to think about contemporary configurations of power. The impasse, as I already indicated in the Introduction and as I will show in more detail in the next chapter, is something that is both shared and yet experienced in substantially different ways. It is bound up with realities of precarity, but with precarity understood as a differential index not a universal category. Insofar as the problem/concept of the impasse shuttles between the subjective and objective, pointing to both the affective atmosphere of the present and its underlying material conditions, it prompts an analysis that does not turn subjects into symptoms of power, but sees them as involved in navigating and adjusting to compromised and compromising conditions; in other words, subjects, in this analysis, retain a level of (however attenuated) agency without this necessarily or most of the time taking the form of resistance. Butler and Agamben, in contrast, do not make room in their accounts for such middle ranges of agency. Instead, their criticism invokes abstract ideas of acknowledgment—in Agamben's case, the political remedy lies in learning to acknowledge the inoperativity that is at the heart

of human life, and in Butler's case, it means affirming life's essential vulnerability and interdependency. Their sweeping style thereby does not afford to admit that critical accounts only ever partially clarify problems and that, whatever redemptive or reparative imaginary they provide will appear as wishful thinking if it does not grapple with and reflect the slowness, uncertainty and complexity of processes that aim to reinvent idioms for the social.[109]

An account of the impasse, in contrast, aims to tarry with such difficulty. It aims to practice a descriptive diligence that makes room in its conceptual architecture for the irresolution and ambivalence processes of change will naturally entail; the fact that people's fantasies form an affective cushion of continuity and coherence in their lives, not given up and replaced easily. Unlike Butler's unifying projection of precariousness (or, for that matter, Agamben's inoperativity), the perspective I adopt is thus more tentative. It seeks to pay greater attention to the persistency of psychic and structural discord that gets bypassed in the attempt to articulate collective imaginaries of emancipation. The solution, in other words, is not so much to advance generalizing tropes of acknowledgment but to slow down the movement between diagnostic claim and emancipatory political practice. In this respect, my approach also differs from accounts, such as Bonnie Honig's. Butler's focus on equal grievability, Honig argues, not only occludes the concrete and divisive messiness of our political actions in favour of a 'sentimental politics of shared feelings', but also neglects dimensions other than mourning itself in the attempt to reimagine community.[110] Instead of considering a plurality of positions to ground community or of discussing multiple meanings in relation to loss and grief, Butler simply offers one account without avowing the politics involved in this rendition. Honig's notion of agonistic humanism is more convincing insofar as the vision of politics it puts forth draws on a multiplicity of experiences and emotions whose meaning, it emphasizes, is various and unstable and thus open to contestation. But, like Butler, Honig's analysis is guided by conceptualising formal possibilities for democratic renewal. These sites or possibilities might always exist; but they are not always or even most of the time acted upon. The political exigency of the criticism therefore runs the risk of distorting the analysis of contemporary articulations of subjectivity and agency, turning transgression and resistance into the only values by which a situation is assessed. The account I develop over the next few chapters, in contrast, approaches the present

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[109] *The Force of Nonviolence* directly confronts this charge of wishfulness. Butler argues that if confronted with the choice between a world in which no one practices a utopian imaginary and one in which they do, most people would prefer the latter. This might be the case. It does not mean, however, that subscribing to ideals of radical equality has to come in the form of the overly abstract and binary ethical framework as it does in Butler. Cf. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 44, 64.

[110] Bonnie Honig, *Antigone Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 64.

from the perspective of everyday affective life, seeking an analysis of the social that focuses not on modes of defiance so much as on ordinary scenes of survival, on disappointment, not refusal and negation.[111] Without renouncing a commitment to social transformation, I emphasize the importance of acknowledging critical theory's own ambiguous status, the sense that its political leverage is unclear, attenuated in and by a present marred by enduring scenes of inequality and injustice. The impasse, then, serves as a reflexive tool that not only claims descriptive purchase, but that also cultivates a mode of reading and writing that heeds the fact that its account is only ever partial and its political efficacy uncertain.

This chapter ends, therefore, not with a solution to the problem of affective investments in normative realism.[112] Rather, it ends by settling in the impasse, as it were, tarrying with its weight and uncertainty. This is to approach its composition as a problem that has us come up against the tenacity of people's attachments. Doing so does not mean turning the impasse into a synonym for stuckness, into a space of time in which nothing happens. Instead, I want to suggest we understand impasses as heterogeneous spaces in which protracted cycles of adjustment and defence unfold alongside practices, however nascent and scattered, that attempt to reimagine what realism ought to look like. Yet, such practices are not avenues *out of* the impasse but occurrences *within* it, disturbances that have not (yet) stabilized as form-shifting events. To adopt such a perspective means to shift the emphasis from a performative subject of subversive agency (Butler's early account) to an understanding of agency and subjectivity in relation to moments or periods of drift and irresolution, but also of attentiveness and experimentation. It is this shift in perspective that forms the subject of the next chapter.

Conclusion

To sum up, I have argued that Butler's work shows an alertness to questions of attachment and their significance when thinking about processes of transformation. In Butler's story, we grow up affectively beholden to a world, whether this world threatens well-being or, instead, provides

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[111] When I ultimately return to Honig in the last chapter, it is with a view to her account of public things which is a more socio-politically specific idea than her notion of agonistic humanism. Public things, I argue, serve as a vehicle for reimagining a political public sphere worth attaching to. The political public sphere is *one* plane of social life; earlier chapters address other zones, especially those of intimacy and labour. Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

[112] The reason for my use of the term 'realism' here is twofold. I use it both in the colloquial sense of the term; i.e. when we talk about expectations or demands being (un)realistic, and also in its connotation as an aesthetic convention. The latter usefully foregrounds the artifice and hence the inherent malleability or contestability of its composition—whether this composition concerns our expectations about art or life.

an ostensibly neutral or facilitating environment to flourish in. The world, in other words, and the normative fantasies that keep it afloat are *in* us, so to speak, shaping our affective ties and sensibilities. While Butler's work thus pushes us to tarry with the role of desire in the reproduction of hegemonic sociality, I have criticized her tendency to turn melancholy into the form this desire inevitably takes. Melancholy should be understood as one of several modes of attachment, not the inaugural trope of all tropes as it sometimes appears in Butler's work. Moreover, if melancholy as foundational impossibility marks one extreme in Butler's trajectory, the other lies in her solicitation of an ethics of precariousness. Seemingly impatient with her previous perspective limited to a politics of subversion and a subject confined to a fundamentally compromised form of agency, Butler moves in another direction in her later work, turning moments of grief and dispossession into sites of political and ethical recalibration. In contradistinction to Butler's binary ethical framework, and in contradistinction to her treatment of subjects as 'ethical intentionalists' who can sidestep the foundational affective attachments whose intricacies Butler herself explored in *The Psychic Life of Power*, I want to advance the problem/concept of the impasse as a way of heeding the slowness, uncertainty and complexity of processes that aim to reinvent idioms for the social. For any account interested in rearticulating what counts as realism, in developing alternative conceptions of belonging and well-being, will have to grapple with the obstinacy of people's attachments and develop a more socio-politically nuanced understanding of precarity.

Chapter Two

Affect and Agency in Times of Crisis Ordinariness: Lauren Berlant's Lateral Aesthetic, Zadie Smith's *NW*, Rachel Cusk's *Outline* and Ben Lerner's *10:04*

In Chapter 1, I started to approach questions of impasse by looking at attachments and their relation to normative imaginaries. Specifically, I asked how attachments to self-continuity and to sustaining the intelligibility of one's world may come to interfere with or complicate processes of change and transformation. Judith Butler's work provided the initial frame for this discussion. I argued that her account showed a disproportionate investment in figures of melancholic desire that did not leave enough room for other modes of attachment—other (dis)composures that, unlike that of trauma and melancholy, are less often attended to in critical narratives even though they inform large parts of ordinary (political) life.[113] Besides, I argued, Butler's solicitation of an ethics of precariousness tried rather too quickly to leave the messy scene of affective predicaments behind by treating emotions—and, by implication, critical accounts that engage them—as vehicles for ethical recalibration. Yet, if we want to better understand and make room in critical accounts for affective complexity and states of irresolution and ambivalence, scenes of impasse require us to tarry with and attend more closely to questions of affective quandaries and compromised forms of agency. They ask us to consider how one's social location, what with Jacques Rancière we might call the differential distribution of sensibilities, informs the way in which people experience uncertainty and the loss of assurance as to their place in the world.[114] In this chapter, I start to address some of these concerns. To do so, I move away from Butler's account, not only from the compassionate humanism of her more recent work but also from her poststructuralist model of the subject with its somewhat limiting vocabulary of iterability. While I do not take issue with this model as a way of thinking the formal constituents underlying discursive practices and the change that can be wrought therein, I argue that we need a more nuanced account when thinking about agency in contemporary capitalist democracies. With its emphasis on performativity and iteration and the notion of grieving for ungrievable lives, Butler's work largely side-lines questions of

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[113] See the Introduction; for the prevalence of tropes of trauma and melancholy see also Dominick LaCapra, '''Traumatropisms'': From Trauma via Witnessing to the Sublime?' in *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence*, Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2009: 59-89, and 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', *Critical Inquiry* 25:4 (1999): 696-727.

[114] Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004).

constraint, both conscious and unconscious. Moreover, her focus on the materiality and exclusionary taxonomy of discursive practices, to wit, U.S. imperial racism and heteronormativity, neglects the regulative power the economy exerts on social being (both individual and collective).

In the stretched-out present between crisis and response, the impasse asks us to attend to and develop ways of representing the hesitancy and uncertainty of suspension. By focusing on the staggering, roundabout movement of the impasse, this chapter thus aims to shift the emphasis from the performative subject of subversive agency to an understanding of agency and subjectivity in relation to moments or periods of drift, irresolution and hesitancy, but also of attentiveness and experimentation. These modes of comportment contribute to a more capacious understanding of subjectivities, one attentive to the rhythms and structures that (dis)organize modes of living in contemporary democratic/capitalist societies. I approach these questions through a discussion of Berlant's notion of 'lateral agency', before bringing the latter into dialogue with three novels, Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), Rachel Cusk's *Outline* (2014) and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014). Like Butler, Berlant enquires into our affective investment in forms of normative realism. But rather than simply evoking the always present possibility of change, she dwells on the difficult and protracted cycles of adjustment and adaptation such change will inevitably entail. Moreover, her affective register is attuned to the taxing rhythms of life in times of lasting economic recessions that have come to hold sway over an increasing number of people both within and across societies. In the following, I thus first want to parse Berlant's account of life in this period of constant crisis, or, what she calls, 'crisis ordinariness'. Specifically, I focus on her notion of 'lateral agency' which serves as a counterpoint to the language of sovereignty with its emphasis on decision-making and performative efficacy. Instead, 'lateral agency' denotes moments of self-suspension and -abeyance. Within an aesthetic register, it resonates with artworks that seek to interfere with the feedback loop of cruel optimism, that seek to carve a space between despair of and naïve fidelity to the political in times of 'crisis ordinariness'.

My subsequent discussion of Zadie Smith's *NW*, Rachel Cusk's *Outline* and Ben Lerner's *10:04* is set against the backdrop of these concerns. Like *Cruel Optimism*, *NW* attends to what happens when people find themselves adrift amidst normative and material infrastructures, unable to find a way out. In doing so, it collates an assemblage of predicaments that each highlights a state of obstructed agency and points to a condition of systemic political and economic

disenfranchisement. As a fictional meditation, then, it illustrates our preceding reflections and allows us to discern claims about contemporary experiences of impasse. In Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, the portrayal of frustration in its middle-class inflection points to scenes of attrition to the side of material constraints; it suggests that those for whom an approximation of the good life is still attainable nevertheless repeatedly fail to find meaning or a sense of fulfilment in it. As a novel redolent with conventional disappointments and disappointing conventions, it thus prompts us to dwell on the difficulty of detaching from the assurances of normative expectations and of finding patterns of living beyond those provided by dominant genres. *10:04*, in turn, shares central features of Berlant's 'lateral aesthetic'. Both are interested in the way in which art may open up possibilities to interfere with habituated modes of perception and projection in times in which the promise of the good life seems to disappear on an ever-receding horizon. Yet, *10:04's* propitious tone, I argue, also poses as a counterweight to Berlant's mostly less than buoyant reflections. It reminds us of the need to be attentive to those moments and modalities of disturbance in which the risk of detaching from the assurance of the habituated life might be experienced as something other than a threat. Overall, then, this chapter advances an understanding of the impasse as an affective register of spreading socio-economic fragility— an index or spectrum that comprises different states of being, different affective responses that vary depending on people's social location: from scenes of irresolution, impassivity and cruel optimism (Smith and Cusk) to episodes of attentiveness and curiosity (Lerner). In its double valence, Berlant's lateral agency relates to both sides, allowing us to understand these different sensibilities and practices as part of the heterogenous landscape impasses engender—stretches of time in which protracted cycles of adjustment and defence unfold alongside practices, however nascent and scattered, that attempt to reimagine what realism ought to look like.

1. Lauren Berlant's lateral agency (I)

Where Butler, as we saw in the previous chapter, highlights the discriminatory gaze of taxonomies of value, construing normativity as above all restrictive in its effects, Berlant, in contrast, is interested in understanding normativity as aspirational. That is, rather than conceiving normative life-worlds as 'bad and oppressive things'[115] she seeks to heed their function as affective promises about social belonging and well-being. By not collapsing this stance of regard or non-contempt for people's objects of desire into a naïve endorsement of these objects, Berlant is able to remain critical while also developing a more nuanced account

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[115] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 15.

of the ways in which hegemonic promises may act as magnetizing clusters that can provide people with, in her own words, 'the affective pre-experience of a potential site of rest, even if one has known it only as at best a mirage of solidity and stability'.[116] This approach leads her to coin the notion of cruel optimism. She uses the term to describe the predicament of enduring attachments to objects or scenes of desire when such attachments prove unworkable, even harmful. At the same time, these very attachments have provided a sense of self, a sense of world it seems impossible to give up without giving up oneself. '[W]hatever the *content* of the attachment is,' Berlant writes, 'the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.'[117] Importantly, optimism, in Berlant's account, doesn't have to *feel* optimistic; it can feel like any number of things: '[O]ptimism manifests in attachments and the desire to sustain them', Berlant writes. '[A]ttachment is a *structure* of relationality. But the experience of affect and emotion that attaches to those relations is as extremely varied as the contexts of life in which they emerge.'[118] As mentioned in the Introduction, at the centre of Berlant's work, stands the normative fantasy of 'the good life' — her shorthand for a cluster of desires tethered not only to the family but also to political and economic norms of reciprocity and belonging. 'Why', she asks, 'do people stay attached to conventional good-life-fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility and dear costs abounds?'[119] Unlike Butler who takes conditions of spreading socio-economic precarity as a springboard for developing an ethics of universal precariousness (i.e. ontological vulnerability), Berlant tracks their affective reverberations across different populations—sketching a heterogenous picture only loosely held together by the recurring theme of cruel optimism.

If we follow Berlant in her description of the contemporary moment as marked by the slow attrition of an enabling set of fantasies, a transitional space in which people's demands and desires are required to subsist in an increasing and increasingly drastic disconnect from reality, what does this mean for how we think and talk about agency? How does the subject of cruel optimism fit the picture of the intentional agent of self-fashioning performativity? The latter, Berlant argues, is the prevalent image elicited not only by a neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility and a moralising biopolitics of health, but also by academic discussions that tend

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[116] Ibid., 185.
[117] Ibid., 24.
[118] Ibid., 13.
[119] Ibid., 2.

to overemphasize events of decision-making and control in relation to both political and personal sovereignty.[120] Berlant writes:

> Sovereignty is a fantasy misrecognized as an objective state: an aspirational position of personal and institutional self-legitimating performativity and an affective sense of control in relation to the fantasy of that position's offer of security and efficacy. But it is inadequate for talking about agency outside of the King's decree or other acts in proximity to performances of law, like executions and pardons. It is also a distorting description of the political, affective, and psychological conditions in which the ordinary subjects of democratic/capitalist power take up positions as agents.[121]

While Berlant does not seek to challenge sovereignty's desirability as part of an emancipatory political idiom, she emphasizes the need for a more nuanced vocabulary to cover a broader array of activity, a language sensitive to the scenes and cycles of life's ordinariness. 'Without attending to the varieties of constraint and unconsciousness that condition ordinary activity,' she writes, 'we persist in an attachment to a fantasy that in the truly lived life emotions are always heightened and expressed in modes of effective agency that ought justly to be and are […] performatively sovereign.'[122] This perspective distorts the fact that, much of the time, people do not pursue projects of self-extension or rigorously uphold habits of self-cultivation. Rather, especially in light of the continuing and ever-increasing fragility and uncertainty surrounding aspirational good-life fantasies, ordinary subjects are taken up by juggling the demands of an overwhelming present. In this environment of exhaustion, people may seek out activities, develop habits that provide temporary reprieve from being worn out by the drudgery of getting by. 'Lateral agency' is Berlant's phrase for this, its sideways drift denoting 'a mode of coasting consciousness',[123] an experience of 'self-abeyance, of floating sideways'[124]. Habitual over-eating serves as her example: over-eating as that what disrupts the liberal subject of intentionality and will. Against the tendency to read it as a symptom expressive of one's personality (amongst other things), the habit's negativity may also be understood, Berlant suggests, as an interference with rather than assumption of one's self. '[T]he body and a life are not only projects,' she writes, 'but also sites of episodic intermission from personality, the burden of whose reproduction is part of the drag of practical sovereignty, of the obligation to

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[120] Butler's notion of non-sovereignty, we might argue, marks an inverse but similarly inflated position. As argued previously, her idea of the performative undoing of sovereign selves as a precondition for post-imperial relations neglects the tenacity of our attachments and conflates emotional and material (institutional, economic) types of redress.

[121] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 97f.

[122] Ibid., 99.

[123] Ibid., 18.

[124] Ibid., 116.

be reliable.'[125] Where conventional notions of agency emphasize intention, planning and making, lateral agency distends. It momentarily provides relief from the (re)productive demands of everyday life, without thereby being transformative or resistant in any strategic sense. Its rhythms do not sound critical projects of negation or subversion, but rather speak of the short-term need for distraction and self-forgetting.

As a critical concept, then, attentive to the psychic and material pressures compromising ordinary living, lateral agency is echoed in Berlant's related discussion of what she describes as lateral or sideways mobility.[126] In times of ongoing precarization of employment across sectors and societies, the roundabout movement of lateral, rather than upward mobility, appears to have greater descriptive purchase. The present, in Berlant's account, becomes distended in (slowly atrophying) circuits of cruel optimism assuaged only by small pleasures of self-interruption. The future is the short-term future of paying the bills, its long-term cousin only appears as fantasmatic dreamscape if it is not drowned out by the present entirely. Lateral mobility is thus the diachronic frame within which to view the pockets of drift and self-suspension that Berlant points to with her notion of lateral agency. As an index of spatial and temporal suspension, it is a vocabulary that as such reflects the historical sensorium that the impasse of crisis ordinariness elicits.

This conceptual imaginary provides a pertinent backdrop against which to approach the literary texts that I mentioned at the outset. Berlant's vocabulary of lateral agency and cruel optimism allows us not only to make sense of some of the ways in which the present impresses itself on the consciousness of the novels' characters and sets limits on their experience and action; its diachronic frame of sideways mobility and crisis ordinariness also enables us to understand their predicaments as belonging to the same, if heterogeneous, historical sensorium. At the same time, the texts, as we will see, partly counterbalance Berlant's account. If Berlant is largely interested in the figure of the cruel optimist, emphasizing the attachments that continue to exert a holding power over us, Smith, Cusk and Lerner each offer further ways in which the pressures and demands of contemporary life are adapted to and lived. The bind of cruel optimism does play a role in their accounts, but so do other forms of adjustment and desire. In other words, one way of responding to the impasse is to remain stubbornly committed to the promises held out by ailing material and fantasmatic protocols. Another, however, is to give in to a sense of

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[125] Ibid.
[126] Cf., ibid., 222.

exhaustion and drift as both Smith's *NW* and Cusk's *Outline* will show. *10:04's* protagonist, in turn, encounters the mounting sense of contingency not as a reason to hold onto what is already not working, but as a promise of what could become. Further, *Cruel Optimism* and the three novels converge in their pronounced, if not uniform, attention to laterality as a mode of aesthetic mediation and address. I will outline in more detail what Berlant understands by 'lateral aesthetic'. Here it suffices to say that Berlant is interested in the possibility that sideways drifting, at least in some of its variants, may not only be a reprieve from but also an interference with hegemonic rationalities. The three novels, in turn, expand on the ways in which laterality or horizontality may (or may not) harbour the trace of a desire for reimagining what individual and collective flourishing might look like.

2. Styles of (dis)composure in Zadie Smith's *NW*

Berlant's account, as outlined above, is as much diagnosis as it is critical prompt. Its vocabulary of persistent yet unmet desires and habits of self-suspension aims not only to draw attention to the disaffections that have marked Euro-American societies over the last few decades but also to the ways in which prevalent social imaginaries tend to misconstrue the agency people hold over the shape and trajectory of their lives. This twin pursuit resonates with the critical portrait that Zadie Smith draws of contemporary urban life in her novel *NW* (2012). Set against the backdrop of a faltering post-2008 economy, *NW* follows three protagonists in their mid-thirties—Leah, Keisha (who renames herself Natalie) and Felix—as they try to disentangle themselves from the Northwest London council estate they grew up in. While the scene of disappointment varies each time, the three characters all come up against the limits of a freedom, of a power of self-invention, that a society of neoliberal entrepreneurialism wants them to believe they possess. Divided into five parts, the novel engages a variety of different narrative techniques and timeframes that converge to form an intricate picture of a socio-economically stratified society. As Wendy Knepper notes, *NW* 'eschews chronology in favour of a spatially configured story'[127], capturing, in David Marcus's words, a 'sense of immobility within the very structure of its narrative'.[128] Tracing the socio-psychological pressures that (dis)organize its protagonist's lives, *NW* thus compiles tableaux of unredeemed desires—scenes of impasse that, as such, both resonate with and illustrate our preceding reflections. They allow me to flesh out Berlant's conceptual framework, furnishing her theoretical scaffold with

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[127] Wendy Knepper, 'Revisionary Modernism and Postmillennial Experimentation in Zadie Smith's *NW*', in Philip Tew, ed., *Reading Zadie Smith: The First Decade and Beyond* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013): 112.
[128] David Marcus, 'Post-Hysterics: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity', *Dissent*, 60, no. 2 (2013): 71.

affective scenarios that help me to discern claims about contemporary sensibilities and experiences of impasse.

NW's first part, 'Visitation', unfolds over the course of a summer: we follow Leah Hanwell, a childhood friend of Natalie's, who appears to have reached a point of stasis in her life, unable or unwilling to reconcile her sense of self with the normative expectations of her social environment. The second part, 'Guest', recounts a day in the life of Felix Cooper—the last as it turns out— as he runs a series of errands that take him from the estates of Northwest London to affluent areas of the city before being murdered on his return home. In a series of 185 vignettes, the third part, in turn, entitled 'Host', charts the life of Keisha/Natalie Blake, from her childhood to the present day. On the surface a capitalist success story of self-making: Keisha, a second-generation Caribbean of working-class origins, changes her name to Natalie, marries up and becomes a barrister. Yet, a persistent lack of intimacy and anchoring sense of self work to undermine the integrity of this narrative. The brief fourth and fifth part of the novel take up the story after Felix's murder and bring together the different narrative strands: as Natalie's marriage unravels and Leah's despondency reaches a critical point, a possibility for candour and intimacy between the two old friends emerges yet quickly fades again. In the following, I focus on each protagonist, in turn, and the way in which their affective comportment points to distinct but related states of socioeconomic disenfranchisement. Leah's irresolution, Felix's cruel optimism, Natalie's impassivity: an inventory of ailing ambitions that allows us to devise a more capacious understanding of subjectivities, one attentive to the rhythms and structures that (dis)organize modes of living in contemporary democratic/capitalist societies. In doing so, I heed Berlant's argument about the need for a more nuanced account of personhood and agency that does not confine its vocabulary to heightened emotions and performative efficacy to think about ordinary living. At the same time, I supplement Berlant's focus on cruel optimism by tracking other attachment styles—different sensibilities and modes of being in the impasse that do not (just) unfold as an effort to achieve alignment with normative forms of happiness, but that also register what happens when one is unwilling or unable to endure its demands.

2.1 Leah's irresolute reticence

As the brief summary above already suggests, Smith's novel explores both the workings and experience of contemporary structural inequality. Attentive to issues of class, gender, race and

sexuality, *NW* captures different styles of (dis)composure as they vary depending on people's social location. In doing so, it compiles an affective catalogue of compromised agency and ailing sociality in a London riven by inequality. Its leitmotif—a sense of freedom that reveals itself to be as chimerical as its ideological grip appears persistent—is already introduced in the book's opening scene:

> The fat sun stalls by the phone masts. Anti-climb paint turns sulphurous on school gates and lamp posts. […] On the radio: I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me. A good line—write it out on the back of a magazine. In a hammock, in the garden of a basement flat. Fenced in, on all sides. Four gardens along, in the estate, a grim girl on the third floor screams Anglo-Saxon at nobody.[129]

The soundbite's sentiment—its projection of a reality of self-making and control—is offset by the claustrophobic atmosphere cloaking the scene. Leah, whose perceptions and impressions we witness in this scene, tries to write out the radio clipping:

> I am the sole   I am the sole author   Pencil leaves no mark on magazine pages. Somewhere she has read that the gloss gives you cancer. […] Don't you bloody start! Look up: the girl's burnt paunch rests on the railing. Here's what Michel likes to say: not everyone can be invited to the party. Not this century. […] I am the the sole. (ibid.)

Rather than sovereign control, the soundbite's fragmentation seems to tell a less coherent story. The professed voluntarism, with its neoliberal resonances of self-fashioning and responsibility, rings hollow in the crammed space of Leah's world. As David Marcus remarks: 'This is not a free-wheeling stream of self-consciousness about the mobilities of self-invention but the painful immobilities of class.'[130] Together with her husband Michel, Leah rents a council flat still in sight of the estate she grew up in: 'From there to here, a journey longer than it looks' (12). Her philosophy degree has only served to highlight the discrepancy between her world and the (upper) middle class life of her peers.

> What was the point of it all? Three years of useless study. Out of pocket, out of her depth. […] An unpaid, growing debt. Along with a feeling of resentment: what was the purpose of preparing for a life never intended for her? (33)

[129] Zadie Smith, *NW* (London and New York: Penguin, 2012), 3. Further references to *NW* will be cited parenthically.
[130] Marcus, 'Post-Hysterics', 70.

Yet, her 'resentment' never develops into a more active stance, a more fully-fledged emotion, but remains, what with Sianne Ngai we might call, a 'weakly intentional feeling', an ambient affect that bespeaks the restricted nature of Leah's situation.[131] Unlike Michel, and unlike Natalie and Felix, Leah is not consumed by fantasies of upward mobility. She keeps her administrative job at a local council involved in charitable activities seemingly out of a mixture of conviction and resignation. While thinking communally and empathetically is essential to Leah's self-understanding, she also appears persistently detached. At points, this manifests as cynicism. Listening to her boss's buzzword-laden speech, Leah responds with derision: 'I AM SO FULL OF EMPATHY, Leah writes, and doodles passionately around it. Great fiery arcs, long pointed shadows' (33). At other moments, her impassivity takes shape as a self-imposed 'stillness' (76), a despondency that, as we will see, will reach a critical point at the end of *NW*.

