

INTIMATE LINEAGES

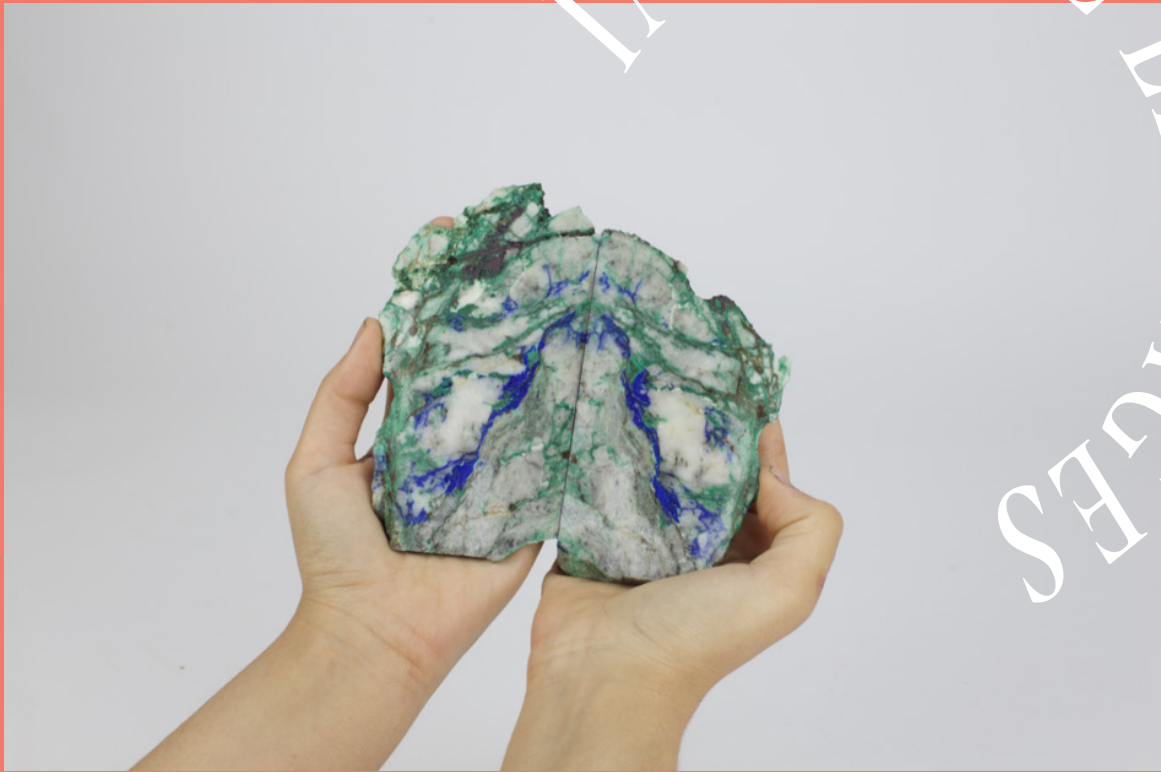


Photo credit: Patrícia Domingues

PASSAGE

#1

Graticule

Patrícia Domingues

A Tinder Lover's Discourse

Marilia Kaiser

On Haunting

Shauni de Gussem

The Making of a Portrait

Pinelopi Tzouva

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MARIA GIL ULLDEMOLINS,
KRIS PINT, NADIA SELS

ON TYING
A MEANINGFUL
MESS OF NETS

INTRODUCTION

Intimacy is a mess,¹ familiarity sheds formality. As we make kin and tighten bonds, lines are not only extended, but crossed. For this very first issue of *Passage*, we wanted precisely to break a line of thought into a mesh of attachments, inheritances, and boundaries. And we wanted to do so by mixing reflections on personal lived experiences together with theory. Which is to say, we wanted to do so from an autotheoretical perspective.

Autotheory picks up the thread of existential phenomenology, very much invested in the embodied, singular relation to the everyday world. Just like the existentialists, autotheorists acknowledge one's situatedness and intimate involvement as a researcher, making clear that it is a form of bad faith to pretend otherwise.

But what autotheory does, and does more explicitly than existential phenomenology, is explore these modes, or moments, of existence that deviate from the so-considered default, neutral position of an ideal, impossibly steady, subjectivity. Taking seriously the affectedness of a body also means including affects that are disturbing, overwhelming, and sometimes too close for comfort.

Arianne Zwartjes beautifully articulates this contamination between the academic and the bodily in her essay (for *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*) called "Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory":

theory has long been a perfect, elite curation of the finest moments of the function of a brain, while hiding all the real lived experience of one particular set of causes and conditions which created that brain's patterns of thinking—thus both disingenuously disguising the origins of the theorizing, but also creating an exclusive façade that tells those outsiders by academia, you can't do this kind of work. Autotheory steps in and intentionally contaminates all that theoretical purity with the messy, the wet, the dank of the hidden: of sex and of body.²

From façades to skin, a mingling of surfaces. A text that touches the world, the writer, the reader, a sensorial transmission. In other words, a mess: Autotheory breaks through both the academic limitations and the line that is the "I."

1 "La confianza da asco," as fellow Spanish speakers will know.

2 Arianne Zwartjes, "Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory," *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* 6, no. 1 (Fall 2019), <https://www.essayjournal.com/arianne-zwartjes8203-under-the-skin-an-exploration-of-autotheory-61.html>.

This mingling definitely describes the four texts that make up our first issue: They deal with experiences of loss and mourning, lust and loneliness, sickness and addiction. There is an implicit sense of urgency in these texts, a need for sense-making. And there is, too, an effort to shape a language that can articulate a complex and subjective truth that prods beyond the self. Which works of art, which philosophical concepts, help to make sense of these experiences? How do they help me to deal with what is happening to me, to others? Can my curiosity embed me into a tradition? How do I weave others and their works into my quotidianity?

We are convinced that the “auto” in autotheory can be misleading (the term still feels like a necessary evil – useful, descriptive, but still, deceptive). It seems to suggest a centering on the self, narcissistically indulging in private issues, an academic counterpart to social media’s flattened self-fashioning. But this kind of writing, if done properly, is precisely a way *out* of the navel – it splinters the line of the I into a net. And while a net is not a synonym for safety, it is likely at least to expand wider than the self. Autotheory is a way of reckoning how intimacy is affected, shaped by events that go beyond one’s particularities, formed with and against events and forces that go beyond the confinements of the ego. It can “unfashion” it, make it other, strange, even alien.

Jeweller Patrícia Domingues, specializing in stone cutting, debuts with a text that evidences the lines that crack past the self, plotting the materiality of geology and history. Patrícia’s text shows the impact and wide reach of processes that shape and transcend the frame of a human life.

Anthropologist and cultural researcher Pinelopi Tzouva writes an essay that escapes into poetry, in which she plays both observer and observed. In this text, Tzouva deals with an ambiguous relation to the body and the impact of a rare auto-immune system disease on one’s own body image.

Architect and film researcher Marilia Kaiser demonstrates how the amorous subject in the age of Tinder not only is created by a discourse on love, as with Roland Barthes, but also emerges from the physical, addictive gesture of swiping as the digital equivalent

of going through a stack of collectible cards.

Finally, film writer Shauni de Gussem treats the reader to a text in which the pangs of personal mourning resonate with computer glitches and melancholic, otherworldly fictions of absent aliens and of ghosts haunting a small Belgian dürüm bar.

The I that speaks in these texts is ultimately aware of this impossibility of being truly oneself, of fully coinciding with a body, a history, an identity. Yet it is precisely this gap, this crack, and – well – this mess that make an autotheoretical exploration possible. An exploration in which fracturing a stone, going through a set of pictures, reflecting on a philosophical concept, looking in a mirror, watching a movie all invite the exploration of new lines of being such an I.

With these texts,³ we want to present what is hopefully just a beginning. For us, the idea behind *Passage* is to create a connective space between communities, disciplines, genres. To take a text's lines and use them as scaffolding to understand better how to live. In the coming years, we want to continue presenting voices that explore the complexity of lived experiences and their resonances with art, artistic practice, and theory, while finding new hybrid forms in which to express it, cast them wide, and catch others with it – like a net.

3 which were written and gathered between the COVID-19 years of 2020 and 2021 and which talk about messes, contaminations, and lines that escape the individual experience into the collective.



PATRÍCIA DOMINGUES

GRATICULE

My practice traces lines between geological phenomena and transatlantic history. As a jewellery artist and a stone cutter, I focus on the properties and qualities of materials but also on their respective histories and the environments we cohabit with them.

The fractures and the cuts I consciously create in materials are performative gestures and intersections of the materials' stories and my own in the past and the present.

In this paper, while exploring a personal, fragmentary approach towards creative writing and revisiting family lineages, I will use an autoethnographic methodology to divagate between landscapes of union and disunion. I will embark on an interweaving of lines—my own, those of the material and of history—as a way of expanding my practice into a broader scene of ideas and events. From the boats docking in Lisbon during the fifteenth-century Portuguese colonial period, to the exploration of gemstones at German markets and my grandfather's abandoned notebooks, how do the lines of history translate into a sequence of performative gestures? Where does the past end and the present begin?

Keywords: Lines, Gemstones, Fracturing Practice, Intimate Writing, Landscapes

1 - Interdependence

In his comparative anthropological study of the line, Tim Ingold looks at things, people and places as the sum of interconnected lines. For him, to study these is to study the lines they are made of, "After all, what is a thing, or indeed a person, if not a tying together of lines – the paths of growth and movement – of all the many constituents gathered there?"¹.

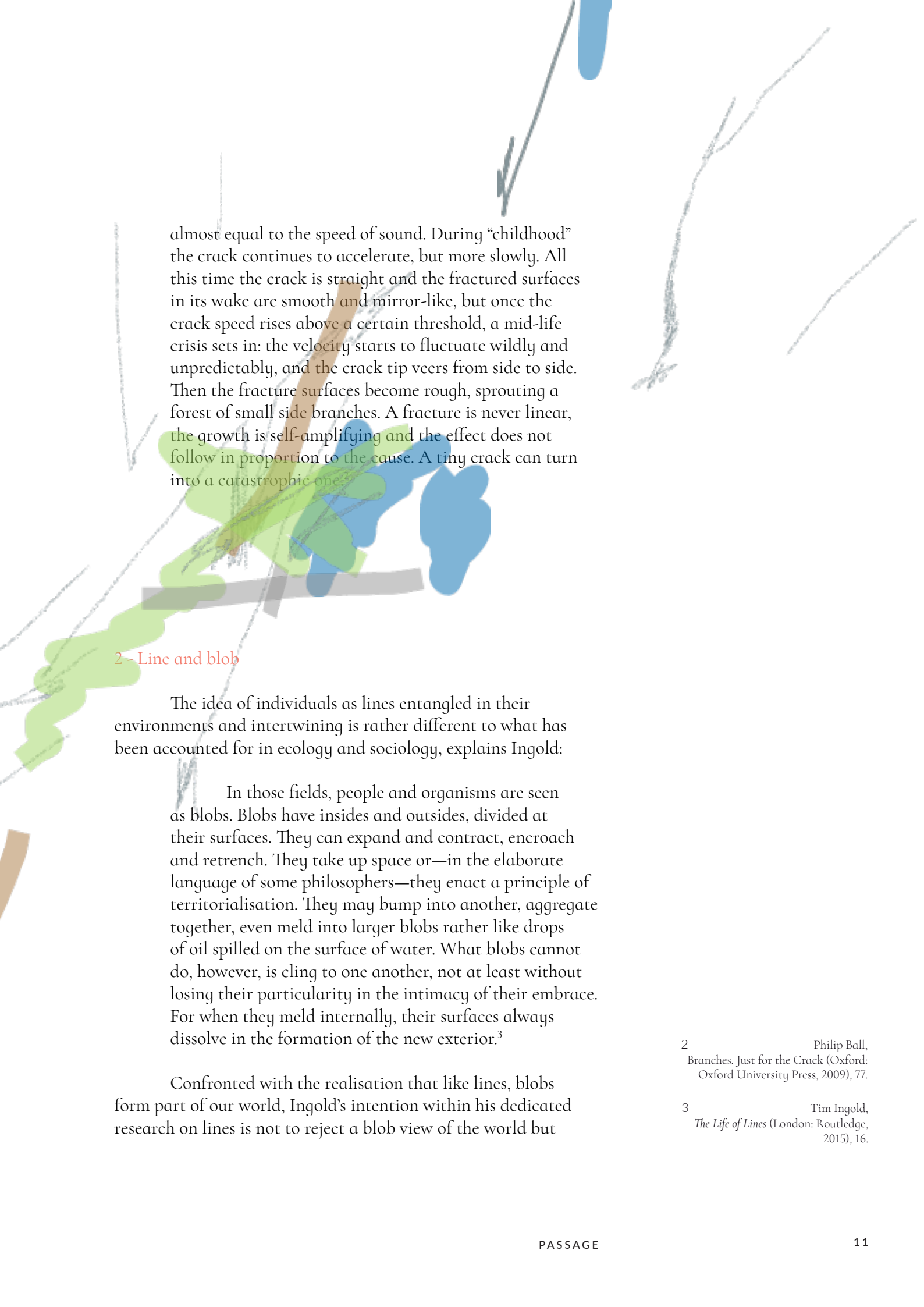
Amongst the particularities of lines that most fascinate me is their capacity to mimic each other and their interdependence. A fault in the land, before it becomes a fault, is a network of smaller fractures. The event of one fracture will stimulate the next and they continue to form until finally they succeed in cracking a massive amount of rock. This phenomenon is often observed when two tectonic plates separate from each other. The hot mantle then rises from the depths of the Earth and occupies the space created by the fault, like blood flowing from a cut in the arm, that solidifies to form a scab. Thus, lines are made of continual gestures, but also of intervals and discontinuities. In these gaps the influx forms new land, and new lines are created where life can then proceed. Through these encounters, fresh magma is pressed against much older rocks and later on exposed to the surface by erosion. As a result, when we look at the ground, what we see is the coming together of different times, a multiplicity of events, enriched and characterised by layers.

Lines that bend or break, that slither and wriggle and come into existence by internal and external accidents, permeate their environment and grow into unexpected places. Hence, lines that entangle are conceivably difficult to classify: Their beginnings and ends, if they exist at all, are blurred, hard to grab and materialise. For that reason, it is important to look closer, to devote more attention, because after all, what is life and research if not a tangle of lines?

2 - A brittle crack

A typical brittle crack grows in three stages. During its "birth" from an initiating notch, it accelerates in less than a millionth of a second to reach a speed

1 Tim Ingold, *Lines – A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2016), 5.



almost equal to the speed of sound. During “childhood” the crack continues to accelerate, but more slowly. All this time the crack is straight and the fractured surfaces in its wake are smooth and mirror-like, but once the crack speed rises above a certain threshold, a mid-life crisis sets in: the velocity starts to fluctuate wildly and unpredictably, and the crack tip veers from side to side. Then the fracture surfaces become rough, sprouting a forest of small side branches. A fracture is never linear, the growth is self-amplifying and the effect does not follow in proportion to the cause. A tiny crack can turn into a catastrophic one.²

2 - Line and blob

The idea of individuals as lines entangled in their environments and intertwining is rather different to what has been accounted for in ecology and sociology, explains Ingold:

In those fields, people and organisms are seen as blobs. Blobs have insides and outsides, divided at their surfaces. They can expand and contract, encroach and retrench. They take up space or—in the elaborate language of some philosophers—they enact a principle of territorialisation. They may bump into another, aggregate together, even meld into larger blobs rather like drops of oil spilled on the surface of water. What blobs cannot do, however, is cling to one another, not at least without losing their particularity in the intimacy of their embrace. For when they meld internally, their surfaces always dissolve in the formation of the new exterior.³

Confronted with the realisation that like lines, blobs form part of our world, Ingold’s intention within his dedicated research on lines is not to reject a blob view of the world but

2 Philip Ball, *Branches. Just for the Crack* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 77.

3 Tim Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (London: Routledge, 2015), 16.

rather to complement it. According to him, any form of social life that does not lead to an interlacing of lines cannot exist. While blobs give volume and mass, lines give movement and connection, constituting the matter from which life is made.

“What lines have, which blobs do not, is torsion, flexion and vivacity. They give us life. Life began when lines began to emerge and to escape the monopoly of blobs. Where the blob attests to the principle of territorialisation, the line bears out the contrary principle of deterritorialisation.”⁴

4 – *De tajar*

*In Spanish: Tajo - De tajar*⁵
(divided in parts, cut).

1. A cut, usually deep and smooth, made with a knife or other cutting instrument.
2. A deep, vertical cut formed in the ground by erosion, e.g., by a river, or by some other natural event.

The Tagus⁶ is the longest river on the Iberian Peninsula. It crosses the central part of Spain and, following an east-west direction, ends up dividing Portugal in two, ending its journey by draining into the Atlantic. It is an historical river loaded with departures and arrivals, and the intersections of boats, people and goods have dramatically and permanently changed the course of the modern era. I have often watched its waters flow into the Atlantic; in certain places, it is possible to see how the two waters pacifically blend into each other. The meeting of the fresh and salt waters sometimes manifests as a delicate line marked by distinct colours that change depending on the weather: grey-blue with a soft beige—the variations are perhaps endless. But most of the time, this line is in fact colourless, almost imperceptible, the kind of line that turns invisible when one isn't paying attention but, nevertheless, does not cease to exist. It is a line of expansion, a kind of controlled rhythmic and constant release. I imagine such continual movement to be different from the energetic spurt of a volcano or the squish of a tectonic fault. Those geographies of fire only release energy at certain times. Whereas the river is in constant renewal.

4 Ingold, *The Life of Lines*, 17

5 “Tajo,” Oxford Languages, https://www.google.com/search?q=tajo+significado&client=safari&rls=en&ssrf=ALeKk-00KNfBe_3x94T8_eY7M_wj09iUoX-g:1625736947116&lr=lang_de&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwihgeyJltPxAhWXOu-wKHeWbB5sQuAF6BAgBEAE&biw=1255&bih=675.

6 In Spanish *Tajo*, and in Portuguese *Tejo*.

Only a few kilometres out from the Tagus estuary the waters of the Atlantic become troubled, in comparison with those of the Tagus that descend from Spain in a rippling and sensuous movement. While the former erodes the land unobtrusively, the latter brutally dislodges land from the coast. I was in my twenties when I first heard the meaning of the word *Tajo* ('Tagus' in Spanish). Before then I had never thought of the river as a cut in the land excavated by the water. Learning the sharpness of its name irrevocably changed my relationship to it.

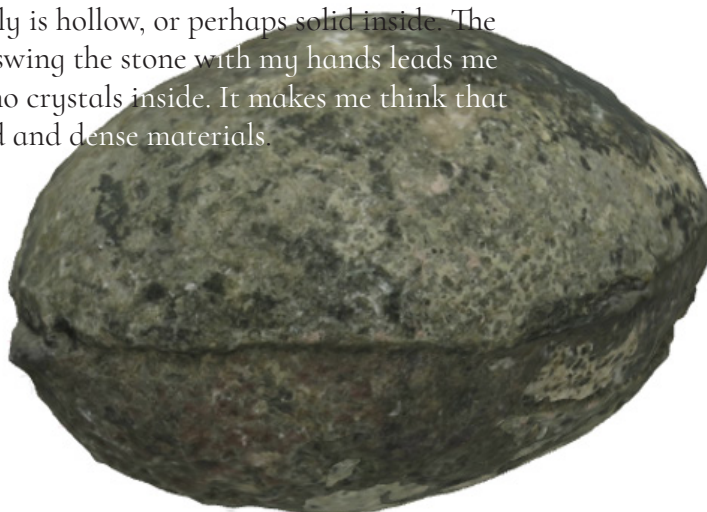
Ever since then, I like to think the river brought me its meaning from a foreign land.

5 – Gift

In 2011, I received a gift from a friend. An agate stone which, despite its ordinary appearance, contains a special phenomenon. The lines in the centre indicate that while in the ground, the stone had been broken into two pieces and naturally glued back together with the help of other minerals (probably silicon dioxide and carbonate) that penetrated it, closing it up again.

I imagine it is most likely dazzling on the inside, as agates usually are. Within, they are often partially hollow. Most start with strong concentric lines, from the outside to the centre, that are interspersed between layers of quartz and silica, creating lines of different colours. These lines normally end with small crystal formations that are followed by an empty nucleus. But this particular stone might be different. Its weight makes me wonder whether it actually is hollow, or perhaps solid inside. The absence of sound when I swing the stone with my hands leads me to believe that there are no crystals inside. It makes me think that it is made up only of hard and dense materials.

▲ – Agatha stone



6 - Physical and imaginary lines

I am an immigrant, and travelling, especially within the European Union, has been a constant part of my life. And although mostly restricted to this continent, my trips around Europe have been extensive enough to involve traversing several different kinds of borders, bringing me to question the kind of lines I was crossing and dealing with. Those forming the perimeters of countries are invisible most of the time, forced into existence. They are not physical realities, and yet they have such a strong impact on people's lives. I feasted my eyes on the natural, twisting ones, following the rivers and mountains that I encountered on the way, and on the direct lines of the highways that allowed me to cross all the imaginary and physical lines in only a few days. I became very interested in the relationship between human beings and their territory, in how land and cultures could be fragmented and how this fragmentation could be directly reflected in the landscape. Themes around the individual and the collective concerned me, as well as those of the cultures of different countries. In other words, I became interested in the need that human beings always have to divide territory up, creating spaces, real or imaginary, where one's culture-identity can be developed, at a distance from others.

7 - An account book

My grandfather worked as an accountant for a metal-casting company in Lisbon. He had thousands of account books that he would fill with numbers. He died before I was born, in a car accident on one of those asphalt lines that criss-cross entire landscapes and cities, and often interrupt people's lives. So unfortunately we never met. However, I still have some of those books, some completely filled with his beautiful handwritten numbers, others that have remained empty. I can't say that the smell of antiquity that emanates from the books once you open them is pleasant, but it doesn't bother me.

What I particularly enjoy is drawing in the unused books, breaking through the gridlines that fill every page. It is satisfying to observe an organic line, full of imperfections and faults, developing within such a rigid structure.

One day, while we were having lunch in one of our favourite restaurants in Lisbon's Graça neighbourhood, my father told me that my grandfather's company cast several pieces of the train lines that were later built in Africa. He simply spoke the words; we looked at each other and were silent. I think we were both reflecting, in that moment, on the weight of such a fact. I knew my father's political ideas well enough to imagine what he might have been thinking.

