

Articles

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‘You’re the least important person in the room and don’t forget it’

‘You’re the least important person in the room and don’t forget it’: The intimate relations of subjectivity and the illegitimate everyday

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Abstract

Collaging epistolary passage and theoretical discussion, this article both embodies and investigates the intimate, cerebral and emotional voice as a post-critical device and a politics of the personal-made-public. Forms of critical memoir and autotheory are examined as rhetorical forms where criticality is charged by correlation to one’s own life. First-person critique, or the ‘radically intimate’, is recognized as a post-critical turn and as a revisionist return to poststructuralist critiques of subjectivity and citational practices

of self-writing. A particular focus is this mode of enquiry applied to art writing and acting as a meta-critique of the conditions of creative practice. As a self-reflexive research methodology, it is argued that first-person observation, inflected by affect, intimacy and the quotidian, can be understood not only as a countercultural trend but as a radical intervention in the means, production and historiography of contemporary art, literature and its discourses.

Keywords

critical memoir

autotheory

radical intimacy

epistolary writing

art writing

post-criticism

After you moved to North America you wrote how you had realized so much of you is habit. You wrote that good therapeutic processes always support the breaking of the habitual. You were thinking that the habitual had to be reinvented. Reinvented, or perhaps resolved, a process warranting incremental adjustments in order to dampen the riot in your gut. This sense of revision and resolution is a form of optimism, a remedial fantasy that desire, experience, life might cohere into some greater, stable meaning. I live with the same temporal pressures you do and know that thinking about one thing in terms of another can either illuminate or obscure both. Or that perhaps thinking, and the unending emphasis on some problem or another, is part of the problem.

‘What is the alternative to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other?’ asks Jack Halberstam in the introduction to *The Queer Art of Failure*, stating that ‘this question announces a political project, begs for a grammar of possibility, [...] and expresses a basic desire to live life otherwise’ (Halberstam 2011: 2). This enterprise is not without its challenges.

When we spoke, we agreed not to feel anything, to choose gravity over disgrace. To learn to live *with* and not *for*. Where in fact my mind still raced with all the said and unsaid, everything done and undone. I wrote to you while on the Amtrak from Montréal to New York City. An archetypal scene already so familiar. At the border, the bus was stationary for over an hour and customs officers ceremoniously filed down the aisles, ‘Where are you going?’, ‘Where have you been?’, ‘What are you doing?’, ‘You got anything to declare?’.

‘You got anything to declare?’

We’re both going to fail, fail, fail each other. And ourselves too (Rankine 2015).

‘Sorry, I thought you were joking about being a coward’, you said, ‘you aren’t and I understand’.

You wrote to me again, this time about mistaken identity and Paul Auster. Our reacquaintings, invariably at critical junctures, act as markers. Your e-mail comes after a month of nothing, a habitual trigger message that is always in communion with the words of others. Always a vicarious and transitional act, relational and associative, of speaking through an objective other. You wrote that we are porous bodies, not cocooned brains. You wrote that neither a walk, or a talk, or a swim or a fucking horse ride is singly

enough to help us out. One must pass and repass through all of this in order to plough some furrows, grasp the discourse and find a new *grammar of possibility*.

‘I don’t care about your life’, poet and critic Jason Guriel titled an article written in 2016 for Canadian magazine, *The Walrus*. The article bemoans the first-person pronoun as a conspicuous ‘handy prop’ – a kind of structural conceit and a ‘selfie-stick’ aimed at the essayist (Guriel 2016). His account of a post-Internet surge in ‘confessional criticism’ claims that ‘relating works of art to one’s life, after all, is easy [as] no reference library is required’ (2016). In considering writers and critics who are ‘indecently self-interested [and] who can’t seem to keep themselves out of their sentences’, Guriel refers to a number of contemporary writers working in a manner combining lyricism and critique, autobiography and politics, memoir and theory (2016). Writing that not only foregrounds emotion but even indulges in it. *The shameless implacable ‘I’* (Didion 2006: 104). The public ‘I’ that can, apparently, only ever face inwards.