Over the course of 'Visitation', Leah becomes increasingly consumed by the poverty surrounding her and the seeming fortuity of her own comparative luck. When a woman called Shar appears at Leah's doorstep one day, begging for money—a scam as Leah later finds out—her distress, whether actual or performed, nevertheless continues to exercise an arresting power over Leah. Torn between feelings of empathy and contempt, of attraction and repulsion, Leah is overtaken by an ambivalence that sees her swearing at, fantasising about, and helping Shar at different points—a distress that is most clearly thrown into relief in the final chapter of 'Visitation'. When coming to collect her developed photographs at a local pharmacy, Leah is mistakenly given Shar's. Flicking through the photographs she takes to be hers she discovers that 'the first is entirely black, and so is the second; the third shows only a red aura, like a torch held beneath a sheet'. Her expressed, repelled shock: 'Look, these aren't mine, I don't want these—' is explained by the next line: 'The forth is Shar' (94). This uncanny coincidence proves deeply unsettling for Leah. The momentary illusion of being Shar is frightening. 'She is shouting, and people look at her like she is mad' (95). Tammy Amiel Houser reads this scene and the troubling presence Shar assumes in Leah's life as evidence of the difficulty of developing and sustaining empathetic relations in a world of sustained socio-economic marginalisation and instability. 'When the possibility of changing places cannot be ignored,' she writes, 'it does not structure empathy, but rather blocks it.' That is, rather than an occasion of fellow-feeling, contingency manifests as a threat in Leah's world. 'Instead of imaginatively stepping into the shoes of the dreaded alternate version, Leah recoils from the possibility of

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[131] Cf. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007)

engaging with a frighteningly defenceless version of herself, a terrifying double.'[132] While this is certainly an important point, it underdescribes what is at stake in Leah's relation to Shar. Shar does not just raise questions about the viability of Leah's attachment to empathy as a way of being in the world. Her presence also elicits doubts Leah has with regard to her own sexuality.[133] In fact, the episode at the pharmacy suggests as much. Leah's repelled shock at receiving Shar's pictures is partially offset by her ensuing desire to see them again. Yet there is no way, we read, 'that [Leah] can take back what she has so loudly proclaimed, in front of all these decent local people, or ask to see photos that are clearly not hers again. What would people think?' (95).

'What would people think?', especially all those 'decent local people'? Leah's section ends with this question. We might thus understand it not just in reference to her behaviour at the pharmacy, but more broadly—an expression of a stifling concern, all the more potent in its ordinary resonance. A line from an earlier scene reads: 'Desire is never final: desire is imprecise and impractical' (41). Yet, Leah does not dare to dwell on this thought or even articulate it in the first place.[134] Instead, her life unfolds—somewhat unwittingly—in line with an aspirational good-life narrative. At least, this is how it appears from her husband Michel's perspective: 'Dog. Car. Flat. […] Seven years ago: you were on the dole. I was washing hair. Things change! We're getting there, no?' (24). Yet to Leah, it is unclear 'where there is'. 'Why must love "move forward"?' she wonders. 'Which way is forward?' (ibid.). Constantly pressed on the subject of motherhood—by Michel, by her own mother, Pauline, by her colleagues—Leah does not have the courage to express her doubt. Instead, masking her 'imprecise and impractical' desire, she secretly has an abortion and steals Natalie's contraceptive pill for her own use.

It is a routine of disguise that, as such, contributes to and reinforces the lack of emotional intimacy and candour in Leah's life. By persistently withholding her doubts, Leah keeps herself in a state of suspense that is at once isolating and reassuring. It allows her to nurse her own

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[132] Tammy Amiel Houser, 'Zadie Smith's *NW*: Unsettling the Promise of Empathy', *Contemporary Literature* 58, no. 1 (2017): 131.

[133] Insofar as Amiel Houser advances her argument by divesting scenes of their affective overdetermination or complexity, her position—while critical of the efficacy of empathy as a corrective to social injustice (see below)—is reminiscent of Butler's perspective as discussed in Chapter 1. Both seem guided by the presumption that ethics in order to qualify as such must be stripped of the confusion of real-life messiness.

[134] The free indirect discourse used in this scene as in many others in 'Visitation' leaves open whether this statement should be attributed to the third-person narrator or Leah herself. I will return to the elusiveness or uncertainty of the novel's narratorial perspective toward the end of my discussion, where I will argue that there, indeed, does not seem to be a single narrator as such, but only an array of different narrative voices. For the sake of simplicity, I will continue to refer to 'the' narrator in the meantime.

irresolution; yet, its secrecy leaves her at a remove from everyone around her. Take, for instance, a scene from early on in the book: a conversation between Leah and Michel in which Leah attempts to discuss her encounter with Shar, at the same time as keeping news of her pregnancy from Michel. 'The woman tries to talk to the man who is her husband about the desperate girl who came to the door' (22). The impersonal tone of this scene underscores Leah's affective detachment. 'The husband can't understand the woman's preoccupation. […] There is no way for him to follow the submerged, feminine logic' (ibid.). To cope with her own doubts and anxieties, Leah retreats emotionally. Even her professed happiness sounds more like resigned stock taking:

> Quite happy, really quite happy, and the sun thins out and purples and arranges itself in strips behind the aquamarine of the minaret and what breeze there is ripples the flag of St George on top of the old estate […]. Maybe it doesn't matter that life never blossomed into anything larger than itself. Moored to the shore she set out from, as almost all women were, once. (77)

Unlike Michel, Leah is not in thrall to what Berlant would describe as cruel optimism. To her, 'moored to the shore', the promise of freedom rings hollow. Yet, this sensibility does not translate into a stance of defiance. Leah's unwillingness to partake in the sacrificial logic of normative good-life fantasies, her reluctance to 'move forward', bespeaks a state of puzzled abeyance, not a subversive strategy.[135] Trapped in the meshwork of normative conventions, Leah's social location has not imbued her with the confidence required to disentangle herself from the assumptions and expectations constricting her. Without the support of a sense of entitlement, she does not dare to voice a wish. Instead, she masks her own desire in an attempt to fit into the world she has grown up in and is still attached to. Towards the end of the book, Leah's impassivity ultimately reaches a breaking point: succumbing to her own practice of disguise, she points Michel to the draw of contraceptive pills and gives in to a state of despondent apathy.

2.2 Felix's cruel optimism

Where Leah is prone to melancholy, silently mourning the possibilities of a 'life never intended for her' (33), Felix's mind is set on the future. Like Michel, he is driven by the dream of social

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[135] Recall the critical opening to this chapter: in its attachment (conscious or unconscious) to intentionality and will, theoretical habit would likely see Leah's behaviour as at least harbouring subversive potential. For a reading that indeed suggests as much, see Beatriz Pérez Zapata, '"In Drag": Performativity and Authenticity in Zadie Smith's *NW*', *International Studies* 16, no.1 (2014): 90.

mobility. And like Michel, he subscribes to the idea of the sovereign self. His language is peppered with catchphrases he takes from self-help books, phrases like 'you just got to be the best you that you can be' (131) or 'I am moving up in the game and I'm ready for it' (155). Yet, the optimism of these mantra-like sayings appears to exist in a disconnect from the reality Felix inhabits—a reality of precarious employment and unstable living conditions. When introduced in 'Guest', Felix is working irregular hours at a garage and, in lieu of having his own home, is staying with his girlfriend. This life of 'crisis ordinariness' finds a historicizing foil in the (white working-class) experience of an earlier generation when Felix runs into his father's long-term neighbour, Phil Barnes. While Barnes's remarks to Felix are tinged with nostalgia that threatens to trade complexity for easy narratability and ambivalence for the affective cushion of clarity, the politicized anger he gives voice to nevertheless bespeaks a sensibility that, when compared to Felix's, allows us to intuit a generational shift. Speaking about the educational bias he experienced growing up as a white working-class boy, Barnes tells Felix:

> In those days, you failed the eleven plus and that was it—on your bike. That's how it used to be. What education I've got, I had to get myself. I grew up angry about it. But that's how it used to be in England for our sort of people. It's the same thing now with a different name. You should be angry about it, too, Felix, you should! (115)

While Barnes's anger hints at the long-standing history of these issues, it may also be seen as an affective index of a specific moment in time, one, I would suggest, that is buoyed by a certain confidence in or optimism about the continuity and progressive trajectory of the social-democratic project post-War Britain had embarked upon. To Felix, whose only experience is that of a post-Welfare society, this sensibility is alien. He shrugs it off with a laugh, calling Barnes 'a proper old leftie […] proper commie' (115). His reply 'I'm more about the day-to-day' speaks of the short-term perspective his circumstances require him to adopt. Tellingly, the day he is murdered (that is, the day of this conversation with Barnes) he is off work because '[t]here wasn't enough work to justify five men working five days a week' (100).

The future for Felix takes shape as fantasy: 'to move up in the game', to be a film-maker, to have a family. These dreams, like his ideas about achieving them, can only remain vague. Loïc Wacquant's description of life on Chicago's South Side thus appears equally apt in the context of the Northwest London Felix inhabits:

> Under such conditions of relentless and all-pervading social and economic insecurity, where existence becomes reduced to the craft of day-to-day survival and where one must continually do one's best with whatever is at hand, that is, precious little, the present becomes so uncertain that it devours the future and prohibits thinking about it except as fantasy.[136]

This disconnect between Felix's future and his present is ironically underscored by an episode in which Felix's reveries about his self-professed knack for film-making, specifically for films set in the future, are cut short when he collides with a stranger outside a video store.

> Hollywood had nothing on Felix when it came to imagining the future. He didn't even have to go to the movies any more, he could just walk down the street like this and see the whole damn spectacle in his mind. Script by Felix Cooper. Directed by Felix Cooper. Starring Felix Cooper. […] Now Felix collided with a real live young-man leaving a glass-walled video emporium. (136)

While Felix's future is forced to exist in a (disavowed) disconnect from his reality, it is this future-as-fantasy together with Felix's disciplined optimism that carries him through the day. As a practice of composure, his buoyancy needs reminders though. We witness Felix 'trying to return himself to that moment of optimism before he'd answered the phone' (135). Or: 'Outside he tried to calm himself and realign with the exuberant mood in the street' (137). Ultimately, however, all these efforts are futile.

On the train back to Northwest London, Felix finds himself at the centre of a series of short exchanges that for all their brevity create a complexly charged atmosphere. 'A white woman, hugely pregnant' wants Felix to ask his 'friend' (165) opposite him to take his feet of the seat for her to sit down. When Felix fails to convince the man to do so, he gives up his own seat instead. The woman's racial prejudice—assuming Felix's friendship with two strangers on basis of their skin colour—leaves Felix stranded among undesirable options: to ignore the woman's request is to accept the men's behaviour; to act on it is to condone the racial condescension contained within her request. Felix's decision to do the latter results in a 'great wave of approval, smothering and unwanted, directed towards him, and just as surely, contempt and disgust enveloping the two men and separating them, from Felix, from the rest of the carriage, from humanity' (166). It is a toxic constellation that, ultimately, has dire consequences for Felix. On leaving the train, he is followed by the two men, who mug him before stabbing

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[136] Loïc Wacquant, 'Inside "The Zone": The Social Art of the Hustler in the American Ghetto', in Pierre Bourdieu et al., eds., *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999 [1993]), 156, cited in Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 187.

him to death. From Felix's short-termism of day-to-day survival to his violent death, 'Guest' is thus the most unequivocal section in the book: if all of *NW*'s protagonists spend their lives trying to reconcile a professed freedom with the determinacies of social inequality, it is an endeavour that in its forlorn destiny is most forcefully exposed in Felix's case.

Interestingly, Felix's section is the only part of the novel narrated in a realist voice: a distanced third-person depiction of scene and setting is interwoven with Felix's subjective experience. The latter is not relayed through the free-indirect discourse that prevails in Leah's section, but mostly remains at the level of external description. Amiel Houser reads this formal decision to reflect Smith's critical relation to realism, specifically realism's faith in empathy as aesthetic and social mechanism suited to counterbalance (the excesses of) market individualism and to support societal cohesion and stability. In its realist make-up, 'Guest' is the only section to invite the reader into its world, enabling her to identify with its optimistic protagonist. 'Nevertheless, it is precisely here', Houser writes, 'that Smith rejects the ethics of empathy.'

> Just when empathy seems to succeed in overcoming social differences and connecting strangers […], it is revealed to be deeply biased, contaminated by social inequalities, and based on the exclusion of those that do not fit the 'fellowship'. This is true both in the represented world of *NW* and in the reading process. To readers, the two black men remain cyphers, their thoughts and feelings unknown and irrelevant.[137]

In other words, no sooner is realism invoked than Smith discards it, showing its investment in empathy to be insufficient, if not misguided. As a formal trait confined to Felix's section, I would argue that there is yet a further dimension to Smith's decision—one that David Marcus hints at when he writes: 'Her [Smith's] character's lives are ultimately determined by where they grew up, but they are also given the freedom—the range—to narrate this determinacy in their own way.'[138] As mentioned above, all three of Smith's protagonists bring with them a different narrative style. By choosing to narrate Felix's section in a realist mode, Smith, I want to suggest, draws an implicit analogy between a realist attitude and Felix's sensibility insofar as both are invested in the idea of a correspondence between word and world. Just as realism is invested in the idea of the accuracy of its representations, Felix holds on to the belief that the claim of 'sole authorship' over one's life maps onto reality; the idea that the word freedom makes sense in the crammed world of Northwest London. As such, form and character dovetail.

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[137] Houser, 'Zadie Smith's *NW*: Unsettling the Promise of Empathy', 137.
[138] Marcus, 'Post-Hysterics', 72.

The realist voice in 'Guest', in other words, works not only as critical commentary on its own history but also as a way to express a character's sensibility.[139]

2.3 Natalie's impassivity

The soundbite that proclaimed people to be the sole authors of their life—having failed to cohere into a cogent sentiment for Leah—returns in its wording in Natalie's section (cf. 209, 212, 221). Like Felix and Michel, Natalie is driven by dreams of social mobility. And like the two men, she believes that its realization lies within the remit of each individual. To act as the sole author of one's life forms both the 'is' and 'ought' of Natalie's existence. '[C]razy busy with self-invention' (209), she is determined to fashion a life for herself free of the material constraints and anxieties of her childhood. And by becoming a barrister and marrying the wealthy Frank De Angelis, she does indeed achieve these ambitions. However, her apparent success comes at the cost of a lack of sense of self. '[H]aving no self to be' (208), Natalie experiences her life as a series of performances that appear to miss their connecting thread.

> Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes, she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic. (278)

Caught in between worlds, Natalie's social mobility has left her alienated; and yet, she holds onto her voluntarism—a tension reflected in 'Host's' formal composition. Divided into a series of numbered scenes charting Natalie's life from her childhood to the narrative's present day, 'Host's' ordered appearance mirrors Natalie's understanding of life as a progressive course of self-invention, as something essentially controllable when treated with enough 'cerebral wilfulness' (180). At the same time, the scenes' shifting length and significance offset this methodical picture. The frequent use of her full name, moreover, together with an impersonal narrative voice underline Natalie's sense of alienation, her position as a bystander to her own life. Take, for example, Natalie's experience of giving birth: 'At the vital moment,' the narrator explains, 'she was able to say to herself quite calmly: "Oh, look, I'm giving birth." Which is all to say that the brutal awareness of the real that she had so hoped for and desired—that she hadn't even realized she was counting on—failed to arrive.' (270) Like the first two sections,

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[139] Historic literary realism is, of course, more nuanced and complex than my treatment of it here would suggest. My stylized account is simply intended to bring out the way in which Smith is able to suggestively relate form and character.

'Host' thus traces not only the ways in which social inequality, in its class-based, gendered and racial formations, works to materially circumscribe the life of our three protagonists. It also explores how its presence is experienced affectively, that is, how systems of structural bias work their way into people's emotional composure.

Despite her nagging sense of lack, Natalie ensures that her life remains in line with the pre-written script of normativity. Apropos of motherhood, the narrator tells us: '[Natalie] had no intention of being made ridiculous by failing to do whatever was expected of her.' (268) Her disciplined composure appears designed to mitigate this fear of ridicule: a protective mask whose very efficacy ends up effacing its bearer. 'There is an image system at work in the world', the narrator asserts. 'To behave in accordance with these images bored her [Natalie]. To deviate from them filled her with the old anxiety.' (269) Natalie's weariness, however, her sense of detachment, is different from the middle-class ennui of some of her contemporaries—a difference underscored by an episode that sees Natalie engaged in a laboured conversation with an art student. Talking about his short films he tells her: 'They're all about boredom essentially. It's the only subject left. We're all bored. Aren't you bored?' (201). While plagued by a sense of detachment, it is a sentiment that, for Natalie, is not the affective index of an existence that, in its material comfortability, has come to ponder its own meaninglessness. For her, boredom is the result of a life that in its disenfranchisement has not been imbued with the confidence required to experiment. Boredom, in other words, appears not as the exhaustion of (meaningful) possibility, but as its very inaccessibility. Without, to adopt Berlant's phrase, 'the ballast of normative recognitions and modes of social belonging in the habit of [her] flesh'[140], Natalie does not dare to diverge. For her, the world is not a place to be awkward in. It is a place, rather, that—haunted by the threatening spectre of 'suburban shame' (303)—asks you to 'always be on [your] best behaviour' (211).

Natalie's emotional detachment thus emerges as a corollary of her attempts to assimilate. She consistently silences any part of herself that is at risk of jeopardizing her ambitions. This includes leaving scenes of casual racism and sexual harassment during her pupillage go unchallenged. In this manner, 'Host' complicates narratives of social mobility that equate success with economic achievement. In order to succeed as a young woman of colour from a working-class background, Natalie is forced to inhabit a gravely compromised position that leaves her alienated, not only from herself, but also from those around her. Caught between

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[140] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 36.

worlds and anxious for her life to be exposed as the 'forgery' (188) she experiences it to be, she withdraws, refusing 'to make a deeper "connection"' (244) — whether with her husband, Leah or her family. This lack of meaningful connection, however, only reinforces her desire for intimacy. 'Natalie Blake wanted to know people. To be intimately involved with them.' (279) In search of such experience, Natalie begins to spend much of her time secretly straying between online chatrooms and unconsummated threesomes. While these activities clearly fail to redeem the perceived emptiness in her life, they do bring a different, smaller relief. As a praxis of dissipation, I would argue, they provide a temporary relief from her relentless practice of self-fashioning, a momentary release from the sovereign subject Natalie so arduously attempts to embody. As such, this routine might be thought of as an example of Berlant's 'lateral agency'. Lateral agency, as outlined earlier, is Berlant's way of countering the liberal/capitalist notion of the subject as intentional agent, of life as ceaseless exercise in self-making, heeding the fact that as she writes: 'The body and a life are not only projects, but also sites of episodic intermission from personality, the burden of whose reproduction is part of the drag of practical sovereignty, of the obligation to be reliable.'[141] To keep up the life Natalie has built for herself is both exhausting and emotionally alienating. The small pleasures of her intermittent drifting, then, can be seen to interrupt these taxing rhythms, producing a welcome 'experience of self-abeyance'[142]. However, this praxis ends up having yet another effect. When Frank discovers Natalie's indiscretions, their marriage breaks down.

What is more, Natalie's friendship with Leah is not exempt from such trouble either. While having been close childhood friends, Leah and Natalie's adult relationship seems increasingly tainted by feelings of envy and irritation. If Leah begrudges the apparent ease with which Natalie's life seems to fit normative models of success, Natalie yearns the physical and emotional intimacy she believes her friend's marriage to hold. These (misguided) projections feed an etiquette of restrained reticence between the friends.[143] When in the final scene of *NW*, a heightened but shared vulnerability results in a moment of renewed intimacy it does so only via a somewhat sinister detour. Sitting in the fenced-in garden where the novel begins, Natalie—herself adrift amidst the ruins of her own marriage—tries to communicate with her

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[141] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 116.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Crucially, *NW* shows this distance to not so much result from individual shortcoming but to be a function of grievances incurred by social marginalization. As Sven Vitse and Hans Demeyer write: 'By not explicitly ascribing envy to either of the characters, Smith avoids the trap of treating envy as a subjective state of mind and instead shows envy as a non-verbalized affective response to social conditions.' Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse, 'The Affective Dominant: Affective Crisis and Contemporary Fiction', *Poetics Today*, forthcoming.

despondent friend. But rather than giving an 'honest account of her own difficulties and ambivalences, clearly stated, without disguise, embellishment or prettification', Natalie resorts to a 'selection of aphorisms, axioms and proverbs the truth content of which she could only assume from their common circulation, the way one puts one's faith in the face value of paper money' (330). Natalie, in other words, continues to find shelter in the unobtrusively conventional, incapable of critical (self-)reflection. Leah, in turn, reacts by trying to change the subject. It is not by sharing their own difficulties and doubts, then, but by placing a joint call to the police that ultimately brings a brief moment of intimacy. Incriminating their old schoolmate, Nathan Bogle, who they believe is responsible for Felix's death, the women, the narrator tells us, are infused with 'new energy', reminded of 'nothing so much as those calls the two good friends used to make to boys they liked, […] two heads pressed together over a handset' (332f.). This rather unsettling comparison—Leah and Natalie are, after all, not calling a primary school crush, but incriminating one with the police—ends the book. What little sociality is left in the world of *NW* appears reduced to, as an earlier phrase in the book suggests, a 'camaraderie of contempt' (88)—the temporary bonding against an excluded other.

NW thus compiles an assemblage of predicaments that each highlights a state of obstructed agency and points to a condition of systemic political and economic disenfranchisement. Leah's irresolution, Felix's cruel optimism and Natalie's impassivity all describe styles of (dis)composure that variously illustrate 'what happens when one finds oneself adrift amid normative intimate and material terms of reciprocity without an event to have given the situation a name and procedures for managing it—coasting through life, as it were, until one discovers a loss of traction'.[144] These are sensibilities, in other words, that call attention to contemporary conditions of failing material and fantasmatic infrastructures—sensibilities that, to use the conceptual register of this project, signal states of impasse. By letting such affective predicaments unfold alongside (and, at points, interfere with) each other, the novel is able to capture something of the historical mood of the present. As we have seen, this is also reflected in *NW*'s formal composition. By substituting temporal progression for a spatially oriented narrative that begins and ends in the same fenced-in garden in a Northwest London social housing project, the sense of stuckness that saturates the characters' life is reinforced formally. Smith's decision to provide each protagonist with their own narrative style reflects just how rooted the affective *sense* of autonomy is, no matter its feeble actuality.

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[144] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 200.

But there is another way to look at the novel's lateral arrangement, I want to argue, one that intimates a trace of optimism despite or amidst all this exhaustion. By replacing a single, consistent narrative voice in favour of an array of different voices, *NW*'s aesthetic attention wanders, spreads out. In this way, it is at once mimetic of the historical present—its meandering yet uncomfortable rhythm echoing the stretched-out present(-without-future) of crisis ordinary—at the same time as it also harbours a democratic quality. That is, in taking stock without filtering or focalizing its account through a single perspective, the book compiles a cluster of sensibilities and dispositions that is egalitarian in its assembly. This is not just to say that there is no omniscient narrator, but that there is no one narrator as such, only a succession of voices that vary in tone and form. As the narrative unfolds, the reader's attention is shifted and made to adjust to the idiosyncratic rhythms of each character's affective cadence. This, I would argue, is a democratizing gesture; it lets sensibilities unfold side by side, giving shape to the noise of the social without returning it to the order of a uniform narrative perspective. In doing so, it makes room for difference and dissonance without stability or the assurance of closure—a form of disorientation that is arguably at the centre of democratic experience.[145] Rather than cultivating empathy and compassion—as we have seen Butler's work do in the previous chapter—Smith invests in the novel's ability to assist in training the reader to bear affective complexity and irresolution. While Berlant's notion of lateral aesthetic, as we will see later, gestures towards the possibility that sideways drifting, at least in some of its variants, may not only be a reprieve from but also an interference with hegemonic rationalities, Smith uses laterality not so much as an interruption, however minor, of habituated modes of being, but as a means of pointing to, of entering into the difficult but necessary experience of social proximity. Ultimately, then, as much as the novel presents a forlorn picture of contemporary sociality, we might see its formal composition to at least retain a desire for the political (however uncertain and muted), its lateral arrangement working as the formalist protector of a democratic imagination.

3. On exhaustion and disappointment in its middle-class inflection: Rachel Cusk's *Outline*

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[145] This is close to but not the same as Rancière's valorization of free indirect discourse as the literary voice of equality. For Rancière, the impossibility to discern a central or external intelligence in a text compels the reader to adopt a more open-ended relation to the narrative's unfolding in which anything or anyone can count as the voice of the narrator, thereby rendering the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate speakers inoperative. In contrast, I argue that rather than a distinct narrative style, it is the paratactic ensemble of an array of different narrative voices that lends the book its democratic force. Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); for a perceptive analysis of Rancière's thought that does not only consider the conceptual import of his writing but also its formal arrangement, see Davide Panagia, *Rancière's Sentiments* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

Like Smith's *NW,* Rachel Cusk's *Outline* collates scenes of unredeemed desire, but shifts the emphasis from the instability wrought by neoliberal capital to the atrophying energies of normative sociality when thinking about states of obstructed agency. This is not to say that precarity does not play a role. The setting for Cusk's novel is contemporary Athens after all, in which echoes of the anti-austerity protests bespeak the brittleness of the moment. Likewise, the reader learns the protagonist's name through a phone call more than half-way through the book—the first and only time it is mentioned—in which Faye is informed that her request for a mortgage increase has been denied—as if to suggest that her identity is tethered to, if not determined by, her financial situation.[146] Yet, apart from these qualifying markers, the book is not focused on economic pressures and their compromising effects on ordinary life.[147] Instead, Cusk's portrayal of frustration in its middle-class inflection points to scenes of attrition to the side of material constraints; it suggests that those for whom an approximation of the good life is still attainable nevertheless repeatedly fail to find meaning or a sense of fulfilment in it. Traditional structures and practices for organizing and reproducing life—customary genres of life as a story of progressive development whose propulsive movement is cushioned by the promise of enduring reciprocity in couples and in families—no longer satisfy, if they ever did. In the following, I analyse how Cusk's novel engages such impasses in zones of intimacy and in the life narratives they generate.[148] Despite the prevailing sense of dissatisfaction that mark and interlink their stories, *Outline's* characters seem unable or unwilling to translate that affect into anything but a resigned shrug. While Faye herself is the furthest removed from these circuits of cruel optimism, her attention, I argue, nevertheless remains tethered to tracing their confines. To think with and through *Outline* about the impasse, then, pushes us to attend to the persistency of established genres of living whose promissory allure endures despite their depleting toll. This both resonates with and illustrates Berlant's reflections about the tenacity of people's attachments. At the same time, *Outline* prompts us to consider occasions in which the propulsive forces of attachment give in to a sense of drift and exhaustion. This, as Faye's emotional reticence and detachment will show, carries an ambiguous potential.

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[146] Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (London: Vintage, 2014), 211. Further references to *Outline* will be cited parenthically.

[147] For a reading that does indeed situate the novel in a primarily economic context, see Pieter Vermeulen, 'Against Premature Articulation: Gender, Empathy, and Austerity in Rachel Cusk and Katie Kitamura', *Cultural Critique*, forthcoming. Vermeulen reads *Outline's* unempathic narrative voice to be in critical dialogue with the (gendered) logic of austerity as a discourse at once economic and moral.