My grandfather, like my father after him and like every Portuguese citizen, directly or indirectly, was connected to lines of occupation in Africa. But in this specific case, my grandfather was indirectly connected to what Ingold refers to as the transport lines or connector lines. The kind of lines that changed our perception of the environment, and the ways in which we relate to it, probably forever:

The line, in the course of its history, has been gradually shorn of the movement that gave rise to it. Once the trace of a continuous gesture, the line has been fragmented—under the sway of modernity—into a succession of points or dots. This fragmentation, as I shall explain, has taken place in the related fields of *travel*, where wayfaring is replaced by destination-oriented transport, *mapping*, where the drawn sketch is replaced by the route-plan, and *textuality*, where storytelling is replaced by the pre-composed plot. It has also transformed our understanding of *place*: once a knot tied from multiple and interlaced strands of movement and growth, it now figures as a node in a static network of connectors. To an ever-increasing extent, people in modern metropolitan societies find themselves in environments built as assemblies of connected elements. Yet in practice they continue to thread their own ways through these environments, tracing paths as they go. I suggest that to understand how people do not just occupy but inhabit the environments in which they dwell, we might do better to revert from the paradigm of the assembly to that of the walk.⁷

I gradually realised that the lines of occupation in Africa were the beginning of a modern transport line, and how colonialism

has the shape of a blob which occupies and robs space but doesn't inhabit and care for it. Unlike the lines of trails that are formed by wandering and wayfaring, through the continuous motion of searching or digressing, the lines of transportation, that connect dot to dot, are built in relation to the incoming and outgoing traffic that is believed to pass through them. The lines we have created to transport the fruits of extraction became deeply instilled in us and inside of us.

8 – Rail line

The imagery of the rail line stretching across the African landscape resonated in me over the years. I would think about it now and then; I suppose I still do. Perhaps that explains the empathy I felt while reading Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines*. In this book, the idea of straight lines imposing onto more round and organic lines comes alive. The rigid straightness of the train lines in Australia not only contrasts with the roundness of the paths of the Aboriginal Australians but has also created interruptions in the sacred process of singing to the land along circular and meandering paths. *Songlines* materialises the idea that alterity is not linear, but for Tim Ingold this is a slightly erroneous concept. He says it is very tempting to describe every linear approach as colonial behaviour, but for him, colonialism is not an imposition of a linearity upon a non-linear world but an imposition of one kind of line on another.⁸ The Australian Aborigines affirm that a territory cannot be divided into blocks, but only into a web of lines that interlace with each other, entangling with the textures of the world.⁹ While Europeans and our trainlines gradually turned into blobs—imposing cutting lines, to straighten our immediate paths—we are historically bound to the kind of trace we follow and leave behind us, and the existence of lines is undeniable. Instead of debating their existence, we should rather look at the intention of the line.

9 – Fissure

- A long, narrow opening or line of breakage made by cracking or splitting, especially in rock or earth. Split or crack (something) to form a long, narrow opening.
- A state of incompatibility or disagreement.¹⁰

8 Ingold, *Lines*, 3.

9 Ingold, *Lines*, 82.

10 "Fissure," Oxford Languages, <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=fissure+meaning&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>.



10 - Celeste

Wayfaring, I believe, is the most fundamental mode by which living beings, both human and non-human, inhabit the earth. By habitation I do not mean taking one's place in a world that has been prepared in advance for the populations that arrive to reside there. The inhabitant is rather one who participates from within in the very process of the world's continual coming into being and who, in laying a trail of life, contributes to its weave and texture.¹¹

One day, talking to elderly relatives back home while on a break from university, I discovered my grandfather had a sort of very tiny atelier in Lisbon. From my Auntie Celeste's description, I imagined his workshop as a corridor between two buildings, in one of the narrow streets of Lisbon, a city which was then under the authoritarian rule of the "New State" regime (1933–1974). In this studio he began to experiment with using acid to etch metal, a personal interest I assume stemmed from the company where he used to work. My Auntie Celeste didn't know exactly what it was that he made there: coins, medals, experiments...these were the words I heard. Years before ever hearing my aunt tentatively describing my grandfather's interest in metals, when I was still in high school, I myself experienced etching copper with ferric chloride, which is a kind of acid. When I heard the stories I instantly connected visually and sensorially to what my Auntie Celeste was saying and could easily imagine my grandfather wrapped up in his experiments. Copper etching is indeed a fantastic technique because, depending on the amount of acid used, you may have more or less control over the intensity and the effect of the erosion on the metal. If you leave the acid on the metal for too long, it will run freely across the surface, corroding the metal and leaving behind a rugged appearance which produces an organic, but also in some sense a harsh, feeling. I occasionally meditated on that and asked myself what kind of feedback my grandfather had got from such experiences, away from the lines of the account book and the lines of the dictatorship. I sometimes hope the lines of the acid touching the metal surfaces were the kind of lines that went for a walk, as Ingold mentions, wayfaring, entwining, and hailing freedom.

11 - Pandemonium

We had a house in Lisbon's Encarnação neighbourhood that was no longer inhabited after my grandmother passed away. One day the house was broken into and burgled, the burglars having entered through the back door. In fact, it was burgled repeatedly, to the point where the back door broke permanently and could no longer close. As a result of this, cats entered and lived in the house for an indeterminate period of time—it could have been months but also years. One day, after the successive robberies, I visited the house and found a scene of devastation. Dust, furniture, books, papers on the floor, traces of the cats' presence—absolute chaos as I recall. This is when I found my grandfather's account books. I picked them up carefully from the floor, one by one. On the same day, I found a framed poster on the floor that used to hang in the office room. It was a very minimalistic image, a black profile of the figure of Fernando Pessoa wearing his hat; an iconic profile, easily recognisable to almost every Portuguese person. The frame was on the floor and I could see a dark stain on its back, probably cat urine, and as I turned the frame over, I could see how the urine had acted like acid and aggressively corroded part of the paper. Some parts had even disintegrated, leaving small fragments of paper which were stuck to the glass. The paper, together with the uric acid, had dried out, as mud does on a warm day, creating a relief full of meticulous details and saliences. Burned by the acid, the stain gained several shades of brown, giving it an earthy-ground appearance, surprisingly not unlike the effect of a metal etching technique. I brought the poster on the frame glass with me because I thought the stain was beautiful. I liked the form left by the urine attacking the paper and the fact that, because of the paper's poor condition, the poster could no longer be detached from the glass. The stain is located at the feet of Pessoa, and it gave me the feeling that now he had ground, a trail where he could walk and wayfare perpetually. It left me amazed that such a vulgar event could create such an impression of beauty.

12 - Navigation tool

I had a second experience of robbery in my life, this one more disturbing than the first. It happened while I was



driving from Portugal to Germany. Not far from Madrid, while I stopped my car to take a break and drink a coffee, everything that was inside the car was taken in a matter of minutes, perhaps seconds. This event was particularly disturbing since I was moving permanently to Germany, so I had taken all my personal possessions with me: my books, my clothes, my tools, my drawings, even one of my grandfather's books that I took great care of. I remember returning to the car and seeing what had just happened. Time seemed to pass more slowly in those first few seconds. The doors and car bonnet were open and lying on the ground. Still fluttering in the winds that swept the arid, sandy ground of Spain was a cartographic map. I had bought it in an antique shop because I was obsessed with maps and because I wanted to see if I could draw lines on the map to generate overlapping lines. I couldn't, and my experiment failed. I guess it failed because I respected the lines of the map too much. I would just stare at them, not daring to draw on them. The thieves saw it as just a map when they vandalised the car. It was the only thing that survived the robbery. So I lost all my belongings, but I still had a map.

13 - Shops in Idar-Oberstein

Nature and humankind have always had a relationship that ebbs and flows. Our fascination with materials, especially those only available elsewhere, has often led us to struggle, exploit, and destroy. The desire for raw materials rose sharply during colonial times and has only continued to grow. The thrill and awe other people feel for rare materials is something that I observed when I arrived in Germany and entered shops selling precious and semi-precious stones in a very special place called Idar-Oberstein. A town well-known for stoneworking, Idar-Oberstein is replete with ateliers that are still working and exploring this millennium's stone-carving and faceting techniques. Surrounded by various mines and an unspeakably stunning landscape, Idar-Oberstein is a geological wonder and a place where different times and realities collide, the geological and the human.

Until the eighteenth century, the area was a source of agate and jasper, and the river Nahe provided the perfect conditions for the creation of a European gemstone-working centre; the river provided free hydropower for the cutting and polishing machines at the mills. It was only after the eighteenth century that the gemstone sources in the Hunsrück region started to dwindle. In an attempt to find alternate sources, miners and dealers travelled to Brazil and Africa, discovering, in 1827, the world's most important agate deposit in Brazil's state of Rio Grande do Sul.¹² Around 1834, the first delivery of agate nodules from Rio Grande do Sul was shipped to Idar-Oberstein. Admiring the beauty of the Brazilian agates, which exhibited very even layers, much more even than those seen in the local stones, Idar-Oberstein's engravers made exquisite figures out of the rare gems.¹³ This, combined with local expertise in chemical dyes, helped the industry grow bigger than ever by the turn of the twentieth century. In Idar-Oberstein's Deutsche Edelsteinmuseum one can find several mementoes of these journeys to Brazil. On the wall of the second room, a Guinness World Record awarded to an Agatha's druse that has been cut into 75 discs is displayed. Originally the geode was about 1.5 metres across, much bigger than anything the stone cutters of the region had ever seen.

12 See Wilhelm Lindemann, Will Larson, and Ekkehard Schneider, *Dreher Carvings, Five Generations of Gemstone Animals from Idar-Oberstein* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsch, 2017).

13 Idar-Oberstein engravers were often specialists in carving animals, and each engraver and stone cutter would become known for one type of animal, for example, wild pigs or birds.

Today, a much broader variety of gemstones can be found in the shops of Idar-Oberstein. Rose quartz from Brazil and Madagascar, Indian jasper, amethysts from Uruguay, quartz from Brazil and Colombia, Bolivian ametrine, moss agate from India, rhyolite from Texas, chalcedony from South Africa, Mexican dalmatian jasper, heliotrope and aventurine from India, tiger's eye from Australia, malachite from Congo, Chinese turquoise, lapis-lazuli from Afghanistan, Peruvian chrysocolla, rhodochrosite from Argentina, sodalite from Namibia, dumortierite from Mozambique, Sri Lankan sapphires, rubies from Kenya, tanzanite from Tanzania—the list goes on and on.

Stones from all over the world are displayed in vitrines, sometimes even caged, like in natural history museums where nature is exhibited in the form of trophies or semiophores.¹⁴ They are cut in half and polished, revealing a glittering spectacle which bears witness to the geological history of the Earth. Naked, seductive, displayed on the shelves showing their flat surfaces, the stones look like modern computer screens, on show in a computer shop. Their screens are portals to a parallel world of an almost eternal endurance. As I walk along corridors, I reflect on how easy it would be for me to grab one, it would only take a second to have it in my hands. All things are potentially nameable, and they are all potentially “ready-to-hand,” as Heidegger says.¹⁵ The shelves are designed in such a way that every human body feels central to the scenario, from every viewpoint each shelf is like a conveyor belt, full of stone fragments, organised by quality, colour, size, and diversity, all coming within reach of our hands.

14 Objects turn into semiophores when they are removed from their original context of use and become part of a museum collection. See Magdalena Michalik, “The Institution of the Museum, Museum Practice and Exhibits within the Theory of Postcolonialism – Preliminary research,” *Muzealnictwo* 59 (2018): 28–33, doi:10.5604/01.3001.0011.7254.

15 Hartmut Bohme, *Fetishism and Culture, A Different Theory of Modernity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 24.

C - Deutsche Edelsteinmuseum





D – Cages

14 - Letters to the king

Inevitably, the Portuguese influence of the fourteenth century came to my mind. Letters written to the king,¹⁶ detailing the riches found by explorers in foreign lands, are an incredible testimony to the desire for raw materials and the looting practiced during that period (see Boxer).¹⁷ Gold from Guinea, emeralds from Ethiopia, diamonds from Angola were just a few of the most sought-after materials. Something about the immediacy of those shelves in Germany brought to my mind the way the goods would arrive in Lisbon directly at Praça do Comercio, and how the city centre was structured around them. Once unloaded, each type of product travelled a different route, and the more organic lines of navigation followed on the sea would be substituted by the rigid streets of Lisbon, all the way from downtown to the upper town. It is still possible to find traces of these material structures; Lisbon's Gold Street and Silver Street are examples. Of course, I have never seen goods being unloaded in Lisbon, just as I have never seen stones being unloaded in Germany. Only traces of the act of extraction remain for me to observe as I look silently at the alien landscape of a common shop in the middle of Germany.

16 John I, also called John of Aviz, was King of Portugal from 1385 until his death in 1433. His 48-year reign, the longest of all Portuguese monarchs, saw the beginning of Portugal's overseas expansion.

17 See Charles Ralph Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire* (Lisbon: Edições 70, 1969).



15 – Conceal

We are a burying,¹⁸ bulldozing,¹⁹ and building²⁰ species, and these three dynamics are the principal ways in which we deal with the soil. Such dynamics are embedded in our language.

¹⁸ I realised that we resort to that giant surface we call the ground when we want to be free of something, perhaps because the Earth lets us forget. The ground is the not-seeing. It is where we bury our dead, where we hide disturbing or, on the other hand, precious things.

¹⁹ I sometimes bury my hands in the heaps of precious stones in the shops of Idar-Oberstein. It reminds me of the sands of Portugal and I like the sensation on my skin. I try to do it on the sly, but I think the shopkeepers already know me, and they turn a blind eye to my slightly unorthodox attitude. I bury my hands and sometimes my arms too in piles of rubies, diamonds from Pakistan, amethysts and garnets, exercising irresistible pressure, forcing aside any opposition, as a bulldozer would do.

²⁰ I realize now that the ground is the biggest line of all, the one that subsumes the immaterial with the constructed. The world is a multitude of grounds and atmospheres, because everything is either seen or not seen. And everything is hidden or it is hiding something else. Everything is simultaneously a tridimensional line and a filling, a tube through which the flow passes.



E- sand.
Refer to the online version to see
video.

16 – *The Writing of Stones*

I cut a gemstone apart and was instantly awed by the beauty I found inside, but the cut seemed almost an act of aggression, as if I were cutting the world. As if I were using the diamond saw to cut a highway in a landscape, or a train line, crossing lands and tearing apart a sort of cosmic matrix made of infinitesimal connections. How could I split apart such an image, imprinted in the gemstone through a complex crystallisation process, irrevocably changing the initial event?

When I read Roger Caillois's *The Writing of Stones*, I felt the same as when I heard my Auntie Celeste describing my grandfather's metal experiments. I could relate, because I too have observed stones and gemstones from inside. Roger Caillois explains that there is an immense world inside a gemstone, a world of exquisite and simultaneously dreamy landscapes. As Marguerite Yourcenar explains in the introduction to *The Writing of Stones*, Caillois was accused of anthropomorphism because he claimed to have observed a consciousness and sensibility in every corner of the universe.²¹ But he claimed instead an inverted anthropomorphism, something that stands for a kind of Copernican revolution, where humans, like every living and non-living organism, are part of the gear that moves the whole. We are no longer the centre, but the centre is latent in every single thing in the universe.

21 Marguerite Yourcenar, introduction to *The Writing of Stones*, by Roger Caillois, trans. Barbara Bray (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1985), xi.

It is possible that, back in the 1960s and 1970s, Roger Caillois read *The Cosmic View: The Universe in 40 Jumps*, published in 1957 by Kees Boeke. This was a breakout work that later

influenced the acclaimed *Powers of Ten* (1968, re-released 1977) by Charles and Ray Eames. I wonder what their initial thoughts were when those authors saw the first-ever picture of Earth taken from space.²² Today such images are common, but back then it must have caused a pronounced visual and even ideological shock. We could finally look at our own planet and realise that its own image is not so different from a blue marble that we could comfortably hold in one hand. Conceivably, those must have been exciting times supported by scientific and technological advances. Just as images from space exploration reached us, so images captured by nanotechnology, from inside organisms, proliferated amongst us. In every corner of the universe, on every surface, in every organic and non-organic material, from molecules to stars, a breathtaking and living world exists. Roger Caillois knew that the world is finite – things repeat, combine, and overlap, creating recognisable patterns in diverse environments. Every surface holds the potential to enter into other dimensions, and the world is nothing more than a constant inside and outside repeated at different scales in a fractalised and intimate relationship.

Caillois, in *The Writing of Stones*, suggested that once a stone is opened, a world of ideas is accessed, displaying incredible similarities between the outside world and the inner world of a gemstone. What was hidden often looks like landscapes, mountains, rivers, skies, stars or sometimes even ruined cities with fantastic heroes. In his research, Caillois was persuaded to think that human invention is only a development of the data inherent in things, including minerals and stones, which hold a form of calligraphy inside.²³ Caillois believed that no matter what image an artist creates, be it abstract or figurative, no matter how absurd it is, there is in the world's vast natural store an identical image: "No matter what image an artist invents, no matter how distorted, arbitrary, absurd, simple, elaborate, or tortured he has made it or how far in appearance from anything known or probable, who can be sure that somewhere in the world's vast store there is not that image's likeness, its kin or partial parallel?"²⁴

22 On 24 October 1946, rocket scientists captured the first images of Earth taken from space. This is the first photograph of Earth ever taken from space. It was captured 105 km above the ground from a rocket that had been launched from the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, USA.

23 Yourcenar, introduction, xviii.

24 Roger Caillois, *The Writing of Stones*, trans. Barbara Bray (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1985), 3.



F - Cut.

17 – Photo album

My father was a photojournalist, and as a consequence our home was full of black and white pictures. Some of the political situation of the time (1961–1990), from the Portuguese Revolution,²⁵ the Colonial War,²⁶ portraits of politicians, and some of the Portuguese countryside. Of course, some pictures were of our family too, of simple trips to the beach or trips to other countries and continents. He was devoted to black and white photography but with time, some colour photo albums were also added to our collection. As an only child, it fascinated me to reorganise these same albums by mixing them up. I can't remember exactly what criteria I used to select pictures and curate new albums but, in the end, every album contained a bit of everything, from the experiences of my family to the collective experiences of society. An album always tells a section of a story, fragments of a fragmented life. But the spectrum of an album can always be amplified or reduced, depending on the focus. As they were amplified, my albums also became more fragmented since they allowed parts of many collective and individual spheres to cohabit.

Currently, my work table is full of materials: natural stones, (hard and soft) artificial and synthetic materials, metals, non-metalloids, woods, silicon, plastic, shells, fossils, etc. Some were found and I have left them in their original form; some

25 The Carnation Revolution (Portuguese: *Revolução dos Cravos*) of 1974, also known as the 25 April (Portuguese: *25 de Abril*), was initially a military coup in Lisbon in which the authoritarian Estado Novo regime was overthrown.

26 The Portuguese Colonial War, also known in Portugal as the Overseas War (*Guerra do Ultramar*), or in the former colonies as the War of Liberation (*Guerra de Libertação*), was fought between the Portuguese military and the emerging nationalist movements in Portugal's African colonies (Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique) between 1961 and 1974. The pictures of the Colonial War were not explicit – there were only a couple of them and they were portraits by my father.



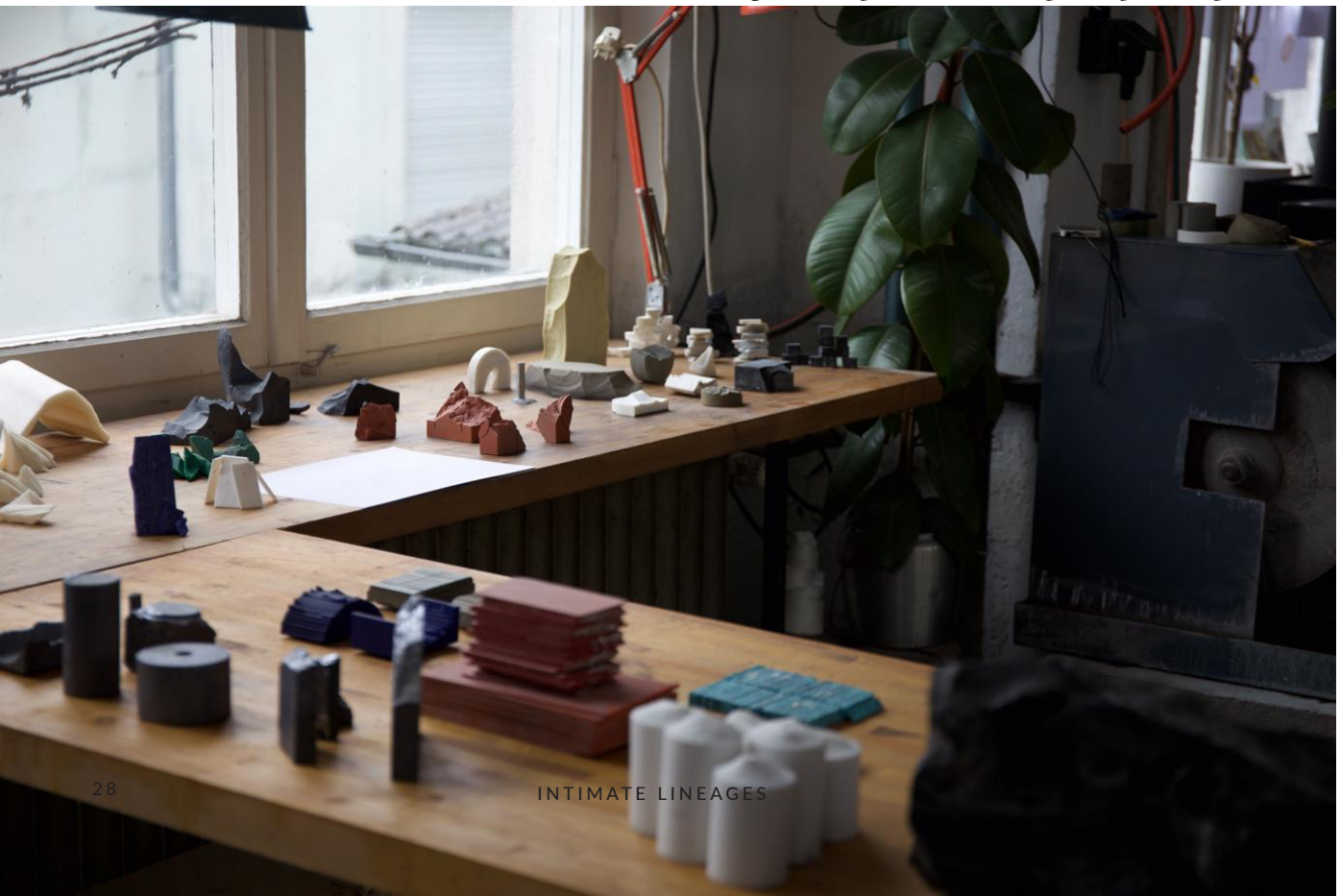
I have manipulated. A collection of fragments that has been brought together over the past 10 years while I have been exploring the landscape of the Hunsrück and the gemstone shops of Idar-Oberstein. My workplace has slowly been transformed into a kind of imitation altar. Natural materials live alongside man-made materials, just like in cabinets of curiosities, where man-made objects were exhibited next to natural finds. I have tried to organise the material landscape by taking an empirical view, studying the materials and their significant differences and

G - This table.
(continues next page)





similarities in origin, size, shape, substance, quantitative aspects, and even different uses throughout human history. While I study what the landscape is made of, I fragment it, creating sections and rooms. But these rooms are only temporary. Ultimately, by cohabiting the studio-practice space, the materials and I mutually shape each other. In this daily interaction new resonances and new lines are brought to light. In my studio, materials seem to be democratised. Considering them equally valuable, I use them as a means to think about technology, artefacts, landscapes, living and non-living beings diving into



a world of correspondence.²⁷ Through these materials, I gain a glimpse of a more intertwined, less fragmented, world.