Heavy-hearted, lighthearted; you wrote that you found a petulant sense of self-importance a particular affliction of many people of our generation and shtick – that this position rests on the implied assumption that what we might be doing or thinking is of greater significance than anything or anyone else. Such accusations instrumentalize and mystify; they call for dutiful paid passage to the boundaries between intellectual and/or political project and subjective experience – a mode of enquiry that overlooks the remedial and denies thought’s intimate relation to life, instead presenting the belief that ‘others, any others, all others, are by definition more interesting [or important] than ourselves’ (Didion 2006: 104). ‘But my convictions and motivations are alarmingly contingent’, you confessed, ‘and I am often very unclear about what to do with my life’.

Uncertain. Difficult. Writing from the margins. A life without sufficient constraints produces aimlessness, alienation and boredom, you might well have said, forgetting that those who have travelled from the centre to the margin might voice an important anecdote full of radical possibilities of knowing and unknowing.

Writing until his death in 1932, Fernando Pessoa, in his self-proclaimed ‘factless autobiography’, admits ‘I write down what I feel in order to lower the fever of feeling’ (Pessoa 1998: 24). *The Book of Disquiet*, a memoir written over the course of Pessoa’s life and first published 47 years posthumously, foregrounds emotion and articulates a structure of feeling while at the same time reconciling the self-reflexivity and affects entangled with personal impact, historical context and political urgencies. Despite an apparent factless ease, Pessoa’s deeply *self-interested* story is not written with lack of critical concern. In fact, his work presents a model for poetics and critique that can be read throughout the histories of criticism and literature at large – a long lineage of writers of the personal performing the self in both heartfelt and paradoxical ways (e.g., artists and poets of The New York School, writers of New Journalism, the New Narrative writers – and as far back as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* and the Age of Sensibility). Their writing presents a model that organizes many feelings, binaries that interlace, each stimulating and moderating the other’s excesses. Intensities of joy and pain, longing and loss, ambivalence and determination, cruelty and compassion present a method for living arising from critique predicated on the present and on the quotidian. In an intergenerational scene of exchange, Pessoa’s work returns like a contemporary voice, speaking among friends, with many echoing his ‘fever of feeling’.

This practice of self-reflexive critique is not only deeply invested in the idea that criticism is social but it begs the question of *how* one might relate one's life to art and culture, alongside acknowledging the inexplicable links that a singular experience has to larger cultural and sociopolitical phenomena. How might the record of one's self and one's body disclose ways to reconcile the intellectual and the emotional, the public and the private, theory and the everyday with personal impact? As a discrete intervention into cultural and sociopolitical circumstances that threaten to engulf us, such writers might subversively oscillate between critic, artist and writer as a way of bringing theory into action and as an ahistorical critique of the conditions of creative practice and the too often limited figure attached to each position. It should be noted that those who occupy a liminal, or transdisciplinary, position between art and literature can have as many roots in the histories of personal narrative in literature as they do with the histories of art and criticism. When Frank O'Hara described the movement 'Personism' – a movement 'which nobody knows about [and was founded] after lunch [...] on August 27, 1959' – he defended writing that 'is at last between two persons instead of two pages' (O'Hara 1961). Michel Foucault's celebration of the 'citational' as an act of 'collect[ing] what one has managed to hear or read', a practice that recognizes the value of the 'already-said, by the recurrence of discourse', importantly states that we come to knowledge episodically that 'the writer constitutes his own identity through this recollection of things said' (Foucault 2006: 211–13). This communication, this citational and perhaps vernacular form of self-writing, is very different from Guriel's diminishingly labelled 'confessionalism', which instead is understood to be fraught with shame and the unburdening of something that is private in a plea for forgiveness. Writing of her

grievance and disaffection in the 1970s, Joan Didion's mode of New Journalism illustrates a sense of being awash with political unrest in the wake of catastrophic cultural change – anxieties that are still ours now. As contemporary writers depict physical, cognitive and political dissonance and demand for social change, writing continues to evolve as a fundamental method of political engagement.