[148] *Outline* is the first part of a trilogy of books, followed by *Transit* (2016) and *Kudos* (2018). While all three novels engage the same themes, I focus on *Outline* here as its mood and formal composition serve as the clearest expression of an impasse sensibility.

3.1 The allure and disappointment of conventional life

In *Outline*, Faye listens to other people recount stories of romantic and domestic intimacies. On planes, in cafés, on boats, in restaurants and classrooms, people tell her of relationships forged and broken, of ordinary frustration and frustrated ambitions. The little we know about Faye herself is that she is a writer visiting Athens for a couple of days to teach a creative writing course. She lives in London with her two children, having moved there recently from her family home in the countryside, a place 'now the grave of something I could no longer definitely call either a reality or an illusion' (11). The dissolution of her marriage has turned Faye into a taciturn observer. Rather than speak, she watches and listens. 'I did not, any longer, want to persuade anyone of anything' (19), she writes early on in the book. Faye's principal role as a narrator, then, is to compile the stories she hears. Some of them she relays verbatim, others through reported speech or paraphrastic retelling. Over the course of the book, a tapestry of reflections emerges woven together by her reticent wit. Out of these stories certain themes arise—the ties of marriage and family life, the strictures of femininity, the struggle of reconciling these with one's sense of self, especially in relation to creative expression.

Faye shares several traits with Cusk, a British writer, mother of two, who has to renegotiate her identity after a calamitous divorce. It is a canny form of autofiction, one that obscures the authorial self rather than revealing it. Unlike, for example, Ben Lerner's *10:04*, that I will discuss later in this chapter, *Outline* does not rely on the psychological shifts of its protagonist to propel its narrative.[149] Rather than using her own life, she largely draws her material from the lives of others whose stories allow a faint outline of Faye herself to emerge. In two scenes, for instance, we encounter women whose impassivity evokes Faye's own composure. Faye is teaching her creative writing class. She has set the assignment to write a story involving an animal. One of the students, a woman named Sylvia, only brings a sentence. She tells the class:

> all I could think of was a line describing the exact moment I was living in: *a woman stood in her kitchen and thought about trying to write a story.* The problem was that the line didn't connect to any other line. It hadn't come from anywhere and it wasn't going anywhere either, any more than I was going anywhere by just standing in my kitchen. (209)

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[149] Indeed, both Cusk and Lerner employ the novel to explore the interplay between literary and lived fictions, using cerebral narrators who resemble their authors to do so. But the effects are rather different. Where *10:04*, as we will see, conjures an atmosphere of intimacy between reader and writer, *Outline's* tone is one of cool detachment. In that, it is in critical dialogue with gendered codes of conduct, as I argue in the following.

The student's imagination, at least on that day, approximates facticity. She cannot step out of the moment's self-reflexivity. There is a sense of deflated curiosity running through her account. Her routinized ordinary of teaching, of commuting, of speaking to her mother over the phone facilitates a motion that reads more like coasting than acting. On the one hand, the woman's failure to think up a story is just that: an unmet assignment. On the other, her inability to abstract herself from the immediacy of her embodied reality, to ride the distorting/transporting logic of fantasy and forge a narrative where there appears to be none, evokes a sense of impasse that points to a difficulty more engrained than a temporary glitch in imagination. In another scene, Faye finds herself in conversation with a playwright named Anne. Anne tells her of what she refers to as 'the incident'—a mugging and attempted murder—that together with the recent separation from her husband has left her unable to muster curiosity for the things and people around her. She calls it the problem of summing up. As soon as she can put a name to what it is she is engaged in, be it writing a play about jealousy or realizing that reading Beckett means navigating scenes of meaninglessness, she loses any interest. This dented appetite for the world also includes her relation to food. Mostly, she does not eat. When she does, it's sugary and she can't stop.

Both scenes, then, raise questions about the role of narrative in relation to a person's lived experience. In the first scene, there appears to be no particular event that can help narrativize its tableau of being-at-a-loss. But even in the second scene where the noise of trauma saturates the air, the impulse to treat the 'incident' as a 'premise towards which everything else is drawn' (232) is resisted. Instead, the two episodes point to a sense of weariness or disillusionment with the use of narrative as a ballast for alleviating the ambivalence the women have toward their present mode of living. Finding themselves adrift amidst previously meaningful genres of living—whether as the result of a loss or some other vaguer, less definable reason—the women are confronted with a sense of formlessness and invisibility. In this, they mirror Faye's predicament whose identity, both as a woman and a writer, has become newly unclear after the dissolution of her marriage. By discovering a loss of traction to what has hitherto provided stability and meaning, she comes up against disordering questions of form. Prevailing genres of life present themselves as questions anew. Weary of the spurious assurances afforded by narrative, she is adrift amidst questions at once personal and aesthetic.

As a novel made up of a sequence of intimate conversations, *Outline* evokes a familiar form of contemporary sociability, one that traffics in modes of confessional storytelling as a way of

cultivating and maintaining a sense of collectivity. By tracking fantasy across different scenes of intimate life-building in this way, the novel draws attention to shared patterns of expectation, which is another way of saying it attends to genre. For 'genre', in Berlant's capacious definition of the term, 'is a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take.'[150] Genres, in other words, lend direction to how people experience what unfolds in front of them. They provide a measure of coherence and continuity to what might otherwise appear as a discordant stream of experiences and impressions. To think about normative conventions in terms of genre helps us to understand the affective pull and compelling quality of normativity at the same time as it brings out the relevance of art when thinking about questions of social conventions. As Duschinsky and Wilson note, 'the concept of genre has the advantage of highlighting the dialectic of fictional and lived forms in which each animates and transduces the expectations and energy of the other.'[151] Generic expectations, in other words, span and interlink patterns of aesthetic consumption and customary modes of life—a concern that is made explicit in *Outline* itself when one of its characters voices his weariness with what he calls 'the story of improvement', which he tells Faye, 'has even infected the novel, though perhaps now the novel is infecting us back again, so that we expect of our lives what we've come to expect of our books' (99). Attentive to the relays between narrative as a mode of cultural creation and narrative as a force in lived experience, *Outline* thus uses the novel to explore conventional patterns of expectation as they relate to questions of femininity, marriage, freedom and the novel form itself.

In its formal arrangement, *Outline* sheds the trappings of traditional realist fiction—a weariness with literary narrative conventions that echoes Faye's disenchantment with prevalent genres of living. There is only a minimal reference to setting, no real story line and the interior life of the protagonist remains largely obscure.[152] Instead of plot or character development, then, we are presented with a series of conversations that unfold alongside one another, that spread out laterally, so to speak. This sense of sideways movement coupled with the novel's polyphonic quality is reminiscent of Smith's *NW*. Unlike *Outline*, however, *NW*, to recall, does not have a

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[150] Lauren Berlant, 'Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness,' *Supervalent Thought*, November 2011, https://supervalentthought.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf, accessed 08 July 2020.

[151] Robbie Duschinsky and Emma Wilson, 'Flat Affect, Joyful Politics and Enthralled Attachments: Engaging with the Work of Lauren Berlant', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28, no.3 (2015): 180.

[152] These formal characteristics resonate with what Berlant calls the 'waning of genre,' a development that, she argues, can be understood as the recognition, in literary terms, of the fading pertinence and purchase of an inherited model of life. She points to 'in particular older realist genres […] whose conventions of relating fantasies to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life.' Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 6.

unifying narrative perspective, but only a disparate assembly of voices. This collage of different narrative styles, I argued, emphasizes the mismatch between the perceived and actual autonomy of its protagonists in a socio-economically stratified society. The voices in *Outline*, on the other hand, are all filtered through Faye which evokes the sense of isolation that mars its protagonist. 'There was no longer a shared vision, a shared reality even', Faye says at one point, reflecting on her children's development. 'Each of them saw things now solely from his own perspective: there was only point of view.' (83) It is a remark that equally applies to the novel. Marooned in their 'separate and untransfigurable histories' (70), Faye and her interlocutors appear at an irreducible distance from one another. As one critic remarks: 'While the narrator is rarely alone, *Outline* mimics the sensation of being underwater, of being separated from other people by a substance denser than air.'[153] At the same time, the uniformity in tone and register that defines the characters' speech points to the sense that it is not so much the particularity of the testimonies that interests *Outline* but their shared resonances. Like *NW*, *Outline's* lateral polyphonic arrangement thus elicits a sense of impasse that circulates between singular personal stories and the impersonality of social structures. Yet the idioms through which both novels explore this condition differ. As we have seen, Smith's *NW* is attentive to mounting socio-economic pressures and the relevance of people's position within political economies of labour and entitlement when discussing encounters with contingency. Cusk's vocabulary, in contrast, is carried by the self-assured cadences of a bourgeois universalism. Her middle-class characters—writers, artists, teachers and other professionals—tend to profess their opinions in a way that has a generalist air to it. Yet even if the stories echo and mirror one another, they can only be partly generalized. For they speak of the exhaustions and dislocations of lives spent in the penumbra of heterocultural conventions as the fate of certain sectors of the (largely white, professional, metropolitan) population. As such, they add *one*, not *the* way in which the present impresses itself on people's consciousness as a time in which current genres of sociality fail to live up to their promises.

If the people in *Outline* are continuously involved in negotiating the tension between the assurances afforded by conventional forms of belonging, on the one hand, and the desire for freedom, on the other, the novel is intent on framing and foregrounding this struggle specially in its gendered inflection: what form can female autonomy take, *Outline* asks, in a world in which women are raised and required to facilitate and care for others? Throughout the novel,

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[153] Heidi Julavits, 'Review of Rachel Cusk's "Outline"', *The New York Times*, 7 January 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/books/review/rachel-cusks-outline.html, accessed 27 May 2020.

Faye appears constantly assailed with the voices of others, especially those of men. There is the Greek businessman, thrice-married and thrice-divorced, whom Faye meets on the plane and who tells her about the travails of his second marriage; there is Ryan, a fellow writing instructor, whose transactional domestic arrangements ensure the viability of his marriage but not, it seems, that of his writing. Finally, there is Paniotis, an editor and friend of Faye's, who recounts the dual demise of his marriage and of his belief in accumulation and improvement as the organizing principles of life. And in one scene, the reader is privy to an awkward attempt at romance in the present tense when the man Faye met on the plane makes an unwanted advance toward her during a boat ride they take together. She remains rigidly still, waiting for it to pass. In this section, as in the others, there is an invitation to read Faye's endurance as decidedly female—a gendered style of composure trained to facilitate the egos and desires of others. At the same time, her passiveness is also, at least partly, a choice—for it forms the narrative strategy that is the propulsive force behind *Outline*. Faye, as a result, neither fully departs from nor conforms to norms of conventional femininity. Her emotional unavailability is ambiguous. On the one hand, it seems to signal the traumatic impact of her recent breakup. The dissolution of her marriage has left her without a frame through which to make sense of herself and the world around her. In this, she resembles the two women whose impassivity reads as an attempt at keeping the viability of their desire intact by shielding it from what continues to disappoint. On the other hand, Faye's emotional underperformance is a deliberate stance. As a narrative strategy, it elicits the reader's participation. For her affective inaccessibility thwarts the associative link between femininity and affective clarity or legibility and, instead 'open[s] up questions about what the terms, registers, and idioms of exchange can and ought to be'.[154] I take this remark from an article by Berlant in which she develops the notion of 'flat affect' as a way of thinking about styles of emotional reticence that inform modes of cultural production to the side of melodramatic conventions.[155] To adopt postures of affective reticence or unavailability, she argues, can be a way of refusing to reproduce relational clarity and thus to reproduce the power differentials suffusing the encounter. She writes:

> biopolitical systems of supremacy often call on the problem populations—such as women, people of color, queers, and youth, but this too will vary—to have emotions *for* the privileged, to be vulnerable, expressive, and satisfying in disturbance. If they

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[154] Lauren Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* (2015) 28: 198.

[155] Berlant develops this argument in relation to 'a cluster of queer and independent docudramatic narratives' that first emerged in the 1980s and that continue into the present. 'Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*', 193.

withhold, they're called inscrutable, which is a judgement against a form of composure that on other bodies would be honored as good manners.[156]

The subject of flat affect, in other words, interferes with social expectations. By refusing affective clarity — by '[f]ailing to provide the appropriately feminine responsive atmospheres', to borrow a phrase by Jackie Stacey about Tilda Swinton — Faye troubles gendered assumptions about empathy and emotional expressivity.[157] Faye's flat affect evokes at the same time as it refuses the gendered norms of dialogic exchange. Rather than offering assurances of fellow-feeling, her muted responsiveness engenders an atmosphere of ambiguity. If Smith's *NW* questioned empathy's efficacy to create solidarity in a society organized around systems of socio-economic and racial hierarchies, *Outline* critiques the gendered implications of such emotive labour.

Faye's listening feels neither empathetic nor satirical; its coolly detached, unsentimental tone hovers undecidedly between the judgmental and the judicious. As such, it thwarts conventional categorization and attests to a degree of agency, 'claim[ing]', as Pieter Vermeulen argues, 'a third position beyond both feminized profligacy and masculine self-restraint: a position of resolute feminine unsentimentality'.[158] Together with the book's formal composition—its layering of encounters—this narrative style has the effect of shifting the attention from the particularity of each story to the shared resonances of their aggrieved testimonies. The personal comes to be seen as organized around the impersonality of social conventions: marriage, motherhood, the sense of life as progressive development. As the conversations accumulate, the feelings of exhaustion and disappointment that traverse them thereby come to seem less like stories of singular grievances than affective indices of a middle-class trapped in its conventions.

Compensating in loquacity for Faye's enduring reticence, the other characters speak to her openly and profusely. They variously attest to a tarnished sense of optimism as the good-life fantasies they have invested in do not yield the sense of recognition and reciprocity they expected. There is the Greek editor Paniotis, for example, whom Faye meets for dinner one evening. While his weariness is more pronounced than that of most of the other characters—in that, he comes closest to Faye herself—it is nevertheless emblematic of the book's overall tone. He tells Faye:

[156] Ibid., 197.

[157] Jackie Stacey, 'Crossing over with Tilda Swinton—the Mistress of "Flat Affect"', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28, no.3 (2015): 268.

[158] Pieter Vermeulen, 'Against Premature Articulation', 20f.

> Improvement itself is perhaps a mere personal fantasy […]. We are all addicted to it, he said, […] the story of improvement, to the extent that it has commandeered our deepest sense of reality […]; but this sense of life as progression is something I want no more of. […] In his marriage, he now realized, the principle of progress was always at work, in the acquiring of houses, possessions, cars, the drive towards higher social status, more travel, a wider circle of friends, even the production of children felt like an obligatory calling-point on the mad journey. (99)

The temporality Paniotis's remark points to is evocative of what Elizabeth Freeman calls 'chrononormativity' — her shorthand for a set of temporal practices and structures that conventionalize desire and intimacy, bringing people's lives in line with narratives of development and change. In Freeman's words: 'These are teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals.'[159] Like Faye, Paniotis no longer believes in these orderly, propulsive rhythms. Yet, life outside such structures bears its own costs and exhaustions. Paniotis speaks of the loneliness and insecurity the end of his marriage brought about (cf. 115f, 119). In this, he echoes several other voices in the book. For example, Faye's seat neighbour on the plane, a Greek shipping magnate, grieves the loss of structure that ensued after the dissolution of his first marriage: '[T]he life without limitations', he tells Faye, 'has been exhausting, has been one long history of actual and emotional expense, like thirty years of living in one hotel after another. It is the feeling of impermanence, of homelessness, that has cost him.' (24) *Outline's* portrait of middle-class life thereby engenders a sense of exitlessness: the stories oscillate between the confines and pressures of bourgeois domesticity, on the one hand, and feelings of isolation, on the other. There seems to be little desire for exploring modes of flourishing alternative to those promised by prevailing forms of living. Instead, the personal testimonies whose sequential movement make up the narrative thread of *Outline* tap into the affective assurances of the complaint. For complaining is ultimately a way of voicing one's grievances without giving up one's preferences; it is a way, in Berlant's words, for 'people to maintain both their critical knowledge and their attachments to what disappoints'.[160] To think with and through *Outline* about the impasse, then, is to come up against the persistency of established genres of living whose promissory allure endures no

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[159] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.
[160] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 22.

matter how depleted its characters feel. As such, it attests to the restraint and the difficulty of detaching from the protections of conventional life.

If most of the people Faye encounters remain invested in what disappoints, that is invested in the promise of belonging held out by normative conventions, Faye describes herself as 'trying to find a different way of living in the world' (171). Disenchanted with conventional forms of love and family life, she is trying to locate a way of being in the world outside these structures. But as much as she is disillusioned with the promise of love and the life story it generates, she ultimately takes her desire for freedom to be illusory as well.

> I felt that I could swim for miles, out into the ocean: a desire for freedom, an impulse to move, tugged at me as though it were a thread fastened to my chest. It was an impulse I knew well, and I had learned that it was not the summons of a larger world I used to believe it to be. It was simply a desire to escape from what I had. The thread led nowhere, except into ever expanding wastes of anonymity. (73f.)

Here, Faye's flattened affect does not suggest a mode of affective agency in critical dialogue with gendered patterns of expectation so much as it signals a sense of impasse: her stolid placidity intimates the orderly rhythms of numb or stunned sensoria that are all too skilled at channelling the subjects' attention in preordained ways. It is a way of knowing, of taking in the world that, unwittingly or not, makes no room for the tumble of surprise. As much as *Outline* thus traces a weariness with customary genres of life and art, it ultimately does so in a way that suggests that the only terms on offer are indeed those of convention. The impasse here comes close to a state of stuckness. Compare this with *NW*. Despite its forlorn presentation of contemporary sociality, *NW*, I argued, retains a desire for alternative idioms of belonging that together with its socio-political sensibility make *Outline's* focus on middle-class life and its discontents appear rather hermetic in both scope and mood.

4. Berlant's lateral agency (II)

Like Smith's *NW* and Cusk's *Outline*, *Cruel Optimism* mostly attends to attenuated forms of agency, tracking people's difficulties adjusting to compromised conditions. At the same time, Berlant, like Smith, also heeds the propitious valences of the lateral, but does so in a different register. That is, she considers—especially in the final chapter of her book—the promises and potentials that may be harboured in moments of halting suspension, that may develop within the folds of what she calls 'lateral agency'. Insofar as the language of laterality denotes gaps

and interruptions, Berlant's notion thus gestures towards the possibility that sideways drifting, at least in some of its variants, may not only be a reprieve from but also an interference with hegemonic rationalities. Of course, most of the time, forms of self-abeyance and -interruption may simply describe moments of temporary suspension of no lasting consequence, as the discussion of *Outline* has shown. Similarly, they may merely constitute necessary pauses abetting the smooth functioning of work cycles. And yet, to the extent that they signal gaps and glitches within life's ongoingness, these practices and modes of being may also, at times, point to the possibility, however tentatively and clumsily, to not simply reproduce what is already not working. Another way of saying this is that optimism dithering at an impasse might make for an opening. While denoting a certain stuckness, impasses also bristle with activity, after all. For one, as we have seen in our discussion of melancholy in the last chapter and of the affective (dis)composure of *NW's* and *Outline's* protagonists in this one, people will not let go of their attachments easily. The sense of self and world the latter have provided will likely have people engage in protracted cycles of adjustment and defence with all the collateral damage this entails. At the same time, periods of prolonged uncertainty may also engender spaces for experimenting in which alternative aspirations may develop and new idioms of belonging be tested out.

Thinking about the present-as-impasse in this manner is one way of complicating the binary between rupture and continuity that often underlies critical accounts. As outlined in the Introduction, such accounts promote a conceptual apparatus that distinguishes between a set of practices and conventions making up existing modes of governance, on the one side, and moments of antagonism drastically reorganizing material (economic, institutional, legal) scenes of belonging, on the other. These moments, in other words, mark the eruption of something definitive or substantial in the ongoing ordinary life of the body politic. Yet, what is relatively neglected in accounts such as these is the way in which the interruptive quality of most events is more uncertain and forgettable than they suggest and unfolds amidst and is easily absorbed by the noise of habituated activity.[161] Berlant's lateral aesthetic, by contrast, allows us to reflect

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[161] Some poststructural thinkers have also argued for the need to challenge this binary. Aletta Norval, for instance, seeks to shift critical attention from a focus on either side of the division to thinking about the mechanisms and practices available for traversing this split, that is, for facilitating novel demands to be inscribed into democratic life. What her analysis does not question, however, is the category of the event as such. Rather, she is interested in how moments of rupture and contestation may continue to reverberate throughout the body politic. My account, in contrast, seeks to attend to experiences not accounted for by a dramatic vocabulary of the event. I aim to make room for disturbances that do not qualify as form-shifting occurrences, for moments of suspension that are not the same as ruptures of the reproductive rhythms of the everyday. I also attend to the role of affect and attachment in these unfolding scenarios—something largely absent from the conceptual landscape of poststructural political thought. Cf. Aletta J. Norval, '"Writing a Name in the Sky": Rancière, Cavell, and the Possibility of Egalitarian Inscription', *The American Political Science Review* 106, no. 4 (2012): 810-826.

the uncertain and often minor quality of many events without thereby turning the unfolding present into a uniform stretch of continuity. Instead, its halting rhythms allow us to envisage the present-as-impasse in which protracted cycles of adjustment and defence unfold alongside practices, however nascent and scattered, that attempt to reimagine what individual and collective flourishing ought to look like.

Berlant herself turns to contemporary political art for an example of such a practice, seeking out work whose aim is to interfere with cruel optimism's double bind: '*not* reentering the normative public sphere while seeking a way, nonetheless, to maintain its desire for the political'.[162] As such, its aesthetic is characterized by a withdrawal from rather than confrontation with dominant political idioms, as Berlant puts it: 'a lateral exploration of an elsewhere that is first perceptible as atmosphere'.[163] This orientation puts it in proximity with certain contemporary attempts—Berlant mentions David Graeber's writing on anarchism along with the neo-communitarianism of J.K. Gibson-Graham—to rethink political practice and community, attempts that advance, in Berlant's words, 'a kind of philosophical pragmatism that involves becoming a political subject whose solidarities and commitments are neither to ends nor to imagining the pragmatics of consensual community, but to embodied processes of making solidarity itself'.[164] Giorgio Agamben's reflections on gestures as, what he calls, 'means without end' come to mind. Neither expressive of a determinate content nor constituting an end in themselves, the gesture, to Agamben, communicates communicability as such. It is a medial act, exhibiting the subject's irreducible sociality.[165] Politics, in this account, becomes the sphere where this shared mediality is enacted, privileging the potentiality expressed in its performance over any orientation to ends or preconditions. Berlant's lateral aesthetic, situated in proximity to these reflections, hovers in the stretched-out present between crisis and response, rummaging the space in-between, as it were. Scenes of 'animated suspension'[166] elicit the spectator's attention, thwarting habituated modes of perception. Slowing down the audience's gaze, they create a space in which an elsewhere, first perceptible as a 'collectively prehensible atmospherics, […] an orientation to the world with no predictable rhythm'[167], might find tentative traction. They provide an instance, however minor, that temporarily decouples

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162 Ibid., 230.
163 Ibid., 20.
164 Ibid., 260.
165 Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), esp. 49-60.
166 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 255.
167 Ibid., 231.

from an already aching cruel optimism, forming an opportunity to learn to pay attention to those moments in which ordinary time is suspended in wavering arcs of hesitation and indeterminacy.[168]

5. Moments of propitious contingency in Ben Lerner's *10:04*

> There are situations where managing the presence of a problem/event that dissolves the old sureties and forces improvisation and reflection on life-without-guarantees is a pleasure and a plus, not a loss.
> — Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*

Cruel Optimism ends by invoking fantasy and the resources of the imagination as pivotal in this transitional moment. '[T]he energy that generates this sustaining commitment to the work of undoing a world while making one', Berlant writes, '*requires* fantasy to motor programs of action, to distort the present on behalf of what the present can become.'[169] The artworks Berlant herself discusses are more subdued than this though. Their 'undramatic flatness' and 'quiet' [170] soundscape lie on the side of undoing rather than of making a world. Berlant writes:

> They [the artworks] manifest a politically depressed position, but without seeking repair in an idiom recognizable in the dominant terms. Instead, this art strays beneath the radar where things go without saying not because they are censored or normative, but because, as the body politic wanders around stunned in the crisis ordinary, it is not clear what to say.[171]

In contrast, the piece of art I want to focus on in the following—Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* (2014)—takes tentative steps towards the latter. *10:04*, I argue, both resonates with and supplements Berlant's lateral aesthetics. Like *Cruel Optimism*, it is concerned with a present marked by ailing material and fantasmatic protocols, in which the question is how to navigate or, rather, how to carve a space between despair of and blind fidelity to the political. Conditions of ingrained social inequality, market fetishism and ecological fragility lend the story its historical frame. Yet, unlike Berlant's account, *10:04's* tone is propitious; its narrative shot through with glimmers of possibility. By, to use Berlant's own phrase, 'imagin[ing] a potentialized present'[172], *10.04* thus takes off where Berlant's reflections end.

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[168] The artworks Berlant discusses that come closest to this notion of lateral aesthetics and that help her elaborate it are video pieces by Slater Bradley and Liza Johnson; cf. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Chapter 7, esp. 249-263.
[169] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 263.
[170] Ibid., 249f.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid., 263.

Set in a New York afflicted by recurrent superstorms, the narrative explores the ways in which the present flickers and shifts in relation to the protagonist's different projections about the future. Recently diagnosed with a potentially fatal medical condition, the unnamed alert neurotic first-person narrator wanders the streets of a city he increasingly imagines underwater. A heightened sense of biological fragility and ecological degradation combine to leave him repeatedly vertiginous—the presence faltering, severed from a viable horizon. At the same time, an unexpected 'strong six-figure' advance for his yet-to-be-written second novel not only adds another dimension in which futurity is at stake in the book, but also directly implicates the author in the 'murderous stupidity' of market fetishism, and the 'bad forms of collectivity' this entails.[173] As the protagonist remarks with unease, he, too, has become a 'futures trader', making money of a future that is yet to form.[174] Yet, while complicit, '[a]rt', the narrator tells his unborn daughter in an imagined conversation about the socio-economic situation that obtained at her birth—art also 'has to offer something other than stylized despair' (93). We may read *10:04* as testament to this sentiment. The epigraph on the novel's threshold already presages this. The Hassidim tell a parable about the world to come that pictures the messianic event to consist in a tiny displacement, a small shift. 'Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.' The story, as I mentioned, is *10:04*'s epigraph and its tenet a recurring motif throughout the book. Its earliest example comes when time appears suspended in anticipation of a major storm creating a common rhythm and topic of conversation that temporarily remove 'the conventional partitions from social space' (15). A halting supply chain estranges routines, allowing the narrator an unusually alert perspective: 'as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand [a jar of instant coffee] began to glow within it as they were threatened' (19). *Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.* The future's vulnerability opens it up to an intuition of contingency, a potential for change: 'what normally felt like the only possible world became one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs, however, briefly' (ibid.). Yet, the storm does not arrive, cancelling not only the communal atmosphere it had created but also the very memory thereof. Alternative pasts appear retrospectively erased, having been enabled by a future that has failed to arrive. Instead, we are back in the homogenous time of the present and its trajectory of capitalist continuity.

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[173] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), 4, 156, 108. Further references to *10:04* will be cited parenthically.
[174] Cf. Ibid., 157.