18 - A line made of people

I found this picture (H - *Rua Victor Cordon* below) a few days after my father passed away in hospital in 2014. A colleague and friend of his had posted it on Facebook with the caption, “Look, Hernando caught in action.” I was surprised because I had spent my whole life looking at pictures taken by him but had rarely seen pictures of him. My mother was right beside me, we both looked at the picture and she immediately recognised a moment to which she had often returned in her mind: 25 April 1974, Victor Cordon Street in Lisbon. The Portuguese army re-established a democratic regime in Portugal, after 40 years of dictatorship. We recognised my father in the middle of the street carrying a camera. She proceeded to tell me that she remembered this moment perfectly, because she too had been there. Not where my father was standing in order to immortalise the moment, but on the other side, in the crowd, together with the other protesters. She told me she had had a headache that day and her boyfriend at the time had called her, telling her “there is a revolution happening out there, might be better to stay at home.” She had ignored his advice and gone out to join the revolution.

Since coming across it I have often admired this picture of my father. There is a quality in the performative gesture of the line formed by the group of people that reminds me of the lines I made in my grandfather’s book, the hypothetical lines of acid explored by my grandfather on metal, those of uric acid on paper, and those printed on stone by the geology of time. These lines contained a spontaneous beauty,²⁸ a sense of oddity and some anomaly that contrasted with the rigidity of our inhabited world.

19 - Properties and qualities

Only years later, in 2017, when I began my doctoral research in the arts, did I realise how the process of creating the lines that I drew into my grandfather’s ledger (see number 7, *An account book*) was fundamentally different from the process of mapping the Earth. The former involved me imposing my organic,

27 This is a term used by Tim Ingold—Things correspond to each other when they live in a sympathetic union, rather than an assemblage of parts. In correspondence we attend to one another. (Lecture - Training the Senses: Tim Ingold - The knowing body. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCCOKQMHTG4>).

28 I am thinking here of Caillois and the way he describes spontaneous beauty: “This spontaneous beauty thus proceeds and goes beyond the actual notion of beauty, of which it is at once the promise and the foundation” (*The Writing of Stones*, 2).



H - Rua Victor Cordon

irregular lines onto the grid already present in the book, while the latter requires the opposite—the superimposition of a grid of latitudinal and longitudinal lines (a graticule) onto the organic lines of the map, in order to be able to project the Earth onto a flat surface. In this way, space can be compartmentalised and thus better defined and measured, and ideally territorialised.²⁹

I gradually came to understand that the way we deal with space and time is intrinsically connected to the way we handle materials with our hands. I have come to realise that movement is the very essence of perception: Only because we scan the terrain of events and objects, moving from the close by to the distant can we perceive them. As a jewellery artist, the special way in which I approach materials is not to see them simply as physical realities, nor only as an imagined idea I have of them. Rather, they are stories even before they turn into physical objects. Those stories are of my own engagement with life that leads my research more in some directions than others. But they also include stories of materials before and after my path crossed with theirs. I realise how their concrete nature can never be completely objectified, as in modern concepts of territorialisation. Mapping and scanning the world should ultimately be a process of inclusion and not only of fragmentation. The properties of nature are our own. And yet we subject them to our shifting environmental perceptions.

29 “It was only consciously formulated as a method in the second century AD by the Greek geographer Ptolemy, who employed a grid of geometrical lines of latitude and longitude (called a graticule) to project the earth onto a flat surface” (Brotton, 11).

From an empiricist perspective the properties of a material or an object, such as colour, size, texture, etc., can be

externalised and seen to be independent of each other. They are thus fragmented and compartmentalised in order to be organised according to the norms of empiricist research. But from a phenomenological perspective such disruption is ultimately problematic. Imprecise knowledge, by which I mean that which cannot be quantified, such as colour, smell, texture, and even stories, has a value that is worth pursuing despite the difficulty in measuring it.

Thus, the properties and qualities of an object and the way we perceive things unfolding in time and space are phenomenological and sensorial experiences that change and are relational and in which the whole constitutes more than the distinct parts.³⁰ The lines I make in materials are an inquiry into the matter, meant to transverse their physicality to connect in a broader sense with their surroundings. They are lines that result from embodied activity, lines that inhabit my space and practice. While I cut materials, saw them, break them apart, and bring them together, my gestures carry a sort of muscle memory, tacit knowledge implicit in my patterns of action that is bound up in the lines I make and turn myself into while wayfaring around in a process of care and knowledge.

30 Christopher Tilley refers to the materiality of the stone as a total sensory experience in which the whole is more than the parts (*The Materiality of Stone – Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology* [Oxford: Berg, 2014]).

I - am

Imagined Erosion, 2020
Reconstructed marble, steel
Brooch – (50 – 40 – 10 mm)



20 - Nature's existentialist questions

The way cracks form patterns makes me think they are nature's existentialist questions, fractal structures repeating on all scales, running in veins, aggregating, and breaking.

21 - Jewellery box

Often, a jeweller has a close relationship with their mother's jewellery box, from their childhood. They often describe the feeling accompanying opening a mysterious box which contained simultaneously the smallest and the biggest treasures. I am, of course, no exception. My mother's was a dark, wooden, pentagon-shaped box with a geometric star pattern on top. It was fascinating to rummage around in it and pull out all the beaded necklaces, huge earrings, fascinating *art deco* bracelets and some unusual golden rings. My mom isn't exactly a conventional woman—quite the opposite—and her jewellery was unconventional for the time, but also elegant and assertive, as she herself is.

After trying the pieces of jewellery on, a ritual that could last for several hours, I could never put them back in the same way that I had found them. It always looked like a whirlwind had passed through, and I wasn't able to close the box properly. There was always a cleft, a crack that revealed my passage. I don't know if I was unable to put things back as they had been or if, in fact, I didn't want to...maybe that little opening in the box was a signature of my presence, a physical manifestation of the fact that I, along with my mother's jewels, had been transformed through that experience. So nothing could be the way it was because things had changed. As with the materials that I currently transform in my studio, this was a process of bodily alignment, a body that is spatially located and does not conquer its space by being territorial, but rather by cohabiting and permeating it.

22 - Los Jardines que se Bifurcan

When I discovered a second picture of that exact moment in the centre of Lisbon on 25 April 1974, I remembered the work



of the Venezuelan artist Juan Araujo (1971). Araujo had had an exhibition in Lisbon called “Los Jardines que se Bifurcan” (“The Gardens that Bifurcate”).³¹ The title was stolen from Jorge Luis Borges’s book and related to the labyrinth of references and appropriations that define our creative processes.³² When I placed both pictures of the Revolution side by side, I noticed how, unbelievably, they were almost identical and simultaneously so dissimilar. It is impossible to say how much time had passed between the two and which was taken first. The second photo was taken by the photojournalist Alfredo Cunha, but the photographer of the first remains unknown. In the first, my father was present; in the second he was gone. Looking at these two pictures was like looking at a gemstone cut through the middle, or at Araujo’s work Mickey and yekciM (2018) (K - *The opening of time*, below). They seem almost identical, yet minor details differ – shapes, opacity, colours, etc. Thus, the opening is the passing of time, and walking through Araujo’s exhibition, where images of different worlds seemed to duplicate while bifurcating, was like opening a book or opening up a stone. It was as if time itself forked, since the cut had duplicated the image.

K - The opening of time

23 - Inherit

Perhaps the power of the objects that we touch lies in the fact that they touch us back. We inherit their stories and their lines; we inherit the landscapes they have witnessed

31 Culturgest Foundation
Caixa Geral de Depósitos, Lisbon
2018, <https://www.culturgest.pt/en/whats-on/juan-araujo>.

32 <https://www.culturgest.pt/en/whats-on/juan-araujo>.



and experienced and the stuff they are made of. And this inheritance is a silent inheritance, which does not knock on the door, but moves along, like a river or a crack in a stone.

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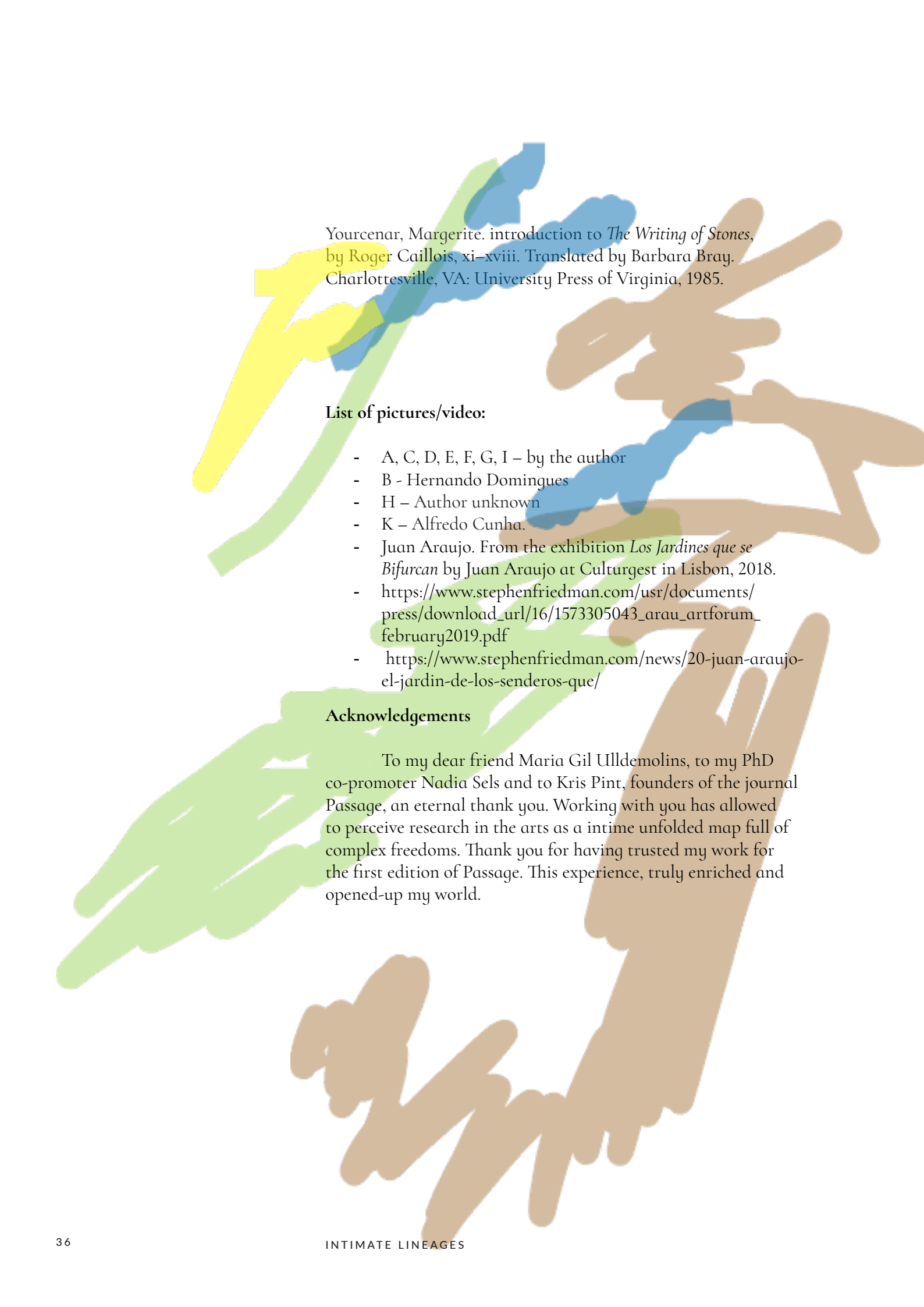
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List of pictures/video:

- A, C, D, E, F, G, I – by the author
- B - Hernando Domingues
- H – Author unknown
- K – Alfredo Cunha.
- Juan Araujo. From the exhibition *Los Jardines que se Bifurcan* by Juan Araujo at Culturgest in Lisbon, 2018.
- https://www.stephenfriedman.com/usr/documents/press/download_url/16/1573305043_arau_artforum_february2019.pdf
- <https://www.stephenfriedman.com/news/20-juan-araujo-el-jardin-de-los-senderos-que/>

Acknowledgements

To my dear friend Maria Gil Ulldemolins, to my PhD co-promoter Nadia Sels and to Kris Pint, founders of the journal *Passage*, an eternal thank you. Working with you has allowed to perceive research in the arts as a intime unfolded map full of complex freedoms. Thank you for having trusted my work for the first edition of *Passage*. This experience, truly enriched and opened-up my world.

M A R I L I A K A I S A R

A TINDER LOVER'S DICOURSE

This essay is an attempt to combine personal experiences and data with research on interfaces and software theory to reflect on personal Tinder experiences and speculate on contemporary desire in the age of dating applications. Blending poetic personal narratives with scholarly readings on software, desire, and the virtual, this essay uses a critical lens to examine the repetitive motions of swiping, messaging, and dating. Extending Roland Barthes's lineage, the amorous subjectivity embedded in the Tinder swiping motions is a solitary one, trying to attach to a constantly moving, eternally replaceable object of desire.

Keywords: Tinder, autotheory, desire, dating applications, pleasure

Editors' note: we have occasionally adapted the layout to preserve poetic line breaks.

I Dated Them All: An Introduction

"It is a lover who speaks and says..."¹

I dated them all.

The Nigerian prince who dined me at Michelin-starred restaurants, got me VIP tickets for theatre shows, and wanted to write a script for a web series but was always late on dates, and one day I found his ex's period stains on the sheets.

The hip-hop musician who had a nipple fetish and had lost his dad a year ago.

The designer who owned a distribution company but sweated a lot, little tears of sweat dripping from his forehead and a neck that looked like snakeskin.

The security guard who painted beautiful sketches and had a heart full of gold but was getting trained to join the army to pay off his student loans.

The creative writer who worked at bars and tried all the drugs but wanted me to spoon him as he fell asleep.

The intellectual from Virginia who hated condoms and convinced me that fucking him with a condom would be an act of racial discrimination.

The vegetarian spoken-word poet who wrote lesbian romantic novels, worked in a spiritual bookshop, and drove me into the California highways while smoking cigarettes, but was a bit too sweet for my taste.

The biologist who studied bats and loved butts but was poly, who gave me edibles, took me to weird film screenings, and took my tears away when I failed.

The special effects guy who told me he was trying to be a feminist, but it takes hard work to undo the patriarchy's hardwiring, so I gave him my body as praise.

The Canadian guy who graduated film school and was my regular booty call, who, when I saw him a year later, was working as an editor for porn.

The black undergraduate student who kept telling me he was from China and had anal with me without kissing so as not to cheat on his girlfriend.

The Mexican Jewish writer with a body filled with colourful ink whom I almost fell for, who only took me on a date per season—summer, spring, fall, winter—walking around New York and having deep conversations on everything and nothing.

The Greek American guy who spoke no Greek and kissed really badly but dared to tell me his yiayia makes a better spanakopita than me.

The British IT guy who was also a personal trainer with shiny, chiselled abs, who ordered egg sandwiches and sweet coffee in the morning and then spent the day with me fucking and watching football.

The hairdresser in New Orleans who had been in prison for three years because he was selling heroin to build a house in Puerto Rico and feed his baby daughter.

The architect who had a Jehovah's Witness son and a pet dog he regularly electrocuted to stay off his bed, who always bought me food and fucked me in a dominant way but never spoke too much, never shared enough, never opened his heart.

¹ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 9.

*The arts educator who took me to art museums and walked by my side all over New York,
who shared his food with me in restaurants but then vanished in the blink of an eye.
The white comedian who failed to make it in LA and asked me to pay for my drinks.
The guy who worked at Spotify, and we didn't work out;
we met in a brewery, he brought me a gift and offered it to me, smiling,
and we had a few drinks as he listened to the pains of my life.
The mixed-race robotics guy who had lived in China
and used a 3D-printed bike as a means of transport.
The DJ from the Philippines who said my armpits smell like onions
and always came to my bed asking, "Did you miss me?"
before he vanished into the dark New York nights.
The male ballerina who waited tables at an Indian restaurant.
The architect from Egypt who drank protein shakes and lifted weights,
trying to shed the weight that had been covering him his entire life.
The web developer from Haiti who had a condo in West Village, gave really good head, and
asked Siri to turn off the lights when it was time to go to sleep.
The guy who had his nose massacred by a bulldog, but he still trusted dogs.
The homeschooled boy who got bullied in high school, gave girlfriends his credit card,
and filled his muscles with tattoos just to feel desired and loved again.
The Jamaican UPS guy who had the widest, whitest smile I have ever seen,
who got me artisan beer and took me to watch the waves of the Pacific
while telling me about his love of smoked meat, rocks, and metals.
The Californian music producer who had never missed Coachella,
loved Vampire Weekend and took beautiful photos of BLM protests.*

*Others paid it all.
Others split it
Others fucked well.
Others kissed me.*

*But with all of them, without exception,
we shared the hope of a connection.
that maybe the networks would fulfil their purpose*

*I dated them all, only to figure out
how alone we all are
enslaved by our smartphones,
estranged from our nows.*

Thousands of miles from my home and family, I started writing this poem, which might resemble a lover's list, during a period when, single and alone in New York, I found myself addicted to Tinder after a devastating breakup. As a new transplant to the United States, the nights were solitary, since after 5 p.m. contact with friends and family in Greece was impossible, so I went on and swiped, swiped and dated, along with many other New Yorkers. I do not intend in any way to say that my personal lived experience is a special or extraordinary one, but it is the experience of a foreigner in the metropolis who uses Tinder to connect, reach out, and be with others, whoever they may be. This lived experience, my own embodied entanglement with my smartphone device, the networked connections Tinder provided me with that actualised into real dates in New York City, are what pushed me to start reading and writing about Tinder.

The paper has the following structure: In the first section, I discuss the fragments of personal Tinder poetry and the first-person address I use and the relationship of this project to autotheory and its attempts to create a self-reflexive analysis of the Tinder interface. In this section, I also discuss how Tinder allows the development of a specific empowered subjectivity that is forced into a binary transaction with the potential matches provided by the application. The second section of the paper explores how the application's Messaging function allows a feeling of ambient intimacy and creates a moving object of desire. In the third section, I look at Tinder's relationship to enjoyment, pleasure, and entertainment and the gamification of dating and desire. I see a clear lineage from Roland Barthes's amorous subjectivity, which attempts to confront an absent other and the movable object of desire that is fostered within Tinder.

Roland Barthes structures his book *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* around fragments of discourse, which he calls σχήματα (schema), amorous episodes where the lover's subjectivity is caught at a standstill.² For Barthes, the lover's discourse is one of extreme solitude, a discourse spoken by thousands but warranted by no one. In the fragments included in the book, the subject speaks through itself, amorously confronting the other, the loved object, who does not speak. This discourse is not dialectical

but captures the amorous subject within different moments of what Barthes calls a “linguistic outburst,” a moment when the figure of the lover explores and vibrates. Those moments can be experienced at different intervals within each love story, but together they structure this book of a lover speaking amorously within the self. Barthes’s amorous solitary subjectivity resembles the solitary repetitive swiping motions of the Tinder lover immersed within the ambient intimacy of the application. Therefore, I use my personal narratives as linguistic outbursts that are then used through the analysis to form Tinder subjectivities through the interface and the haptic movement of the swipe.

Tinder allows the user to become a powerful, desiring subject, sorting through an infinite pool of matches while also defining the self as an object of someone else’s desire, an object for the other user’s gaze. The process of intimate communication through written language (messaging) remains steady as the object of desire changes details and faces. Matches become easily surpassed and replaced when the connection fails. One match becomes another, but the cycle of swiping, matching, messaging, dating, and disappearing remains unchanged. The Tinder circles leave behind them traces of data, a pattern demonstrating each user’s romantic history. Using autopoiesis and the subjective, I attempt to explore this circle of affecting and being affected and what those repetitive patterns reveal about contemporary desire.

I see my approach here as an analysis or theorization of my own battles with the Tinder world. By studying the intentions of Tinder’s creators, the gamification of desire, and the functioning and hapticity of the interface, I gradually came to understand my own investment in this dating world, my years-long relationship with the application and its unlimited pool of singles, and how, time after time, the app promised to rescue me from boredom and loneliness, only to bury me deeper in it. Tinder is often analysed from two angles: on the one hand, the academic readings, interface studies, software analysis, and studies of Tinder use through sociological and ethnographic methodologies, and on the other hand, the BuzzFeed articles, testimonies, journaling narratives, poems, and memes from those who experience it daily. The first angle appears to be distanced from reality in order to understand it, while the second almost

myopically fails to explore what Tinder means or does. How can the analysis meet the embodied lived experience? And how does Tinder produce an amorous subjectivity? There are two sides to the “I” who speaks here, but both of them are one, and each builds upon the other. So why remove the personal experience from theory, and why not integrate them? Who knows Tinder better than a serial swiper who actually attempts to study the interface while reading Barthes and psychoanalysis on the side? And can this revelation of the intentions and overlapping layers of the subjectivity of the writer within this essay count as autotheory?