So who, then, gets the privilege to speak? And with what language? Chris Kraus' novel *I Love Dick*, first published by Semiotext(e) in 1997, chronicles Kraus' and her then-husband Sylvère Lotringer's cerebral and emotional *ménage à trois* of letter writing in pursuit of the cultural theorist and third party in their narrative fantasy, Dick Hebdige. When Dick fails to respond, Kraus continues the project alone, finding an epistolary way into writing by addressing her autobiographical fiction and critical essaying to an existent person but one who more importantly operates as a transitional object. In letters remaining unsent for a sustained period, Kraus writes 'if I could love you consciously, take an experience that was so completely female and subject it to an abstract analytic system, then perhaps I have a chance of understanding something and could go on living' (Kraus et al. 2006: 235–36). Earlier she writes that emotion is 'just so terrifying the world refuses to believe it can be pursued as a discipline, as a form' (2006: 197). Kraus' project arguably transforms the pain of obsessive and unrequited love into a *new form of philosophy* where the self and the body, examined alongside the social apparatuses that enable and limit it, occupy an inferential critical space (Myles in Kraus et al. 2006: 15).

The precarious, the uncertain, the unconfirmed, the somewhat illegitimate knowledge uncovered through informal letters, photographs, social events and contracts effect how creativity is understood, how it is managed and eventually historicized. As

Michael Baxandall describes in *Patterns of Intention*, the inferential critic deduces meaning not only from the object(s) but from its origins and development, a process that is not only relational but sociable (Baxandall 1987: 137). *I Love Dick* is a crucial example of writing (and distribution) situated within so-called ‘real life’ and the dynamic field of social relations. McKenzie Wark records in his Afterword for Kraus’ novel *Torpor* that ‘in writing about the work of others we usually write something about our own’ (Wark in Kraus 2015: 298). This sense of self and of social capital – accounting for friendship, career, gossip and community relations – is also resounded in Kraus’ critical essay ‘Sentimental Bitch’ (2002). Writing about Andrea Bowers’ exhibition *From Mouth To Ear*, shown in Los Angeles in 2002 – which she describes as a ‘self-portrait fashioned from a Deleuzean sense of self’ – Kraus maintains the belief ‘that who you are is never any more or less than who you love, than who has made you larger’ (Kraus 2004: 197). Kraus’ Native Agents series, initiated at Semiotext(e) in the late 1980s, demonstrates her worthy desire to create a space for publication, distribution and circulation of radical, personal, feminist narratives, works by her, at that time, underappreciated and largely unread friends or colleagues such as Eileen Myles, Cookie Mueller and Lynne Tillman. Lois Klassen, in her 2015 *Fillip* article ‘Arriving at nowhere’ rightly insists that Kraus’ entire writing and editorial project was developed from a necessity of performing a kind of ‘public naming’ of the subjectivities, including her own and those of other women writers, who were fated to be least described and published (Klassen 2015). In its realization, the space of the collectively imagined and desired is a site that is politically active where the ‘writers who can’t seem to keep themselves out of their sentences’ signal no new crisis in criticism but instead a new grammar of possibility or set of values.

Both literary and social, and combining the emotional intimacy of friendship with the intellectual commitment of critical theory, such practices offer a model of inferential criticism that is full of radical possibilities and engages in social ecology and a kind of activism. The crux here is that words too are brimming with inferences and references and, as Maggie Nelson writes, they ‘change depending on who speaks them’ (Nelson 2015: 8). It is true that linguistics tells us that the sign is always half someone else’s, or as Gavin Butt claims in discussing the ‘crisis of contemporary criticism’ and the significance of performativity, gossip and illegitimate knowledge, they are held within ‘a viral economy of communication that destabilises the authoritative truth of the documents with which [...] history is written’ (Butt 2004: 15). Like most historiographies, the truths are mostly misrecognized, ill-reasoned, ill-perceived feelings-made-fact. Or we might say that the self-reflexive and viral forms of inferential criticism could performatively cause things to come into existence.

From different perspectives and in different contexts, each of Kraus’ books forefronts a critical gaze that is turned as much in on itself as the world and composes a self-portrait infused with a recurring affective consciousness alongside versions of Kraus and her lovers and friends. In an intertextual corporeal game of their own, ‘her narratives’, writes Leslie Jamison, ‘bleed and echo, texts wink at one another across their separate spines’ (Jamison 2015). Kraus’ novels present tenuously connected visions of intimate scenes that in their partial nature play on the reader’s voyeuristic desire for autobiographical access and to learn about the private lives of the characters represented – characters who happen to be highly visible intellectuals. This creative practice – not to delimit reading Kraus’ work as vulnerability and self-exposure as narcissistic acts of

unmediated 'confession' (a descriptor she has consciously resisted), not only courts potential disdain but raises discussions of ethics and epistemology.