The messianic shift, this early example suggests, consists in a sense of contingency and possibility as well as an intuition about a commonality not predicated upon price. An instance in which these qualities appear realized comes in the form of the 'Institute for Totaled Art', a project the narrator's occasional lover Alena sets up together with a friend of hers.[175] Artworks legally declared worthless due to (at times only imperceptible) damage are severed from their status as commodities and become free to inhabit a less 'bad collectivity'. 'Not the shattered or slashed works to which Alena thrilled,' the narrator remarks, 'but those objects in the archive that both were and weren't different moved me: they had been redeemed, both in the sense that the fetish had been converted back into cash, the claim paid out, but also in the messianic sense of being saved from something, saved for something.' (134) As such, they point to an alternative future, one in which social relations are organized by something other than the blind metric of exchange value. A further related but distinct use of the messianic maxim occurs when the narrator contemplates a conversation he has just had with his friend Noor whose sense of self and world had collapsed upon learning that her biological father was not the one she had been raised by and identified as such. 'If there had been a way of saying it without it sounding like presumptuous co-op nonsense,' the protagonist muses,

> I would have wanted to tell her that discovering you are not identical with yourself even in the most disturbing and painful way still contains the glimmer, however refracted, of the world to come, where everything is the same but a little different because the past will be citable in all of its moments including those that from our present present happened but never occurred. (109)

What to make of this Benjaminian intuition of a past that would be 'citable in all of its moments'? We may read it, I think, as an alertness to and heightened sense of the past's contingency and dormant potentiality: a moment in which what could not have been but was and what could have been but was not become indistinguishable. It is arguably not so much about the past as it is about the ways in which the 'past's citability' allows us to distort the present on behalf of what the present may become, to use Berlant's phrase. From this perspective, 'discovering you are not identical with yourself' may not only be vertiginous, it can also feel promising, a threshold of possibility in which uncertainty becomes pleasurable.

At the same time, it matters who speaks. Lerner's protagonist exudes confidence. He is able to see possibility in moments of suspension. Berlant's qualification about the speaker in one of

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[175] The institute, the acknowledgments tell us, is 'modelled on Elka Krajewska's Salvage Art Institute' (243).

John Ashbery's poems appears equally pertinent here: 'Because Ashbery's [read: Lerner's] speaker is confident, because he has the ballast of normative recognitions and modes of social belonging in the habit of his flesh […] he can stand detaching from the promise of the habituated life and can thrive in the openness of desire to form, as heady as that may be.'[176] For others, including his friend Noor, the gap between one scene of optimism and another yet to be devised may feel more threatening than promising. This is an example of what I, at the outset, referred to as the relevance of social location when discussing people's encounter with contingency and the loss of assurance (which is one way of describing the impasse). Depending on one's position within political economies of labour and entitlement—circuits shaped by questions of class, race, gender, sexuality—embodied practices of comportment and response will differ. The unequal distribution of leisure time as much as the differential circulation of sensibilities, say, of trust in the world as a space one can safely be adrift and unknowing in, means that, in *10:04*, it is a white, middle-class, male narrator, living and (mostly) enjoying the life of a modernist flaneur, who is the one able to take pleasure in and collate moments of radical uncertainty.[177]

His more conventional political avowals do not work to convincingly address this imbalance either. When making dinner for an Occupy Wall Street protester who has come to his apartment to shower, it is this small act of care that suddenly triggers in the narrator the desire to have a child—a desire he, however, 'recoils' from just as quickly.

> So this is how it works, I said to myself, as if I'd caught an ideological mechanism in flagrante delicto: you let a young man committed to anticapitalist struggle shower in the overpriced apartment that you rent, and while making a meal you prepare to eat in common, your thoughts lead you inexorably to the desire to reproduce your own genetic material within some version of the bourgeois household. (47)

What might be the alternative? The narrator's answer: 'What you need to do is harness the self-love that you are hypostatizing as offspring, as the next generation of you, and let it branch out

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[176] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 36.

[177] Political accounts conceived within a primarily poststructural idiom—for instance, the work of Ernesto Laclau or Oliver Marchart—are at risk of treating notions such as contingency and uncertainty as politically emancipatory, or at least auspicious, regardless of their specific context, as I already noted in the Introduction. Yet for many people encounters with contingency and the loss of assurance may present scenarios more numbing in their familiarity or threatening given the prospect of prolonged instability than they present propitious stretches of time in which established customs are once more rendered indeterminate and are open to debate. Poststructuralism's sceptical relation to the category of experience as a valid object of analysis results in a disregard for the significance of such affective sensibilities when thinking about processes of social transformation. See, for example, Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London & New York: Verso, 1996) and Oliver Marachart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

horizontally into the possibility of a transpersonal revolutionary subject in the present and co-construct a world in which moments can be something other than the elements of profit' (ibid.). These political musings do not develop beyond these articulate catchphrases, however, 'leav[ing] themselves open', as Elaine Blair writes, 'to a lightly satirical reading'.[178] Unlike his reflections on art that come out of his work as a writer, these convictions do not translate into any direct political practice. Besides, the narrator ultimately decides to have a child with his best friend Alex anyway, spending a considerable sum of his advance on artificial insemination treatments.

But *10:04* is also in large part an attempt to transcend these (predictable) shortcomings. The promising contingency that the protagonist repeatedly discerns, be it in collective atmospheres, in anecdotes or in artworks, is rendered in such a way as to not remain confined to the particularity of his position. That is, by dilating his auspicious intuition into an affective training of the senses, as it were, in which perception becomes highly attuned to the heterotemporal spaces within capital, the narrator, we might argue, is able to amplify the potentiality he senses—beyond the singularity of his experience—into a resonating set of reflections. One way in which he does so is through the arch of the story itself which comes to mimic the shift of the messianic event. Having set out to write a book about forging a writer's archival past, the protagonist abandons these plans over the course of the book in favour of arriving in a present which repeatedly collapses historical and fictional authorship and in which pronouns and deictics become destabilized, uncannily referring to multiple orders at once. 'I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now', the narrator announces toward the end of the novel's fourth part,

> a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them; I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an actual present alive with multiple futures. (194)

At the end of the book, everything is the same—after all, the narrative is still about the writer's fraudulent plans—only a little different: he comes to replace them with his reflections about replacing them.

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[178] Elaine Blair, 'So this is how it works. Review of *10:04* by Ben Lerner', *London Review of Books*, 37, no.4 (2015), https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n04/elaine-blair/so-this-is-how-it-works, accessed 1 April 2019.

By trading the appearance of a polished object, a finished thought for the development of its conception, *10:04* shifts the reader's attention to the drift of thinking itself.[179] It substitutes the stabilizing effect of closure for a more intimate relation with the reader. The reader, in fact, is not only intermittently addressed throughout the novel; she is also tentatively evoked as part of a shared body of readers—in the second person plural.[180] The novel's concern with collectivity is thus translated into its very form as the narrator's reflections on belonging find a practical (if cautiously advanced) instantiation in the book's mode of address.[181] Alongside this appeal to the second person plural, the text is shot through with gestures of people waving and of arms reached out: Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc* reaches her arm toward the viewer as she is summoned by the angels; Marty McFly reaches his hand to his face as he vanishes in *Back To the Future*; Walter Benjamin's angel of history throws up his arms as he is propelled into the future; children wave at a news camera during the first storm, the narrator waves at a news camera, possibly the reader, during the second storm; he tries to hail a cab he imagines to pick up fares from, to use one of the book's images, 'both sides of the poem', etc. As these images accumulate over the course of the book, a curious assembly emerges, its parts conversing across and between different media, different times and narratives (the text incorporates film stills and photography, poetry and short story, recurrent references to times gone and ahead). This collage of nascent approaches further bespeaks *10:04's* interest in interconnectedness. Fittingly, the narrator repeatedly imagines different temporal orders and realities resonate and interfere with each other, allowing him to intuit a sense of sociability across time and space.[182] He has inklings of alternative orders immanent to the existent one and ventures that it is in art, above all, in poetry, in its prosody and grammar, that this intuition can find expression.

> Bundled debt, trace amounts of antidepressant in the municipal water, the vast arterial network of traffic, changing weather patterns of increasing severity—whenever I looked at lower Manhattan from Whitman's side of the river I resolved to becomes one of those artists who momentarily made bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body. (108f.)

Aptly, *10:04* is interlaced with some of Lerner's own previously published poetry and a *New Yorker* story. Lerner himself has spoken of this device as the literary equivalent of the ready-

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[179] In this respect, the novel echoes the aesthetic ambition behind some of Lerner's poetry. Cf. Ben Lerner and Gayle Rogers, 'An Interview with Ben Lerner', *Contemporary Literature*, 54, no.2 (2013): 218-238.
[180] Cf. Lerner, *10:04*, 157, 240.
[181] Walt Whitman serves as the protagonist's interlocutor in these matters. Part four of the novel is in large part devoted to Whitman and his poetic ambition of 'a textual commons for the future' (168).
[182] Cf. Lerner, *10:04*, 14f., 67, 78, 112ff., 194, 238ff.

made found in visual art.[183] While the poems and story remain materially identical, they are transformed by virtue of being placed in the novel, lending yet a further twist to the messianic evocation of a past that has become 'citable in all of its moments'. The novel, in Lerner's hands, thus becomes a virtual space that curates encounters with multiple art forms and tracks the ways in which artworks enter a character's mind and inform subsequent experiences. As much as this results in an engaging form of art criticism, it also allows Lerner to explore the ways in which different contexts and shifting projections resonate and interfere with our experience of the world. This is at once an aesthetic and a political concern. As *10:04* is intent to illustrate throughout, the texture of the present shifts depending on its arrangement into one narrative or another.

Perhaps, we can gauge the scale of these shifts in terms of their gradual assembly. The narrator's vivid imagination together with his alert sensibility manage to catch glimpses of alternative modes of sociability. While instances of such auspicious intuition might appear few and far between, the messianic parable—as a piece of *enabling fiction*—draws these fragments together. It provides a frame for moments that might otherwise fall through the habituated web of perception, allowing us to see them as links in a burgeoning constellation. As such, the book may teach us to pay attention to, have transference with, those moments of suspension in which meaning has become newly indeterminate. Being alive to these heterotemporal spaces, it suggests, may allow us to intuit different forms of sociability. This atmosphere of animated suspension that thwarts habituated modes of perception brings *10:04* in proximity to Berlant's lateral aesthetics. Both situate politics in an alertness to the present activity of the senses, in a commitment to the now in which potentiality is affirmed. Yet, in its propitious tone *10:04* also departs from Berlant's perspective.[184] Unfolding within the book's shift from 'irony to sincerity' (4) as the protagonist comes to displace the projected narrative about fraudulence with 'the one I've written in its place for you, to you, on the very edge of fiction' (237) — unfolding within and as part of this shift, *10:04's* collage of gestures of waving and reaching out together with its curation of temporary breaks within the contemporary order evoke a sense of nascent solidarity and promise, of, to use the narrator's own words, 'a present alive with

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[183] Cf. Ben Lerner and Tao Lin, 'Interview with Ben Lerner', *The Believer*, 110 (2014), https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-ben-lerner/, accessed 30 October 2020.

[184] It may, indeed, be a difference in tone more than anything else. Berlant's description of the 'lateral politics' she sees the contemporary moment to harbour appears as an equally apt summary of the message coursing through *10:04*. That is, both act 'in the hope that changing the white noise of politics into something focused but polymorphous can magnetize people to a project of inducing images of the good life that emerge from the sense of loose solidarity in the political that now occupies the ordinary amidst the exhausting pragmatics of the everyday.' Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 262.

multiple futures' (194). This, we could say, is *10:04's* take on the 'potentialized present' Berlant invokes at the end of *Cruel Optimism*. Or, somewhat less buoyantly, we may perceive the novel's import to lie in its playful interweaving of historical and fictional authorship and its repeated collapse of multiple fictional levels. Such devices create a sense of indeterminacy as they interrupt the flow of reading. In this vein, *10:04's* political force, however indeterminate or minor, may lie in an intensified experience of the present, in the way it facilitates an opportunity to sound out the moment of reading, allowing it to resonate in its ambiguity. With this, the novel appears once more in sync with the attentive but wavering drift of Berlant's lateral aesthetics.

Lastly, it is worth noting that as much as the political sensibility that *10:04* tracks and possibly engenders conveys a sense of tentative promise, it is a sensibility that appears uncoupled from any sense of direction. Rather than an aspirational imaginary, the book's critical gesture lies in its promotion of an attachment to potentiality as such. In this respect, the affective landscape of *10:04* is closer to the distended present that *NW*'s and *Outline's* characters inhabit than it might first appear. In all three novels, the protagonists navigate the impasse of the present 'without', in Berlant's words, 'an imaginary for the terms and the register in which new claims on social resources of reciprocity could be made'.[185] Indeed, the same could be said about *Cruel Optimism* itself to the extent that it is primarily concerned with tracking how people adjust to or become disoriented by the distended time of the impasse. Berlant's lateral aesthetic aims to register the different valences of suspension, but it does not consider the question of how to forge better modes of relationality from within and beyond the pressures of the current moment. While the next two chapters build on Berlant's reflections as they continue to examine the impasse as the phenomenological condition of life in the present, they will also begin to address questions of response, examining the pertinence of different ethico-political imaginaries in relation to the proliferating pressures compromising ordinary living.

Conclusion

By focusing on the staggering, roundabout movement of the impasse, this chapter has aimed to shift the emphasis from the performative subject of subversive agency to an understanding of agency and subjectivity in relation to moments or periods of drift, irresolution and hesitancy, but also of attentiveness and experimentation. These modes of comportment, I argued,

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[185] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 222.

contribute to a more capacious understanding of subjectivities, one attentive to the rhythms and structures that (dis)organize modes of living in contemporary democratic/capitalist societies. I approached these concerns through a discussion of Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* and brought the latter into dialogue with three novels, Zadie Smith's *NW*, Rachel Cusk's *Outline* and Ben Lerner's *10:04*. Berlant's conceptual imaginary, I suggested, provides a pertinent backdrop against which to approach these literary texts. Her vocabulary of lateral agency and cruel optimism allowed us not only to make sense of some of the ways in which the present impresses itself on the consciousness of the novels' characters and sets limits on their experience and action; its diachronic frame of sideways mobility and crisis ordinariness also enabled us to understand their predicaments as belonging to the same, if heterogeneous, historical sensorium. At the same time, the novels, I argued, supplement Berlant's account. If Berlant is largely interested in the figure of the cruel optimist, emphasising the attachments that continue to exert a holding power over us, Smith, Cusk and Lerner each offer further ways in which the pressures and demands of contemporary life are adapted to and lived. Together, then, these writers allow us to understand the impasse as a predicament that elicits a variety of responses that vary depending on people's social location: from the affective (dis)composures exemplified by Smith and Cusk's protagonists to the propitious sense of ambient contingency in Lerner's *10:04*. What, in the end, unites these disparate scenes, forming a recurrent theme throughout, is the sense of the increasingly brittle (which is not to say broken) state of the material and fantasmatic infrastructures holding current forms of the social together. This predicament will re-emerge in intensified form in the next chapter in which the cluster of developments summed up under the term 'Anthropocene' puts further pressure on the present and the cycles of (re)production that hold it in place.

Chapter Three

On Time and Narrative in the Impasse: Lisa Baraitser's *Enduring Time* and Maggie Nelson's
The Argonauts

So far, the impasse has directed our attention to questions of attachment and agency amidst patterns of spreading socio-economic precarity. As a conceptual heuristic, it is conceived in response to a rhetoric of trauma and catastrophe prevalent in critical discourses about the present. Building on Berlant's work, I argued that realities of intensifying structural inequalities often manifest in less dramatic ways and that, by reducing our conceptual imaginary to figures of trauma and exceptionality, we risk discounting a whole range of affective states that are of diagnostic value when trying to conceptualize contemporary subjectivity and agency. In the context of these reflections, the temporal experience of the impasse has only featured obliquely thus far, to the extent that I discussed the lagging temporalities of attachment and the fraying fantasies about the future as a time of betterment. In this chapter, I seek to attend to this question of time more explicitly. I want to do so by extending the descriptive reach of the impasse from denoting a condition of neoliberal crisis ordinariness to include a sense of the temporal unsettlement that the developments summed up by the notion of the Anthropocene precipitate. The Anthropocene refers to the human impact on the geological and ecological make-up of the planet, naming our present geological epoch as one of our own making. Yet the Anthropocene is a contested term. There is an ongoing debate about the term itself, the period of time it encompasses and the range of phenomena it includes.[186] For the purposes of this chapter, I use the notion to point to the ways in which anthropogenic climate change unsettles visions of the future as hopeful horizon predicated on continuous growth and development (both individual and collective). As such, this chapter is not conceived as a contribution to the vastly proliferating scholarship around the Anthropocene. Instead, it is interested in thinking about the temporal qualities of the impasse as inflected by the shadow of climate change. In light of the Anthropocene's emergence into public consciousness and debate, the impasse, we could say, denotes the suspended time of the present in which knowledge of the unviability of current

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[186] For an insight into some of the principal debates in this field, see, for example, Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Thesis', *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197-222; Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

modes of production and consumption coexists alongside the seeming impossibility of bringing about a workable alternative. The impasse, then, points to the experience of living in and through this present—a space of time in which continuity continues, so to speak, but tainted by a sense of socio-economic and ecological frailty. As Lisa Baraitser writes, whose work will be one of the focus points of this chapter: 'This caesura has duration. We differentially live it, are living in it, enduring it.'[187]

The simultaneous frailty and persistence of traditional infrastructures for reproducing life, I will argue, calls for a critical framework that in its attention to temporal experiences of ongoingness and duration supplements critical imaginaries bent on scenes of transgression and the immediate sense of change they entail. The impasse asks us to think through the slowness of chronic time, rather than the time of rupture. In the following, I turn to Baraitser's *Enduring Time* and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, one a monograph, the other a memoir, as works that heed the affective and temporal rhythms of the quotidian at a moment in which customary frames of expectation and futurity are fraying. Instead of drawing on critical registers of rupture and transgression, their writing suggests that it is the experience of living in and through the present-as-impasse itself, that can (paradoxically) teach us something about change. With Baraitser we will see that staying attuned to temporal forms of suspension pushes us to think about care and that to think about care is to think about a form of work *on* the social that is not reducible to acts of mere reproduction. Inserted within these questions of temporality is thus a question of ethics. Where evental theorists valorize practices of radical defiance or refusal, thinkers, such as Baraister and Nelson, cultivate an orientation to what sustains us, to what might facilitate a less bad experience at the level of the everyday movement of life. By advancing Baraitser and Nelson's account as a counterbalance to theories of the event, I do not propose that we replace a vocabulary of rupture with one of care. Instead, I want to suggest that we understand their relation as supplementary. If there is one thing that Nelson's *The Argonauts* teaches us, as we will see, it is the inadequacy of conceptual binaries to account for the complexity of life and its requirements. By focusing on the punctual temporality of rupture, evental theories risk abandoning the necessity of care and the often unevenly distributed labour that comprises it. To attend to the latter allows us to offset this imbalance, something that appears especially pertinent within the contemporary context in which the drawn-out temporality of the impasse asks us to think about duration rather than difference, about the feeling of 'within' rather than 'beyond', as it were. But before I turn to these matters, let me

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[187] Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 7.

begin by a brief comparison of two books that will allow me to trace how the developments indexed by the Anthropocene can be said to unsettle the temporal experience of the present. Doing so will also enable me to develop the case for the impasse as a supplementary perspective to the evental rhetoric that traverses much critical scholarship about the present.

1. The present as 'durational caesura'

In an article for *The New Inquiry*, Morgan Adamson suggests that we live in a time of what she calls Anthropocene realism. Drawing on Mark Fisher's idea of capitalist realism, she suggests that Anthropocene realism, or the sense that there is no alternative to petro-capitalism, is the prevalent genre shaping the contemporary political imagination. She invokes the psychology of disavowal to account for this: 'In the structure of disavowal,' she writes, 'belief and action are separated. […] [We] know climate change is a real, terrible thing, but we act as if the extraction of oil is necessary, the only viable solution to secure a sustainable future.'[188] This remark certainly captures something of the reigning ideology of our political present. Yet, I would argue that the destabilizing force wrought by (the prospect of) climate change is somewhat more pronounced. As a time uncoupled from its grounding in scenes of materiality, the abstract time organizing capitalist regimes of production is a time propelled by a future-oriented linearity in thrall to notions of endless economic growth and development.[189] The shifting conditions wrought by anthropogenic climate change put pressure on these temporal frames once unencumbered by material constraint. 'Time feels different in the Anthropocene', Briohny Walker writes.

> The material limits vanished under capitalist projects of abstraction are becoming
> visible […]. Heightened economic and ecological precarity are symptomatic of
> shifts and changes that reveal the failing of some dominant narratives of futurity to
> correlate with material possibility.[190]

The developments indexed by the Anthropocene, in other words, render the capitalist conception of time as abstract and linear newly uncertain and with them the 'homogenous, empty time' of realism whose secular imagination treats time as steady and predictable,

[188] Morgan Adamson, 'Anthropocene Realism', *The New Inquiry*, 30 November 2015, https://thenewinquiry.com/anthropocene-realism/, accessed 31 August 2019.
[189] Cf. Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 358-363.
[190] Briohny Walker, 'Precarious Time: Queer Anthropocene Futures', *Parrhesia* 30 (2019): 142.

stretching indefinitely into the future.[191] In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant writes: 'The impasse is a space of time without a narrative genre.'[192] The impasse, in other words, marks the dissolution of customary frames of expectation and development. To read our present's relation to climate change in this manner is thus to suggest that the dogma of Anthropocene realism persists but is losing its self-evidence. From within this present bent on capitalist continuity, the narrative frame of realism is fraying.

To corroborate this idea, I want to briefly compare two books that both trace the ways in which the developments indexed by the Anthropocene unsettle the present: Lisa Baraitser's *Enduring Time* (2017) and Andreas Malm's *The Progress of This Storm* (2018). These are books with rather different objectives. While Baraitser is interested in experiences of suspended time and the temporalities of caretaking she finds at work therein, Malm is engaged in an instructive polemic against a type of scholarship he accuses of obscuring questions of agency and responsibility in relation to climate change. And yet, as part of their different agendas, both theorists advance depictions of the present and its temporal experience that overlap in interesting ways. Invoking Fredric Jameson's account of postmodern time as a time of the synchronic, a time stuck in an eternal present devoid of a sense of historicity, both Baraitser and Malm argue that our contemporary moment signals a qualitative shift. The temporal experience of the present, they argue, is no longer the timeless time of postmodernity; its quality has changed or, at least, is in the process of changing. Insofar as this experience revolves around a sense of fragility, it is also not quite the same as the sense of Anthropocene realism that Adamson advances which is still able to appeal (via its structure of disavowal) to a sense of endless continuity and in that sense is closer to Jameson's account of postmodern timelessness.[193] Where Malm and Baraitser's accounts diverge, however, is on the question of wherein precisely the new temporal sensibility lies and of how it unfolds. In Malm's account, the present has become suffused with a renewed sense of time in the face of climate change. 'History has sprung alive', he writes.[194] As the sum of innumerous acts of fossil fuel combustion over the past two centuries, the storm of Malm's title is the past making landfall on the present and, we should add, on the future. For global warming does not just link past and present—the

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[191] For the relation between realism and time, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

[192] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 199.

[193] Adamson notes herself that, on closer examination, the tropes of Anthropocene realism 'feel both worn thin and lacking in confidence'. In this respect, she comes closer to the temporal sensibility Baraitser describes and that I outline in the following. Adamson, 'Anthropocene Realism', n.p.

[194] Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 11.

shadow of anthropogenic climate change also clouds the horizon, extending into a future of increasingly extreme weather. Malm notes: 'We are only in the very early stages, but already our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural responses, even our politics show signs of being sucked back by planetary forces into the hole of time, the present dissolving into past and future alike.'[195] In other words, for Malm, the advent of climate change dislodges or, at least, has the potential to dislodge the postmodern slumber. Yet rather than a modernist sense of buoyancy, the time returning to us, Malm suggests, is one of impending catastrophe.

In *The Seeds of Time* (1996), Jameson described postmodernity as a condition in which 'time consists in an eternal present and, much further away, an inevitable catastrophe, these two moments showing up distinctly on the registering apparatus without overlapping or transitional states'.[196] We could say that, for Malm, the 'much further away' of the catastrophe that Jameson saw as capitalism's temporal horizon has suddenly come much closer. Yet, like Jameson, he continues to uphold the conceptual separation of these two temporal moments. Lisa Baraitser, on the other hand, suggests that what characterizes time consciousness in the 21st century is the collapsing of this very separation. Decades of neoliberal precarization spent in thrall to the dogma of productivity and flexibility under conditions of economic austerity and a perception of the future that appears emptied of its affective quality of hope and betterment converge to leave us stranded in a present that is experienced as a time that is at once relentlessly driven yet fails to unfold. 'We appear to be holding our breath,' she writes, 'waiting, not for a pending catastrophic event in the sense that Fredric Jameson suggested characterized postmodern time, but for a diffuse catastrophe that has already happened to unpredictably play itself out.'[197] Where Malm conceives the shift in the temporal experience of the present as a series of punctual ruptures—epitomized by the synecdoche of his book's title[198]—Baraitser articulates it as a change that is registered in and as the 'new chronic' of the present.[199] That is, where Malm finds two temporalities in competition with each other— the monotonous time of the ordinary and the evental time of crisis—Baraitser folds them into one another. In her account, the

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[195] Ibid.

[196] Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 70f.

[197] Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, 7.

[198] Admittedly, the 'progress' of Malm's title works against a conception of temporal rupture. Yet, the prevailing objective of his account is to set up the evental time of climate change as something that has the potential to break into the monotonous scene of contemporary capitalism.

[199] Baraitser takes this notion of 'the new chronic' from Eric Cazdyn who analyses the ways in which a continual state of crisis management in contemporary medicine, globalization and politics has given rise to a condition that he names 'the new chronic'. Engaging a variety of different disciplines, he traces how that condition affects perceptions of time and denies ideas of alternative futures. Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

violences of contemporary capitalism are registered not so much as punctual crises but as part of an ordinary of socio-ecological precarity.[200] A look at Ben Lerner's *10:04* might help illustrate the discrepancy between their temporal imaginaries in light of Malm's own discussion of the book. In his reading, Malm first underlines the ways in which the narrator's reality is a familiarly postmodern one, to then point out how this reality is in fact 'under siege', a condition epitomized by the two storms that bookend the novel — 'a point of irrefutable reality [that] pierces the narrative'.[201] Malm notes how the protagonist becomes invested in questions of time in the light of these weather events. What he does not mention, however, and what a reading in line with Baraitser's account might dwell on, is the fact that both times the storms actually do not materialize, at least not in the New York neighbourhood that the protagonist lives in. So, rather than puncturing the narrative, their effect is more diffuse, such a reading might suggest. They do not so much break into the synchronic space of the narrator's present, but add to an atmosphere of already existing socio-ecological precarity.

The tendency in critical theory to construe what happens to people and populations as the result of catastrophic impacts risks attributing an overly disruptive power to events. In doing so, such scholarship neglects what is familiar, ambiguous or subtle about the event and how its impact might unsettle but not necessarily undo people's relation to the ordinary. Lauren Berlant's reservations appear pertinent here. Rather than seeing the 'historical present as the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful life that was supposed to just keep going on and with respect to which people felt solid and confident', she proffers to instead think about 'the ordinary as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine'. This is not to say that calamitous events do not occur. They do. As Berlant writes:

> Catastrophic forces take shape in this zone and become events within history as it is lived. But […] most such happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness' and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective takes form, becomes mediated.[202]

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[200] Baraitser's account here resonates with what Stephanie LeMenager calls the 'everyday Anthropocene'. The 'everyday Anthropocene', LeMenager writes, is intended 'to invoke neoliberalism as both a feeling-state and its underlying socioecological conditions, characterized by enduring crises that never quite come to a head' (224). As a way of attending to the 'present-tense, lived time of the Anthropocene', it is designed as a correction to the 'contemporary epochal discourse that capitalizes on the charisma of crisis' (225). Stephanie LeMenager, 'Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre', in Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor, eds., *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017): 220-238.