Lauren Fournier approaches autotheory as a provocation that integrates the self with theory, producing self-reflective works that challenge theory or the master’s discourses by relating them to embodied lived experience and the subject that produces the theory or writes in relation to the world surrounding them.³ While Fournier sees the potential of embodied lived experience, Marquis Bey, in his essay “On Lived Experience,” finds the deployment of lived experiences problematic as lived experiences within oppressive systems: Although they are valid, they often do not provide enough analysis of the oppressive system. Extending the thoughts of Bey and Fournier, I intend to create in this essay a space where the embodied lived experience can meet analysis. I use images and screenshots from my own Tinder profile, my memories and narratives of being immersed in the “swipe life,” and my own data that I requested from Tinder, which catalogues in detail how many times I logged on and off the app and how many bios and photographs I altered, silently transcribing my communications with potential lovers. Then, examining the interface and functions of the application, I attempt to understand how Tinder creates an affective, haptic relationship with a movable object of desire and how the contemporary lover experiences this repetitive circulation of swipes, messages, and affects.

The Swipe Makes the Subject

No stress.

No rejection.

Just tap through the profiles you’re interested in, chat online with your matches, [and] then step away from your phone, meet up in the real

3 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 13.

*world, and spark something new.*⁴

“So it is a lover who speaks and says...”⁵

Swipe right, swipe left.

Decline or accept.

Text on Tinder.

Text through SMS.

Text ’til there is nothing else to text.

Text on zodiac signs and failures of the past

and what you ate today and how you wear your pubic hair.

Meet and greet.

Fuck and drink.

Release—and then say goodbye.

Vanish.

The line from one point to the next gets cut.

Hours and minutes spent into nothingness.

People you knew and then you didn’t.

Digital lovers vanish into the thin air of pixels.

Spread their existence into networks.

Lost forever.

Trying again to connect new strings, new dots, and new people, form new connections.

A never-ending cycle that ends in loss or disappearance.

Farewell, my digital lovers; you will not be remembered for long.

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “tinder” is a flammable substance or something that serves to incite or inflame.⁶ Tinder, first launched in September 2012,⁷ is a dating application that incorporates smartphone location and the trademark gesture known as the “swipe” (reflecting the binary decision—yes or no—of whether to date someone). In computing, interfaces can be thought of as the layers between software and hardware, code and device, user and data. For Benjamin Bratton, an application like Tinder is an “interface between the User and his environment and the things within it, aiding in looking, writing, subtitling, capturing, sorting, hearing, and linking things and events.”⁸ What Tinder provides is a link between the physical geolocation and the data that overlay this space—in Tinder’s case, the profiles of other singles in the area. According to the location of my smartphone, as well as the age and gender filters set, the app displays all the profiles available in the surrounding

4 “What Is Tinder?” Tinder, accessed 17 November 2019, <https://www.help.tinder.com/hc/en-us/articles/115004647686-What-is-Tinder->

5 Barthes, 9.

6 *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “tinder (n.),” accessed 25 November 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tinder>.

7 “Tinder Information, Statistics, Facts, and History,” Dating Sites Reviews, accessed 25 November 2019, <https://www.datingsitesreviews.com/statistics/index.php?page=Tinder-Statistics-Facts-History>.

8 Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 237.

area, up to a fifty-mile radius. Tinder filters those people according to the user's position on the map. Tinder then functions as a filter between me and the world, selecting and feeding me with dating options.

Bratton goes on to define user interfaces as diagrams of possible action, a menu of simulations that, when activated through a user-initiated motion, execute a procedure, resulting in an outcome approximating what was displayed on the menu.⁹ Cramer and Fuller explain how a user placed in front of an application's interface is considered the subject or agent, who has the power to access and interact with computational patterns and elements that describe all possible interactions within the application's domain¹⁰. In a sense, the interface limits, outlines, and governs all possible interactions that the user can have and allows the user to see what they can do with the application or software.

In an interview with *Time*, Sean Rad, one founder of Tinder, says, "We always saw Tinder, the interface, as a game."¹¹ As he explains, the whole application was modelled on the idea of a stack of cards, like the sports-card collections we exchanged as children. This time, instead of football players, Pokémon, or witch spells, the cards display potential matches and their personal details. One must interact with the top card by throwing it to one side to reveal other potential matches. If two users reciprocally swipe right, they become a match, and they can move to the Messaging mode to chat. The user's hand can interact with and manipulate the interface, and its owner gets intertwined, interlaced, entangled, and influenced by the information and experiences to which the interface opens them.¹² Tinder's interface incorporates different hand gestures, such as tapping, pressing buttons, and, of course, swiping.

Swiping is a sliding motion of the finger to the right or left on the phone screen, a movement that is determined while simultaneously caressing the device. Each user is allowed twenty right swipes per twenty-four-hour period. In his interview, Rad claims that "the fun activity of swiping, the motion and the reaction, is the main reason why people join Tinder, not their desire to find a potential match."¹³ The act of swiping turns the

9 Bratton, 221.

10 Florian Cramer and Mathew Fuller, "Interface," in *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 151–52.

11 Sean Rad, "Inside Tinder: Meet the Guys Who Turned Dating into an Addiction," interview by Laura Stampler, *Time Magazine*, February 2014, <https://time.com/4837/tinder-meet-the-guys-who-turned-dating-into-an-addiction/>.

12 Bratton, 227.

13 Rad, interview.

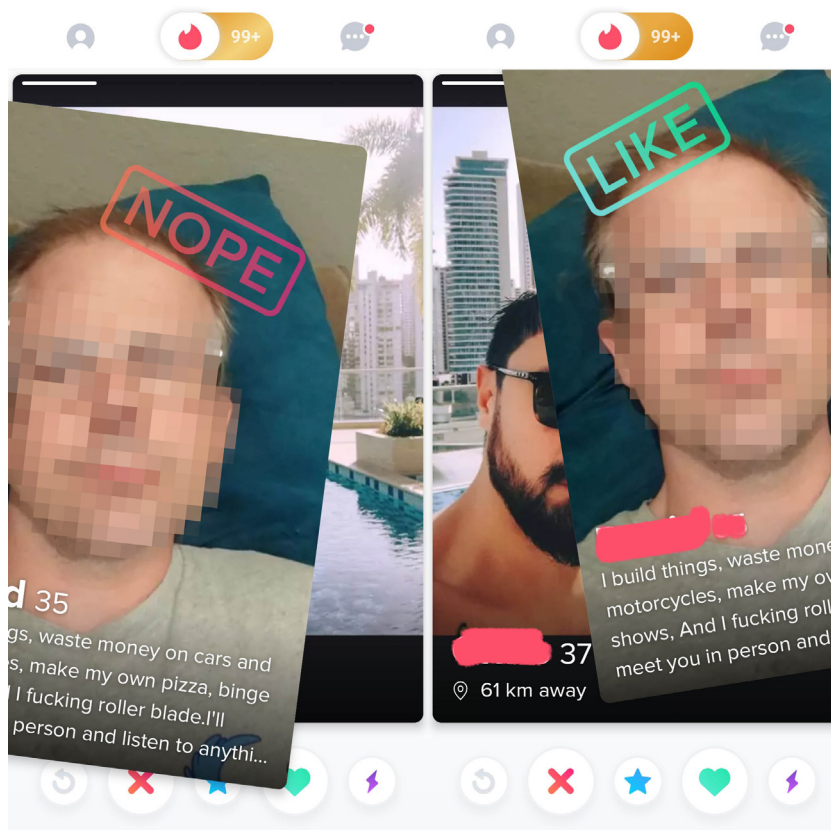


Fig. 1. A seal of approval. Screenshot from Tinder profile. Created by the author. Accessed 12 Jan. 2019.

app into a never-ending game that someone would still want to play even if they weren't looking for a date. When I swipe left or right, an animation that resembles a seal or stamp appears at the top of the profile, saying "Like" for approval and "Nope" for disapproval. Thus, my swiping decision is credited with an official seal of approval or disapproval (Fig. 1). If I match with someone, a small animation appears saying, "It's a match. [X] likes you too!" If I swipe left, then the undesirable profile disappears forever as a potential match. Tinder gives me the options; all I must do is decide, judge, and determine who I like and don't like. This binary transaction between me (the user) and the interface can easily be translated into code.

According to Søren Pold, "buttons force decisions into binary choices" by transforming the user into a "masterful subject in full control of the situation," triggering happiness and making the world of information seem accessible and "on the edge of one's fingertip."¹⁴ It entails a feeling of commanding and controlling the interface, the finger being able to order the potential matches available in the application. In the controlled environment of an interface, where all possibility is directed by the creator's design, the user still feels like a strong subject who can make decisions and who becomes the central factor in every interaction. This feeling of power and mastery, however, is carefully crafted and designed.

14 Søren Pold, "Button," in *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 34.

This false sense of subjectivity, which relates to mastery and a power to interact with elements of the outside environment, is also fostered through the creation of a profile that captures my existence in the virtual space. As I log on to the application for the first time, I am asked to use my Facebook profile or phone number to verify my identity. Tinder borrows specific types of information from my Facebook profile—such as age, education, work, and photographs—to start building a basic profile. Unlike old dating applications and services, the data imported from Facebook ensures the validity of the user, guaranteeing that their information is not randomly scripted but actually reflects reality. I can upload up to nine photos and write a personal description of up to five hundred characters to personalise the profile that other users will encounter in the application (Fig. 2). Through this small text I define myself, my likes and dislikes, and my personality, in order to capture the interest of a potential match. I can further individualise my Tinder presence by linking my profile to my Spotify or Instagram accounts. Signing up and creating a profile transforms me into a Tinder profile or card for others to “swipe” through, an object of the collective gaze. At the same time, this profiling also transforms me into a choosing subject with a moving finger commanding the interface.

The “swipe” becomes attached to the Tinder application, and the dating process is redefined by one’s power to use their finger to sort through a seemingly infinite stack of potential partners. The complex process of meeting someone, getting to know them, and asking them out is simplified and transformed into a simple finger movement. The swipe itself, then, is transformed into a unique gesture of swiping and sorting people—one stack for the people you like, another for those you don’t. The choice of whether to date someone is reduced to a binary choice—“Like” or “Nope,” swipe right or swipe left—sorting through as many potential singles as possible, as quickly as possible, solving the problem of dating with the tip of your finger.

Erica Biddle writes that “the perverse pleasure of being subjects to power by participating in its growth fulfils a post-historical yearning for virtual participation.”¹⁵ In Tinder’s world, everyone is a judge in an infinite game of decisions, as well as an object of other users’ desires, participating in a

15 Erica Biddle, “Info Nymphos,” *MediaTropes* 4, no. 1 (November 2013): 77.

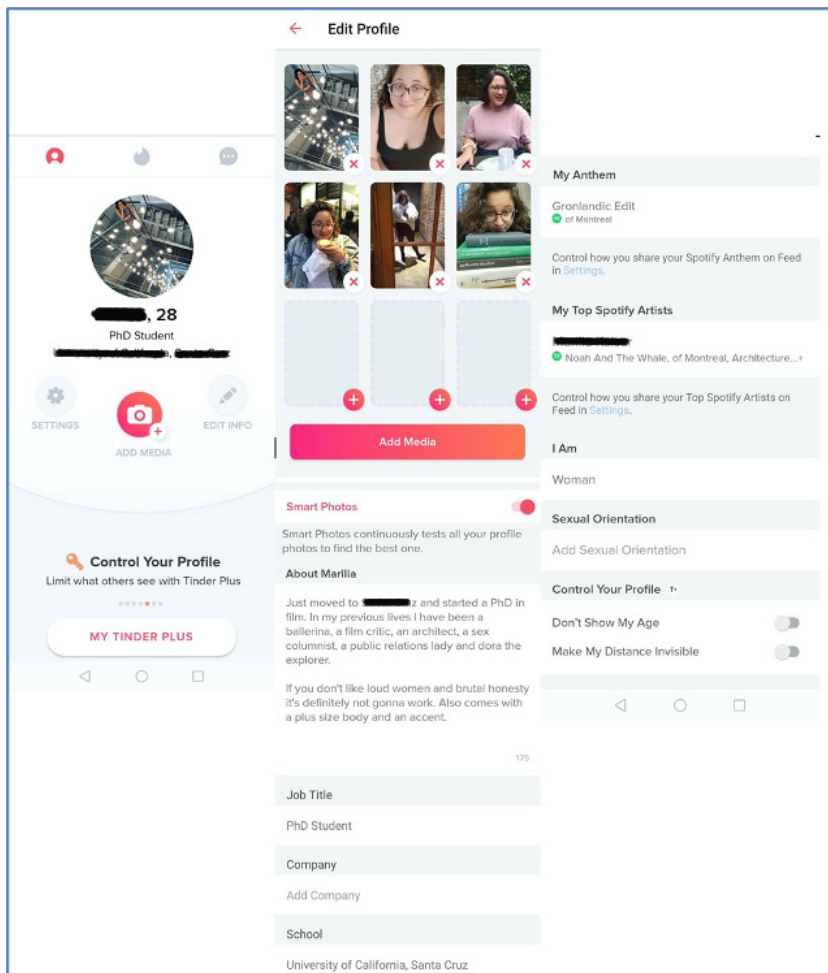


Fig. 2. Screenshot from Tinder profile.
Created by the author. Accessed 12
Jan. 2019.

game of choice. Tinder is a never-ending game of transition from masterful subject to object of someone else's desire. You sort the stack while being sorted, and you judge while being judged. The more matches you get, the more valuable and interesting your profile is. Biddle reads the notion of the haptic as "nonverbal communication and somatic feedback."¹⁶ The "swipe" is a nonverbal gesture, a haptic movement that takes place on the topology of the screen. When the validation "It's a match" appears or when my phone buzzes with a new message from an exciting match, I feel the vibrating pleasure of success pings. I have successfully interacted with the interface and sorted potential matches on the screen long enough to receive at last the pleasurable notification that I have matched with another person and can now proceed to the next part of the interaction: Messaging mode.

Ambient Intimacy and Movable Objects of Desire

"So it is a lover who speaks and says..."¹⁷

It was one of those nights, at a house party,

16 Biddle, "Info Nymphos," 77.

17 Barthes, 9.

*where you know everyone pretty well,
so you turn to your Tinder matches for a quick fix.
You do know that no one has ever
gone on a good date after 2:00 a.m. or two bottles of wine.
He picked me up in front of the house, and it was really cold, New York in December.
He was a basketball player in Europe, stuck in NYC because of a shoulder injury.
He was waiting to get surgery while missing his game season.
He didn't want to have a drink at a bar.
We walked around Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn; the streets were empty.
I was on automatic pilot, so somehow we ended up under my home.
In front of my apartment building, he told me he was an orphan.
I gave him an awkward hug.
He insisted on coming upstairs, and I couldn't say no.
We ended up lying on my bed, sipping my cheap bottle of red.
We fell asleep without ever touching or kissing each other.
The next morning, I woke up, and he was gone.
His presence was replaced with an intense headache.
I checked the app and realized he had unmatched me,
all traces lost, every possible connection vanished.
Just a bottle of opened red and two half-empty glasses on my nightstand.
Lying in my bed alone, I wondered if I had imagined everything.*

In Messaging mode, users can review and search past matches and initiate a discussion on private chat boards (Fig.3). Messaging with a match allows me to share intimate conversations with an invisible other. As I invest the time to closely read the details of a match's profile or repetitively message them to determine whether they are dateable, I have a much more personal experience than the initial swipe that led me there. Lisa Reichelt coined the term "ambient intimacy," which she defined as "being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn't usually have access to because time and space conspire to make it impossible"¹⁸ Sharing personal details and fragments of everyday life with a stranger gradually adds value to the relationship and creates a sense of familiarity before going on a date.

As I am sharing, writing, and chatting with my matches, at any point during the conversation, if I am dissatisfied with the correspondence, I can "unmatch" or be unmatched by them. The unmatched function makes the match disappear forever. The

18 Reichelt, Lisa. "Ambient Intimacy." *Disambiguity*, 1 Mar. 2017, <http://www.disambiguity.com/ambient-intimacy/>.

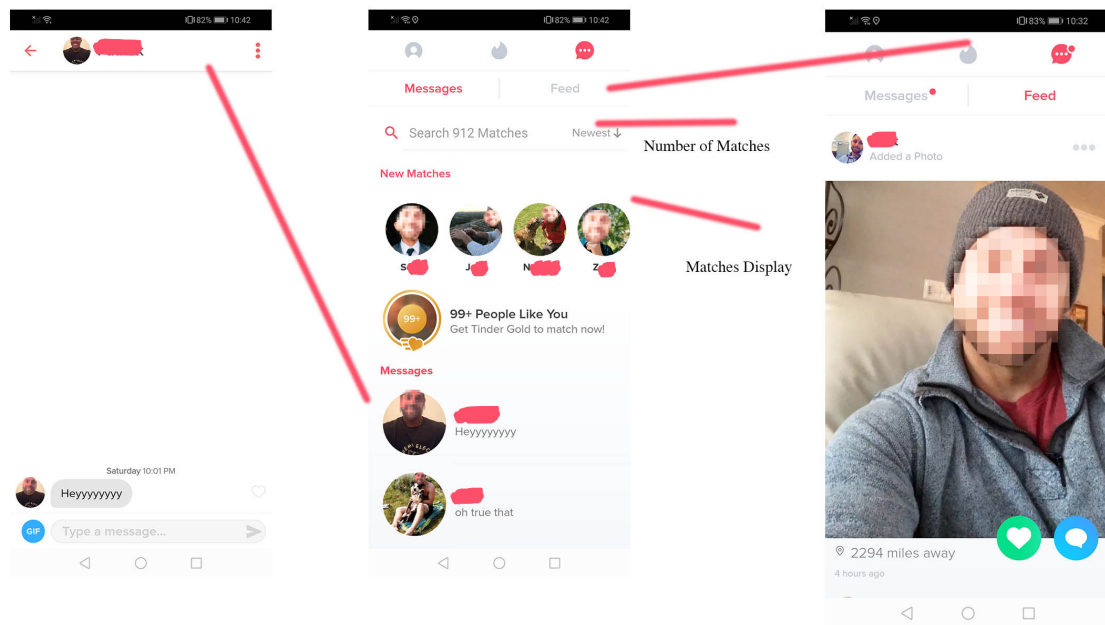


Fig. 3. Screenshot from Tinder.
Created by the author. Accessed 12
Jan. 2019.

card and messaging history both vanish in the blink of an eye, irreversibly, but the experience is very different when, as I am engaging in an involved and intimate conversation, the other user unmatched me. Suddenly, after feeling the positive vibrations of messages being received as I engage in an involved conversation, the vibrations stop. I return to the app, only to find that my match has disappeared. At times, it seems like I imagined the match; it is like this whole conversation never happened. The time and energy I spent on that match, engaging and sharing information with them, vanish forever, with no trace of their existence. When that happens, I feel violently cut out. I return to Discovery mode to find someone to replace the lost match, but my attempts are often fruitless. What is left is a feeling of emptiness, with my time and energy stolen and the match absent and forever lost.

When writing about absence, Barthes discusses how the lover stays immobile and the object of desire (the match) departs.¹⁹ The match is gone, and I must endure their absence. I remain alone with a memory of our conversation but without any proof of it or any reason for the disappearance. I try to endure this absence by replacing one match with another, displacing the desire I felt with another object where I can place my affection, another situation where I can engage in an intimate discussion. Barthes writes, influenced by or vaguely quoting the Greeks, “But isn’t desire always the same, whether the object is present or absent? Isn’t the object always absent?”²⁰

19

Barthes, 13.

20

Barthes, 15.

In François Truffaut's film *The Story of Adèle H.*, we see the female protagonist writing passionate letters to an absent, unresponsive lover. His lack of response is what intensifies her desire and feeds her fantasies of being involved with him. She sees him desiring and flirting with other women, but nothing can turn her away. In *The Subject of Semiotics*, Kaja Silverman uses Adèle H. and her passionate writing process to explain the primary processes of desire and the function of displacement. The protagonist's writing routine is an act of affection that relates her to her father but replaces her father as an object of desire with a different man and the act of writing itself.²¹

Adèle's unreciprocated desire and letter-writing routine are very similar to my experience with the Messaging mode. Every match on Tinder is a constantly replaceable object of desire. What becomes addictive and pleasurable is not the person, nor even the dating process itself. The process of constant correspondence and the abstract feeling of ambient intimacy with a stranger becomes a habit of moving desire and ambient intimacy from one match to the next and to the process as a whole. My addiction to Tinder is evident when I get increasingly used to the constant flow of notifications, messages, matches—the feeling of ambient intimacy, of being able to communicate, of being desired and connected. Like Adèle, I frantically send messages to potential suitors, not seeing them for what they are but rather as a collective public of desire. It is not whom I message *per se* but the feeling of being heard and the potential for my desire to be fulfilled. Erica Biddle writes,

There can be no permanent satisfaction of desire, only the creation of dissatisfaction following a temporary high. The carrot the Internet offers is the pleasure of participation, the fantasy-generating element, the false intimacy, the developing egocentrism of it, and the stick is terror and bodily fear, the fear of social interaction and alienation endemic to rampant materialism, and the fear of our mortality, which is ramped up to fever pitch by the practice of consumption.²²

Examining my Tinder data history (which I requested from Tinder itself), I can see when and how many times I

21 Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 79.