In his analysis of confession and its history, Michel Foucault suggests that the 'internal ruse' of confession is the misguided belief that a decision in favour of honest speech is an expression of freedom (Foucault 2000: 201). Confession, we are reminded, is an act of shame, guilt-laced and often in appeal for absolution. Kraus supports this with the claim that confession 'pursues [a] cheaply cathartic agenda (will everything "change" once the confession is made? Doubtful [...])', she writes in her essay 'Stick to the Facts' (Kraus 2008). In *Aliens & Anorexia*, she laments that 'women have been denied all access to the a-personal' and that it seems that the 'straight female "I" can only be narcissistic, confidential, confessional, [that it's] impossible to conceive a female life might extend outside itself' (Kraus et al. 2006: 197). In a reconsideration of the feminist axiom 'the personal is political', Kraus argues to Jamison, 'life is not personal' (Kraus 2015).

'I would like to present this [story] as an exemplary case', writes Peter Handke in *A Sorrow beyond Dreams*, his semi-autobiographical novella first published in 1972 (Handke and ke 2012: 5). Impulsively recounting the suicide of his mother, Handke strives to get both himself and his mother *out* of the story. First appearing as a process of abstraction and a resistance to emotionalism, Handke's 'confessional' first person is a somewhat muted apersonal, not an exposition of the soul of a novelistic character or autobiographical self. Written in quotes and at an exhausting distance, his critical memoir makes repeated attempt to theorize his mother's life and to consider her singular existence in a sociopolitical context, so that his words will be applicable to not only his

mother but also to ‘the biography of a woman with my mother’s particular life’ (2012: 29–30). ‘The essential is to avoid mere quotations’, Handke expands,

even when sentences look quoted, they must never allow one to forget that they deal with someone who to my mind at least is distinct. Only then, only if a sentence is firmly and circumspectly centred on my personal or, if you will, private subject, do I feel I can use it.

(2012: 29–30)

In writing the story of his mother, ‘second in his own interest’, and lastly ‘like an outside investigator [...]’, Handke hoped to present an ‘exemplary case’ (2012: 30). His memoir is at once a reconciliation tool for the self and all of its iterations; a method of lived experience as a form of research; and also a critique – a critique of the world as *he* might see it and one in which we, as readers, are invited to participate.

What might we be able to offer each other that we are not able to offer ourselves? The performative act of critical memoir participates in its own definition, allowing the work to sustain a meditation on its own intervention as both an aesthetic and political practice. It is an aesthetics of existence linked to an ethics of existence – an imagined and reimagined proposal that all sorts of experience hold universal significance and that ‘there can be no good politics, no flourishing, without *care of the self*’ (Joy 2015, emphasis added). Asking if there can be a just world, in a lecture entitled ‘Can there be a feminist world?’ (2015), literary theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Spivak states that ‘when we think of the ethical in a human being in general, we think of being directed toward the other rather than toward the self. It is not necessarily always doing good. [...] This creates a particular problem for us, as concerned women’, she tells us, ‘because women [...] are socially obliged to care for others. Socially obliged. In the ethical,

therefore, we have to learn to work within this contradiction' (Spivak 2015). And in discussing the practice of subjective writing, Joan Didion notes that this 'is a difficult point to admit', she says, '[we are] taught to be diffident, just this side of self-effacing, [...] to affect absorption in others [rather than] dwell upon the self' (Didion 2006: 104). *You're the least important person in the room and don't forget it* (2006: 104). She continues, 'for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the impeccable "I"' (2006: 104). Here, we are reminded of Foucault's legacy of an 'aesthetics of existence', tracing back to his analysis of the techniques of the self and the *souci de soi* (care of the self) (Foucault 2000: 261). His theory provides an ever-widening scope for questions about the material, the form, life or its subjects as a work of art. 'Thought on thought', Foucault suggested, 'might open us to certain freedoms and the invention of *a manner of being that is still improbable*' (Foucault 2000: 137, emphasis added). It is therefore possible that as we speak of our own experiences, we inferentially map and transform our own conditions or grammar of possibility. Furthermore, we can understand the private-made-public as an ethics of attentive research and a discursive form of referencing.