[201] Malm, *Progress of This Storm*, 3.

[202] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 10.

So instead of a binary account of the present whose analysis shuttles between the status quo and its disruption, Baraitser and Berlant call for a more differential picture, one that makes room for gradation and that allows us to heed middle ranges of agency, modes of conduct or adjustment that are neither acts of mere compulsion or passivity nor forms of heroic refusal.[203]

Admittedly, Malm's conceptual register is close to Baraitser's, at points. His appeal to 'learn how to track this storm' as well as his notion of 'the *progress* of this storm' signal an appreciation of the chronic and ongoing temporality of the crises of contemporary capitalism.[204] Yet, in Malm, this stands in competition with and is at risk of being obscured by a readiness to attribute the evental a rupturing power which is indicative of and is tied up with his (modernist) notion of change as an instantaneous temporality that disrupts or, at least, has the potential to disrupt the empty, mechanical time of capitalism.[205] As a result, Malm's account channels its critical attention in such a way as to leave the present reduced to a question of complacency versus activism, conformity versus radicality.[206] It leaves no room for modes of experience and time that do not conform to registers of the eventful or disruptive; panic and fear are the affects his writing is in thrall to. In fact, we could argue that Malm's account thereby subscribes to an apocalyptic temporality. For the apocalyptic, to adopt Robyn Wiegman's definition, 'is attached to the time that has not yet been lived, which writes the present as the failure of the future'.[207] This is the temporal horizon that Malm's writing at once summons and chafes against. Baraitser's work, in contrast, depicts the present as a form of suspended time, as a time in which the affective horizon of the promise of the future has given way to practices of endurance. By

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[203] Žižek's politics of the act or Agamben's construal of Bartleby come to mind with respect to the latter. Both thinkers focus on radical modes of non-compliance at the expense of more ordinary composures and practices. See the Introduction for a more detailed outline of their accounts.

[204] Malm, *Progress of This Storm*, 14, title page.

[205] This is corroborated by Malm's effort, elsewhere, to develop 'dialectical images', in Walter Benjamin's sense of the term, from fossil fuel fiction. 'The dialectical image,' Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*, 'is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash' (473) and whose puncturing force has the possibility to disrupt the 'status quo' (474). In Malm's words: 'By seeing itself as prefigured in past images preserved in works of art, the present awakens to its real structure' (128). Further drawing on Benjamin, he writes: 'Reading this [fossil fuel] literature in a warming world will "explode the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins—that is, with the present". Images from the past might be recovered so as "to bring the present *into a critical state*"' (135). Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999). Andreas Malm, '"This is The Hell That I Have Heard of": Some Dialectical Images in Fossil Fuel Fiction', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 53, no. 2 (2017): 121-141.

[206] It thereby comes close to a type of theory that Eve Sedgwick calls out for its reifying depiction of the present. She writes: 'One's relation to *what is* risks becoming reactive and bifurcated, that of a consumer: one's choices narrow to accepting or refusing (buying, not buying) this or that manifestation of it, dramatizing only the extremes of compulsion and voluntarity.' Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 13.

[207] Robyn Wiegman, 'Feminism's Apocalyptic Futures', *New Literary History*, Vol 31: 4 (2000): 807.

tarrying with and in the time of this ordinary, she makes room for experiences that risk being overlooked when we gear our attention towards occurrences that correspond to the register of the eventful. Accordingly, rather than conceiving change through the temporal logic of the break (whether catastrophic or revolutionary), she attends to practices and temporalities that allow her to rethink 'social change as occurring in or through a form of chronic time'.[208] By staying close to stretches of time in which difference gives way to duration and experiences of interruption yield to questions of persistence and endurance, Baraitser thus counterbalances narratives, such as Malm's, that, in their attachment to the punctual rhythms of rupture, risk discounting non-eventful spans of time. Like Berlant's, Baraitser's is a language of brittleness and attrition that approaches the social from within the troubled, yet ongoing movement of life. As such, it helps us to further develop a conceptual scaffold around the impasse as an experience of 'crisis ordinariness', whose drawn-out, unspectacular appearance lacks the urgency and intensity of the extreme. Yet, unlike Berlant, Baraitser also invokes an ethical register, reflecting on what it might mean to consciously inhabit the time of the impasse.

2. On care, repetition and queer theory

Until recently, that is, before the emergence of the notion of the Anthropocene into public consciousness and debate, the problem of futurity has been most vigorously presented *as* a problem by queer theorists.[209] Most prominently, Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004) critiqued the logic of 'reproductive futurism'.[210] The predominance of heteronormativity, he argued, results in a political order in which the future can only be conceived in relation to the progressive unfolding of a normative timeline expressed through the figure of the Child as hopeful horizon. 'We are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future,' he wrote, 'than we are able to conceive of the future without the figure of the Child.'[211] In response, Edelman calls for an embrace of queer negativity. That is, rather than striving for inclusion in this domain, he suggests a deliberate identification with those who are '*not* "fighting for the children"'.[212] Queerness, in his account, thus lies in the refusal to secure

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[208] Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, 17.
[209] And, I should add, by Marxist thinkers like Fredric Jameson. For Jameson, postmodern time, as mentioned earlier, is a time that lacks a sense of historicity and thus also a sense of possibility regarding the future as a time different from the present. For the purpose of my argument, however, this section focuses on the way in which queer theory has problematized questions of futurity.
[210] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).
[211] Ibid., 11.
[212] Ibid., 3.

meaning through the anticipation of a developmental-futural narrative ('the poor man's teleology'[213]) and an embrace of one's status as the 'outside' of the social order's viability. To be queer is to refuse 'every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally defined'[214], a refusal Edelman names as the death drive.[215]

Yet, since Edelman wrote *No Future* the context has changed. The temporal unsettlement of the Anthropocene that both Baraitser and, as I will argue, also Maggie Nelson's writing register calls into question the pertinence of Edelman's account of queer as a refusal of futurity. Now that the horizon of contemporary politics is troubled by the prospect of climate change, a problem that is likely to be made worse by the existence of more and more children, the imperative to reproduce is losing some of its normative power—a development exacerbated by conditions of socio-economic precarity whose persistency renders the prospect of having and raising children increasingly unfeasible.[216] As a result, there is the need to rethink the notion of queerness as it relates to time. Not unlike the evental scholarship I outlined in the Introduction, Edelman's account, as the brief summary above suggests, is invested in a critical strategy geared towards dramaturgies of rupture and transgression: queerness, for Edelman, is the unbinding force that ruptures totality or, as A.C. Facundo puts it, the 'fantasy of shattering reified intelligibilities in a kind of cathartic trauma'.[217] Baraitser and Nelson eschew such a vocabulary. Instead, their writing attends to the temporal and affective rhythms of the quotidian to make room for other valences of queer experience. These valences are of timely significance, I argue, for they come at a moment in which the simultaneous frailty and persistence of affective and material infrastructures calls for a critical framework that in its attention to the drawn-out temporalities of the impasse supplements critical imaginaries bent on scenes of transgression and the immediate sense of change they entail. The impasse asks us to think through the slowness of chronic time, rather than the time of rupture. In the following, I first focus on the time of repetition, one of the obdurate temporalities Baraitser dwells on, before turning to

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[213] Ibid., 4.
[214] Ibid.
[215] In Edelman's Lacanian reading of Freud, the death drive acts as a force of unrelenting pressure in psychic and social life whose negativity and temporal constancy persistently undercut the future orientation of the symbolic order.
[216] Once more, Lerner's *10:04* is illustrative in this respect. Rather than the default assumption, the idea of having and raising a child courses through the novel as a question that fills the narrator with ambivalence. On top of concerns about his (in)adequacy as a potential father, his ambivalence is in large measure due to anxieties about the future and an unease about the act's apparent selfishness with respect to present-day expressions of sociality committed to an alternate futurity as well as to the dire reality that the child will likely have to navigate. Cf. Ben Lerner, *10:04*, 47, 92-94.
[217] A.C. Facundo, *Oscillations in Literary Theory: The Paranoid Imperative and Queer Reparative* (New York: SUNY Press, 2016), 44.

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*. Baraitser's account allows us to see that the time of repetition forges attachment and thus a more tightly knit social tapestry. Nelson's work adds to this by questioning the forms these attachments take. In so doing, she supplements Baraitser's work, I argue, not only by adopting a more capacious understanding of sociality but also by making room in her account for the ambivalences and ambiguities that saturate scenes of relationality. Taken together, *Enduring Time* and *The Argonauts*, I argue, thus contribute to the idioms available through which we understand and (re)negotiate better forms for the social. Instead of appealing to critical registers of rupture or envisioning alternative temporal imaginaries, their writing attends to what it might mean to consciously inhabit the time of the impasse. Doing so, they suggest, prompts us to reclaim the time of the chronic and the pedagogy of ambivalence for thinking about processes of social transformation.

2.1 Remaining Faithful to the Non-Event: Lisa Baraitser's *Enduring Time*

Baraitser's *Enduring Time* focuses on forms of suspended time that emerge in response to foreclosed futures, what she describes as 'felt experiences of time not passing'.[218] She relates these temporalities, which include 'waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, maintaining, preserving and remaining'[219], to the act of caretaking itself. Care work, in her account, is not so much or not just aimed at respite from exhausting realities of productive labour and is thus not simply reducible to acts of social reproduction. Shifting her focus from acts of caring in line with trajectories of development or recovery, to modes of caring that may never come to an end, Baraitser reads the latter as a form of work *on* the social itself—practices in which there is the potential to transcend 'the immanence of our own historical moment in precisely the places that it looks simply impossible to happen'.[220] In other words, 'care work', as Elizabeth Freeman succinctly summarizes, 'changes [or, we may add, at least, has the potential to change] what looks like historical inevitability, but through acts that do not look in any way historical, event-like, ruptural, or even temporal at all'.[221] Moving away from a framework of rupture and transgression, Baraitser seeks to reimagine 'social change', as I have already hinted at above, 'as occurring in or through a form of chronic time'.[222]

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[218] Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, 2.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid., 14.
[221] Elizabeth Freeman, 'Committed to the End: On Caretaking, Rereading, and Queer Theory', in Scott Herring and Lee Wallace, eds., *Long Term: Essays on Queer Commitment* (London and Durham: Duke University Press), forthcoming.
[222] Baraitser, Enduring Time, 17.

One of the forms of suspended time that allow her to do so is that of maternal time. In critical dialogue with the queer theory of Edelman and his followers, Baraitser asks: 'Can we use maternal time, deliberately embraced as repetitive time, as a way to rethink queer and the time of the death drive?'[223] She raises two questions in relation to Edelman's account. Firstly, as already noted earlier, she sees the linear narrative time Edelman's polemic pits itself against as itself in crisis, displacing the dichotomy between the future and the death drive that his account relies on. From concerns around the brittle state of material and affective infrastructures amidst conditions of austerity to ecologically-inflected discussions around inter-species survival, she argues that the prevalence of an understanding of the future as endlessly deferred, yet hopeful horizon is in the process of losing if it has not already lost its hold on the collective imagination. 'As the ways we imagine futures shifts,' Baraitser writes, 'our temporal imaginaries may no longer be structured by that "poor man's teleology" that relies on the figure of the child for its production, calling into question Edelman's defence of queer as a deliberately recalcitrant refusal to fight for the future.'[224]

Secondly, in relation to these shifting temporal imaginaries, Baraitser calls for a reconfiguration of the time of the death drive. Drawing on Adrian Johnston's work on the temporality of the drives, she argues that the death drive does not just unfold along one temporal axis. Rather, it is internally split into an 'axis of iteration (which accounts for the constancy of the death drive), and an axis of alteration (which accounts for the capacity for the drive to change object and aim)'.[225] For Edelman, in contrast, the temporality of the death drive persists as a turn away from rather than an assumption of developmental time. By discounting alteration in favour of the temporality of iteration, he 'relegates *development* to the nether side of queer,' Baraitser argues, 'and with it the time of maternity, of staying alongside the development of another'.[226] The time of maternity, in Baraitser's account, is the time it takes for attachments to materialize. It is through the 'repetitive, obdurate, mundane practices of maternal care', she argues, that repetition literally comes to *matter* as a bond between mother and child.[227] Maternal time and Edelman's queer time thus share 'a dynamic *chronicity*, alive to the potentials of *not* moving on'. Yet, a maternal death drive or, more simply, maternal time maintains 'its link with the

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[223] Ibid. 78.
[224] Ibid. 84.
[225] Ibid., 85.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid., 76.

ethical principle of one's future being bound up with the future of another'.[228] The death drive, reconfigured via this notion of maternal time, thus encompasses both the time of constancy and the time of development. As 'the suspended time of allowing one life to unfurl in relation to another'[229], it allows us to apprehend a time that is neither the disruptive time of Edelman's transgression, nor the temporality of normative development. Such a time shares with our current temporal imaginaries a sense of suspension, of what Baraitser herself calls 'thick or viscous time'[230]; but repetition also indicates the time involved in forging attachments and hence a more tightly knit social tapestry. For the repetitive time of care 'admits the possibility of interdependence', as Freeman points out,

> and of matter as something built, created, sustained into the future, by *practice* rather than just as emerging intact into and symbolizing a future. Here, staying close to an object that does not contain the potential to liberate us (or itself) is precisely what creates and recreates the social.[231]

Care work, in Baraitser's account, then, is something other than the seemingly meaningless labour of social reproduction. For her, practices of care are forms of sustenance, the sustenance of oneself as well as of others, that create and maintain the social fabric. Such practices do not just facilitate a semblance of continuity but constitute an accomplishment in a present marked by ever increasing pressures on ordinary modes of living on. To tune into the temporal rhythms of the repetitive and the chronic in this way is thus to attend to what risks being overlooked by critical imaginaries geared toward registers of the eventful. *Enduring Time* thereby allows us to understand the drawn-out temporalities of care as a potential response to the protracted time of the impasse whose endurance after all requires the maintenance of social bonds.[232]

However, what Baraitser leaves relatively unquestioned in her account of care as generative of attachments are the forms and the affective qualities that these attachments take. In so doing, she risks sentimentalizing the time of care, lending its performance a somewhat certain and unambiguous quality. That is, she does not pay much attention to the possibility of its failure and to the way in which our attachments are likely to be sources of frustration as much as

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[228] Ibid., 92.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Ibid., 68.
[231] Freeman, 'Committed to the End', n.p.
[232] Questions around care and maintenance will reappear in the next chapter where I will discuss them in relation to Hannah Arendt's division of human reality into the domains of labour, work and action. Arendt, as we will see, sees labour as a type of activity that is purely reproductive, a notion that Baraitser's account usefully complicates. In this respect, Baraitser's work shares traits with that of Mierle Laderman Ukeles whose art I will focus on in the next chapter.

satisfaction (Berlant's cruel optimism would be a case in point). The time of 'mattering' as the time in which social bonds are forged and sustained is a time of conflicting rhythms, after all, in which ambivalent desires coexist. This is not to say that Baraitser does not take note of these valences. She does. However, the focus of her reflections centres on the idea that enduring time is about a 'principle in psychic and social life of the permanent non-severance of selves, others and institutions from what sustains them'.[233] That is, she focuses on the permanence of our attachments rather than tracing their affective vicissitudes or questioning their desirability. It is with this in mind, that I now turn to Maggie Nelson.

2.2 Scenes of thoughtful inconclusiveness: On Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*

Maggie Nelson's genre-bending memoir *The Argonauts* shares Baraitser's interest in a queer theory whose conceptual register does not remain confined to ideas of rupture and transgression. Akin to Baraitser's account, a sense of ecological fragility and future uncertainty index the historical atmosphere within which Nelson's reflections unfold. While these themes do not occupy the centre of her narrative, they nevertheless frame it. Already in its first few pages, humanness is associated with 'trashing and torching the whole motley, precious planet, along with its, our, future'.[234] Nelson's reflections end, in turn, on a more tender note, yet one that still evokes a sense of uncertainty, of temporal unsettlement: 'I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song' (178). The theme of 'no future' also emerges halfway through *The Argonauts* when Nelson voices her ambivalence towards Edelman's work. While she agrees that '[r]eproductive futurism needs no more disciples', she is sceptical of the political implications Edelman's thought carries. '[B]asking in the punk allure of "no future" won't suffice,' she writes, 'as if all that's left for us to do is sit back and watch while the gratuitously wealthy and greedy shred our economy and our climate' (95).[235] Yet, rather than composing a plea for political activism, Nelson uses this mood of socio-ecological precarity as an occasion to rethink the social structures and temporal patterns through which we organize and narrate our lives, 'adapting', as Tanya Agathocelous suggests, 'the individualistic

[233] Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, 180.
[234] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House UK, 2016), 5. Further references to *The Argonauts* will be cited parenthically.
[235] Edelman has specifically distanced his own embrace of negativity in *No Future* from a punk aesthetic. The latter, he argues, succeeds on the level of style alone. Politically, it is still invested in the identity principle of reproductive futurism. (He makes this point in reference to the work of Judith Halberstam.) Yet, Nelson's reservations still hold, I would argue. Whether punk or not, Edelman's account makes no room to salvage some form of future that is different to the heteronormative trajectory he opposes. Cf. Lee Edelman, "Antagonism, Negativity, and The Subject of Queer Theory", in 'Conference Debates: The Anti-Social Thesis in Queer Theory' Special Issue, *PMLA* 121, no. 3: 821-822.

focus of life narrative to the question of how we might think about collaborative survival in precarious times'.[236]

Indeed, in its fragmented, non-chronological style and its probing reflections that never seem to settle, *The Argonauts* reimagines life narrative from a movement forward in time to an ongoing labour of 'revisitations' (140). Life, in Nelson's depiction, does not so much unfold as a linear narrative driven by intention and ambition and centred around events and epiphanies, what Lauren Berlant calls the idea of life as unfolding in 'projects of self-extension that seek to lock in the will-have-been of future anteriority'[237]; instead, life narrative, in *The Argonauts*, is an episodic account of recurring themes that involves revisiting old ideas and allegiances and measuring them against one's shifting lived experience. Its episodic narration takes the form of paragraphs—there are no chapters—that range from a single sentence to two pages in length, sometimes forming a sequence, at other points each remaining a self-contained thought. One way to recount the arc of the book is to describe it as the story of Nelson's falling in love with, marrying and raising children with the artist Harry Dodge as well as of Harry's bodily transformation—he decides to undergo top surgery and starts taking testosterone—that is paralleled by Nelson's own during her pregnancy. While this summary is accurate, it is deceptively neat. More than the plot or any of its elements, it is the distinctive rhythm of Nelson's searching intellect that lends the book its associative coherence. Like Baraitser, Nelson is keen to disentangle motherhood from an image of conformity and to make room for a notion of queerness that is capacious enough to encompass quotidian realities of care. 'The tired binary that places *femininity, reproduction, and normativity on one side and masculinity, sexuality, and queer resistance on the other* has lately reached a kind of apotheosis,' she writes, 'often posing as a last, desperate stand against homo- and heteronormativity, both' (94). She chafes against the misogynism of this position that treats 'procreative femininity' as an interference with queerness. If there is a principal concern traversing the book, this is it: how to forego an understanding of queerness that reduces complex and messy lives into a binary of transgressive versus normative and that treats motherhood and the domestic as inherently reactionary forms of love? *The Argonauts* does not express these concerns in the form of argument, however, nor does its narrative seek their resolution. Instead, personal stories lay the ground for conceptual explorations, that at times turn into art criticism, before circling back again to further personal stories—wheeling reflections at the heart of which lay questions about

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[236] Tanya Agathocleous, 'Life (Narrative) in the End Times', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 29 November 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/life-narrative-end-times/, accessed 31 August 2019.
[237] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 99.

normalcy and deviance, love and family-making at a time in which customary frames of expectation and futurity are fraying. In its exploration of questions of intimacy, family making, femininity and creativity, *The Argonauts* recalls Rachel Cusk's *Outline*. Indeed, in both texts the present is encountered as a disordering question of form. Rather than offering assurance, prevailing genres of intimate life-building and narrative present themselves as questions anew. Yet where Cusk's *Outline*, as we saw in the last chapter, ultimately remains entangled in the prevailing terms and registers of social life, Nelson offers a tentative projection of an alternative good-life imaginary. Here we encounter an improvisation with conventional genres of both life and art that turns the loss of assurance felt in the wake of the impasse into an incitement to imagining alternative ways of inhabiting this transitional space.

In one scene, Nelson recounts the story of a friend who comes over to her and Harry's house and, looking for a coffee mug, pulls down a mug that has a photograph printed on it, showing Nelson, seven months pregnant, and her family dressed up to go to the *Nutcracker* at Christmas time. '*Wow*,' the friend exclaims, '*I've never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life*.' While certainly meant as a joke intended to signal inclusion, something about the comment irritates Nelson: '[W]hat about it is the essence of heteronormativity?' she wonders.

> That my mum made a mug on a bougie service like Snapfish? That we're clearly participating, or acquiescing into participating, in a long tradition of families being photographed at holiday time in their holiday best? That my mother made me the mug, in part to indicate that she recognizes my tribe as family? What about my pregnancy—is that inherently heteronormative? Or is the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation (or, to a put a finer edge on it, maternity) more a reactionary embrace of how things have shaken down for queers than the mark of some ontological truth? (15f.)

Nelson is not interested in an account of queerness that trades in oppositional thinking and that precludes certain forms of domesticity, including the domesticity the 'bougie' mug signals. '[I]t's the binary of normative/transgressive that's unsustainable,' she writes at a later point, 'along with the demand that anyone live a life that's all one thing' (93).

Yet, *The Argonauts'* episodic narrative does not amount so much to a defence of things like motherhood and marriage as it presents Nelson's way of understanding or forging her own relation to these practices through writing. She attends to the specificity of her experience, measuring it against rather than making it cohere with received ideas and allegiances. For example, in reference to the experience of caring for her newly born son, she writes:

in Iggy's first year of life, Winnicott was the only child psychologist who retained any interest or relevance for me. Klein's morbid infant sadism and bad breast, Freud's blockbuster Oedipal saga and freighted fort/da, Lacan's heavy-handed Imaginary and Symbolic—suddenly none seemed irreverent enough to address the situation of being a baby, of caretaking a baby. *Do castration and the Phallus tell us the deep Truths of Western culture or just the truth of how things are and might not always be?* It astonishes and shames me to think that I spent years finding such questions not only comprehensible, but compelling. (24)

The italicized question comes from gender theorist Elizabeth Weed, one of many quotations Nelson laces her text with. Mostly they appear in italicized font with the original writer's name printed in the margins. This heightened intertextuality enacts the lineage of Nelson's identity as a writer and lends the book a polyphonic quality. It is also a way of reflecting in form what the book covers thematically. Borrowing a phrase from the poet Dana Ward, Nelson names the numerous thinkers she invokes in the course of her reflections her 'many-gendered mothers' (71). As Moira Donegan remarks, '*The Argonauts* is a project about queer family-making twice over: literally, as it tells the story of Nelson, Harry, and their children, and literarily, in its composition.'[238] Nelson's experiences of bearing and caring for a child take up a central position in this account. Yet, despite their importance, at no point in the text, does her son lend her reflections a teleology they otherwise eschew. Like its other autobiographical elements, the parts revolving around her son arrive out of order. We first encounter Iggy, 'pause[d] on the threshold of [Nelson and Harry's] backyard, as he contemplates which scraggly oak leave to scrunch toward first with his dogged army crawl' (24f.). But just as quickly he reverts back to a wish, as Nelson lies on a gynaecologist's table, enduring gruelling rounds of artificial insemination (cf. 96). While Iggy forms a central part of Nelson's episodic story-telling, it is the affective and bodily experience of bearing and caring for him that her narrative primarily attests to. Not unlike Baraitser, shifting her attention from the cared-for subject with his trajectory of development and maturation to the experience of maternity and maternal care, her account remains wedded to the present in all its detail. These specific, often very physical descriptions keep Iggy literally grounded; at no point is he elevated to the conceptual heights of symbolizing futurity. Rather, as Tanya Agathocelous writes, he 'too becomes a voyager on the *Argo*'.[239] To the extent that the book holds onto a sense of futurity it is thus not the

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[238] Moira Donegan, 'Gay as in Happy: On Maggie Nelson', *n+1* issue 23 (2015), https://nplusonemag.com/issue-23/reviews/gay-as-in-happy/, accessed 31 August 2019. However, it is important to note that Nelson's queer family-making inscribes its own erasures. Sophie Mayer points to 'the almost complete absence—in fact, persistent erasure—of people of colour in *The Argonauts*, either as lived beings or through Nelson's citational practice of queer kinship'. Sophie Mayer, 'Medea's Perineum', *Angelaki* 23, no. 1 (2018): 190.

[239] Tanya Agathocleous, 'Life (Narrative) in the End Times', n.p.

reproductive futurism Edelman critiques, which, as Nelson writes, 'needs no more disciples' (95). Rather, it is the future in form of the open-ended journey of the *Argo*, a journey that is not so much predicated on arriving somewhere as invested in an ongoing investigation of the (in)commensurability between life and form. Nelson thereby turns the loss of assurance felt in the wake of unravelling temporal imaginaries into a writerly ethics, I want to argue, an ethics committed to tracing and retracing the structures of thought and feeling through which we understand and narrate our lives.

In their different ways, both Baraitser and Nelson thus refuse to apprehend maternal care against the temporal backdrop of reproductive futurity. What is more, their accounts complement each other in their respective attention to the affective tonalities of care. Where Baraitser emphasizes the often arduous side of care, Nelson is intent on bringing out its joy and pleasure.[240] Yet, Nelson, unlike Baraitser, does not confine the theme of care to the dyadic parent-child relation. Nelson and Harry's care for each other during her pregnancy and his double-mastectomy as well as the care for Harry's terminally-ill mother are equally part of *The Argonauts'* narrative. In this way, the text accommodates a reservation that Elizabeth Freeman has voiced with respect to Baraitser's account. Freeman asks: '[W]hy privilege maternity as the paradigm for a caretaking committed to an alternate futurity, when eldercare, care of life partners, care of friends, intergenerational eroticism, and teaching and mentoring have been so central to queer life?'[241] To attend to forms of care that do not follow the downward logic of generationality, Freeman turns to Susan Sontag's short story 'The Way We Live Now' and its depiction of the reiterative time of caretaking during the early AIDS crisis. In the acts of caretaking this short story describes, Freeman argues, and in the acts of rereading that it demands, suspended time and repetitive actions materialize a de-individuated and non-futural social field that is nonetheless thickly relational.[242] I would suggest that something similar is at stake in *The Argonauts*, albeit in a different form. While it is through the repetitive practices of caretaking and the rereading they elicit that social bonds are fostered and enacted in 'The Way We Live Now', in *The Argonauts* it is Nelson's citational method that weaves together a multiplicity of

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[240] Cf., for instance, Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, 2, 76 and Nelson, *Argonauts*, 52f., 55, 140, 176.
[241] Freeman, 'Queer Commitment', n.p.
[242] Here is Freeman: 'This emergence of the social *is* the plot of "The Way We Live Now", as the reader gradually comes to understand that each of the names of the twenty-six relatively undifferentiated characters who talk about the unnamed person with AIDS begins with a different letter, and so mean something as a whole rather than as a number of individuals—they constitute less a group of characters than an alphabet, something defined as a set. As one character puts it, "his illness sticks us all in the same glue". In short, the suspended time and repetitive actions that constitute caretaking make the social matter, materialize the social as a field thick with moving parts that cannot be extracted from it as discrete individuals, though within it individuals can combine and recombine, like letters of the alphabet or like DNA molecules.' (Ibid., n.p.).

voices—academics, writers, artists, mentors—creating a web of people as it were. As a tapestry of voices held together by Nelson's associations, the narrative gives form to a textual social field whose collage-like assemblage performs a commitment to the open-ended process of thinking itself rather than to arriving at a knowing destination. Overall, then, *The Argonauts* does not privilege any one mode of relationality, but makes room for a variety of different forms of interdependence and care that converge to form a picture of a more heterogenous social landscape than Baraitser's model allows for.