22 Biddle, 78.

Fig. 4. Screenshot of user login data requested from Tinder.
Created by the author Nov. 2019.

| | | |
|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 2015-04-27: 41 | 2015-05-11: 60 | 2015-08-28: 0 |
| 2015-04-28: 21 | 2015-05-12: 42 | 2015-09-05: 0 |
| 2015-04-29: 16 | 2015-05-13: 20 | 2015-09-09: 150 |
| 2015-04-30: 53 | 2015-05-14: 6 | 2015-09-10: 150 |
| 2015-05-02: 49 | 2015-05-15: 13 | 2015-09-11: 102 |
| 2015-05-03: 40 | 2015-05-16: 5 | 2015-09-12: 110 |
| 2015-05-04: 107 | 2015-05-17: 5 | 2015-09-13: 65 |
| 2015-05-05: 75 | 2015-05-18: 0 | 2015-09-14: 42 |
| 2015-05-06: 50 | 2015-05-22: 21 | 2015-09-15: 105 |
| 2015-05-07: 9 | 2015-05-24: 1 | 2015-09-16: 31 |
| 2015-05-08: 44 | 2015-05-26: 0 | 2015-09-17: 32 |
| 2015-05-09: 35 | 2015-05-27: 0 | 2015-09-18: 26 |
| 2015-05-10: 44 | 2015-05-31: 1 | 2015-09-19: 76 |
| 2015-05-11: 60 | 2015-06-01: 3 | 2015-09-20: 117 |
| 2015-05-12: 42 | 2015-06-02: 0 | 2015-09-21: 142 |

have opened the app (Fig. 4). A lot has changed since I first logged in to the application in terms of the hardware I own, the application's software, and the interface I use to access the experience Tinder offers. My first Tinder profile was created on 6 April 2014, over five years ago. Since then, I have logged into my profile almost daily, depending on, among other factors, my relationship status and mood. Some days, I have logged in over a hundred times. Those days are followed by those with much less activity. What then pushes me to open and close the application one or even two hundred times? Some days, I swipe and sort through the infinite pool of potential matches that I have defined with my prerequisites, which is constantly filtered by my location in the world. Other days, I keep logging in and out of the application to respond to messages from a match. Deeper ambient intimacy and a developing connection with a new human, a potential lover, lead me to repeatedly log into the application.

I specifically reviewed my logins in April and May 2015 (Fig. 4). At the time, I had sprained my ankle, so I was desperate for a distraction and had a lot of time available to message potential matches. On 5 May 2015, I matched with an interesting man, with whom I chatted constantly for about a week. After we went on our first date, I would log in only sporadically. Eventually, I stopped logging in at all for the next three months that our relationship lasted. A day after our breakup, I logged in 150 times. It is fascinating to see how my login data so accurately describe my relationship status and emotional processes. My

Tinder logins tend to increase when I am excited and frenetically messaging with a new match or when I am sad, lonely, and seeking a distraction and a form of ambient intimacy to alleviate my solitude. The continuous feed of information I have provided to the application provides a profile of my changing emotional states.

An application like Tinder follows me and gathers my data, remaining constantly accessible wherever I go. No matter how many devices or locations I change, Tinder is an omnipresent and constantly available dating aid. The logins might decrease or stop for months at the time, but I return to the application again and again. The stack of cards might change according to the geolocational data, but the processes of the Discovery and Messaging modes, as well as the act of sorting through an infinite stack of cards, remain the same. My dating patterns and personal preferences reside in Tinder's data cloud, laid out and codified in ones and zeroes—six years of romance, relationships, failed dates, one-night stands, meaningful and meaningless sex, and thousands of messages exchanged with strangers in four cities. What is left for me to download are the links of the photos I uploaded and no longer use, some messages with matches who have remained on the app, and traces of my login patterns, but for me, this experience has been so much more than the data traces left behind. Tinder has been about absent loves, ambient intimacies, and movable objects of desire. Tinder has been an omnipresent vibration in my back pocket, a bit of flirtation, and at least the hope that, maybe, once a string attaches, the algorithm will bring me the right object, and my romantic outburst will have a more permanent recipient.

Pleasure and Fun in Swipe Life

“So it is a lover who speaks and says...”²³

*Now I travel and search the networks for new digital lovers.
Strings attached and detached.
Meaningless conversations help me push through the realm of time.
Thousands of unknown singles in pools of information.*

Brian Massumi, influenced by Spinoza, defines *affect* as

the capacity of the body for affecting or being affected.²⁴ He sees the ability to affect and be affected as two inseparable facets of the same event that happens between states and allows a transition to take place. He writes that “when you affect something, you are also opening yourself up to being affected in turn and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before.”²⁵ The pool of singles to whom I have access is constantly affected by the positioning of my smartphone and body in the world. My fingers reach out to touch the screen, but at the same time, I also touch others who are playing the same game as I am. I reach out and try to form a connection, constantly accumulating and reordering information, making dating choices and patterns visible to an invisible computational eye, and storing data in some spreadsheet I can’t control. All my data—all the exchanged messages, locations, and photographs—are stored and commemorated. What I do on the dating app leaves a trace behind and marks my routines: how I behave in the online dating world.

I do know all of this, and I am tired of moving my desire here and there, investing in ambient intimacies that might well vanish the next second. Something, though, keeps me addicted to this application, to this process of sorting men into stacks, choosing and determining whether they will enter my messaging board or not. In 1995, before smartphones and geolocation apps were ubiquitous, in his interview with Jérôme Sans, Paul Virilio described a shift between two realities: the concrete factual and the digital. Games, in the form of digital apps, penetrate reality, in a sense, almost forming a new reality of constant distraction. According to Virilio, “play is not something that brings pleasure; on the contrary, it expresses a shift in reality, unaccustomed mobility with respect to reality.”²⁶ The example he uses to further analyse this statement is the difference between meeting, loving, and making love to a person in the concrete world and using technology to have cybersex with someone from a distance without touching or risking real contact. Tinder requires both digital attention and then physical presence, mainly since making love still requires two individuals to share the same physical space. What Tinder turns into play is not the sex itself but the ability to meet people instantly and engage in a conversation with them without having to place your body outside your home.

24 Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (Durham: Polity, 2015), 3–4.

25 Massumi, 4.

26 Paul Virilio, “The Game of Love and Chance,” interview by Jérôme Sans, *Grand Street* 52, (April 1995): 12.

What must be discussed here is the difference between fun and pleasure. Mark Blythe and Marc Hassenzahl argue that while “enjoyment,” “pleasure,” “fun,” and “attraction” are used interchangeably, there are important differences among forms of enjoyment.²⁷ They are differentiated in terms of “flow,” the peak experience of total absorption when engaging with dance or sport, and the micro-flows of unnecessary but engaging and satisfying activities that appear as distractions, such as chatting and doodling. Fun is characterised by the absence of seriousness and the ability to stop relating to the self—short, meaningless, repetitive intervals that serve as distractions. On the other hand, pleasure involves activities that require a specific devotion and allow someone to make sense of themselves and nourish their identities through them. Tinder allows a user to engage equally with both; the user has fun while swiping through matches in Discovery mode but must devote time to engage in conversation in Messaging mode to attain a date. Swiping time on Tinder is time within real time, usually empty time spent waiting for the bus or in fragments of boredom throughout the day.

In *Politics of Affect*, Massumi writes about the “micro shocks” that populate every moment of contemporary life. He describes a micro shock as “a shift of attention, an interruption, a momentary cut in the mode of onward deployment of life.”²⁸ Tinder is based on creating this type of shift in attention throughout the day, moving one’s focus in and out of the app, allowing what takes place in the Discovery and Messaging modes to influence one’s experience in the world and *vice versa*. The process of swiping seems to create two different worlds: the world in which you are present and the virtual world through which you swipe.

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Andrew Lison explore how software came to be considered as something fun, not focusing on the games or the users themselves but rather on the people who write the software: the programmers. The common ground that both gaming and programming share is “the double valence of fun: fun as enjoyment and fun as an obsession.”²⁹ They illustrate this idea with one of the first programmes that people learn to write when they begin programming, and they show how the production of an immediate result makes the programmer feel

27 Mark A. Blythe and Marc Hassenzahl, “The Semantics of Fun: Differentiating Enjoyable Experiences,” in *Funology: From Usability to Enjoyment*, ed., Mark A. Blythe, Kees Overbeeke, Andrew Monk, and Peter Wright, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 91–100.

28 Massumi, 53.

29 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Andrew Lison, “Fun Is a Battlefield: Software Between Enjoyment and Obsession,” in *Fun and Software: Exploring Pleasure, Paradox, and Pain in Computing*, ed. Olga Goriunova (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 182.

both power and enjoyment.³⁰ Tinder has transformed the act of swiping from a coded notion already charged with different uses into the most elemental binary meaning of “yes or no” for dating.

This binary decision, that of yes or no, transforms the Tinder user into the masterful subject, as discussed in the first section. This mastery over the stack of cards ties the format of the application back to desire and pleasure. We can better understand this through a psychoanalytical lens—more specifically the *fort-da* game explored in Sigmund Freud’s essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” and the mirror stage explored by Jacques Lacan, both stories that try to capture the emergence of subjectivity. Freud describes a game between his grandson and the child’s mother. The child, placed inside a crib, throws a toy outside the crib, and the mother brings it back. The child is entertained by the emergence and disappearance of the mother, with the feeling that it controls this emergence and disappearance, extracting pleasure from being the master of the situation.³¹ Lacan’s mirror stage describes the moment when a child first recognises itself in a mirror and differentiates itself from the outside environment.³² The child, in fact, *misrecognises* itself as capable and self-sufficient when, in reality, the child is neither of these things.

So, similar to these examples, when I use Tinder, I feel pleasure in ordering around the potential matches, feeling like a masterful subject, but actually, like the child in front of the mirror, I *misrecognise* myself as a subject because the game in which I am entangled is orchestrated by designers; my ability to interfere is actually both very limited and pleasurable by design. In the interface of Tinder, no one can stay out of the dance once they have entered. I swipe and judge, but I am also being swiped on and judged. I form connections with potential matches and exchange words and pleasurable or unpleasurable effects, but as I affect and I am affected, I am changed because of the constant flow of intensities and vibrations.

The swipes and taps conceal the deeper motive of finding a displaced object of desire, an “*objét petit á*” that might transform into a partner and bring my “swipe life” to an end. As one object of desire displaces the next, as one partner disappears

30 Chun and Lison, 177–81.

31 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (London: Penguin, 2003), 141–43, HathiTrust Digital Library.

32 Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 76.

and another emerges, the massive pool of potential matches is transformed into a constantly changing object of desire. I return to Tinder again and again for the comfortable blanket of ambient intimacy that creates pleasurable vibrations on my device. The high of meeting someone new can be repeated over and over, always accessible wherever I go. Only when the vibrations stop or a match disappears just for a minute do I become bothered, but then I return to the application because the fun and pleasure are too hard to resist and because I am too alone to handle it all.

Despite all the fun and pleasurable power vibrations that tone one's subjectivity, what Tinder ultimately taps into is the desire to find, through the swipe, an object of desire, a partner, and a fulfilling relationship, even if that experience is short-lived. Swipe after swipe, the act of sorting through matches starts to become tedious, a constant interplay between Discovery mode and Messaging mode, the real and the virtual, fun and pleasure. The inability to find our object of desire becomes exhausting, but the loop of the seemingly never-ending pool of potential matches and the repetitively distractive act of swiping somehow drags us back into the application again and again.

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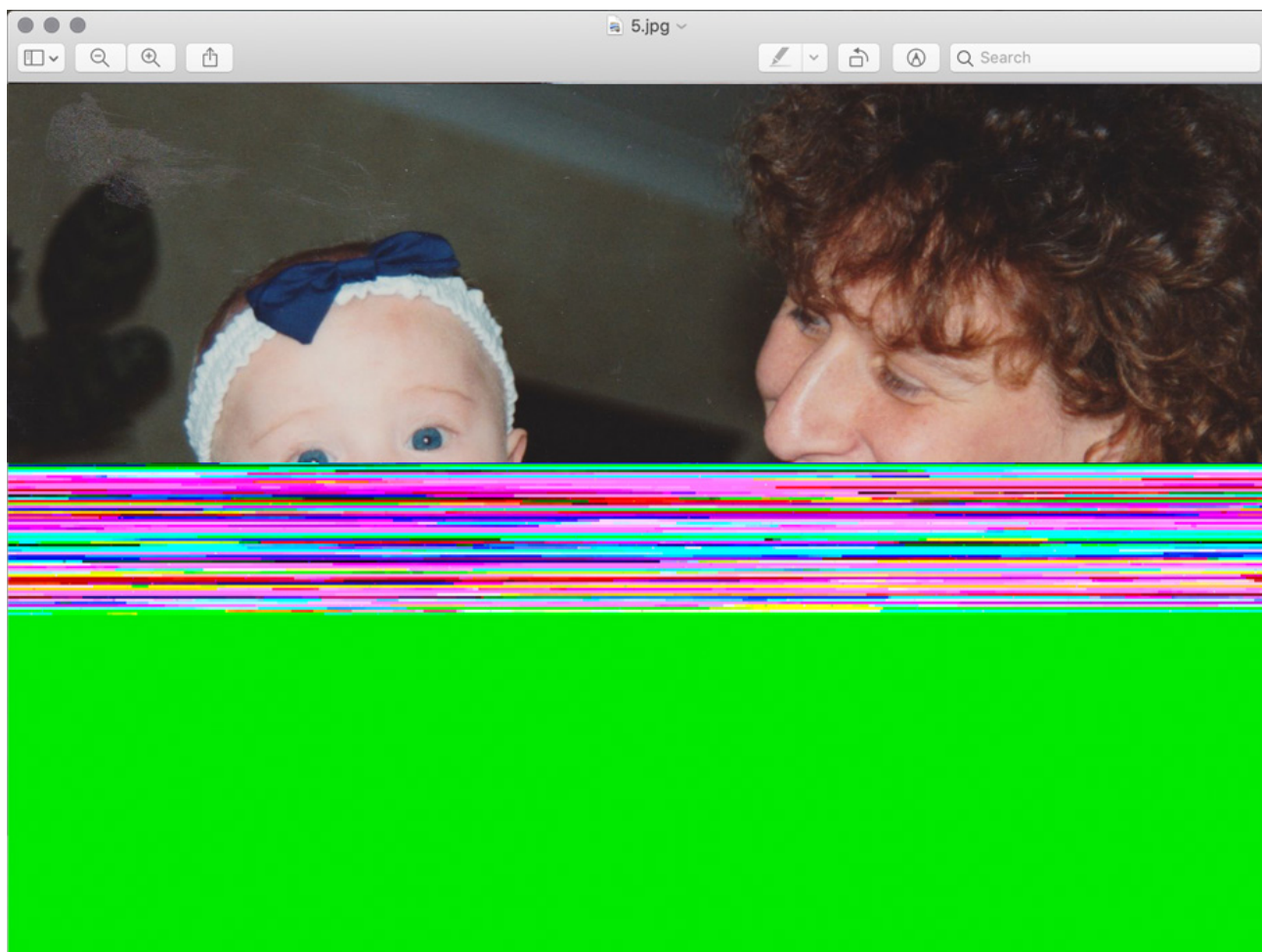
S H A U N I D E G U S S E M

ON HAUNTING

This personal essay starts by taking a closer look at the appearance of cosmic disillusion in contemporary science-fiction stories and how the idea of an unresponsive and cold universe in which humankind is totally alone makes our space stories melancholic, existential, and deeply reflective of our humanity. In a universe seemingly empty of other sentient life, we turn towards the figure of the ghost, the phantom, the spectre to face the Other, but also, paradoxically, ourselves. Technology, literature, film, and art allow us to transcend the inescapable propulsion of time and to confront our past selves, but without ever fully succeeding in any of these, which banishes these frantic but doomed attempts to haunt the realm between life and death, to become a flimsy ghost-like witness to the writer, the audience, and all things irrevocably past, only to find its own ending in inevitable entropy. Lastly, I state that even language itself is in a way a ghost, haunting mercilessly until it also falls apart one way or another, but that it is right there, in the very failure and the very process of dying, life and meaning may be found.

Keywords: autotheory, personal essay, cultural criticism, hauntology, language philosophy

Editors' note: we have used
a thinner, lighter font for
this text at the request of the
author.



*"This is the best way to go.
That way, you can see the city lights brighter than ever
And stars and constellations
And it's breath-taking
The star field is just so spectacular
And one day, I saw something come down to us
Come down to us"*

(NASA Earth Scientist Melissa Dawson 2012/Burial 2013)

"I saw a UFO once," Lev announced matter-of-factly while mindlessly prodding a leftover piece of salad on his red serving tray. We were both nineteen and seated at our usual table in the corner of a small *dürüm* bar in Brussels. The bartender of the place looked uncannily identical to a young Johnny Depp, which was probably the major reason people knew about the bar, because the food was nothing special. Any stranger unfortunate enough to have heard parts of our pretentious and tireless discussions about films must have found us insufferable. However, that one time, Lev led us off our well-trodden path of usual conversation topics. I urged him to continue to talk. He said that one time, he and his mother saw a UFO – she interpreted the apparition as a sign of God – and pointed out that non-Westerners still dare to think mythically. His words pulled away the blanket of habit that had crept over us. I kept silent. The buzzing fluorescents starkly lit the distance between us. It's been two and a half years since Lev and I last spoke, and young Johnny Depp has since quit his job. The newest neighbourhood residents have no idea who he is.

*

There have never been fewer UFO sightings in Belgium as in recent years, according to the Belgian UFO hotline. This remarkable downward trend has also been recorded for the UK, and *The Guardian* lays the blame on the democratisation of professional cameras and smartphones: "Part of the reason is that the technology for providing documentary evidence of such matters is now widely available to everybody with a smartphone, and such purported evidence as there is on YouTube looks extremely threadbare."¹ The lack of proper confirmation has left the broader public uninterested in the subject. UFO enthusiasts are abandon-

1 Philip Jaekl, "What is Behind the Decline in UFO Sightings?" *The Guardian*, September 21, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/21/what-is-behind-the-decline-in-ufo-sightings>.

ing their flying saucer clubs at a rapid pace and are now looking elsewhere for their weekly portion of conspiracy theories. Aliens can't seem to fascinate us any longer.

Even within our popular culture the magic surrounding extra-terrestrial life has been taken over by an alien bore-out. Science-fiction tales used to be full of intergalactic space battles and scuffles with monstrous space creatures, but instead, there has been a turn towards narratives in which humanity is set against an infinite empty universe, existentially alone and dark. Even a new season of *The X-Files* in 2018 couldn't bring back the giddiness of old. One of the films that did rake in awards and stellar reviews that year was *High Life*, a melancholic and existential science-fiction story directed by French filmmaker Claire Denis and a textbook example of the growing cosmic realism movement. "I want to believe" turned into "Oblivion awaits." Futuristic narratives say very little about what the future truly holds for us, but rather reveal a complex testimony of the time, society, and ideological framework in which they were created. For example, the drawings of Jean-Marc Côté in the *En L'An 2000* series betray the almost naive prevailing optimism of progress of the nineteenth century. So, what does the collective wave of cosmic disillusion say about our world view today?

Pioneer of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud once claimed that man has sustained three major narcissistic blows over time: the first one happened thanks to Copernicus' evidence that the earth revolves around the sun and not the other way around. Darwin delivered the second blow when he proved humans have descended from monkeys and were not created in the image of God. The last one was Freud's own conceptualisation of the human unconscious, which showed us how little deliberate rational thought actually controls our decisions and desires: "[We are] not even master in [our] own house, but ... must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in [our] own mind."²

If he had lived any longer, Freud would almost undoubtedly have added Einstein's theory of relativity and Hawking's work on cosmic singularities, both of which have disturbed and shocked our basic understanding of time and space. They have

2 Sigmund Freud, *General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis*, trans. G. Stanley Hall (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1965), 296.

introduced an incomprehensibly complex image of the universe because of which even our ideas surrounding extra-terrestrial life got stirred up.

" Two possibilities exist: either we are alone in the universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying." According to Stanley Kubrick, Arthur C. Clarke spoke these words when Kubrick was researching for *2001: A Space Odyssey*.³ Over time, storytellers have mainly explored the second idea of this dichotomy; exciting stories about unknown life and aliens threatening humanity used to be common in popular entertainment. Even more high-brow literature such as the 1961 novel *Solaris*, written by Polish writer Stanisław Lem, uses the Other in extra-terrestrial life to reflect on what it means to be human and what our place and meaning is in the larger whole. The exponential growth of cosmic knowledge during the twentieth century aroused the old familiar *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Humanity simultaneously felt a collective childlike enthusiasm as well as a deep fear of what our coming-of-age would bring about. Fiction gratefully exploited this chasm.

But something in our collective underbelly started to gnaw, and the uneasiness has grown into dimensions impossible to ignore any longer. The more we try to uncover, the more we find an endless enigmatic emptiness out there. We realise that acquiring ample cosmic knowledge to understand major parts of our universe will take a terrifying number of human generations and may as well never happen.

In addition, the idea of space exploration has, since very recently, been claimed and tainted by the bleak space capitalism of Elon Musk's Space X, which has steered the idealist vision of old towards the exit of profound disillusion and melancholia. We are haunted by a nostalgia for a lost future⁴, an idea British cultural theorist Mark Fisher introduced in what can only be described as an oeuvre that was ended way too soon.

So, despite our Hubble telescope, Voyager spacecrafts, and deep yearning for anything that resembles an answer to our shouts into the cosmic void, there is to this day still not one shred of evidence for extra-terrestrial life. Mathematically, we know that we are unlikely to be the only ones out there, so the question

³ Gene D. Phillips, *Stanley Kubrick: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 35.

⁴ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2014), 30, Adobe ePub.

is not whether alien life exists, but whether the infinite universe is not too big and our life span not too short to ever discover that other life, let alone communicate with it in any way. What if in this tiny corner of the universe, we are all alone after all? What if it is just us?

The potential ultimate aloneness of our human species in space throws us upon ourselves. The confrontation with the desolate infinite nothingness pushes the main characters of recent science-fiction films such as *Gravity* (2013), *Ad Astra* (2019), *Moon* (2009), *High Life* (2018), and *Interstellar* (2014) into an existential state of reflection on their relationships at home, their past, their traumas, and their mortality. Like the metaphorical ghost from a classic Gothic story, their earthly life haunts them relentlessly. The vastness of space sends Brad Pitt's character in *Ad Astra* into such a deep reflective state about his past on earth and his daddy issues galore that several online reviewers renamed the film "Sad Astra" and in doing so, proved how popular and widespread this trope has become.

Interstellar, however, turns it upside down by staging how the future haunts the past, an appropriate intervention to bring home the recurring theme of time. During his dangerous space mission, main character Joseph Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) ends up inside a black hole, where time becomes an overseeable dimension and where he watches, as a voyeur, his own past in which he says goodbye to his family at the start of his present mission. He tries to shout to his former self not to leave, but that's not how the film's physics work.

Yet, with great force and by bending cosmic rules, he manages to push a book off the bookcase into the past, hoping they will interpret this as a sign, but everyone in the room laughs it off through their tears: "It must have been a ghost." Cooper sees his past self leave and cannot help but witness his own inevitable decision. "Time is a flat circle," says Marty (again McConaughey) in episode five of the dark American crime series *True Detective*; "Everything we have done or will do, we will do over and over and over again, forever."

We gaze into the emptiness of our universe, but nothing

gazes back. We shout and only our own faint echoes answer. That what once was us, returns, yet delayed in time, slightly faded, and therefore estranged and *unheimlich*. If nothing answers our calls out there, at least we can meet ourselves, even if it is as a flimsy whisper, a haunting spectre. The concept of time in the cosmos is a fickle little thing, which makes circular temporal structures in science-fiction narratives the ideal locus to give rise to ghosts as an existential substitute for the exiled extra-terrestrials.

The 2016 gem *Arrival* by Canadian filmmaker Dennis Villeneuve seems to mark this very event when a seemingly unresponsive alien life form arrives on earth. Every person on the planet is in a state of absolute panic while linguist Dr Louise Banks (Amy Adams) is sent to decipher what these extra-terrestrials want for humanity. After an arduous communication process, Banks discovers that both the answer and the question have always lain in her being both within and without time, haunted by “a daughter that is dead before she is even born, staring at her mother both from the past and the future.”⁵ The ghost of *La Jetée* (1962) returns in the most unexpected of places.

Recently I walked by my old regular Brussels *dürümbar* and saw the ghosts of a former us at the table that has undoubtedly become the meeting spot of a new duo of film students. I, too, was within and without. Lev believes in demons, gods, and aliens, and I don't. “I see ghosts,” I told him weeks later. I meant it. He sniffed scornfully after making sure I wasn't cheaply referencing *The Sixth Sense*. “That's ridiculous,” was his reply, “but continue.” So I continue.

*

Ghosts inherently float around in the complex veiny structures of our technology as if it were a digital Styx. Of the more than 40 million deceased Facebook users I know one personally. He may be dead, but his profile page is still very much alive: messages of remembered memories, statements of being missed, and “Happy birthday, wherever you are” have been routinely flooding his wall during the past six years. His profile picture is still the same photo taken at his 22nd birthday party. A little over a month later he fell through an unstable roof and to this day I still

5 Van Hee, personal communication.
Editor's note: undated.

come across messages he left behind under old photos of mutual friends. His smiling digital ghost roams the cloud, which means that ironically and annoyingly enough, my first-grade teacher, Miss Griet, is right after all when she said that dead people live on in the clouds.

The internet never forgets. This platitude flashes on and off like a metaphorical neon sign every time a conversation broaches the theme of online privacy. The moralising horror stories of videos of drunken parties ruining a job application ten years down the road are retold as if they were modern oral myths. In 2018, Jihad Van Puymbroeck, a young new employee of the Flemish broadcasting company VRT, suddenly found herself in the eye of a relentless media storm when right-wing news site SCEPTR dug up six-year-old tweets of hers to help state their argument that the national broadcast is allegedly too ideologically biased in its political reporting. Some people called for her resignation and wanted her to answer for mundane digital statements she had made when she was not yet a public servant or even an adult. Similar cases served as a motivation for Google and the European Union to team up and find a solution to protect individuals against the disadvantages constant access to all information may have. They came up with the controversial “Right to be forgotten” in 2014, according to which users can request certain search results linked to their names to be removed from online search engines. The internet forgets a bit if you ask nicely.

No, the internet does actually forget. Like anything that is subjected to time, the worldwide web does not escape entropy. It may seem that Google, Facebook and Apple together remember all possible data, but it is only a matter of time before all of it is lost again. For example, it's genuinely hard to find anything online today that is over twelve years old, with the exception of some extremely popular segments that are still being shared and mirrored. But the fan websites from the 1990s, personal blogs, and family videos from before 2010 have almost all irrevocably disappeared. Hyperlinks in old internet forum posts lead nowhere, and the new generation of internet browsers can't support ancient programming languages any longer. Websites and data, as if they were the Ukrainian ghost town of Pripjat decades after the Chernobyl disaster, are claimed by chaos. Servers and server owners go

bankrupt, hard drives crash, pixels and bytes get lost.

When I migrated my personal files from one computer to another one the other day, an irregularity occurred when transferring a scanned photo of my mother and baby me laughing together. It is now a glitch, in which more than half of the photo has been lost and replaced with an unnatural digital green. *Panta choorei*. I wash my hands in the slow-flowing Lethe of digital entropy.

When French philosopher Jacques Derrida combined the words haunting and ontology to form the neologism “hauntology” in his book *Spectres de Marx*, he used the idea of the ghost to focus on a phenomenon that in the words of Colin Davis is “neither present, nor absent, neither dead, nor alive”⁶ – which inspired Mark Fisher more than a decade later to broaden the definition of the word and eventually link it to the idea of being haunted by a lost future. Derrida was fascinated by the figure of the phantom. In one interview in the non-linear film *Ghost Dance* (1983) Derrida even refers to himself as a ghost because the interview is being filmed. He recognises that his appearance on film is an interference in time and this image of him is now cut loose from him as a person.

This is the ghost he talks about and links theoretically to the medium of film: “Le cinéma est un art des fantômes. C’est un art de laisser revenir les fantômes”.⁷ If cinema is inherently a disturbance of time and space, the internet is basically a place of non-time, according to Mark Fisher.⁸ Images and words return again and again, even beyond the existence of the person represented, often losing parts of itself, context and subjectivity, becoming a ghost of a ghost. We can only hope for the bliss of entropic oblivion.

The Twitter profile picture of Thomas Blondeau, a Flemish writer who died suddenly in 2013, still maintains firm eye contact with any internet user who comes across his profile. The four tweets he sent into the world the day of his death are still right there under his photo, in hindsight almost prophetic in their nature now that we know what was about to happen. Famous last words. Lost future. He seems both as far away and as close

6 Colin Davis, “État Présent Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms”, *French Studies*, 59, no. 3 (2005): 373.

7 Ken McMullen, *Ghost Dance*, Looseyard Production, 1981.

8 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 19.

as is any living stranger in the world behind their screen. For a moment I cherish the illusion that the technology has forged an unforeseen bridge through time and that someone can tweet him to drop by the hospital. Time is a flat circle, Marty says in *True Detective*. Blondeau's death continues to happen endlessly, every day, every time someone reads those four tweets.

Collectively, humanity has already achieved great feats of knowledge, but time is a problem we have not yet resolved. Time remains this unavoidable propulsion. That this drive would be forward or somehow towards a target is a delusion. Time pushes without direction, but always away from what has happened. It was a quarter past two during a warm June night and my father woke me with a long sigh. My responding silence got lost in the poor telephone connection. The cleft apart phonemes of our silent conversation still vibrate there at the frequency of the unspeakable, like a glitch in the air that is hard to notice. I floated in the dark and looked into the infinite universe, with somewhere the moon reflecting a weak light. *La nuit sera noire et blanche*. I counted the individual minutes. Every moment brought me noticeably further away from her. I panicked and searched for a way to put my heels in the mud. How to stop the unrelenting progression of time so that the distance between her and me would, at least, not increase. But minutes passed, then weeks, kilometres and years. It is the grief for my mother that made me understand why a light year is not a unit of time, but a unit of distance.

*

When Uri, son of writer David Grossman, passed away during his military service in the Israeli armed forces, his father couldn't escape what he would call "the gravity of grief"⁹ and wrote his genre-defying book *Falling Out of Time*. The ex-partner of a dear friend of mine lost his own young son and read an excerpt from the book: "In August he died, and / when that month was over, I wondered: / How can I move / to September / while he remains / in August?"¹⁰ I saw myself floating in the dark and his heels were digging their own deep trenches in the mud. *La nuit sera noire et blanche*. He muttered the first verses of W.H. Auden's *Funeral Blues* afterwards. "Stop all the clocks."¹¹

The one medium that is in a way able to stop all the clocks

9 Joachim Cauwe, "Uit de tijd vallen' Over rouw en psychoanalyse", *Psychoanalytische Perspectieven* 37, no. 4 (2019): 944, <https://www.psychoanalytischeperspectieven.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/13-Cauwe.pdf>.

10 David Grossman, *Falling Out of Time*, trans. Jessica Cohen (New York: Knopf, 2014), 145.

11 Cauwe, "Uit de tijd vallen", 944.

is, of course, photography. As if it were the mechanical counterpart of Medusa, the photo camera turns time to stone right onto a shiny piece of paper. The past gets embezzled with a shade of the present, saved from the digestive process that is brought along by the passing of years. But never quite entirely. Photography fails in fully bringing back the past and this makes the medium inherently melancholic for the viewer, moving in its grimness. No one describes this phenomenon more beautifully than Roland Barthes in *La Chambre Claire*, a sentiment undoubtedly shared by Andy Grundberg, who wrote about Barthes' book in the *New York Times*: "Barthes bites into photography like Proust into a madeleine and what results is an intricate, quirky and ultimately frustrating meditation linking photography to death."¹²

At some point after his mother's death – about which he touchingly wrote in his *Journal de deuil* – Barthes discovered a photograph of her as a child in the winter garden in Chennevières-sur-Marne, an event around which his whole idea of photography as being haunting was built: "Devant la photo de ma mère enfant, je me dis : elle va mourir : je frémis (...) d'une catastrophe qui déjà eu lieu. Que le sujet en soit déjà mort ou non, toute photographie est cette catastrophe."¹³ He is also deeply moved by an 1865 photo of Lewis Payne waiting for his execution after being sentenced to death for an attempted murder. The punctum of this photo lies for Barthes in the thought that Payne is about to die, but the nature of the photograph makes time stand still, and Payne seems to be stuck in the eternal limbo of waiting.¹⁴ We're looking at nothing less and nothing more than a ghost.

Photo portraits from the late nineteenth century are often described as ghostly. Generic strangers sit stiffly next to each other, never smiling, while the monochrome complexion of their faces has started to fade already, thus mercilessly crushing any signs of vitality. Imagine my amazement when I came across a lavishly illustrated online *Vice* article from 2017 titled "The Unbridled Joy of Victorian Porn." As the title suggests, the editors collected and wrote about old pornographic photos of Victorian times. The rigidity and prudishness we so deeply associate with these times vaporised instantly. Instead, these explicit pictures show men and women, just like us today, enjoying intimate and animalistic mo-

12 Andy Grundberg, "Death in the Photograph", *New York Times*, August 23, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/08/23/books/death-in-the-photograph.html>.

13 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire: Note Sur La Photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 150.

14 *Ibid.*, 149.

ments of the now. The people of any time period are our contemporaries.

Photography proved to be a true revolution in pornography. In 1839, French inventor Louis Daguerre created the predecessor of the photograph as we know it today, and it took very little time, of course, before the French public was overwhelmed by an unprecedented range of realistic bawdy imagery. “For a time, the photos were incredibly expensive: one daguerreotype cost a full week’s wages for a French worker” according to Alain de Botton’s article “The Poignancy of Old Pornography.”¹⁵ He claims it was cheaper to pay the services of a prostitute for one day than to buy one unchaste photo of her. But prices collapsed due to the rapidly growing supply of pornographic images. “By 1860, there were estimated to be 400 shops selling pornographic photos in Paris,”¹⁶ but on-the-go was also an option; for example, women in train stations sold packs of five photos that they conjured up from under their skirts.

In his article, de Botton links these vitalist thrusts of expression to a melancholic affect in the viewer when realising all the people in the picture are now dead: “Their photographic liveliness makes their eventual deaths all the more tangible.”¹⁷ For a fraction of a moment, they seem to live again, but inevitably they, their entire inner world of experiences, and all the moments of their lives, big and small, get lost in time, like tears in rain. “It’s worse when it’s children,” de Botton claims.¹⁸ When we see old pictures of young children staring in the lens, we imagine how much future was still waiting for them in that moment, even though it is already fully behind us or may have never even happened. Everything they were, everything they would ever be, has been annihilated.

The will to remember, to retain, to contain and the will to overcome death, it’s an invisible thrust that arguably drives many branches of the arts. French all-rounder Jean Cocteau said about cinema, for example, that it is “la mort au travail, la mort au présent.”¹⁹ With its ability to capture motion and duration, cinema can be seen as the ultimate medium to remember. Or in the words of Olivier Assayas, during an interview with *Indiewire*: “Cinema is about resurrection. Cinema is about dealing with

15 Alain de Botton, “The Poignancy of Old Pornography”, *The School of Life*, <https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/old-pornography/>.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Bernardo Bertolucci, “Entretien avec Bernardo Bertolucci”, *La Cinématèque française*, September 10, 2013, <https://www.cinematheque.fr/video/489.html>.

ghosts and bringing them to life. Cinema ... allows what is lost to come back."²⁰

Olivier Smolders reflects in his experimental short film *Mort à Vignole* (1998) on the ability and non-ability of film and photography to explore the themes of remembering and death: "How long do people remember every one of us? After two generations we're just shadows. When you add a third, at best, we're prisoners of vague memories and stories. All our dreams, enthusiasm and hatred come down to a few pictures saved by time."²¹ *Mort à Vignole* consists of a montage of home videos shot during Smolders' own childhood. But when viewing these moving pictures, we cannot help feeling something is lacking. Even though we see various family members interact with one another, we do not know who these people are, what they're thinking, what lives they lead. These intimate moments do not subjectify the strangers. Despite the time conserved in the images, they remain strangers, a few of the infinite number of people we will never know. We feel these memories may be meaningful to Smolders, but not to us. They are flimsy spectres, with no past, no future. These are ghosts of ghosts.

*

Yuri Gagarin knew that just like any other living being he was going to die one day. The probability that he would lose his life in his technically imperfect Vostok capsule was rather high; he knew that too. But the top commanders of the USSR wanted to make history, and so Gagarin was strapped into his cramped seat on April 12, 1961, where he sat waiting for the historic rocket launch. A photographer quickly snapped a few obligatory marketing portraits, images that went around the world while the propaganda machine was chugging away at full speed.

One of those photo frames is overcrowded with different pieces of technological hardware, but then, childishly small in a giant helmet, Gagarin's face suddenly stands out, the only living element in the whole photograph. His facial expression seems calm and resigned. He knows that he's playing Russian roulette with his life and that this photo will be in the papers the next day either as the man who burnt up in the atmosphere like half of the

20 David Ehrlich, "How Kristen Stewart and Olivier Assayas Bring the Dead Back to Life in 'Personal Shopper'", *Indiewire*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/03/kristen-stewart-olivier-assayas-personal-shopper-interview-1201789051>.

21 Olivier Smolders, *Mort à Vignole*, Wip, 1998.

other test capsules or as the first human in space ever. The resolute acceptance of his fate tugs at the heartstrings. We know he survived. We know that in the photo he will soon be the first human to float in the vacuum of space. In his trip around the earth he will transmit via his radio: "I see earth! It is so beautiful!" Gagarin will always be the first who was, just for a few hours, not part of life on earth. How existentially alone he must have felt. He might as well have been a god. He might as well have been a child. Of course, this is all me fantasising. His gaze in the picture might as well have been towards the series of banal security checks he had to carry out, but the turn to sentimentality is an easy one to take.

In 1922 another Russian, film theorist Lev Kuleshov, conducted his now-famous film-editing experiments and proved how deeply the cinematic medium is built on the idea of viewers being machines of meaning. An audience identifies with the neutral close-up of a man on the screen and unconsciously tries to correlate this man's gaze to the following seemingly random images: when a shot of soup is edited after his close-up, we think the man is looking at the soup and that he's hungry. When a baby in a coffin is shown, we think he's sad. A beautiful woman lying down, he's aroused. The resulting interpretations of the audience were all the same. The Russian montage theorists of the beginning of the twentieth century pinpointed the revolutionary potential of the cinematic medium right here. According to them, a filmmaker and a film editor have immense suggestive powers.²²

When I repeated this experiment in my own screenwriting classes, it struck me how everyone's interpretations certainly were in the same broad categories, but nevertheless differed slightly from one another. Someone told me, for example, that the man was desperately trying to hide his love for the woman; another student was absolutely positive the man was indignant because of her 'erotic display', while another thought the man might even be gay.

Only the individual audience member can complete a story or cultural product, and the meaning is never fully fixed. I, as a viewer, gave meaning to the Gagarin photo in the same way: The astronaut's fate belongs to our measureless shared archive of

22 Lev Kuleshov, "Art of the Cinema", in *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 55.

knowledge. The context of the picture evokes many feelings in me, which I unconsciously project onto Gagarin. The act of interpretation says more about the interpreter than about the object interpreted. Meaning is a mirror. We are all propaganda machines of our own ideas.

Cinema inherently bears the doubling of projection: The first kind is that of the physical movie projector, the optical apparatus that sends a beam of fast-changing light. The second is the projection of meaning taken on by the audience. Both projections meet each other on the silver cinema screen, a silent dialogue between filmmaker and viewer, between strangers, with the veil as locus.

Gagarin's own thoughts are long gone and what remains are phantasms, projections, mirrors. The well-known news photo of Yuri Gagarin suddenly becomes partly fiction. Without the viewer's gaze, the photo only exists in its materiality. Add a singular gaze and the shot is overloaded with meaning. No two gazes are the same, so one photo carries an abundance of possible interpretations and meanings, some of which are directly opposite to each other. The presence of the audience is, in other words, absolutely crucial.

Positioning the audience as a necessary witness is an act the American film *A Ghost Story* (2017) explicitly undertakes. In the movie, the husband of a young American couple (Casey Affleck) is killed in a car accident, after which the wife (Rooney Mara) tries to cope with life thereafter, even though she is crippled with grief. However, as time goes by, her grieving becomes less all-encompassing and she builds a new life for herself. She inevitably does what the living are destined to do: She moves on.

The man, however, sticks to life as a ghost, a literal, almost cartoonish white-sheet presence in the house, only visible to the viewer. The ghost seems to be tied to the house and his old life for eternity. He also must move on and let go, even if he doesn't know what that means. The ghost witnesses the woman falling in love with someone new, her moving out, and an unfamiliar family moving in. Time passes by. People come and go, parties are held, lover's quarrels are settled. The house gets demolished and a busi-

ness building takes its place. The future is impersonal and therefore uninteresting and estranged. The phantom lives through the end of time, and all starts anew: the formation of the earth, the break-up of Pangea, the colonisation of the American continents and finally the ghost sees his past self move into the house together with his wife.

The director of the movie, David Lowery, has made the idea of time being a circle the very foundation of his story. The phantom simultaneously haunts, observes and remembers the times his past self and his wife make music together, wake up together and talk about the future together. He becomes the voyeur of his own death. But then he also sees himself return as a ghost. Now there are two ghosts in the house: one per time rotation. The old ghost is invisible to the new ghost. The viewer realises that this cycle can go on infinitely. Who knows, maybe there are three, four, or even a hundred ghosts in the house, but they're not visible since we haven't got around to that specific time rotation yet. Time may be a circle, for Lowery, but it has depth, just like a spring. The ghost becomes its own ghost, the erosion of haunting.

The entire film can be read as an abstract metaphor for cinema. The audience is the voyeur to the lives of fictional characters on screen who act as if they don't know they're being watched; we only get a limited insight into their lives and then they leave us without a second thought. All we can do as an audience, is to restart the movie. At this point we do not only re-watch the narrative that we already know, but we may also remember the first viewing.

Every time I start *The Tree of Life* (2011), I think back to my first screening and the cinema where it took place. I remember the musky smell of the dark red seats and the physical feeling of just having been struck by lightning when the credits rolled. I remember the company I was with and our conversation afterwards, full of long contemplative silences. When I revisited the film three months after my mother passed away, I couldn't even finish an hour of it because I felt like every cell of my body would fall apart if I did. It took me years to try again, and that time around the movie was suddenly comforting in the way it engulfed, destroyed, and rebuilt me. I remember every single re-watch crystal-clear,

and I sit myself down next to myself every time I press play.

Two psychoanalyst FilmAtelier colleagues spoke in their introduction to a screening of David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* (2003) about the idea of the previous viewing experiences being captured on the material of film itself. On a reel of analogue film, the image is literally burnt in a negative layer while recording, so it can be developed later and rolled out for viewing. Every time such a reel is played, new scratches and bumps are added to the film because the material itself is quite sensitive and flimsy. These blemishes add to the characteristic visual noise we so deeply associate with analogue film. In this way, each screening makes a physically real impact on the original material, and every gaze adds to the collective of viewers. When looking at a reel of film, we look at the many lives that saw this exact movie pass before their eyes, but there's a fundamental impossibility of ever reconstructing or meeting these lives. Cinema is a medium of haunting presences and of alien absences.

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Ghosts pop up everywhere in our cultural products, even though they were carried to the grave in 1960 by American literary critic Leslie Fiedler in his book *Love and Death in the American Novel*, in which he called ghost stories "an obsolescent subgenre," a "naive little form" intended only for members of the lower middle class.²³ He couldn't wait for it to disappear. Hopefully, the cemetery in Buffalo, New York is being monitored for paranormal sightings, because since ghost stories are alive and well, Fiedler surely must be spinning in his grave with the speed of an unchecked windmill in a winter storm.

Fiedler should have known better. People fictionalise their fears and use fiction as a voltage conductor to deal with the danger and the unknown. For example, stories about zombies, biochemical monsters, and spies reached a peak in the 1950s and 1960s because the bombing of Hiroshima and the Cold War caused a collective anxiety neurosis, which was made liveable partly through cultural products dealing with this fear. This is also true for the way the supernatural is represented: During the Civil War in the United States, ghosts wore distinctive white

23 Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), 473.

dresses, while during the Victorian era in England, they roamed houses and the streets in black sackcloth; both fashion choices were inspired by their respective local funeral customs, and were therefore seen as creepy only locally. Our fictional ghost stories betray our real and singular human struggles with grief, love, transience, and meaning, while never refraining from unconsciously reflecting the writer's backdrop of time and culture.

As soon as the writer forms a sentence, whether fiction or non-fiction, they always offer a part of themselves. Every word and every musical note of Nick Cave's album *Skeleton Tree* breathes the loss of his son Arthur, who tragically died during the recording process. Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, her last collection of poetry, eerily predicts Plath's suicide after she finished writing the book.

While some authors attempt to hide themselves and their lives as well as they can inside their work, others experiment with showing and hiding the generous fertile soil of personal experience. Some, for example Norwegian Karl Ove Knausgård and his literary oeuvre, lavishly indulge themselves in pushing their stories to the very limits of narrative exhibitionism. Whether obtrusively naked or almost not quite hidden, the spectre of the author can't but roam his work after all.