Read together, *Enduring Time* and *The Argonauts* thus contribute to the idioms available through which we understand and (re)negotiate better forms for the social. Instead of appealing to critical registers of rupture and transgression, their writing attends to what it might mean to consciously inhabit the time of the impasse. Doing so, they suggest, pushes us to think about modes of care and commitment as practices whose effects might not be liberating, without being negligible, at that; for they create and sustain part of the fabric of the social without which no life could continue to exist. Evental theorists are likely to find fault with what, in their view, might appear as an overly acquiescent account. Yet, I would argue, that reading the temporal experience of the impasse for its ethical valences is not the same as admitting defeat. For it *matters* how we inhabit and conceive of such time; to bear the slowness of chronic time, Baraitser suggests, allows us to grasp the time involved in forging social bonds, making the social materialize as a sphere of interdependence whose maintenance matters. Nelson's narrative, in turn, responds to the impasse's temporal suspense by weaving together a multiplicity of voices, focusing on the ongoing negotiations with others that underscore the sustenance to be derived from a tightly knit social tapestry. In contrast, we might say that ethico-political strategies, such as Edelman's, that are centred on practices of refusal or withdrawal—what Mari Ruti has described as an 'ethics of opting out'—rely on a gendered notion of autonomy.[243] Sarah Sharma speaks of what she playfully calls 'sexit' to point to 'the patriarchal penchant and inclination towards exit'.[244] For Sharma, the idea of turning one's back on oppressive structures is a conspicuously masculine one: '"pulling out" is a deceptively simple solution to real-life entanglements, and […] the very privilege to imagine doing so is fundamentally a male prerogative'. Exit, in other words, 'is an exercise of patriarchal power, a privilege that occurs at the expense of cultivating and sustaining conditions of collective

[243] Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[244] Sarah Sharma, 'Exit and the Extensions of Man', *transmediale*, 8 May 2017, https://transmediale.de/content/exit-and-the-extensions-of-man, accessed 15 March 2020. My thanks to Pieter Vermeulen who first pointed me to this article.

autonomy'.[245] Edelman's account of queerness shares in this imaginary. His call to embrace its negativity, that is to refuse to accede to the rhythms of hegemonic sociality, disregards that acts of refusal are hardly a desirable option, if they are an option at all, for those whose relation to the social is an already precarious one. For them, and this arguably includes those whose survival depends on care work (whether as cared-for or carer), such acts, laced as they are with the threat of further destabilization, might neither be something they desire nor can afford. It thus seems important to counterbalance a vocabulary of refusal with an account, such as Baraitser and Nelson's, whose language of brittleness and attrition argues that staying attached to life and gathering practices for adjusting to this singular and shared present of crisis ordinary is already an accomplishment. Rather than calling for practices of radical defiance and resistance, they attend to what might facilitate a less bad experience at the level of the everyday movement of life.

As a memoir, *The Argonauts'* non-chronological, fragmented form eschews the idea of life unfolding in linear developmental terms in which meaning reveals itself through time. Instead, it is loosely evoked in moments of resonance: fragments align, forming a sense of interconnectedness. For example, an argument between Nelson and the fluidly gendered Harry about whether 'words are good enough' (3) is echoed by Winnicott's notion of the 'good-enough mother' (23) whose insufficiencies engender the infant's ability to bear ordinary frustrations and forego both idealization and denigration. Or, a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson '*Spirit is matter reduced to extreme thinness: O so thin*!' (41) which Nelson cites in response to the idea that what a psyche experiences depends on what you think it is made out of, is invoked again in her account of giving birth: 'by means of labor, the wall [cervix] must somehow become an opening. This happens through dilation, which is not a shattering, but an extreme thinning. (*O so thin!*)' (155). Nelson does not link up these parallels into a stable structure. Rather, their elliptical composition captures something of the evanescent time of association, creating an experience of sense forming and slipping away again—a continuous motion not unlike that of the boat that lends the book its name. Indeed, if there is one theme that runs throughout the text, it is that of the *Argo*. It first appears in the form of a quote from Barthes in a letter Nelson sends to Harry:

> Just as the *Argo*'s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the
> *Argo*, whenever the lover utters the phrase 'I love you', its meaning must be

[245] Ibid.

renewed by each use, as 'the very task of love and of language is to give one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new'. (5f.)

It reappears in reference to Eve Sedgwick's understanding of queerness — 'a perpetual excitement, […] willing to designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip' (35f.) — then in relation to Michael Jackson's habit of replacing his ageing pet-monkey, Bubbles, 'with a new, younger Bubbles. (Cruelty of the *Argo*?)' (47). Each time the *Argo* appears in the text it is thus given a new inflection, entangling the reader in its self-reflexivity. Beyond these explicit references, the *Argo* traverses the book symbolically. As a way of marking the paradoxical interleaving of identity and difference across time, it comes to stand for Harry and Nelson's bodily transformations, for improvised family making and for the continuous refabrication of the self in relation to others. This engagement with the paradox of the *Argo* is reflected formally, too. By playing with different narrative conventions, the text does not only disassemble generic expectations, it also remakes them. That is, it does not so much refuse the generic conventions of memoir and academic prose as appropriate them to its needs and in doing so extend the limits of their intelligibility. As Monica Pearl writes:

> by using critical theory in her autobiographical account [Nelson] is stretching the category of autobiography (and possibly also of critical theory). Like the *Argo* and its commutable parts, once we have an idea of the genre […] it can do almost anything and still be that name.[246]

The *Argo*, in other words, is Nelson's ambivalent embrace of form—of family, of personal identity, of genre. Her way of 'asserting while also giving the slip'. Rather than resolving ambivalence, it is a means of remaining alive to it, of both desiring and fearing, of seeking and refusing the stability of form. At the end of the last section, I argued that Baraitser's account risks sentimentalizing the time of care by lending its performance a somewhat certain and unambiguous quality. I suggested that she does not pay sufficient attention to the possibility of its failure and to the way in which our attachments are likely to be sources of frustration as much as satisfaction. In contrast, Nelson's figure of the *Argo*, I want to suggest, is a way of marking the radically open-ended and thus uncertain trajectory of the time of care involved in forging queer relations and family-ties. At no point in the book are acts of love and care guaranteed to outlive or signal anything beyond their immediate expression. *The Argo* stands, after all, for a form of sociality whose bonds and capaciousness have to be continuously updated lest they ossify in obsolete structures. As an ambivalent embrace of form, it also bespeaks an

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[246] Monica Pearl, 'Theory and the Everyday', *Angelaki* 23, no. 1 (2018): 200f.

alertness to and investment in the conflicting affective circuitries that shape social life. Rather than focusing on the persistence of people's attachments and understanding such persistence as a form of accomplishment, as Baraitser does, Nelson approaches sites of attachment primarily as sites of ambivalence. Yet, it is not so much maternal ambivalence that is at stake in *The Argonauts* or the ambivalences Nelson's love for Harry engenders—as a love story and a story about mothering, it is a rather sanguine account. Instead, the text traces the affective quandaries of attachment on a more general level. That is, it bears witness to the desire for the stability and assurance of form (of family, of identity, of writing), on the one hand, and the hatred of the latter's oversolidity, on the other. 'On the one hand, the Aristotelian, perhaps evolutionary need to put everything into categories—*predator, twilight, edible*—on the other the need to pay homage to the transitive, the flight, the great soup of being in which we actually live.' (66) As a critic, Nelson is clearly drawn to the former, that is, to precision and rigour and to the control that writing affords her—a 'faith in articulation as its own form of protection' (154), as she puts it late in the book. Yet, she also watches Harry and his visual 'art of pure wildness' with envy: 'as I labor grimly on these sentences, wondering all the while if prose is but the gravestone marking the forsaking of wildness (fidelity to sense-making, to assertion, to *argument*, however loose)' (65). Similarly, Nelson writes of her experiences of coupledom and of mothering as experiences that are not only joyful but also threatening. For they require an openness to submit or surrender that in its intensity is not only pleasurable but also laced with anxiety given the proximity to one's own 'undoing', to 'losing sight of *my own me*' (174, cf. also 58). By making room in her account for such vicissitudes, Nelson counterbalances the rather steady rhythm of repetition and attachment that organizes Baraitser's account.

Akin to this embrace of ambivalence and fluctuation, *The Argonauts* shows an affinity for the irresolution of ambiguity. For example, early on, Nelson writes:

> Before we met, I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained— inexpressibly! —in the expressed. This idea […] doesn't exalt any angst one may feel about the incapacity to express, in words, that which eludes them. […] Words are good enough. (3)

Yet, for the fluidly gendered Harry, for whom the failings of language are more visceral and intimate, this notion of words being good enough does not hold up. They argue about it. 'For a time, I thought I had won', Nelson writes. 'But I changed too. I looked anew at unnameable things, or at least things whose essence is flicker, flow. […] I stopped smugly repeating *Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly* and wondered anew, can everything

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be thought' (4f.). Such indeterminacy traverses the book. When Harry and her rush to marry in the final hours before Proposition 8 passes (the ruling that will make gay marriage temporarily illegal in the state of California), Nelson writes: 'Poor marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable). Or reinforce it (unforgivable)' (28). In another scene, Nelson voices her ambivalence about a pamphlet distributed by anti-assimilationist activists at the 2012 Oakland Pride. 'I was glad for their intervention', she writes; yet she fails to identify with their revolutionary language. 'Perhaps it's the word *radical* that needs rethinking', she muses.

> But what could we angle ourselves towards instead, or in addition? Openness? Is that good enough, strong enough? *You're the only one who knows when you're using things to protect yourself and keep your ego together and when you're opening and letting things fall apart, letting the world come as it is—working with it rather than struggling against it. You're the only one who knows.* And the thing is even you don't always know. (33f.)

As an assemblage of such searching reflections, *The Argonauts'* narrative thus forgoes the assertive stride of academic prose in favour of a thoughtful inconclusiveness that holds the reader in its spaces of ambiguity. Returning to Lauren Berlant's remark, cited at the beginning of this chapter, that the 'impasse is a space of time without a narrative genre', we could say that Nelson turns this sentiment into a writerly ethic. At a moment, in which customary frames of expectation and futurity are fraying, *The Argonauts* embraces the loss of assurance felt in its wake, revising life narrative from a movement forward in time to an ongoing labour of 'revisitations'. That is not to say that the impasse becomes any more comfortable to inhabit as a result, but that the discomfort itself is worth attending to, that sometimes it is the desire for resolution and mastery, for clear feelings devoid of ambiguity, that are (part of) the problem to begin with. 'There is much to be learned from wanting something both ways', Nelson writes about her mentor Eve Sedgwick who wanted the word queer to be 'a nominative, like *Argo*'— which is to say, an answer and continual question at once (35f.). *The Argonauts* can be read as a pledge of allegiance to this sentiment. It chafes against the impulse that seeks comfort in orderly partition: motherhood and female eroticism, transgressive and normative politics, the sphere of the domestic and the intellectual, of memoir and theory—to juxtapose alleged opposites is to abide by the sense that 'contamination *makes deep* rather than disqualifies' (12). By combining its interrogative questioning with a humility that is alive to the limitations and dependencies of individual experience, the text thus offers a fragmentary and episodic pattern of what a 'good-enough' queer life might look like. 'At the end of one kind of fantasy, we need to be lured towards better ones', Berlant writes. We may read *The Argonauts* as inhabiting this

transitional space: 'a projection that reorients us to […] a different structure of feeling associated with the good life'. In its embrace of affective irresolution and ambiguity, it reminds us: 'There are no unmixed political feelings, there is no unambivalent potentiality for the social.'[247] With this emphasis on ambivalence, *The Argonauts* supplements Baraitser's account. Where Baraitser focuses on the time of repetition as the time it takes to forge attachments, Nelson attends to the forms and the affective qualities of these attachments. That is, where Baraitser points to repetitive time as generative of social bonds, Nelson questions the structures of thought and feeling through which we understand those bonds. In so doing, she does not only adopt a more probing relation to sociality but also makes room for the ambivalence and ambiguity that saturates scenes of relationality.

Conclusion

To conclude this discussion of *The Argonauts*, then, let me turn to the story's own end that also doubles as a reflection on ending. Citing Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani as prelude to the text's concluding lines, Nelson dwells on what it means that life—or narrative, for that matter—necessarily comes to an end: '*the joke of evolution is that it is a teleology without a point, that we, like all animals, are a project that issues in nothing*' (178). 'But is there really such a thing as nothing?', Nelson wonders. 'I don't know', she writes. 'I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song' (ibid.). This last sentence, as I already noted earlier, resonates with a temporal anxiety that, in light of the narrative's socio-political sensibility and concern, I would argue, goes beyond that occasioned by a reflection on individual finitude. The sentence is also the only one in the book that falls into rhyme, supplanting the text's theoretical locution to end in poetic diction. In doing so, Robyn Wiegman suggests, '*The Argonauts* overrides theory's knowingness in its final gesture, underscoring the sustenance to be found in the register of a de-universalized "we", one whose bonds lie in the intimate sphere where maternity, marriage, and kinship are revalued as queer.'[248] Like Baraitser's vocabulary of endurance, Nelson's reflections thus end by invoking care and its temporality of persistence. I have argued that these valences are of timely significance; for they come at a moment in which the simultaneous frailty and persistence of affective and material infrastructures calls for a conceptual framework that in its attention to temporal experiences of

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[247] Gesa Helms, Marina Vishmidt and Lauren Berlant, 'Affect and the Politics of Austerity: An Interview Exchange with Lauren Berlant', *Variant* Vol 39/40 (2010), https://www.variant.org.uk/pdfs/issue39_40/V39_40_Berlant.pdf accessed 15 March 2020.
[248] Robyn Wiegman, 'In the Margins with *The Argonauts*', *Angelaki* 23, no. 1 (2018): 213.

ongoingness and duration supplements critical imaginaries bent on scenes of transgression and the sense of change they entail. Rather than appealing to ideas of radical transformation or envisioning alternative temporal imaginaries, both Baraitser and Nelson remain immersed in the present. In doing so, they reclaim the time of the chronic and the pedagogy of ambivalence for thinking about processes of social transformation. Overall, then, this chapter has continued to examine the impasse as the phenomenological condition of contemporary life in the Euro-Atlantic world, at the same time as beginning to address questions of response. Yet if the latter has primarily unfolded in an ethical register, the next chapter will take questions around the material and affective practices of care into the realm of politics, that is, from a matter of personal conduct to issues of collaborative, contestatory practice. Doing so will open up a way of thinking about the impasse not just as an experience of (dis)composure and adjustment, but also as a space of time in which questions arise as to how to forge better modes of relationality from within and beyond the pressures of the current moment.

Vocabularies of (Dis)repair: Bonnie Honig's 'Public Things' and Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 'Maintenance Art'

In the previous chapters, I read the impasse as a political heuristic that allows us to circumscribe and address issues of psychic and structural discord in contemporary democratic/capitalist societies. The uneven distribution of resources, risk and vulnerability and intensified anxieties and tensions around the environment converge to form scenes of ailing material and fantasmatic infrastructures. From within such scenes of disrepair questions arise as to possible directions and forms of response. Part of the challenge any response will face concerns the difficulty of dishabituation, of unlearning one's sense of the ordinary—something the preceding chapters have already discussed. Here I want to extend these reflections while also complementing the emphasis on *un*learning and *de*taching with questions about what it is people may become attached to and gather around in the halting transition of the impasse. What, in other words, may be sites of attachment worth (re)securing? In the face of damaged infrastructures of sociality, what will reparative practices look like? And what form will such practices have to take to be more than or alternative to quick fixes, more than provisional patches that end up reproducing scenes of disrepair? By attending to these questions, I implicitly ask yet another one. What position does critical theory take up in all of this? What, if anything, might its concepts contribute to the collective struggle to devise alternative imaginaries? It is a question that thus also partakes in ongoing debates about what a criticism may look like that goes beyond or lies to the side of an ethos of suspicion and negativity.[249]

This chapter approaches these concerns by bringing Bonnie Honig's political theory of 'public things' into dialogue with Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 'maintenance art'. At stake, for both Honig and Ukeles, are questions about attachment, repair, democratic collectivity and equality in times of 'crisis ordinary'.[250] Both public things and maintenance art, I will argue, can be seen as vehicles for inhabiting the space of the impasse differently, so to speak. As such, they form

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[249] For some of the key texts in this debate, cf. Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225-248; see also Eve Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003): 123-151.

[250] In her book, Honig makes recourse to Berlant's notion of 'crisis ordinary' to draw up a context for her own narrative. As we will see, it is also a fitting rubric for viewing Ukeles's work. Cf. Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 5.

alternative types of (transitional) infrastructure if by infrastructure we understand any mediation, whether material or imaginary, that organizes the movement of social life. Both Honig and Ukeles are interested in devising conceptual and artistic idioms in an effort to conjure an infrastructure through which people can learn to bear the ambivalence of social interdependency, forging an imaginary for better negotiating the unevenness and complexity of contemporary existence. For Honig, this involves what she calls public things.[251] 'Public things', she writes, 'bind citizens into the complicated affective circuitries of democratic life.'[252] As part of the 'holding environment' of democratic citizenship, they provide material and fantasmatic bearing for collective, antagonistic action. Ukeles, on the other hand, advances what she has come to call 'maintenance art.' Driven by the quest to unsettle habitual economies of value, she places ideas of maintenance into the conceptual and practical centre of her art. Her often collaborative performances combine feminist concerns with a broader social agenda around the importance of public institutions in the life of a polity, bespeaking her deep-seated investment in some of the material and affective practices that are required to ensure lively and inclusive infrastructures of sociality.

This chapter will explore the contributions either perspective makes and ask about the relation between them. I will argue that Honig's theory of public things provides a useful frame through which to approach Ukeles's work, allowing us to see the latter as another resource for approaching the question of what to do when the democratic holding environment that public things provide is under attack. Yet, Ukeles's art, I will suggest, also speaks back to Honig's account. Where Honig's perspective brings to the fore the central importance of public things to our collective lives—in both their material as well as fantasmatic dimensions—Ukeles's art provides a counterbalance by reminding us of the ways in which such things rely on the ongoing labour of maintenance. In other words, it is not just public things that matter, that enlist our collective capacities to build and care for a common world collaboratively. Importantly, it is also about how we view, what value we accord the labour that goes into maintaining them. After decades of neoliberal deregulation and privatization, invoking vocabularies of public things and their maintenance may seem anachronistic, an appeal to a bygone era. We may equally hold, however, that calling such practices anachronistic is to *prematurely* give up on the democratic project of public things as a set of historical accomplishments as well as still

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[251] Honig does not define public things as such. Instead, working with examples, an array of different entities is framed accordingly, held together by Honig's narrative. In her account, as we will see, public things range from universities, parks and prisons to natural resources and governments.
[252] Honig, *Public Things*, 7.

ongoing struggles asking to be extended further. Reading Ukeles's work together with Honig's account, I argue, persuasively brings this out. For their work points to the importance of sustaining and renewing worldly points of anchorage without which political life is at risk of going astray. What is more, they show that it is not only public things that require care; importantly, it is also the angry impulse in the face of their decimation that is in need of renewal and maintenance. Such anger forms part of any repertoire of resilience, a political posture that does not give in to despair or indifference, but that holds onto the possibility of more democratic formations.[253] In *Cruel Optimism*, as we have seen, Lauren Berlant points to the present as a time of pervasive precarity in which people are busy navigating proliferating pressures on their ordinary lives 'without an imaginary for the terms and the register in which new claims on social resources of reciprocity could be made'.[254] They find themselves adrift amid normative and material conventions, unable to find a way out. I want to suggest that, from within these scenes of disrepair, public things may act as points of orientation that help to reanimate and possibly loosen the grip of this suspension. Where in Chapter 2 I focused on a certain kind of potentiality that experiences of suspension might harbour, here I am interested in the way in which the grammar of public things might allow us to hone in on those moments and provide us with a conceptual infrastructure that works to orient people's desire for more promising forms of sociality. Of course, the desire for public things might itself result in a form of cruel optimism, immuring people into cycles of repeated disappointment. In Berlant's account, as we saw in previous chapters, such compromised relations persist in having value insofar as they preserve 'the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world'.[255] Yet when we look at the desire for public things and the anger at their dismantling that informs both Ukeles and Honig's account we can see that the individual's sense of continuity is not the only nor necessarily the most important thing that is at stake here. What persists in such relations is also the belief in the political sphere as a space in which better modes of sociability and flourishing can be worked out.[256] In the extended meanwhile of the impasse, this is a difficult, possibly cruel optimistic, stance to maintain; but

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[253] When I invoke the term 'resilience' here I am mindful of its frequent association with neoliberalism. Construed as an individual trait, it is often used to put yet further responsibility and pressure on already overburdened subjects. But, as we will see, both Honig and Ukeles will allow us to think differently about this notion. In their hands, the term is foregrounded in its material context and seen not so much as an individual virtue but as a capacity situated in between people and things that enlists and lends a permanence to democratic collectives.

[254] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 222.

[255] Ibid., 24.

[256] This point is indebted to Michal Givoni who makes a similar case in relation to political attitudes of despair. Cf. Michal Givoni, 'Indifference and Repetition: occupation testimonies and left-wing despair', *Cultural Studies* 33, no. 4 (2019): 595-631.

it is a stance that keeps alive a trace of the desire to reimagine the common world collaboratively.

1. Bonnie Honig's *Public Things*

Alive to the pressures and exhaustions that mediate the ordinary for most people, Bonnie Honig hesitates to resort to genres of catastrophe to make a truth claim. Mostly, she adopts a language of malfunction and brittleness, but also of aspiration and resilience that approaches the social from within the troubled, yet ongoing movement of life. Interested in contributing a conceptual syntax that helps to better navigate these contemporary scenes of disrepair, she advances what she calls a 'political theory of public things'. Eschewing a definition, she works from examples instead. Public things, in her account, range from universities, parks and prisons to natural resources and governments. 'Without such public things,' she writes, 'democracy is reduced to procedures, polling, and policing, all necessary perhaps, but certainly not sufficient conditions of democratic life.'[257] As objects of attachment, the power of public things, she argues, lies in their capacity to 'bind citizens into the complicated affective circuitries of democratic life' (7) and to prompt 'the inaugurations, conflicts and contestations that underwrite everyday citizenship and democratic sovereignties' (6). Honig is mindful of the fact that what constitutes a public thing for one community may often be the result of an act of dispossession and disempowerment for another. What is more, once a public thing is successfully instituted and maintained, access to it often follows a differential logic, privileging some while excluding others. For example, '[i]n the context of white supremacy [in the U.S.], public things have operated not to equalize people into citizenship but to communicate the terms of a differential citizenship and the frequently subordinating terms of governance and belonging' (24). These difficult and often violent realities notwithstanding, Honig wants to hold onto the idea of public things as essential to democratic life. 'At their best,', she writes, 'they [public things] may bring peoples together to act in concert. And even when they are divisive, they provide a basis around which to organize, contest, mobilize, defend, or reimagine various modes of collective being together in a democracy' (ibid.). Public things, in other words, are the 'infrastructure' (17) of democratic existence.[258]

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[257] Honig, *Public Things*, 4. Further references to *Public Things* will be cited parenthetically.

[258] We might thus see Honig's account as a way of addressing what Bruce Robbins notes is a failure of the 'cultural left' to defend public infrastructure. He writes: 'thanks to our anti-utilitarian, antigovernmental bias, we of the "cultural left" have little if anything to say about [the neoliberal decimation of public infrastructure]. […] [W]e don't usually think of infrastructure as something to be planned, funded, built, regulated, and sustained. Whatever our beliefs as individuals, collectively we have trouble defending state or state-regulated institutions even when

1.1 The Role of Objects in the Work of Donald W. Winnicott and Hannah Arendt

To corroborate this idea, Honig turns to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* and D.W. Winnicott's object-relations theory. From Winnicott, Honig takes the idea that infants require a physical object, what he calls the 'transitional object', such as a stuffed toy or a blanket, to develop a sense of the world as something external to themselves.[259] Specifically, by surviving the child's changing moods and fantasies of destruction, the transitional object fosters an understanding of object permanence. 'The fantasy of infantile omnipotence', Honig writes,

> gives way, in the face of the object's permanence, to the reality of subjectivity, finitude, survival. The object thus *thwarts* the infant with its object-ivity, but that very same trait also *underwrites* the infant's own developing subjectivity. The object's capacity to thwart is the same as its capacity to support: Both are related to its permanence. (16)

The child, in other words, comes to understand that there is a world that exists outside herself and that she is not at the centre of it. The object's survival of the child's (fantasies of) destruction thereby does not only contribute to her capacity to bear ambivalence—to feel that it is safe and acceptable to express both love and hatred, affection and aggression—and, via the object's cohesion and unitariness, to reflexively acquire an integrated sense of subjectivity. Object permanence also allows her to develop what Winnicott calls a 'capacity for concern', that is, the ability to be concerned with a world that is 'not-me' and the desire to contribute to that world. Together, then, these objects form an integral part of what Winnicott calls the (maternally secured) 'holding environment'. Honig takes this theory of the transitional object and maps it onto democracy. She asks:

> What if democratic forms of life depend partly upon objects to help collect diverse citizens into self-governing publics divested […] of fantasies of omnipotence and invested with a sense of integrated subjectivity, responsibility, agency and concern? (17)

In other words, if objects enable a child to develop an integrated sense of subjectivity as well as the ability to relate to and show concern for others and the world, maybe they are also integral

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they absolutely have to be defended. This is a problem.' Bruce Robbins. 'The Smell of Infrastructure: Notes toward an Archive', *Boundary 2* 34, no. 1 (2007): 28.

[259] Cf. Donald Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (New York: Routledge, 2018); see also Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

in organizing democratic collectives? Maybe public infrastructures, such as libraries, parks, universities and highways, play a more constitutive role for the body politic than might at first appear? It is with these questions in mind that Honig turns to Arendt.

Like Winnicott, Arendt underscores the significance of things to worldly existence and indeed to reality itself: '[H]uman existence', she writes, 'would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence.'[260] These 'things' primarily correspond to Arendt's notion of work, one of the three registers through which she thinks about human existence. The other two are labour and action. Labour, in her account, is the domain of life-preservation in which humans perform the ceaseless and repetitive tasks necessary for survival, while action is the domain of inaugural speech and political acts in concert that create significance and meaning. Situated between these two, the domain of work, Honig argues, exerts a stabilizing function. If labour follows the cyclical time of biological reproduction, action is subject to the uncertain temporality of great acts. As such, both labour and action depend on work to redeem their temporal vicissitudes. The durable products of work alleviate the burdens of labour (in the form of tools), on the one hand, and reify and shelter the memories forged by action (in the form of poems, sculptures, memorials), on the other. When read through the lens of object relations theory, the domain of work, then, can be understood as a kind of Winnicottian 'holding environment', Honig suggests, that provides the objects necessary to facilitate the transition from immersion (labour) to individuation (action). Like Winnicott's transitional objects, Arendt's things thus allow us to move beyond the realm of bare necessity and become people who care for the world.[261]

Honig's objective is not the seamless translation of Arendt's political account into Winnicott's psychological one or vice versa. Instead, starting from the insight that the two thinkers 'share a hard-earned, war-tossed appreciation of the importance of stable, worldly things to our capacity to achieve stability, integrity, and adhesion to things and to each other' (40), her interest lies in exploring what the different registers of Winnicott and Arendt's respective paradigms might contribute to a political theory of public things. Winnicott's attention to fantasy, Honig argues, supplements Arendt's focus on facticity; while Arendt's concern with collective action points to an account of object relations that is not confined to the individual. Read together, they thus

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[260] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.
[261] Honig argues that we should not think of this transition as a one-time development or even in developmental terms at all. Instead, she argues, object-relating is a negotiation between needs and independence that we are engaged in throughout our lives.

allow Honig to understand public things as 'objects of both facticity and fantasy [that] underwrite our collective capacity to imagine, build, and tend to a common world collaboratively' (38). To the extent that public things here become a way of thinking about questions of care and concern, her account resonates with some of the things I discussed in the previous chapter. To recall, I argued that Lisa Baraitser and Maggie Nelson's work raised pertinent questions around the material and affective practices of care in relation to the protracted temporality of the impasse. Yet, while the previous chapter primarily engaged an ethical register, Honig's account allows us to take the question of care into the realm of politics, that is, from a matter of personal conduct to issues of collaborative, contestatory practice. As such, it opens up a way of thinking about the impasse not just as an experience of (dis)composure and adjustment, but also as a space of time in which questions arise as to how to forge better modes of relationality from within and beyond the pressures of the current moment.

1.2 Neoliberalism and the Decimation of Public Things: Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope* and Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*

The reign of neoliberal ideology over the last few decades has seen a profound remodelling of society across both Europe and the United States. As a school of thought steeped in the language of managerialism and the organizing intelligence of the market, neoliberal doxa has reduced social aspiration to a logic of entrepreneurialism and installed efficiency and profitability as the principal standards of value by which every aspect of society (economic and non-economic alike) is judged. For Honig, these developments present a serious threat to the political power of public things. The neoliberal transactional stance to 'opt out' of the public (leaving what remains to the socio-economic fringes of society) and sustained practices of privatization radically curtail the efficacy of public things. She writes:

> it is not exactly that objects lose their thingness in neoliberalism (they may or may not); the concern here is that they lose their *political* thingness. That political thingness is as precious and necessary for the body politic as is the personal magic of the transitional object for the individual in Winnicott's object-relations theory. It is not that the object exerts a personal magic on all of us in common, but that all of us in common get our very sense of commonness from the object. (30f.)

In neoliberalism, in other words, the democratic holding environment that public things provide is under serious attack. To lose such environments is to lose one of the enabling conditions of

democracy. Yet what to do with this insight for it to become more than a diagnosis of disrepair? Firstly, Honig is keen to point to existing practices that challenge the notion that neoliberalism has achieved a complete saturation of our socio-political lives. Indigenous struggles, such as the Mayan people's claim to food sovereignty in Guatemala and Unist'ot'en Camp's ongoing efforts to prevent oil companies from building extractivist infrastructure on tribal lands in Canada, serve as some of her examples—aimed against corporate power, these are movements, Honig argues, that heed the importance of public things. While they may lack the political infrastructure that is required to negotiate the challenges of the contemporary moment, they nevertheless bespeak an attunement to public things that provides political orientation. If we disregard such practices and modes of living, Honig suggests, we risk painting a near-totalizing picture of neoliberalism, depriving ourselves of valuable lessons that might help to 'vivify the imagination' (22). Honig's principal focus, however, is not on these alternative traditions. Instead, in her final chapter, she turns to Jonathan Lear's book *Radical Hope* (2006) and Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011). Both the book and the film, she argues, act as vehicles that allow us to apprehend stand-ins in times when public things are persistently being dismantled. In both works, the failure of public things and the attenuation of social customs gives rise to an exploration of alternative resources, 'alternative holdings', that allow the people afflicted to bear the upheaval and uncertainty of change.

Lear's *Radical Hope* centres on the question of how the Crow people, aboriginal to the United States, survived the devastation of their way of life wrought by white supremacy and settler conquest.[262] The principal figure for Lear is the Crow chief, Plenty Coups, whose imaginative vision and talent for ritualization, helped the Crow people endure the violent loss of their community's place in the world. By adapting the symbolic universe and social customs of the Crow to the new context, Plenty Coups did not so much or not just give in to the pull of collaborationism, but adopted a courageous pragmatism driven by what Lear calls 'radical hope'. Honig suggests that we understand Lear's 'radical hope' as a transitional affect:

> Radical hope takes the place of the [transitional] object, since the transition in question is forced on us by the fact that the object has gone missing. Where for Winnicott, such transition requires a 'holding environment' which is the performative product and postulate of transitional activity […], radical hope is Lear's response to the unavailability of such environments. (65)

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[262] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

In addition to Lear's focus on hope, Honig brings out Plenty Coups's sensitivity to the need for (new) public things. From his participation in a ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to the donation of his home as a national park, Plenty Coups's acts, according to Honig, reveal an understanding of the importance not only 'to ritualize but also, and more specifically to *refurnish* the world […] with public things around which to constellate, to which to attach, over which to fight' (69).

In von Trier's film, in contrast, it is not the subjective trait of an individual—an orientation that, as Honig points out, comes rather close to the neoliberal 'overinvestment in individual capacities' (80)—but the intersubjective pleasures experienced in play that serve as a means to bear the loss of assurance as to one's way of life.[263] Honig reads the imminent collision of the planet Melancholia with Earth—the dramatic frame of von Trier's film—as a parable for the destruction wrought by neoliberal capitalism of social and ecological life-systems. Amongst the film's characters is Justine. Unlike her sister and brother-in-law who both seek relief in 'old rituals'—the former wants to drink a glass of wine on the terrace while awaiting the collision, the latter 'opts out', taking his life with sleeping pills—Justine is innovative, enlisting her young nephew in a playful game that has them construct what she calls a 'magic cave', a tepee made out of sticks. It is a practice that clearly does not work, Honig admits, if the measure of success is withstanding planetary collision. But it is not nothing either. Indeed, we might see the 'magic cave', she suggests, as a kind of 'holding environment, a shared space in which to endure, if not survive, the most unthinkable of all abandonments' (75). Acknowledging the ways in which the bare tepee surely acts as sign of indictment (of settler violence, of environmental degradation), she also wants to understand it as enacting the democratic need for public things or at least as standing in for this need. '[M]ight it be a sign of a future to be celebrated and built,' she wonders, 'in which our dwellings are more open to nature or at least not fortressed against it, and in which we risk experiencing each other in conflict and through play, collaboration, and touch' (83)? These elements—conflict, collaboration, touch and play—also take up a prominent position in the practice of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, an artist whose work I turn to next.

But before I do so, let me return to the question of the impasse and its relation to Honig's account. By privileging consumer- and entrepreneurial forms of collectivity, neoliberal practices undermine the idea of the public as a space in and through which better normative and

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[263] Lars von Trier, *Melancholia* (Toronto, ON: Entertainment One Films Canada, 2012).

material terms of reciprocity can be worked out. Honig approaches this predicament through the lens of Rousseau's paradox of politics. To wit, Rousseau's paradox names the concern that a democratic citizenry and democratic institutions presuppose and require each other simultaneously: good citizens require good law (in order to shape them) and the law relies on good citizens (in order to make good law). While this is a quandary that besets any democracy at any time, Honig argues, drawing on Wendy Brown's account, that it becomes particularly acute in the context of neoliberalism.

> Rousseau's paradox reasserts itself ever more powerfully under neoliberalism because of the evisceration of the public university system whose mission of civic education is undone not only by underfunding […], but also by neoliberalism's cultivated hostility to anything that is not clearly instrumental, profitable and practical from the perspective of late capitalism. (18)

According to Honig, shifting the focus to public things can alleviate the pull of the paradox. While the latter trains our attention on the people who are never fully who they need to be in order for democracy to flourish, public things redirect our focus to the material conditions that enable democracies to function. 'When we think from the angle of public things,' Honig writes, 'we are switched to questions of orientation and receptivity, from subjectivity to object-ivity, from identity to infrastructure […]. From a public things perspective, we are moved first to ask not "who are we?" but "what needs our care and concern?"' (28). Admittedly, this shift in perspective does not so much alleviate Rousseau's paradox as it restates it in a different guise: instead of good law, it is public things that presuppose good citizens and good citizens who rely on public things. Still, what Honig's account of public things does, which is of interest to us here, is provide us with an understanding of the importance of these worldly anchors, and offer a language through which to approach them. The book, we might say, works as a training in the attentiveness and receptivity that public things require, enacting the kind of education that is under pressure from neoliberalism yet without which democratic culture is at risk of becoming hollowed out. Honig's account of public things thus may be read as a kind of 'conceptual infrastructure', a grammar that does not only work in a theoretical register but that, as Berlant suggests, may become 'part of the protocols or practices that hold the world up'.[264] To attend to this infrastructure is to devise an imaginary around which issues of equality and justice can take shape. I want to suggest then that we read public things as sites of attachment that are worth (re)securing in the halting transition of the impasse. While some efforts may unfold in

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[264] Lauren Berlant, 'The Commons: Infrastructures for troubling times', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34, no. 3 (2016): 394.

defence of historical achievements, such as the welfare state, others may be anticipatory (e.g. the struggle to curb climate change). As material and fantasmatic anchors, public things may help to reanimate the suspension that I have tracked across the previous chapters, working to orient people's desires for better forms of sociality. In times when the desire for anything public is routinely rerouted into the sphere of the commercial by an austerity politics that insists that the public is itself the problem, too expensive to be maintained, this is a difficult venture. But that is not to say that it is in vain. At the very least, Honig's account is a goad to rethink political imaginaries whose ideals of self-governance and efficiency fail to see society other than through its marketized shadow.

At the same time, it is important to note how the psycho-political landscape of neoliberalism has become suffused with a newly invigorated populism across both Europe and the United States in recent years. The ongoing provocation of popular energies has engendered what with Honig we might call an alternative holding environment in which fortified walls and nationalist symbols are the public things that have captured the political imagination of a considerable part of the demos across different societies. Promising stability and security, these things uphold fantasies of the good life based on segregated use and racial hierarchies. Yet, this is not a reason to renounce public things as such. Admittedly, there are certain things that may warrant to be abandoned wholesale. But even then, as Honig would likely retort, such things are politicizing, enabling people to experience themselves as part of a larger polity in agonistic contest over its forms of sociality. The task is to channel these political energies away from their defensive formation and turn them into a more democratic mode of politics. This would involve cultivating a willingness to embrace the discomfort of true equality, what Lauren Berlant calls 'the inconvenience of equally valued social being'.[265] An overly pastoral version of public things risks disregarding that politics is not only about forging infrastructures for collective flourishing but also and at the same time about redistributing insecurity, after all—something that Honig is very much aware of. Her account does not promote a reparative imaginary, if repair means the construction of a smooth plane of social likeness. Undoubtedly, issues of inequality around race, gender, class and sexuality will persist. As Honig notes:

> If public things have a certain Winnicottian magic, it is not they can magically heal
> […] social divisions or blind us to racial hierarchies. It is that they furnish a world
> in which we encounter others, share the experience of being part of something

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[265] Berlant, 'The Commons: Infrastructures for troubling times', 408.

larger than ourselves, and work with others, acting in concert, to share it, to democratize access to it, to better it, to desegregate it, to maintain it. (36)

Public things, in other words, do not provide a guarantee for progressive politics, but offer a set of material anchors around which questions of democratic sovereignty can take shape. In times of impasse, they may thus offer a tool for reimagining a world worth attaching to.

2. Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 'Maintenance Art'

For Honig, as we saw, Lear's *Radical Hope* and von Trier's *Melancholia* alert us to the democratic need for public things, providing a kind of counter-pedagogy to the market-driven rationality of neoliberalism. Turning to Ukeles, we will see that something similar is at play. Her art, I want to suggest, serves as another form of 'alternative holding', that is, as another resource for approaching the question of what to do when the democratic holding environment that public things provide is under attack. Yet unlike Honig, Ukeles's work does not engage a catastrophic imaginary or archive to think about modes or sources of sustenance and resilience. Hers is an aesthetic of the everyday, of the ceaseless, repetitive labour that undergirds life, both that of the individual and of the body politic, one that assumes a particular character in relation to the infrastructural brittleness and emerging neoliberal pressures it is responding to. As such, it allows us to remain within the grammar of the impasse as an experience of 'crisis ordinariness', whose drawn-out, unspectacular appearance lacks the urgency and intensity of the extreme. If we limit our reparative imaginary to scenes of devastation, we risk unduly singling out experiences of extraordinary injury to think about the impact of and response to shifting political and socio-economic conditions, implicitly suggesting that people ordinarily register historical pressures seamlessly and in ways that lack political import. In contrast, Ukeles's work, as we will see, pushes us to tarry with the everyday. By at once dwelling in and reanimating quotidian rhythms and routines of labour, Ukeles, I want to suggest, does not only enact a commitment to and sense of solidarity with a type of work often denigrated in society; she also reveals such work in its function as a means of lending a measure of coherence and permanence to the social fabric and of supporting the latter's resilience in times of impasse.

2.1 Manifesto for Maintenance Art

In her art, Ukeles merges feminist with environmental and labour-related concerns and combines elements of conceptual with performance art, institutional critique and, what today

would be called, 'social practice'. Born in 1939, she first rose to prominence through her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition 'CARE'* (1969). Written in a single sitting, in a state of 'cold fury'[266], the text channelled the frustration Ukeles was experiencing as an artist and recent mother, living in a culture whose prevailing artistic values of autonomy and novelty were at odds with the quotidian reality of motherhood and its often repetitive and mundane labour. Working against the status and power differentials governing these realities, she decided to shift such mundane and repetitive labour into the conceptual centre of her manifesto—a gesture that did not simply aim to counter the prevailing gendered and class-based structures of the public realm (the art world, in particular), but that sought to challenge the very notion of change and agency at work therein. As Shannon Jackson writes:

> Maintenance is a structure that exposed the disavowed durational activity behind a static object as well as the materialist activity that supported 'dematerialized' creativity, a realization that called the bluff of the art experimentation of the era.[267]

Maintenance, in other words, became a way, for Ukeles, to unsettle habitual economies of value that distinguished between valorized and de-valorized labour and to counter artistic presumptions of autonomy that disowned conditions of dependency.[268]

The manifesto is divided into two main sections: 'Ideas' and 'The Maintenance Art Exhibition'. In 'Ideas', Ukeles submits a series of distinctions organized around the work of development, on the one side, and the work of maintenance, on the other. Where 'development systems' are associated with individual creation, with notions of change and novelty, 'maintenance systems' are characterized by repetitive practices of sustenance and preservation.[269] Where development signals 'progress, advance, excitement, flight or fleeing', maintenance is a 'drag', but, crucially,

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[266] Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Bartholomew Ryan 'Manifesto for Maintenance: A Conversation with Mierle Laderman Ukeles', *Art in America*, 18 March 2009, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/draft-mierle-interview-56056/, accessed 29 November 2019.

[267] Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (London: Routledge, 2011), 88.

[268] It was not just her domestic experience, however, that had fed into the composition of the manifesto. Prior to becoming a mother, Ukeles had been trying to create massive inflatable sculptures that could be folded up and transported easily. This desire for an unencumbered art form proved impossible, however. 'I was completely dependent upon industrial processes,' Ukeles recounts. 'So there was a big glitch between concept and process. And they [the sculptures] all leaked. They had horrible maintenance problems.' Ukeles cited in Jackson, *Social Works*, 84.

[269] She aligns the former with the 'death instinct' ('separation, individuality, Avant-Garde par excellence, to follow one's own path to death—do your own thing, dynamic change'). The work of maintenance, in contrast, is part of the 'life instinct' ('unification; the eternal return; the perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species; survival systems and operations; equilibrium'). Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 'Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! — Proposal for an Exhibition "Care"', reprinted in Patricia Phillips, et al. *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art* (Munich, London, New York: DelMonico Books, Prestel, 2016), 210.

a drag that facilitates and underpins development: 'keep the dust off pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight'.[270] Development, in other words, is utterly dependent on maintenance; it is, in Ukeles's word, 'infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials'.[271] And yet, maintenance work, in all its varied scales and contexts, is underappreciated and insufficiently remunerated. 'The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay'.[272] Having outlined these two systems, Ukeles, then, simultaneously fuses and inverts their logic. Realising that, as an artist, she gets to define for herself what constitutes art, she declares maintenance work to be art. She thus does not simply call for the recognition of maintenance labour, but for the viability of 'maintenance art', opening up the possibility of reflecting on and appreciating the 'broad social, political, and aesthetic implications of maintaining'[273] without immediately subordinating them to the time and logic of development.

The first part of the manifesto ends with the proposal of an exhibition entitled 'CARE' that 'would zero in on pure maintenance, exhibit it as contemporary art, and yield, by utter opposition, clarity of issues.'[274] The second part delineates the proposed exhibition in more detail. It would have three parts: personal, general and earth maintenance. The first component proffers to fuse the personal labour of the domestic sphere (washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing) with the public body of the museum. 'The exhibition area might look "empty" of art,' Ukeles writes, 'but it will be maintained in fully public view. / My working will be the work.'[275] The second part envisages exhibiting transcripts of interviews with people from different socio-economic backgrounds and in a variety of professions about the maintenance aspects of their life, alongside live interviews with museum visitors. The third part proposes that different types of refuse (garbage, polluted air, polluted water, ravaged land) be rehabilitated within the grounds of the museum. While CARE has never been shown in its entirety (parts have been), the manifesto has defined the parameters of Ukeles's work ever since.

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[270] Ibid.
[271] Ibid.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Patricia C. Phillips, 'Maintenance Activity: Creating a Climate for Change', in N. Felshin (ed.) *But Is It Art: The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 171.
[274] Ukeles, 'Manifesto for Maintenance Art', 210.
[275] Ibid., 211.

2.2 Performing Maintenance

Ukeles's two performances *Hartford Wash: Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Outside*, 1973, for which she cleaned the steps outside the Wadsworth Athenaeum (Hartford, CT), and *Hartford Wash: Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Inside*, 1973, for which she scrubbed and mobbed the museum floors for several hours, are some of the first works to enact the ideas of her manifesto (cf. *Figure 1* and *2*). Her reflexive staging of maintenance as art with its painterly deployment of the mob was both playful and trenchant. As Helen Molesworth asks, 'Do we laugh knowingly at Ukeles's "floor paintings", with their explicit evocation of the grand painterly gestures of Jackson Pollock, or do we feel a tinge of shame at the public display of a woman who cleans up after us?'[276] Keenly ambivalent, one effect of these performances was to draw attention to the unglamorous work that enabled the museum to function.[277]
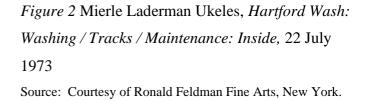

Figure 1 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Outside,* 22 July 1973

Source: Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

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[276] Helen Molesworth, 'House Work and Art Work', *October* 92 (2000): 91.
[277] The use of performance here is thus less its own medium as a vehicle for revealing art's conditions of production and reception (cf. Jackson 2011, 92).

Figure 2 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Inside,* 22 July 1973

Source: Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

While the idea and practice of maintenance labour remained her enduring concern, Ukeles's work soon shifted in both scale and scope, becoming increasingly collaborative, time-consuming and municipal in focus. For 'Art < > World' (1976), a group exhibition at the Whitney Museum's branch downtown, Ukeles contributed two pieces. In *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* (1976), she accompanied the service personnel who maintained the Wall Street building that housed the museum twenty-four hours a day in three eight-hour shifts. While the 300 maintenance employees continued to do their regular work, they were now asked, for one hour each day, to consider their tasks as 'art'. Over a period of five weeks, Ukeles worked one, occasionally two successive shifts, documenting the individual worker's activities through photographs asking each one of them, as the photographs emerged from the Polaroid camera, if they were involved in 'Maintenance Work' or 'Maintenance Art' at that particular moment. She labelled each photograph accordingly and added it to the expanding grid back in the Whitney galleries. In a second live performance, titled *Maintaining NYC in Crisis: What Keeps NYC Alive?*, Ukeles orchestrated a dissonant arrangement of voices in an effort to measure the 'thickness' of New York's maintenance system.[278] While pacing the gallery in parallel 'reading lanes', forty volunteers simultaneously read from the mayor's executive budget, each a different passage, listing public jobs that were to be eliminated in response to

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[278] Ukeles quoted in Phillips, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art,* 87.

the fiscal crisis New York City was experiencing at the time.[279] In its simultaneous evocation of different customs of speech, the recitation seemed to be anticipatory requiem and declarative protest at once—its ambiguous form a way of capturing what was in the process of being lost.

Increasingly tilting away from the museum and closer to the municipality, Ukeles's work is best seen in relation to the era's larger socio-political developments: the urban and fiscal crises that engulfed the country in the 1960s and 1970s and the concomitant emergence of today's neoliberalism. Following a period of rising inflation and unemployment alongside continuing racial discrimination, the urban landscape had been rattled by a surge in organized labour action and social unrest during the 1960s. While the initial response by the federal government was to increase public spending, the onset of a recession in the early 1970s prompted a shift away from this policy. As the recession gathered momentum, New York City's budget deficit (already sizeable due to years of profligate borrowing) became increasingly unserviceable. In 1975, the city's private-sector creditors essentially forced the city into 'technical bankruptcy', leading to layoffs, cutbacks, and a radical diminishment of the power of the municipal unions. The creditors, a group of powerful New York investment bankers, seized the opportunity to remodel the city in ways that suited their own (business) interests, part of which meant gradually turning city government from a social democratic into an entrepreneurial entity. David Harvey writes:

> The management of the New York fiscal crisis pioneered the way for neoliberal practices both domestically under Reagan and internationally through the IMF in the 1980s. It established the principle that in the event of a conflict between the integrity of financial institutions and bondholders' returns, on the one hand, and the well-being of citizens on the other, the former was to be privileged.[280]

The austerity measures introduced in the wake of New York's fiscal crisis prompted several strikes at the Sanitation department, culminating in a wildcat strike of 10,000 workers protesting the dismissal of 3,000 of their colleagues.[281] 'Much of the social infrastructure of the city was diminished', Harvey writes, 'and the physical infrastructure (for example the subway system) deteriorated markedly for lack of investment or even maintenance.'[282] Amidst this disrepair and ignited by a sense of anger about a type of work that was often reviled, Ukeles conceived *Touch*

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[279] Originally, Ukeles had intended to have the individual names read out of all the employees whose jobs were jeopardized by the impending cuts. As city officials threatened to sue her if she proceeded with this plan, she only included the position titles.

[280] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48.

[281] Cf. Joshua B. Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 261f.

[282] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 46.

Sanitation Performance (1979-80), a durational art piece that was her first project with the New York Department of Sanitation (DSNY).

2.3 Touch Sanitation

In a 1976 *Village Voice* review of 'Art < > World', David Bourdon jokingly suggested that the beleaguered and underfunded Department of Sanitation might qualify for a National Endowment for the Arts grant if they performed their work as maintenance art. Seeing the potential in this suggestion, Ukeles took Bourdon's idea seriously and got in touch with the then commissioner of the city's sanitation department. It turned out to be a formative moment in her practice: since the late 1970s, Ukeles has been the unsalaried artist-in-residence at DSNY, a position she holds to this day. For her first project, *Touch Sanitation Performance*, she travelled around the city for eleven months, shaking the hand of all 8,500 'sanmen' (sanitation workers, all men at the time) and thanking them 'for keeping New York city alive'. Prior to this, she had devoted herself to studying the system and infrastructure of sanitation, both in its technological and social dimensions, as well as its multiple sites, creating an intricate cartography of the city's boroughs and sanitation districts that helped her to methodically map out her routes (which she called 'sweeps'), spending eight-, occasionally sixteen-hour shifts visiting sanitation crews (cf. *Figure 4*).

Figure 3 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance: 'Handshake Ritual' with Workers of New York City Department of Sanitation*, 1979-1980

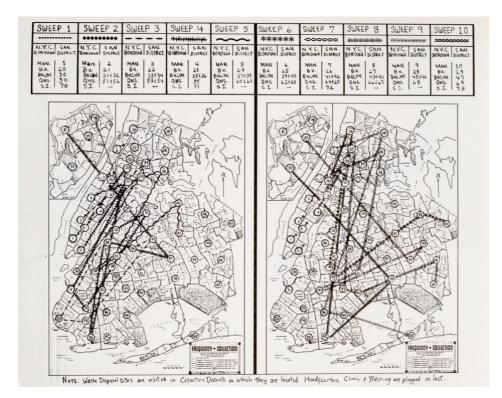Source: Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Figure 4 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, sweep maps from *Touch Sanitation Performance,* 1979-1980

Source: Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

In a letter Ukeles sent to the sanitation workers regarding the 'Handshake Ritual', she wrote:

> I've talked a lot about 'hands', to 'handle' waste, 'handling' the pressures and difficulties of the job, and finally – about 'shaking, shaking, shaking hands'. This is an artwork about hand-energy. What you are expert at, what you do everyday. The touch, the hand of the artist and the hand of the sanmen. I want to make a chain of hands […] A hand-chain to hold up the whole City.[283]

As a figure of collaboration and interdependence, the hand-chain countered the then emergent neoliberal doxa of sovereign-style subjectivity and self-sufficiency. At a time when the logic of the market came to put increasing pressure on the social fabric, it was a gesture that insisted on the need for public things (for sanitation and, by extension, municipal infrastructure) and the importance of their maintenance ('to maintain' from the Latin *manu tenere*, meaning 'to hold in the hand').[284] Lisa Baraitser writes:

> Ukeles offers us a model, through maintenance art, of attending to the absolute singularity of beings and things, whilst at the same time understanding how that singularity is constantly propped up by networks of other singular beings and things and institutions and ideas, on whom we are all dependent.[285]

Her work, in other words, heeds the fundamentally relational and contingent quality of social life. By tarrying with modes of lived experience frequently denigrated in society, it is a way of reflecting and thereby giving back what is there to be seen but is too often ignored. It provides what Honig calls a 'counternarration of the democratic need for public things' (Honig, 61). Working against a societal ethos that construes life as a project of self-authorisation and -expansion in which dependency is disowned, seen as infantile, and autonomy is cast as maturity, her work offers an alternative trajectory, a different maturation narrative that instead places its emphasis on interdependence and that avows the importance of a good-enough holding environment.

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[283] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 'Letter to Sanitation Workers', reprinted in Patricia Phillips, et al. *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art* (Munich, London, New York: DelMonico Books, Prestel, 2016), 101.