The work of art is becoming an entire pantheon of different hauntings: the writer's, the audience's, the characters', the subject's. They could form a modest party, as in James Joyce's short story "The Dead". So many shadows and flimsy prints of long-gone realities and only half-true phantasms in something so simple as a story, a book, a movie, a photograph, silently overcoming death and making sure that even though we may be fully alone within the universe, we're never without. "[H]e heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."²⁴

Rows and rows of slow-moving handshakers say that there are no words for it. They admit they have no idea what to say, that they can't imagine what it's like. At funerals even well-meaning words lose all consolation. The failure of language is almost tangible. Some people turn to famous poems of long-gone writers in the hope these works of art can put whatever they're feeling

24 James Joyce, "The Dead", in *Dubliners*, by James Joyce (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1992), 225.

into words. But nothing is enough at that moment. Language is a too small blanket that always leaves your feet cold; it will never cover any of us. Roland Barthes perfectly compared it to a stone in his *Journal de deuil*: “Désespoir: le mot est trop théâtral, il fait partie du langage. Une pierre.”²⁵

Grossman can't help but undertake the same quest. In *Falling Out of Time*, the character of the Centaur struggles to describe death: “Death will deathify, / or is it deathened? Deatherized? / Deathered?”²⁶ He turns it into a game that exposes the limitations and the flexibility of language itself. If anything, the ghost in this essay I'm writing, is language itself, something never enough, a spectre of impossibility, haunting, haunted. When asked by Polonius what he is reading, Hamlet answers: “Words, words, words.”²⁷

Writing is an absolute torment. It's physical labour, including the back pain, the sweat, and the low hum of continuous swearing. Every so often I mutter that line from *Hamlet* to myself. Words, words, words. It doesn't matter what is put on paper. Since it cannot grasp anything substantial, it is in itself empty and meaningless. Only fools, both deceived and deceiving, write. Words disappear into a Danaides' infinite emptiness out of which only flimsy ghostly echoes return, disintegrated, nonsensical. Even language falls apart. What is left, is annihilation. And yet, I write. I can't not write. I can't turn away from it. Hamlet reads words, words, words, but thank god he reads them.

Just as in the vanishing portraits by Jake Wood Evans of humans struggling against their own vanishing presence, almost-lost VHS-like memories in the paintings of Andy Denzler or throughout William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops*, it is the very act of dying – but never succeeding – in which life is to be found.

The first scenes of *The Tree of Life* show the birth of the universe, as sublime as it is vast and incomprehensible. The “Lacrimosa” of composer Zbigniew Preisner's *Requiem for my Friend* forms a deeply moving accompaniment for this sequence. What is born is in a constant process of decay as well. The beauty of the event doesn't cancel out the grief for its inevitable loss, and vice versa. What Barthes didn't see when he looked at the portrait of Lew-

25 Roland Barthes, *Journal de deuil* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), 117.

26 Grossman, *Falling Out of Time*, 89.

27 Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 139.

is Payne, or indeed of his mother as a child, was that what was captured was not a catastrophe alone, but also a stubborn continuation of life within the catastrophe within ourselves.

When a bereaved woman asked Nick Cave whether he also sees the phantom of his son sometimes, he answered in a beautiful letter to her which he ended with these lines: “Create your spirits. Call to them. Will them alive. Speak to them. It is their impossible and ghostly hands that draw us back to the world from which we were jettisoned.”²⁸

Language and its inherent failure drive the invisible guardian angel Daniel (Bruno Ganz) in the German film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987) to become human. He’s an absent presence, a form between life and death. He wanders around and observes human life, which he finds fascinating but can’t understand. Eventually, he makes the choice to become a mortal being, and even though he’s ecstatic that he’s now part of humanity, something is still lacking. Because of his persistent position of distant observer, a stubborn repetitive reminder of how he roamed the earth for millennia as an angel, he’s barely connecting to people and thus missing out on the most human of experiences.

During a Nick Cave concert, Daniel meets a woman who looks right through him and puts him on the spot. She forces him to decide what he wants to do, whether he really wants to take the leap of faith into what he calls the absence of knowing. Whether he allows for time and unpredictability to exist. Whether he can accept the not-enoughness of language. Life is in the unknown beyond. Life is in the poetry of failing, falling, dying.

During her monologue the woman suddenly breaks the fourth wall and looks straight into the camera. She doesn’t just address Daniel, but also the audience. The watcher in the dark, who has had an implicit voyeuristic position throughout the film, is recognised and is told, to come out of the shadows; it is now up to you to decide.

It’s up to you now. It’s up to me now. In the limping, leaky, jolting language, I take pleasure in the endless failure of trying again and again. There is life in this unstable hopscotch game.

28 Nick Cave, “Issue #6: Dear Cynthia”, *The Red Hand Files*, October 2018, <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/communication-dream-feeling>.

Je te laisserai des mots. Language is a ghost, an alien, a presence between life and death as it falls in and out of itself. All in all, it is actually unimportant that the tsunami of entropy will claim even this, for at least the game existed for as long as it did. Now the game is over. It's coming. The end is coming.

Inevitably, m y l a n g u a

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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the editorial board of *Passage*, especially Nadia, but also Jürgen, Isolde, and Bert, without all of whom this text would have never seen the light of day.

P I N E L O P I T Z O U V A

THE MAKING OF A PORTRAIT: AN EXERCISE IN HYBRIDITY AND IN LOOKING AGAIN

The goal of this article is to offer an instance of hybrid scholarship that advocates for creative-critical practices in the academic context, and specifically in ethnographic writing. I start with a re-thinking of my own creative-critical methodological choices in a given research project on illness narratives and I focus on hybrid practices between art and science. I present fragments of my creative-critical work inviting fellow-researchers to a research process that does not anticipate completeness or finalisation and that unfolds through repetition and variation akin to the studies of painters who commit their energy to looking again at the same object from different angles, under different light, and try to depict it using different materials.

Keywords: arts-based research, hybrid forms of knowing, experimental ethnography, portraiture, magical realism

This Participant Whom I Will Call Zoe

This participant, whom I will call Zoe, was 22 years old at the time of the interviews and she was studying at the University of Athens.

“She had a squint and myasthenia gravis since the age of seven, the ocular type of the disease.¹ This means that, apart from the fact that in the past she had faced considerable difficulty with keeping one of her eyes open, she had none of the other symptoms. She underwent surgery when she was eight. At eighteen, she tried an additional treatment, which, nevertheless, did not help her. She had been under the same medication since the age of eight: six pills every day, which she regulated herself. Her eye problem is not very perceptible today – except for the times when she gets very tired”.

The above excerpt from my fieldwork notebook – a very brief selection from the observations I had jotted down quite some years ago – gives a few basic facts about a young woman’s medical history, but actually tells nothing about her. In my work for that project I divided my material in sections and directed my efforts towards a systematic study. Who was Zoe and what had happened to her? How did she experience the events? What could I learn about the experience of chronic illness through her specific and socially situated account? These were some of the questions I asked back then. Yet, today they don’t feel anymore like relevant questions to ask. What is more, they somehow seem inherently wrong. Like dead-end questions impossible to work your way through. So, today I’m looking at Zoe once more, but from a quite different angle. I ask: What was it like to me, in terms of affects, to have met her and listened to the story she told me? How could I understand her and imagine her through my own life events and medical history? What do we get when Zoe and Pinelopi come

1 Myasthenia gravis comes in different types with different symptoms. One of them is generalized weakness of the muscles (extreme weakness in different muscle groups) that can affect the whole body. Another is double vision. Yet another is what Zoe had – the falling of an eyelid. Typically, the surgical removal of the thymus gland is what western medicine prescribes as a treatment, but not as a cure. There is no known cure for this condition.

together and what kind of partial, unfinished story can we tell about it? It isn't Zoe or the experience of chronic illness this time that is the "object" of my study. What I now want to see is "how moving forces are immanent in scenes, subjects, and encounters, or in blocked opportunities."² And I want to do so without aiming "to come to a finish," but desiring to immerse myself again in the sensibilities of those encounters and watch their "tendrils stretching into things I can barely, or not quite, imagine."³

A Good Pair of Boots is Not Enough

I can tell you what I had to do for my master's thesis in a short and simple sentence: I had to study illness narratives. Listen to the stories of women with a chronic illness and then write about it. Three women from Greece who had the same illness I had – a neurological condition that can take different forms, a rare disease of the auto-immune system with a half-Greek and half-Latin name: myasthenia gravis. To take this topic was a quite straightforward choice because it was close to my life and to my own experiences. It was, at that point, only obvious to me that illness as a topic and the ways we think about it would not merely define the subject of my thesis – the final stage of a university programme trajectory – but would also constitute what I would care for and try to contribute to further my academic path. Because it simply mattered, in an absolute and urgent way, to give my time to these specific questions which were intertwined with my existence, and, in very palpable ways, with who I have become. Of course, this very likely resonates with the experiences of many other people. People whose own outstanding life encounters have left them with no other choice but to write. As Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick has put it in connection with her own field of study, "I think many adults (and I am among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly

2 Kathleen Stewart,
Ordinary Affects (Durham and London:
Duke University Press, 2007), 128.

3 Ibid

remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit.”⁴

To hear the call or feel the pull is certainly one thing, but to set off and make your move as you begin to go about it is another. Certainly, the level of complexity can be significantly high in a great amount of research done in many different domains today. However, ethnography is a very special activity – the messiness and fuzziness of where you’ve found yourself (in a real-life situation with real people, raw emotions, expectations, hesitations, uncertainties, fears, and confusions) can be, at times, too much. Bud Goodall, giving his reader a taste of it, quotes the answer of the legendary ethnobotanist Charles Schultes when he was asked by a Harvard graduate student, “What is the best preparation for fieldwork?” To which Schultes laconically replied: “Don’t worry about getting a good pair of boots.”⁵ Moral: when you are doing ethnography, you are bound to find yourself unprepared. As Goodall, a proponent of creative writing as a method of inquiry and of experimental ethnographic forms, explains:

WRITING ETHNOGRAPHY IS DIFFICULT TO LEARN because no matter how many exemplars you locate, no matter how many hours you devote to editing and rewriting, and no matter how much you love language, are skilled with metaphor, and are aware of representational limitations, what may be truest about writing is this: The tensions that guide the ethnographic writer’s hand lie between the felt improbability of what you have lived and the known impossibility of expressing it, which is to say between desire and its unresolvable, often ineffable, end.⁶

4 Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3.

5 Harold Lloyd Goodall, *Writing the New Ethnography* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2000), 7

6 *Ibid.*, capitals in the original

How to Do This? – Back Then...

All this was very new to me, but sometimes lack of experience can be an advantage. And it can be that people decide (on how to write) more spontaneously when they are less hindered by great amounts of knowledge, as is the case with any novice. They are, also, perhaps more likely to follow their intuition,⁷ a choice that may lead to interesting and unexpected alternatives regarding the way one sees the world. I had always been drawn to literature and art, so when I found out that it was possible to integrate them into my research and use them as a guide, it felt to me like a choice as straightforward as that of my topic. In my readings, I saw that a growing amount of research experimenting with art and literature⁸ has shown that the imaginative, the poetic, and the fictional add layers of meaning and intensities to an inquiry and to the account that is finally composed. I also learned that in certain research topics – such as health research –conventional scholarly prose cannot convey experiences that are deeply embedded in the social but are simultaneously very personal and are ingrained in the emotional-bodily being of people in ways that are highly idiosyncratic and subjective. Arts-based research, which moves in between the territories of creativity and intellectual inquiry, seemed to be the best bet in connection with vulnerable social groups. Beginning in the second part of the twentieth century, it coincided with the postmodern movement, as well as social justice movements, which “shattered dualistic, positivist conceptions of truth and science and broadened what was considered acceptable within formal academic research.”⁹ During that period the intellectual and academic tendencies and concerns, as well as the historical conjectures, of the time ripened to produce and reintroduce “[t]he idea of art-as-research as a scientific endeavour.”¹⁰ We see, then, the formerly marginalised and delegitimised ways

7 See Bergson's philosophy on intuition as a method of knowing in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bergson/#MethIntu>. Erin Manning, in *Minor Gesture*, draws from Bergson's work and makes a case for intuition as knowledge and as a research-creation process: “I argue that intuition is as key to a process as any other building-block and that through intuition, as allied to the creation of a problem, the artful comes to expression” (2016: 14).

8 See Poindexter, “Research as Poetry”; Prendergast et al., *Poetic Enquiry*; Faulkner, *Poetry as Method*; Banks & Banks, *Fiction and Social Research*; Angrosino, *Opportunity House*; Saldaña, “Playwriting with Data”; Denzin, *Performance Ethnography*; Valle & Connor, “Becoming Theatrical”.

9 Gioia Chilton and Patricia Leavy, “Arts-Based Research Practice: Merging Social Research and the Creative Arts.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Patricia Leavy (New York and Oxford: University Press, 2014), 3.

10 Ibid., italics in the original; see also: Leavy, *Method Meets Art*; Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research*.

of acquiring insights into the human condition with aesthetic means¹¹ becoming acknowledged for their value, and openly challenging such pre-given and long-entrenched divides as that of art versus science. Moreover, artistic inquiry values and places at the forefront not one individual, objective truth, but multiple, intersubjective realities that are produced, re-imagined, and embodied in manifold emotional, bodily, cognitive, and social landscapes.¹²

With these in mind, the decision I finally came to felt right in connection to what I'd figured mattered the most: what I perceived as the nature of my inquiry, and my personal inclinations, my ways of relating to the world. I would compose an account that would mix fact with fiction and evoke emotions, draw the reader in, and create a colourful world to accommodate each of the women and their lived experiences. I would look at them, I thought, in a way that would have depth and imagination, a way that would not only pay attention to their words, but would scrutinise details in their expression and voice, in their overall demeanour, that would allow me to discern and capture something essential about them. But it was very difficult to achieve this in a prosaic way. All the more since the question was not merely to compose an insightful and engaging account that would create affect. It was, most crucially, to do justice to the people who trusted me, to the political significance of their experiences, and to their ethical entanglements. The way to do this was through an aesthetic form, a form that could speak of..

11 See: Finley, "Critical Arts-Based Inquiry"; Kapitan et al., "Creative Art Therapy in a Community's Participatory Research and Social Transformation"

12 Barbara Bickel, "From Artist to A/t/tographer: An Autoethnographic Ritual Inquiry into Writing on the Body." *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 2, no. 2 (2005): 8–17.

when I met Zoe in the waiting room,
Silver and Pretty,
with a movie-star smile
and with one of her eyes
half-closed.

An eye-lid,
like an aspen leaf –
Rhyming with thief,
and grief,
and disbelief –
displaced and probing,
on her shining face;
giving her an ambivalent expression.

Her angels were hanging around,
small and chubby.
And kind of cross,
pissed-off.
Their faces
stern and stubborn.
Shutting me out.
Chin up, little angels!

All of them had one eye
half-closed
and none of them would look me in the face.
Oh, boy! Those angels,
they were hard to get.
For it was a serious matter –
of trust.

Looking for Voices

When I first met Zoe, I really didn't know what to expect. I never met her in a waiting room, and neither did I meet her in person. The discussions I had with her were on Skype. I had posted a few lines about my research, looking for participants on a Facebook group page for people with myasthenia gravis. She

responded to it: she wanted to help. I got many responses from the people there, and had discussions with many of them, but eventually I selected three women who could give more elaborate accounts, or accounts close to what I had imagined an account should be like. I was – perhaps naively – surprised to find that not all people could or would offer a story. For a number of them, it was just the facts, or at least that’s what their responses looked like to me. How they got sick, then were diagnosed, then treated, then continued to live with the disease – without much detail, emotion, or reference to the everyday – with occasional mention of their persisting symptoms. There were emotions, sure enough, and there were difficulties (what in the fictional world they call conflicts). But I had to fish for them, and even then the responses remained at the very surface, never growing into more than a basic sentence. “Yeah,... I didn’t know what it was. Sure, I was concerned.” “I lost my job. Was on the dole for a year...” Maybe they didn’t really believe I cared to know these things. But maybe they hadn’t given it much thought, either. It’s easy to assume that others are like you – dwelling on their hurt, reliving situations in their heads, looking for answers in the same old worn paths, worn and torn themselves under the weight of their own interpretations.

It’s not like that. One thing I’ve learned – again – from that fieldwork was that people have different ways of addressing and sustaining whatever it is that’s called interiority or self. But the three women I chose to work with, were more like what I thought I needed. They could talk at length about how they felt, they each had been to a therapist of some sort, or came from an environment that was fairly familiar with this practice. Their feelings/expectations/understandings were well formulated and mattered to them. They had a story to tell: linking things, making causal connections, expressing shame, anger, frustration. And

that is why I chose them, I think. For making it easier for me to write it down and for being, in certain ways, like me. I could relate to them more. And maybe I wanted to re-think my own story through theirs. But, and I'm afraid I have to say, it seems I wanted to do this not to explore, but to confirm. The other people, those I'd ruled out, could have offered me a chance to look again, and do this in a new way, perhaps finding new words, new landscapes, imagining different things as the ones that mattered. But when I didn't see in them what I acknowledged as a valuable account, I thought, "There's nothing here. Keep looking." Now I wonder: What would it be like to think less about yourself? To be less concerned with the subtleties of your emotions and with how exactly this or that affects you? What would it be like to dispense less energy in preserving your identity, fortifying it day by day, saying "yes," saying "no," saying "this I like, and this I don't." Saying "this is *me* and this is what happened *to me*." Of course, I can never be sure that that was the case with them. If I had listened longer, I might have discovered something different altogether. They were speaking to me with their silences, and pauses, and hesitations, with their uncertainty as to what should come next and why, but I wasn't capable of grasping that then and I couldn't keep listening. In retrospect, I was looking for the voices of rational, individual, humanist subjects,¹³ and in my search for coherent stories, I was conducting very traditional and even biased research, despite my claim that I was using art and having open-ended interviews to let marginalised voices emerge and do justice to people's experiences. As Mazzei argues,

Conventional approaches to qualitative inquiry often favour *the* voice of *a* subject, assuming that voice can speak with the authority of consciousness and experience located in a particular space and time. Voice in humanist qualitative inquiry must be present—spoken, witnessed,

13 Lisa A. Mazzei, "Voice Without a Subject." *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 16, no 2 (2016), 152.

recorded, date-stamped, and transcribed into words in an interview transcript. Qualitative researchers in the social sciences have been trained to afford authority to voice, to ‘free’ this authentic voice from whatever restrains it from coming into being so it can relate the truth about the conscious self.¹⁴

A Creative Critical Writing Practice

What I tried to do back then in terms of understanding Zoe’s experiences did involve an artistic element but did not possess strong critical qualities as to the situation, Zoe’s performance, and my own. As I now think again with literature and through literature – that is, fiction and poetry – I pursue a less conventional path and, again, a form of writing that brings together the aesthetic and the critical, the affect and the concept, as proposed by Ola Ståhl, in his article “Kafka and Deleuze/Guattari: Towards a Creative Critical Writing Practice.”¹⁵ I pursue a writing that addresses such dual preoccupations through a (for me, renewed) opening up to hybrid forms of composing and knowing – a writing less burdened by looking for the right voice and the right story. And “[i]t is as if an entire writing practice comes out of the encounter with impossibility; one which doesn’t recognise literary genres or formats but proceeds through assemblages of fragments, false starts, botched becomings, and the proliferation of interminable lines of flight.”¹⁶ Territorial forms of writing, the preservation of boundaries, the familiar and the habitual are questioned here and undermined. This is an ethico-political project combined with an aesthetic utterance, a telling of an experience not for the sake of the biographical interest of it, not following the content that is ready, not representing the experience, but starting from the affect and writing in a way that allows becoming-minor in your own

14 Ibid, italics in the original. In her article, Mazzei explores the ways traditional qualitative inquiry looks for a “[v]oice burdened with authenticity and self-reflexivity” which “obliges the interpreter to ‘center’ and stabilize, to fix that subject to produce a supposedly coherent narrative that represents an accumulation of a coagulated and sedimented truth” (title, 153-154).

15 Ola Ståhl, “Kafka and Deleuze/Guattari: Towards a Creative Critical Writing Practice.” *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 33, no 7–8 (2016): 221–35.

16 Ibid., 222; see also Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects*.

language and in your own life. Then I can think of who Zoe is,
and ask, as she asked...

Who is this Pinelopi?
And what is she
gonna do
with the stuff
she does?

Then I can re-member her saying (but not exactly)...

I lift my fear and go on with my fingers.
I hid the mirror and I know
My body with my fingers
My face.

Cross eyes
Front of the mirror
... endless hours at my eye, to hide my photos,
And anything either
(her myself and life. Nothin

“I’ve always had scared
; I have the children of the disease
My memories begin mainly from seven,
so I don’t talk about my fear or worse.”

was paying attention
in order to cover something’s gone
My memories begin mainly from my parents,
I remember myself tearing more...

so opens up your life

You settle this and go on with your life.
Now I don't talk about my eye

"I was paying
my paying was careful
to with my eyes, from back that...
a large-eyed carention
what I look atterriblem with that so much

The Making of a Portrait

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, who has pioneered the method of portraiture in the social sciences,¹⁷ pays a lot of attention to the voice of the people she studies as she tries to create an aesthetically informed but also, as much as possible, a more faithful and reliable portrayal. Inspired by Clifford Geertz, she employs many descriptive details from the actual context and physical settings of her fieldwork in order to compose a vivid account that succeeds in bringing to life the entire situation and the people involved. Elaborating on her intentions guiding the development of portraiture as a method of inquiry, she states,

I wanted to develop a document, a text that came as close as possible to painting with words. I wanted to create a narrative that bridged the realms of science and art, merging the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature. I wanted the written pieces to convey the authority, wisdom, and perspective of the "subjects"; but I wanted them (the subjects) to ... be introduced to a perspective that they had not considered before.¹⁸

17 Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Davis Hoffmann. *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997)

18 Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, "Reflections on Portraiture: A Dialogue Between Art and Science." *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11, no. 3 (2005), 6.

I find this type of ethnographic engagement particularly attractive. Nevertheless, while I knew that I wanted to follow in Lawrence-Lightfoot's direction, it was clear to me that my practice would have to proceed with a different goal in mind. But then what did I want to do differently? The differentiation between my practice and Lawrence-Lightfoot's manifests itself exactly at the point where the ways we imagine ethnography, the ethnographer, and the ethnographic "other" do not allow for questioning and transgressing the limitations of our own thought models, our conceptualisations of what counts as valid knowledge acquired through reliable procedures, and our own position of power. For while "[p]ortraiture admits the central and creative role of the self of the portraitist"¹⁹ in all the different steps of the process, Lawrence-Lightfoot warns against "those who misunderstand, misuse, and abuse the frontiers of innovation ... (and) those who will use boundary crossing as a way to avoid the *rigours* and standards of both art and science."²⁰ She suggests that "[t]hrough *rigorous* procedures and methodological tools, the researcher tries to rid the work of personal bias that might distort or obscure the reality that he or she is recording."²¹ She concludes that "at the centre of all research, the investigator needs to manage the tension between personal predisposition [...] and *rigorous* scepticism."²² And this is a position I would like to think about.

To come to a certain conclusion about things – whatever the issue in question – one has to start from a given set of principles, or what one takes to be the case. In the brief excerpt cited above, we see that art and science are taken to be two distinct areas of human activity, each with its own codes and *rigours* to be necessarily followed by those who practice either the first or the second. Those who practice a mixture of both are expected to adhere to the rules of both fields in order to

19 Ibid., 9.
 20 Ibid., my italics.
 21 Ibid., 11, my italics.
 22 Ibid., my italics.

produce legitimate offspring. Furthermore, the (pre-existing?) reality should not be distorted or obscured by the self of the researcher – only enhanced by the creative means she uses in the telling of the story. Lawrence-Lightfoot admits the handling and shaping of the presentation of this reality on the part of the researcher and the different points at which her subjectivity (tastes, style, personality) show up. However, there are always borders that should never be crossed and that are defined by scientific *rigour*, a word we see repeated multiple times in those few lines above that describe good research. Wanting to make sure I know the correct definition, I looked it up. The Cambridge English Dictionary²³ defines *rigorous* as follows: “careful to look at or consider every part of something to make certain it is correct or safe”; “controlling behaviour in a severe way”; “severe or difficult, esp. because at a high level”; “detailed and careful”; “strict or severe”. Thesaurus.com²⁴ gives, among others, the following synonyms for *rigorous*: “exact”; “harsh”; “rigid”; “stringent”; “austere”; “uncompromising”. This is illuminating, right? Now, science is supposed to lead us to knowledge. But is it an effort doomed to fail if it is not always done this way? Can it be that if we “control behaviour in a severe way” we miss the chance to explore possibilities for other types of knowledges that may not be “rigorous” but might nevertheless be legitimate, and valid, and worthy of our trust? Ways that can open up directions to imagine differently both the personal and the social?

Lawrence-Lightfoot realises that she stands between two binary poles – art and science; aestheticism and empiricism. In the final part of her “Reflections on Portraiture: A Dialogue Between Art and Science,” she writes, “In closing, I want to blur the art/science contrasts that have dominated my analysis thus far,”²⁵ and proceeds to soften the positivist tones of her

23 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/rigorous>

24 <https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/rigorous>

25 Ibid., 13.

approach. To this end, she asserts that such boundaries produce distortions,²⁶ while it is the same intellect, the same imagination working in similar ways in each of the two domains. This final turn she takes in her description of portraiture, her conclusion, summarises the point of my article and announces what I would like myself to pursue. This stance, that we see more confidently express towards the end in Lawrence-Lightfoot's text, is, I believe, what could lead to "community building," "acts of intimacy and connection,"²⁷ and to a real "people's scholarship."²⁸ In a like manner, Ståhl, coming across Deleuze and Guattari's hesitation about a creative-critical writing practice and their persistence in making a distinction between the two, argues, as I have discussed, for an erasure of this line. I, too, search for a hybrid practice that does away with such categorisations and which, instead of striving to adhere to a specific set of pre-determined rules of doing science and of conducting a rigorous inquiry, is more concerned with asserting its identity as an experimental, affect-driven, chance-taking and chance-following, excess-and-transgression-favouring ethico-political-and-aesthetic project.

So that I can speak
of Zoe's angels again,
and how I saw them getting
agitated and tearful
as she was tearing the school photos –
in pieces.

The children's voices
ringing far away –
"Cross-eyed!"
"Captain Hook!"
The angels covering
their faces with their hands.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 12.

28 Featherstone, quoted in Lawrence-Lightfoot, "Reflections on Portraiture," 12.

Oh! Fuck all that!
 I am a circus queen.
 An expert contortionist
 with a rubber-like body;
 and no one has seen
 my glittery-flickery costume,
 underneath my clothes.

One of the people I was thinking of is Laurel Richardson, who gestures towards writing as a mode of inquiry, a method that “coheres with the development of ethical selves engaged in social action and social reform.”²⁹ Richardson, inspired by postmodernism and poststructuralism,³⁰ points to a kind of scholarly writing that does away with academic conventions and allows the researcher to nurture her own writing voice and learn about her project and about herself. Moreover, she introduces what she calls CAP ethnographies (CAP: Creative Analytical Processes), which, taking into account feminist, queer, and critical race theory critiques, open up the field and its possibilities for the sprouting of new species. These processes, she says, lead to an ethnography that “displays the writing process and the writing product as deeply intertwined; both are privileged. The product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production, or the method of knowing.”³¹ This practice, at the same time creative and analytical, offers a situated and partial account and “frees us to write material in a variety of ways—to tell and retell. There is no such thing as “getting it right,” only “getting it” differently contoured and nuanced.”³² Richardson compares this mode of investigation to that of triangulation, which is typically employed in more conventional or positivist research paradigms,³³ and suggests that the crystal is more suitable to describe what is at work in writing as inquiry:

I propose that the central imaginary for “validity” for

29 Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, “Writing: A Method of Inquiry.” In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (London: Sage Publications, 2018) 1410.

30 See Davies, *Poststructuralist Theory and Classroom Practice*.

31 Richardson and St. Pierre, “Writing: A Method of Inquiry,” 1415.

32 Ibid.

33 The triangle is seen as offering three points of reference/analytical perspectives, thus enabling a well-rounded analysis (see Denzin and Lincoln, *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 777-799). Interestingly, triangulation is used also by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis Hoffmann (204) and trusted as a method “through which emergent themes in research portraits gain their authenticity” (ibid., 233).

postmodernist texts is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionality, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, and arrays casting off in different directions.³⁴

Still, I kept bumping into study after study discouraging the kind of take I had in mind. Indeed, a significant amount of work I had consulted about the relationship and crossings between anthropology and literature seemed to consider this mating in predominantly realist terms, some of it more implicitly and some of it quite explicitly. For example, Craith and Kockel,³⁵ in their article, “Blurring the Boundaries Between Literature and Anthropology: A British Perspective”, only examine what is called social realist literature in connection to the different ways that literature can be like, or be inspired by, anthropology, and vice versa. In this article, they highlight the connections between specific literary narratives and anthropology/ethnography. To this end, they examine these narratives as final products: detailed realistic descriptions of relations, situations, and settings. They consider the way they were composed: after careful observation of the social and often consulting materials such as letters and diaries. And they elaborate on the intention of the author: to convey an as much as possible closer to reality depiction of the world around her. In all these points they find that realist literature³⁶ is very similar to ethnography and the other way round, and they conclude that since the methodology of anthropologists and realist writers “has much in common, there is much to gain from cross-disciplinary perspectives and

34 Ibid., 1416. This quotation comes from the chapter “Writing: A Method of Inquiry” (in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*) co-authored by Richardson and St. Pierre and divided in two parts, each part written by each of the two authors. The quotation comes from Part I: Qualitative Writing, which is authored by Richardson.

35 Máiréad Craith and Ullrich Nic and Kockel, “Blurring the Boundaries Between Literature and Anthropology: A British Perspective.” *Ethnologie française*, 44, no. 4 (2014): 689-697.

36 They mention among others Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad, and E.M. Forster.

intercultural interactions.”³⁷

In a similar vein, Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor make a case for ethnographic poetry and demonstrate “how poetry may help anthropologists to write insightfully about how we and other people live,”³⁸ but underscore that anthropologists have a lot to learn from social realist poetry, and such is the poetry that they should also write themselves. So, “like the author of historical fiction, the ethnographic poet must try to be faithful to external historical experience, while reaching beyond or through it to an equally true, artful reality, a sense of aesthetics that enhances literal ‘facts’ rather than diminishes them.”³⁹ So, while we have long realised all the problematic aspects of ethnography⁴⁰ and undertake to expand our understanding and our practice in the hope of creating something less oppressive and more authentic, what still seems to be a preferred path in our opening up to the employment of fiction in ethnography is to stick with social realist narratives. But such an insistence (as we see it above, and as we saw it also with Lawrence-Lightfoot) on a form of storytelling that is particularly similar to ethnography as we used to know it, precisely for this reason – for being similar – does not seem to really break new ground. What realist narratives are known to do and part of how they function is to take the pieces together, tie up all the loose ends, and create a neat story, a story that makes sense and that explains what the point of it all is.

When I was thinking of creating portraits of the women I encountered, I didn’t have in mind the realist type. Realist portraits, like those advocated by Lawrence-Lightfoot, resemble the subject while still managing to surprise with details that are not exactly the same as in the original, thus offering insights about the person portrayed, projecting aspects never thought of before, and spelling out unrealised dynamics and inner tensions.⁴¹ However, there are also portraits of another kind,

37 Craith & Kockel, “Blurring the Boundaries Between Literature and Anthropology: A British Perspective”, 695.

38 Kent Maynard and Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor. “Anthropology at the Edge of Words: Where Poetry and Ethnography Meet.” *Anthropology and Humanism*, 35, no. 1 (2010), 2.

39 *Ibid.*, 12.

40 Objectification and colonization of the “other” through writing, production of knowledge that privileges western notions of causality and linearity and negates the messiness and the untamable of existence, placing the ethnographer in the center as a master narrator.

41 This is linked to Haraway’s discussion of reflection and diffraction: “Diffraction does not produce ‘the same’ displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction ... the first (reflection) invites the illusion of essential, fixed position, while the second (diffraction) trains us to more subtle vision” (*The Haraway Reader*, 70).

abstract ones that can bring to our attention aspects of the person in her life-world in other ways, following different paths of aesthetics and perception. These portraits can create, perhaps, a much stronger affect too, in their transgressive character, and do so in far more profound and jarring ways, with bold juxtapositions and manipulations of the form, as they are less (or not at all) restricted by the norms of a realist approach. They can be more confronting, more arresting, shocking even, and make a more lasting impression on us, while they simultaneously do not claim to be a translation of the real but openly expose their constructedness. Similarly, the portraits I was imagining would not attempt a faithful rendering of features, physical and emotional, nor would they communicate a truth of accuracy. They would distort the encounter in certain ways, deform the subject and the story, make use of props, masks, costumes, and communicate to the reader what I understood as an important element of theatricality.

Right here lies a paradox of my position and of my intentions as a portraitist-ethnographer: On the one hand, I wanted to honour the women and their experiences, their confessions, their interpretations, their own insights, and their identities. On the other hand, I wanted to break their identities and mine, to shatter them, to crack them open and see what else was inside.⁴² My need to give a creative-critical response that would avoid the realist path stemmed precisely from a keen awareness of my own power over the text, the power to fix the women in specific roles, to limit their landscape in a frame of my choosing. A realist exposition wouldn't do justice to what we shared; it would be dull and dead. For these reasons, I wanted to look at their narratives and their identities as fluid and rhizomatic,⁴³ to pay attention to power relations and individual traits, the situatedness of the accounts, but also to regard their

42 I don't mean to say here that identity is something like a shell to break open and bring into the light whatever it hides – an essence/truth of sorts. Rather I wonder about the *more* that is there, the multiple, the plurality, the refracting angles of the crystal Richardson has proposed, the “what else” as sought after by Van Goidsenhoven and De Schauwer (“Listening Beyond Words,” 335), who cite an excerpt from Manning’s *Minor Gesture*, quite pertinent for me here, too: “The unquantifiable within experience can only be taken into account if we begin with a mode of inquiry that refutes initial categorization. Positing the terms of the account before the exploration of what the account can do only results in stultifying its potential and relegating it to that which already fits within preexisting schemata of knowledge” (Manning, quoted in Van Goidsenhoven and De Schauwer, *ibid.*).

43 A different approach to narrative research is inspired by rhizomatic understandings of selfhood (Loots et al., “Practising a Rhizomatic Perspective in Narrative Research”). The psychologist Jasmina Sermijn and colleagues used the rhizome as an open form of thinking to “search for an alternative story notion” and “an alternative view on narrative selfhood” (Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots, “The Narrative Construction of the Self: Selfhood as a Rhizomatic Story”, 634). This rhizomatic approach originates from French poststructuralist, postmodern, and deconstructionist takes on narrative (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*; Barthes, *Image Music Text*). These were taken up by feminist theorists (Davies and Gannon, “Feminism/post-structuralism”; Davies et al., “Constituting the Feminist Subject in Poststructuralist Discourse”; Richardson and St Pierre, “Writing: A Method of Inquiry”) and had great influence in social research. In this tradition, narrative and selfhood are seen as multiple, performative, situated and contextualized (Davies and Harre, “Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves”).

stories (and mine, too) as performances responding to life, instead of as representations of life. But still, I was hesitating and started feeling suspicious of myself. By creating my poetic/anti-realist/anti-rational portraits, wasn't I, again, the one deciding on all the things they'd be comprised of? The props, the masks, the costumes, the frame? Did I, perchance, merely want to add more drama? Make the women look more exotic than they were?

The Magical Realist Way

Looking further, I came across Darlene Juschka⁴⁴ and her article "The Writing of Ethnography: Magical Realism and Michael Taussig," in which she asks a very relevant question: "If writing is a potential act of colonisation, how can it be reclaimed as a challenge to colonisation?"⁴⁵ As the title suggests, Juschka examines the possibility of doing so through the employment of magical realism in ethnography, and takes as an exemplary work done this way that of Michael Taussig.⁴⁶ Juschka shares the realisation of many: that we cannot escape narrativisation (to always put things in the form of a story). However, she points out, "it is precisely this narrativisation laying claim to the other. How then should one engage narrativisation in such a way as to resist colonisation?"⁴⁷ Among other studies, the author looks at Hayden White's book *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, the subject of which is the writing of history – always performed in current genres "meaningful to the historical period of the interpreter"⁴⁸ that not only offer a structure for the telling of events but also determine their meaning. The same is the case with ethnography, where events are assimilated into a story. The form then, the generic type of the story, furnishes it with meaning. What is more, the ethnographer, even the self-reflexive kind, does not cease to be at the centre of the narrative as "the authentic knower," the mediator who "translates and interprets

44 Darlene M. Juschka, "The Writing of Ethnography: Magical Realism and Michael Taussig," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 5, no. 1 (2003): 84-105.

45 Ibid., 90.

46 This is Taussig's book: *The Magic of the State*.

47 Juschka, "The Writing of Ethnography: Magical Realism and Michael Taussig", 90.

48 Ibid., 91.

for the reader.⁴⁹ As a potential solution to this predicament of ethnography, Juschka proposes magical realism, a mode of writing that “blurs the line between the ‘real’ and the fantastic”⁵⁰ and complicates our understandings of time, reality, and space.⁵¹ Magical realist narratives, examined as a postcolonial response to colonial ways of thinking⁵² and linked to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze,⁵³ challenge the relations of centre and periphery, as well as those of cause and effect. Furthermore,

In magical realism, irony and tragedy operate as the face behind the mask of the comedy that underscores tragic futility. In this equation, the real is the colonialist overlay that imperils life and culture, while the fantastic is that which operates in direct antithesis to the European super-civilisation in an attempt to negotiate the persistence of colonial memory, in the hope of creating a future that neither represses the past nor is permanently mutilated by it.⁵⁴

That was more like it. With magical realism, I had a feeling of recognition. For in a sense, here all the threads could be brought together: a creative-critical practice advocated by Ståhl, by the portraiture of Lawrence-Lightfoot, and by Richardson’s invitation to a creative practice as we look multiple times at our subject through a crystal. Further inspired, this time by a work of conceptual art, Yoko Ono’s *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings*,⁵⁵ I composed three exercises/conceptual tasks motivated by my encounter with Zoe. These, as well as the short poems that appear in this text, I perceive more as exercises in creative-critical writing or exercises in hybridity and in looking again. I do not consider them as examples of magical realism or anything of the sort. They form part of this article because – whatever their level of correspondence – they are part of the same thinking process that slowly matured through my readings, as I was grappling

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 92.

51 Ibid.

52 Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

53 Eva Aldea, *Magical Realism and Deleuze: The Indiscernibility of Difference in Postcolonial Literature* (London and New York: Continuum Literary Studies, 2011)..

54 Juschka, “The Writing of Ethnography: Magical Realism and Michael Taussig”, 92.

55 Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970)..

with the question of writing in a creative-critical mode and with what the best way is for an ethnographer to do this. Their value does not lie in how fine they are, but rather in what I have learned by doing them and what others can learn by trying similar directions. As Richardson says, there is no “getting it right”⁵⁶ “only ‘getting it’ differently contoured and nuanced.”⁵⁷

To be executed by Zoe and her angels.

Exercise I

Theatre Piece for a Choir

Go from room to room in your apartment making a lot of noise and scream

1. in front of a small mirror,
2. in front of a big mirror,
3. in front of any other reflecting surface.

Exercise II

Sound Piece

Record the sound of the pills as they jump in their bottle.

Record the sound of coffee as you pour it in your cup.

Record the sound of boiling water until it all evaporates.

Exercise III

Collecting Piece

Go to a hospital waiting room and record the discussions of patients.

Learn them by heart.

Mix them with your own story.

Repeat them in your mind in different orders one afternoon.

56 Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 5th ed (London: Sage, 2018), 1415.

57 Ibid.

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Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Estonian Research Council (Grant 1481), by the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies), and by the Foundation for Education and European Culture.

M A R I A G I L U L L D E M O L I N S

A CRAVING FOR
POACHED PEAR

REVIEW:

Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism

Lauren Fournier

2021, The MIT Press.

308 pages

ISBN 9780262045568

In *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), scholar, curator, artist, and writer Lauren Fournier fulfils the promise of the title: to layout a wide-ranging understanding of autotheory not so much as a genre, but as an interdisciplinary, intersectional practice, an “impulse” to blend the “auto” with “theory.” Fournier has already published the article “Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice” (2018),¹ which pretty much established her as *the* expert on this (much hyped) phenomenon.

With this book, Fournier proposes a double gesture: to define and to expand. The introduction is a perfect, deep-diving, what-you-need-to-know, from historical overview² to the multidisciplinary definition she favours.³ She makes a very conscious point of giving credit to women and queer BIPOC (Black, indigenous people of colour) whose ground-breaking contributions have historically been overlooked in favour of white counterparts (she names, for instance, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Cherríe Moraga, Sylvia Wynter). The rest of the book covers different facets of this “autotheoretical impulse”: self-imaging, critique, citation, disclosure, and exposure.

The first chapter revels in Adrian Piper’s *Food for the Spirit* (1971), a performance piece that engages with Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. This is a brilliant (and brilliantly chosen) example that helps unfold the multidisciplinary potential of autotheory and solidly makes Fournier’s point (in more ways than one, Piper is, after all, a Black woman, too). The second chapter points a finger at the theoretical surge in art-schools-turned-universities (which seems an important lead in the rise of autotheory) and engages in a vaster sweep of examples, mentioning Chris Kraus but also visual artists engaging with – again – different media, from video to social media to industrial objects. The third chapter targets memoiristic approaches that weave in citations as an intrinsic part of describing, or understanding, being-in-the-world (Moyra Davey, Maggie Nelson, Joanna Walsh), with an essential Barthesian swerve, touching on queer and trans concerns, and potential issues of ethics and appropriation. Chapter four takes similar themes but applies them to visual art. Here Fournier highlights anew the political implications of citational and referential practices.

1 Fournier, Lauren. “Sick women, sad girls, and selfie theory: autotheory as contemporary feminist practice.” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 33, no. 3 (2018): 643-662.

2 Fournier comes across as especially sensitive to the American context from which she writes.

3 The term “autotheory” is most often associated to literary pieces.

Chapter five picks up the Chris Kraus thread in order to dive into the complications of exposing (and/or fictionalising) the self in feminist narratives (the personal is political), including a detour into cancel culture. The conclusion is particularly personal, mostly revolving around a university event with David Chariandy (a Black writer). Fournier uses this moment, and the interactions that subsequently transpired, as an opportunity to channel final reflections on class, race, and community.

Fournier is generous with her examples. She declares the choices “intuitive,” fruit of her own experiences. This seems not only valid, but exactly what this kind of research calls for. Fournier’s defence of autotheory as multidisciplinary is rather undeniable, yet I have found myself wondering whether some of the instances may feel like too much stretching of the autotheory label. Without a doubt, the author’s intent is to spark a bigger conversation, to make a radical proposal that other scholars can use as a base for further work. But I cannot help but wonder whether the stretch may distort the definition just as it launches (let us not forget that this is the very first book on autotheory as such). Is printing textual fragments on a vinyl floor autotheoretical? How about the mere mention of “theory” as a general term in a visual artwork, or of the names of canonical theorists?

Fournier also proposes that the book is, in itself, partly autotheoretical. There is an early passage in which she describes herself reading about narcissism in the British Library, then moving on to the Tate Modern, where she stumbles upon Piper’s work, and eventually ending (possibly my favourite image in the whole volume) being fed bites of Luce Irigaray’s poached pear...by Irigaray herself. It is utterly delightful in all its detail. Poached pears! Hand-fed! This whole sequence allows the reader two effects (or affects, even): on the one hand, the pleasure of savouring the anecdote, on the other, the freedom of some space (the more descriptive tone allows the reader to project their own thoughts, impressions, and conclusions). Other personal accounts, on the contrary, are more insightful in their content, but at the expense of revealing the author’s own positioning, directing the reader more explicitly: more telling than showing.

That said, one of the genuinely exciting things of witnessing the emergence of autotheory is to discover the myriad ways in which it can be applied and interpreted, seeing new ways that this “auto” voice presents itself and the materials with which it engages. In this sense, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice* is a great tool for discussion and exchange, and not simply a guide. It is a wonderfully rich source, and surely an essential contribution not only to those interested in autotheory: Many of the discussions in it are relevant to anyone engaging with wider concerns in contemporary art, writing, and criticism. I am very curious to see how this book will pave the way for others, as it is bound to do, feeding essential bites from its position as first of its kind.

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