[284] As such, it finds a way of addressing the infrastructural neglect Bruce Robbins laments when he writes: 'unlike commodities, infrastructure is the object of no one's desire, or no one but a few passionate amateurs. It is not artfully illuminated in a shop window for all to see but tucked away out of the usual sight lines, indeed often inaccessible to all but unauthorized personnel—personnel who (maybe because funds have dried up) are here conspicuous by their absence. Infrastructure smells, it seems, because attention is not paid because it is neglected. And it is neglected because it belongs to the public domain, all other tokens of belonging effaced, owned in effect by no one. The smell of infrastructure is the smell of the public.' Robbins, 'The Smell of Infrastructure', 26.

[285] Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 67f.

This notion of the avowal of dependency and need as constitutive social traits recalls Judith Butler's work that I discussed in Chapter 1. To recall, for Butler, political subjectivity is frequently formed on the basis of the repudiation of interdependency—a developmental phenomenon that she links to multiple scenes of violence, including racism, homophobia and misogyny. In acknowledging our shared sociality, this pattern might be interrupted, Butler suggests, as it allows subjects to divest themselves of their defensive sovereignty, able to recognize previously ungrieved 'grievable lives'. Ukeles's maintenance art shares a similar semantic register. Yet, unlike Butler, who readily abstracts the idiom of (dis)avowal from a specific political context, Ukeles's work remains grounded in the material realities of her present. That is, rather than a universal trait of politically emancipatory power, the acknowledgment of dependency here acts both as a reminder of the flawed standard of autonomy underlying neoliberalism and as part of an agenda to revalue a socially stigmatized type of labour. Still, insofar as Ukeles's art appeals to the powers of affective recognition, it is not far from Butler's work on 'grievable lives'. To address social inequities, both women invoke practices of acknowledgment as transformative political vehicles. One might note the problems this approach harbours (as already touched upon in Chapter 1). For example, Berlant writes:

> projects of compassionate recognition have enabled a habit of political obfuscation of the differences between emotional and material (legal, economic, and institutional) kinds of social reciprocity. […] Recognition all too often becomes an experiential end in itself, an emotional event that protects what is unconscious, impersonal, and unrelated to anyone's intentions about maintaining political privilege.[286]

Indeed, there is a way in which Ukeles's work lends itself to being seen as providing some welcome publicity to the sanitation department.[287] What one critic has described as her 'redemptive voluntarism'[288], Ukeles's presence at DSNY was a way of garnering recognition for municipal labour that could easily be embraced by management and city officials as it appealed to people's *sense* of dependency and implication without being tied to the need for material readjustments. For example, the city's mayor Ed Koch, known for his anti-union rhetoric, expressed his appreciation of Ukeles's art in a letter to the artist: 'Seriously, who's to deny that friendly exchange and contact between human beings is not the greatest of all arts?

[286] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 182.
[287] I deal with Butler's account in detail in Chapter 1. Here my focus is on Ukeles.
[288] Ben Davis, 'What Mierle Laderman Ukeles's "Maintenance Art" Can Still Teach Us Today', *artnet news*, 20 September 2016, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/mierle-ukeles-laderman-manifesto-655478, accessed 3 January 2020.

Accordingly, may you continue to "shake up" our City for years to come.'[289] Still, it would be misguided to simply denounce Ukeles's work as a result. For, one, as Berlant herself notes, while compassionate recognition is often not matched in scale by changes in the law, in economic and institutional arrangements, it *does* always play a part in struggles for empowerment.[290] And, two, Ukeles's model of maintenance art does not simply ask for the recognition of maintenance labour, but calls for the efficacy of maintenance art. As such, it goes beyond idioms of acknowledgment, challenging its audience by confounding received distinctions. In other words, her work trades in multiple registers, only one of which has to do with people's empathic capacities. Its pertinence, for our concerns here, also lies in the way in which it plays with ingrained manners of perception and solicits an attentiveness to the role of infrastructure in the life of a polity. It is to these qualities that I now want to turn.

3. The Democratic Need for Maintaining Public Things: Ukeles and Honig

I want to suggest that the idea and practice of Ukeles's maintenance art offers another 'alternative holding', that is, another resource for approaching the question of what to do in times of impasse when the democratic holding environment that public things provide is under attack. For Honig, as we saw earlier, the work of Lear and von Trier performs such a function. She writes: 'They [*Radical Hope* and *Melancholia*] do not just warn about the loss of public things; they take their place and offer an opportunity for guilt and rage to develop into the kinds of ambivalence and concern that public things presuppose and require' (Honig, 56). The same can be said about Ukeles's work. Ukeles's anger, her 'cold fury', about the low status of maintenance labour and the latter's alleged separation from more estimable matters led to the composition of her manifesto. Both the manifesto and her subsequent work were means to channel and transform this experience into a type of work that repeatedly invites its audience to learn to bear the ambivalence of social interdependence and to develop a concern for the role of maintenance in sustaining human and planetary welfare. Like Honig's use of Lear and von Trier, Ukeles thus allows us to think about the democratic need for public things in times when such things are persistently being dismantled. Yet, unlike Honig's examples, Ukeles does not engage a catastrophic imaginary or archive to envision possible responses. Hers is an aesthetic of the everyday, of the ceaseless, repetitive labour that undergirds life, both that of the

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[289] Cited in Davis, ibid.
[290] 'Self-transforming compassionate recognition and its cognate forms of solidarity *are* necessary for making political movements thrive contentiously against all sorts of privilege, but they have also provided a means of making minor structural adjustments seem like major events, because the theatre of compassion is emotionally intense.' Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 182.

individual and of the body politic—one that, as I already suggested, assumes a particular character when seen in relation to the infrastructural brittleness and emerging neoliberal pressures it was responding to.

For the most part, Honig also refrains from employing genres of catastrophe. Adopting a language of malfunction and brittleness, she approaches the present from within the troubled, yet ongoing movement of life. The exception is her last chapter, where she engages tropes of 'world-endingness' to think about the impact of and possible response to the evisceration of the public. She justifies this by arguing that, rather than feeding attitudes of despair, Lear's *Radical Hope* and von Trier's *Melancholia* offer spurs to action. The latter, she writes, may 'mobilize those who might otherwise succumb to what they simply assume, wrongly and dangerously, to be inevitable. Witnessing inevitable destruction, we may be moved out of passivity and into action' (71). Maybe. Or maybe (more likely) not. But is this a useful standard to apply in the first place? In attributing to art such interventionist power, are we not suggesting that work that falls short of having such effects is somehow wanting? At the same time, pace Honig, could we not say that one of the principal effects of von Trier's *Melancholia* is to entertain consumer tastes for disaster more than or at least as much as it may fuel anti-capitalist spirits? Simon Bayly's reflections on our present's relation to catastrophe seem pertinent in this respect. He writes:

> far from being adequate to produce a response that would prevent their realization, [sufficiently convincing images of a catastrophic future] appear to be having the opposite effect: contemporary capitalism […] feeds off the consumption of the images (and the realities) of its own self-induced dissolution.[291]

Honig's own hesitation regarding the use of catastrophe mainly derives from the lack of agency and the attenuated imaginary of survival that such a focus engenders—something that, in her view, both Lear and von Trier circumvent. This might be so. Yet I would argue that more is at stake when we use historic or fictional narratives of devastation to think about the troubled landscape of the present. For we thereby turn ongoing realities into intensified situations. We might do so because as systemic conditions they have not incited the types of response a vocabulary of crisis and emergency calls for. Such rhetoric, however, does not describe well how people encounter proliferating pressures on the ordinary movement of life.[292] Living with

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[291] Simon Bayly, 'The End of the Project: Futurity in the Culture of Catastrophe', *Angelaki* 18, no. 2 (2013): 175.
[292] Lauren Berlant makes a similar argument in relation to the so-called obesity epidemic in the US. See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Chapter 3.

infrastructural brittleness is not the same as facing imminent systemic failure or extinction. If we limit our conceptual frames to the extreme and exceptional, we risk reinforcing habitual economies of attention that privilege scenes that correspond to registers of the eventful (cf. Chapter 3). In her book *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (2011), Elizabeth Povinelli makes a similar point when she distinguishes between 'events' and what she calls 'quasi-events':

> If events are things that we can say happened such that they have a certain objective being, then quasi-events never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place. They neither happen nor not happen. […] Crises and catastrophes are kinds of events that seem to demand, as if authored from outside human agency, an ethical response. Not surprisingly then, these kinds of events become what inform the social science of suffering and thriving.[293]

In other words, by deriving our reparative imaginary from scenes of devastation we risk unduly singling out experiences of extraordinary injury to think about the impact of and response to historical pressures. But is the impact of the neoliberal disinvestment in public life not better described by what Povinelli calls 'quasi-events' or what with Berlant we have called 'crisis ordinariness'? Rather than constituting a catastrophe, are conditions of ordinary life in contemporary Euro-Atlantic societies often not better described by enduring scenes of exhaustion whose effects are corrosive but undramatic? Consequently, what kind of (artistic) strategies help us to reflect and foreground these temporally and spatially diffuse processes? And how can we attend to these experiences without immediately categorizing and thus reducing them to the monotonous time of the ordinary vis-à-vis the eventful time of rupture? I want to suggest that Ukeles's work provides one possible answer.

For Ukeles's art stays in tune with the quotidian rhythms of hegemonic forces and the ways in which life becomes disorganized without being undone by its pressures. As such, it allows us to remain within the grammar of the impasse as an experience of crisis ordinariness, whose drawn-out, unspectacular appearance lacks the urgency and intensity of the extreme. Where Honig resorts back to scenes of extraordinary injury or threat in the search for promising political anchors, Ukeles remains immersed in the ordinary movement of life. Performances, such as *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* and *Touch Sanitation*, inhabit the chronic

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[293] Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 13f.

time of maintenance in an effort to highlight and revalorize the significance of this temporal labour. As Lisa Baraitser writes:

> [Ukeles's] work allows us to attend to the qualities of a kind of suspended temporality that is not the time of the event, and is neither the time of progress and development. […] [W]hat maintenance does is keep us attached to time itself, in that it recognizes that 'betterment' is not a time in the future, but the time we labour within the 'now', in its repetitious, bleak, and at times ugly forms.[294]

Insofar as Ukeles dwells in this time and opens it up to an association with liveness, the quotidian rhythms and routines that organize her work do not only reflect a commitment to and sense of solidarity with a type of work often denigrated in society; such work is also revealed as a means of lending a measure of coherence and permanence to the social fabric and of supporting the latter's resilience in times of impasse. As such, it offers a welcome counterbalance to Honig's catastrophic repertoire. At the same time, Ukeles's work can also be read as a goad to rethink fantasies of the good life that equate societal well-being with quantitative economic growth. For her patient yet insistent efforts at revaluing maintenance cultivate an orientation to the world that is less geared toward imperatives of production and novelty than it is to the skilful preservation of the world. This is not to say that her work does not make room for or unfolds in contradistinction to processes of change or development— her manifesto emphasized maintenance work as an integral if underappreciated part of development, after all. Rather, by developing an aesthetic around modes and questions of maintenance and renewal, Ukeles, we might argue, shifts the focus from quantitative to qualitative change. Indeed, in its lack of forward momentum, Ukeles's work shares the attention to laterality and horizontality that characterized the art works I discussed in Chapter 2. Unlike the latter, however, her work delineates a purpose, an alternative aspiration that harbours an imaginary of the terms and practices in which new claims on social resources could be made. The lack of forward momentum that has formed a recurring theme throughout the chapters here is given an alternative inflection. Similar to Baraitser's revaluation of the chronic time of care, but more collective in its outlook, Ukeles's 'steady-state aesthetic'[295] embraces its repetitive

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[294] Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, 68.
[295] I take this notion from Benjamin Kunkel's lecture 'Steady-State Aesthetics'. In this lecture, Kunkel develops an analogy between what he calls capitalist growthism and the compulsion to novelty characteristic of much modern and contemporary art. Like capitalist accumulation, the drive to create endlessly new aesthetic forms, Kunkel argues, is a drive without a purpose. Drawing on Herman Daly's notion of a 'steady-state economy', that is, an economy decoupled from quantitative growth and thus constant in its biophysical throughput, Kunkel seeks to imagine what a 'steady-state aesthetic' might look like, that is, what kind of art might foreshadow or emerge in a post-growth society. He mentions (but does not elaborate on) Ukeles's work in this context. Benjamin Kunkel,

circularity. By decoupling from the impulse to produce something new, she instead finds creative potential in acts of maintenance and care as material and affective practices that contribute toward lively and inclusive infrastructures of sociality.

So far I have suggested that Ukeles's maintenance art provides another resource for approaching the neoliberal attenuation of democratic life that Honig's theory of public things draws attention to. Yet it is important to see that Ukeles's work also speaks back to Honig's account, complicating her use of both Winnicott and Arendt. To recall, Honig uses Winnicott's notion of the transitional object as an analogy for thinking about the role of public things in democratic life. Like the transitional object that enables the child to develop an integrated sense of subjectivity along with the ability to relate to and show concern for others, public things, Honig argues, are integral to helping citizens form democratic collectives divested of omnipotent fantasies and imbued with a sense of responsibility and care. Yet as compelling as this analogy may be, it also (like any analogy) has its limits. One disparity is that, unlike transitional objects, public things need tending. That is unlike transitional objects, public things require care so that they can care for us, in turn. Honig is certainly aware of that. She says as much herself when she writes:

> In Winnicott, it is key that the object resists and survives the infant's emotional drama. Only in this way can the infant move past its grandiose omnipotence and dependency on the object, into play with it and beyond it (poetry, culture, politics). Politically, of course, the survival of the public thing—climate, the planet, health care—cannot be taken for granted and so the reality tested may yield to the test rather than the other way round. (56)

Yet, for most of the book, her reflections display a different focus. She is primarily interested in showing how things and their resilience may enlist us as citizens who develop a sense of care and responsibility. Little attention is paid to the labour that is required to keep these things intact or alive. Her use of Winnicott's transitional object and Arendt's notion of work is indicative in this respect insofar as it leads her to read public things as 'shapers (Arendt) and even sources (Winnicott) of our capacity to care for the world' (38). What this leaves unaccounted for, however, are the material practices that enable such things to continually be in good-enough shape in the first place. That is, it is not just public things such as education, health care or access to clean water and efficient sewers that are objects of political struggle but also the labour

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'Steady-State Aesthetics' [online], 8 November 2017, The Artist's Institute, New York, available from http://theartistsinstitute.org/artists/sept-dec-2017/recordings/, accessed 29 November 2019.

that goes into maintaining them. To attend to democratic infrastructures, in other words, requires us to not only heed their material and affective powers but also to note the ongoing labour that keeps these enabling patterns intact. Honig's emphasis on the generative power of things threatens to discount this aspect—an imbalance that Ukeles's work allows us to address.

Ukeles's manifesto, to recall, distinguishes between the repetitive, ceaseless work of maintenance and the productive processes of development. In this respect, it resembles Arendt's distinction between 'labour' and 'work' that we already came across when discussing Honig's account.[296] To repeat, labour, for Arendt, is perpetual and never completed. Its 'monotonous performances of daily repeated chores'[297] strive against the propensity of all living systems to decay—an effort that, unlike work, does not yield a final product. 'It is indeed the mark of all labouring', Arendt writes, 'that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of the effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent.'[298] Work, in contrast, is transformative. Concerned with the fabrication of objects, it lends 'permanence, stability and durability'[299] to a world otherwise ephemeral and in constant flux. This includes the creation of works of art which, due to their 'outstanding permanence', are, for Arendt, 'the most intensely worldly of all tangible things'.[300] To return to Ukeles's work, we can see that it is this very distinction between labour and work that falters. Her quest to dissolve the boundaries between valorized and de-valorized labour is a quest that, as such, also unhinges Arendt's categorization between work and labour together with its implicit value hierarchy. By reframing her ephemeral labour of maintenance as art, Ukeles weaves together what Arendt keeps apart. 'My working will be the work', her manifesto announced. Yet this is not to say that Ukeles simply replaces work with labour. Her ambition to revalorize routinely unseen and underappreciated labour relies on the instruments that, for Arendt, define 'work' after all—think of the photographs documenting her maintenance art as well as of her writings. These lend a certain durability to the otherwise ephemeral nature of her work. At the same time, her practice as a performance artist also shares some of the features Arendt attributes to 'action'. Unlike labour and work, which can take place in isolation, action, for Arendt, requires the presence of a plurality of others to perceive and give meaning to what they see—a condition that applies equally to Ukeles's maintenance art.

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[296] Julia Bryan-Wilson also makes this connection between Ukeles and Arendt in her book *Art Workers*. Cf. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 166.
[297] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 100.
[298] Ibid., 87.
[299] Ibid. 126.
[300] Ibid. 167.

Besides, action, for Arendt, is inherently performative. Rather than revealing or confirming pre-existing identities, action creates and confounds. Its inherently unpredictable quality engenders new realities that work to offset what Arendt sees as the normalizing effects of the social. In this respect, it is similar to Ukeles's performances and her impulse to unsettle habitual economies of value. But where action, in Arendt's account, is presented as ruptural or inaugural, yielding a politics of new beginnings, Ukeles's performances promote the importance of repetition and of maintaining the already existent for the liveliness of the body politic.[301] And, in contrast to Arendt, who insists on the necessity to distinguish between the private (the domain of labour and work) and the public realm (the sphere of action and politics), Ukeles's art confounds their distinction. By drawing on elements of work and action (in the form of visual and written documentation and practices of re-signification), her performances politicize the role and value of such labour and critique its gendered and classed divisions.[302] Maintenance labour, her art insists, underwrites the private as much as it supports the public realm. And maintenance labour can occur simultaneously with and have the same value as art.

This reciprocal conjunction of art and maintenance provides a counterbalance to Honig's somewhat one-sided emphasis on the way in which the objects of work exert a stabilizing function on the domain of labour. For in Ukeles's practice, it is the often unseen activity of labour that stabilizes the object world (not just the other way around). Where Honig risks fetishizing public things (i.e. attributing a somewhat magical power to them), Ukeles's art can be seen as a continual encounter with and insistent reminder of the ways in which such things (whether the museum, the sanitation system or other municipal infrastructure) rely on the ongoing labour of maintenance. Performances, such as *Hartford Wash* or *Touch Sanitation*, are exemplary in this respect by drawing attention to the durational practices underwriting the public realm. In other words, it is not just public things that matter, that enlist our collective capacities to build and care for a common world collaboratively. Importantly, it is also about

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[301] In this respect, her art recalls Baraitser's reappraisal of the repetitive time of care as an important but underappreciated dimension of social life, a form of sustenance that creates and maintains the social fabric.

[302] Drawing on Honig's reading of Arendt, we might note that part of the destabilization that Ukeles's art achieves is foreshadowed by Arendt's account itself. As Honig points out, despite Arendt's insistent reliance on the public/private distinction—the idea that both labour and work are domains external to action and politics—the resources for its politicization are already present within her account. For the insight that action, in Arendt's view, is performative, a moment of constitutive power, and not the assertion of an incontestable, foundational ground, can be applied to her own conceptual distinctions; doing so means seeing—with and against Arendt—that the public/private distinction is itself the performative result of a political struggle and as such is always only ever partially secured and thus open to contestation. Honig writes: 'Action is possible in the private realm because the social and its mechanisms of normalization consistently fail to achieve the closures that Arendt attributes them too readily.' Bonnie Honig, 'Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity', in B. Honig, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press: 1995), 148.

how we view, what value we accord the labour that goes into maintaining them. Ukeles's valorization of municipal labour at a time when such labour was systematically being dismantled and public disinvestment was becoming the new ordinary was thus not only an insistence on the importance of public institutions and infrastructures for providing a democratic holding environment (though it was that, too); it was also an insistence on the need to revalorize the unglamorous and often denigrated work of maintaining such systems.

Conclusion

After decades of neoliberal deregulation and privatization, invoking vocabularies of public things and their maintenance may seem obsolete, 'an old hope's bitter echo', as Berlant might say.[303] Baraitser, for example, writes with respect to Ukeles's art:

> There are many ways Ukeles's work could now be seen as anachronistic. Municipal sanitation departments in most major cities in the global north have been taken over, or their service outsourced, to vast multinational corporations whose slow violence far outweighs that of the ailing social institutions that Ukeles was seeking to investigate and prop up.[304]

This is certainly the case. Yet, we may equally hold that calling such practices anachronistic is to *prematurely* give up on the democratic project of public things as a set of real historical accomplishments as well as still ongoing struggles asking to be extended further. Reading Ukeles's work together with Honig's account persuasively brings this out. For their work points to the importance of maintaining and renewing (Ukeles) worldly points of anchorage (Honig) without which political life is at risk of going astray. What is more, it shows that it is not only public things that require care; importantly, it is also the angry impulse in the face of their decimation that is in need of renewal and maintenance (think of Ukeles's 'cold fury' and the aggression and anger that features in Honig's account by way of Lear and von Trier's work). Such anger forms part of any repertoire of resilience, a political posture that does not give in to despair or indifference, but that holds onto the possibility of more democratic formations. In the extended meanwhile of the impasse, this is a difficult, possibly cruelly optimistic, stance to maintain; but it is a stance that keeps alive a trace of the desire to reimagine the common world collaboratively. Public things, then, bring us to the edge of where this thesis can go, preparing

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[303] Berlant, 'The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times', 414.
[304] Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, 59.

us for something more instrumental and politically efficacious than the sensibilities and experiences of impasse that have occupied this thesis.

Conclusion

> Theory, as Gayatri Spivak writes, is at best provisional generalization: I am tracking patterns to enable […] readers to see them elsewhere or to not see them, and to invent other explanations.
> — Lauren Berlant, Desire/Love

This thesis has offered the concept of the impasse as a way of evoking both the affective atmosphere of our political present and its underlying socio-economic and ecological conditions. The present in the Euro-Atlantic world, I suggested, unfolds as a time of troubled continuity in which an inherited set of fantasies shows signs of increasing frailty along with the social infrastructures that once appeared to make it attainable, while alternatives appear unavailable or undesirable. As a conceptual heuristic, I have advanced the idea of the impasse as a counterpoint to two related tendencies in political theory: the use of tropes of trauma and catastrophe to describe the crisis-shaped present and an emphasis on rupture and radical discontinuity to think about political change. Shifting the conceptual framework from the state of exception to the impasse of crisis ordinariness, and from the event of rupture to the non-event like event of the impasse, I argued, allows us to attend to other stories or other sides of stories that risk being overlooked or displaced by critical strategies geared towards limit events or experiences. To track the valences and time of the impasse, then, was to consider and to be patient with the slowness and difficulty of social transformation. Doing so did not mean dismissing the need for impatience or denying the exigency of the current moment; the spirit of this thesis has been one of expansion: the aim has been to multiply perspectives and to consider and cultivate different capacities.

I began by thinking about impasses as affective predicaments that arise when people's attachments to normative fantasies are damaging and/or threatened. Insofar as these attachments have structured people's relation to themselves and others as well as to the social as such, they will not be abandoned readily or without ambivalence. People's fantasies, in other words, form an affective cushion of continuity and coherence in their lives, not given up and replaced easily. That is to say, even people for whom the world is not an accommodating place and who have an interest in or commitment to living otherwise will not only feel excited by the prospect of discontinuity. With this in mind, I argued that we need to make room in our critical accounts for the irresolution and ambivalence that encounters with contingency will likely entail. Rather than insisting on the transformative possibility that lies dormant within adverse conditions, I argued that we need to slow down the movement between diagnostic claim and

political practice. For part of the effort is to recognize the place of constraint, both psychic and material, in the movement of everyday life, to be sensitive to the way in which people are involved in navigating and adjusting to compromised and compromising conditions.

The subsequent chapters, then, aimed to be attentive to the moods and temporalities of the impasse, not advancing too readily to recuperate them. As an affective index, the impasse, I argued, describes and distils some of the prevalent ways in which the present impresses itself on people's consciousness and sets limits on their experience and action. This was not to suggest that its composition engenders the same feelings and responses in people; there is no mono-affective imaginary attached to it, so to speak. Rather, it was to suggest that what is collective is a sense of the increasingly brittle, which is not to say broken, state of the material and affective conditions holding current forms of the social together. Tracking the different sensibilities and experiences of impasse, I argued, pushes us to consider modes of subjectivity that trouble understandings of the self-determining and intentional agent—understandings that lie at the heart of neoliberal thinking but also often inform critical conceptions of dissent.

My third chapter turned to questions of time. In light of the Anthropocene's emergence into public consciousness and debate, the impasse, I suggested, points to the present as a time of suspension in which knowledge of the unviability of current modes of production and consumption coexists alongside the seeming impossibility of bringing about a workable alternative. The simultaneous frailty and persistence of traditional infrastructures for reproducing life, I argued, calls for a critical framework that in its attention to temporal experiences of ongoingness and duration supplements critical imaginaries bent on scenes of transgression and the sense of change they entail. The impasse asked us to think through the slowness of chronic time, rather than the time of rupture, and the conflicting rhythms of ambivalence, rather than the unambiguous embrace of action.

Finally, I explored the question of what it is people may become attached to and gather around in the halting transition of the impasse. The answer came in the form of public things. As material and fantasmatic anchors, public things, I argued, may help to reanimate the suspension of the impasse, working to orient people's desires for better forms of sociality. As such, they allowed us to see the impasse not just as an experience of discomposure and adjustment, but also as a space of time in which questions arise as to how to forge better modes of relationality from within and beyond the pressures of the current moment. The last chapter, in other words,

saw the impasse not only as a problem, but also as a possibility that makes room to reconsider what more sustaining and sustainable forms of sociability might look like.

I want to end, then, with a note on form. Writing this thesis, I wondered at points, to what extent the conceptual order and coherence, the handholding links of academic prose and its argumentative thread went against the confounding nature of the impasse. By writing about the impasse in this way, was I turning it into something other than itself? Was I obscuring its own obscurity, so to speak, lending its uncertain and ambiguous shape an all too certain quality? I wondered what it would mean to recognize or acknowledge the impasse in a way that did not immediately convert it into a passageway for analytical transparency, but that reflected its weight and befuddlement. What form of address would be adequate to make palpable and available those qualities? I turned to literature and art for answers. Their formal arrangement each held some articulation of suspended time or movement that rendered sensible feelings of impasse. Still, the questions remained, accompanying the writing of this thesis like a shadow. After all, the difficulty of detaching from normative conventions applies to writing criticism as much as it does to other objects and fantasies that have organized and continue to organize our ways of being in the world. It brings out the need, once more, of learning to bear the uncertainty associated with such practices as well as the importance of a world in which it feels safe to be unknowing in and to try things out. To find oneself at an impasse when writing about one seems fitting, then. Still, my desire persists to register the impasse in ways other than through admitting one's own creative impasse—an absorbing awareness of the need to experiment.

Here, I hope to have offered a vocabulary and a set of perspectives that bring the impasse into focus as a time of troubled continuity whose experience cannot be ignored without neglecting some of the prevalent affects, states and practices that make up the texture of ordinary life in the contemporary world of Euro-America. To think about the present as impasse, then, is not to suggest that things cannot change. It is to argue that most people find themselves ambivalently attached to a world that is also wearing them down and that the prospect of change may not only be exhilarating, but also frightening. Concomitantly, it is to argue that the terms and registers through which we try and imagine better modes of relationality from within and beyond the pressures of the current moment must not only invoke idioms of refusal, protest or transgression but also attend to the difficulty of bearing irresolution and to the arduous and unevenly distributed labour of care and maintenance. To pause, then, to consider what the impasse might be telling us is also to pause calls that demand quick solutions. If there is a

promise that attends this time, it is tentative and uncertain; it lies in the sense that the impasse is something shared, a time in which the fantasies and values by which we make sense of the world present themselves as questions again.

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