Analysing vulnerability is not the same as enacting it, and reading fragility is not the same as speaking it, as writing it. Subjectivity too is keenly relational, we perform who we are through the multitude of encounters that assail us and in an exchange that is about becoming or unbecoming, about emotions replacing other emotions, our stories navigate what is overwhelming. 'A repository of inner self-relation', philosopher and social theorist Gillian Rose tells us 'the discovery, simultaneous with the suddenly sculpted and composed words, of distance from and deviousness towards myself as well

as others' (Rose 1995 35). The author is complicit, is vulnerable and has relinquished a safe position. Something is at risk: '[we] may be merciful [or we] may be merciless' (Rose 1997: 55). 'How does one submit to falling forever, to going to pieces?' asks Maggie Nelson (Nelson 2015: 84).

Maggie Nelson's hugely celebrated work of memoir and critical theory, *The Argonauts* (2015), deftly moves between perception and idea, quotation and action, in examination of family-making and academic life. Her critical memoir considers what it means to assume the role of an artist and a scholar and what it means to be perceived to submit to the normative while drafting unconventional taken directly from her life and body's transformations. Like Chris Kraus, her work presents not a privatized confessional space but rather a continuum between criticism and autobiography. Early in the book, Nelson details a seminar she attended at The City University of New York in October 1998 where Jane Gallop had been invited to present new work and Rosalind Krauss to respond. Recounted is Jane Gallop's presentation of a series of photographs taken by her husband, Dick Blau (now a long-time collaborator), which captured Gallop with their baby boy; in the bathtub, by a lake, lounging on the sofa, naked. Gallop is described as presenting the work-in-progress which she later went on to publish as *Living with His Camera* (2003), a project addressing photography from the standpoint of the photographed subject coupled with the subjective position of being a mother. Nelson writes, 'another position generally assumed to be', and she remembers Gallop's words, 'troublingly personal, anecdotal, self-concerned' (Nelson 2015: 40). *Living with His Camera* later goes on to intersect Blau's images with intimate readings of what it means to be a domestic partner, mother and photographic subject. Allying with Roland Barthes,

Gallop claims her writing to also ‘combine intellectual work with self-reflection, theory with memoir’ (Gallop and Blau 2003: 27).

‘It was Krauss’ turn’, writes Nelson, ‘she scooted her chair up to the table and shuffled her papers. She was Gallop’s inverse – sharp face, classy in a silk scarf, Ivy League, Upper East Side way. [...] She started by saying how important Gallop’s daring and thorough work on Lacan had been’, Nelson continues, ‘this praise went on for some time. Then, theatrically, she swerved. “The importance of this early work is why it is so deeply disturbing to behold the mediocrity, naïveté, and soft-mindedness of the work Gallop has presented to us today”’. Nelson describes a thickening of the room as Krauss dismembered Gallop for ‘taking her own personal situation as subject matter’. ‘The tacit undercurrent of her argument’, Nelson advises, ‘was that Gallop’s maternity had rotted her mind – besotted it with the narcissism that makes one think that an utterly ordinary experience shared by countless others is somehow unique, or uniquely interesting’ (Nelson 2015: 40).

So, returning to Foucault’s question, what understanding of aesthetics is required as a basis for making life a work of art? ‘Couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art?’ he asks, ‘why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our lives?’ (Foucault 2006: 261). The art of living, or the ‘aesthetics of existence’, conceives art as esoteric knowledge, entailing a whole set of practices, as well as various modes and purposes of productivity. Such intimacy can be understood not as ‘soft-mindedness’ but a whole set of strong-minded political and social practices that assert argument, however loose the form, however close to real life (2006: 261). As Kraus writes in *Torpor*, ‘[...] for the first time it occurred to her that perhaps the only thing she had to offer was her specificity’

(Kraus 2015: 110). Starting with the life she knew best, by writing to *Dick*, Kraus offered her life as a case study and her personal experience is an example of socially entrenched problems. As works of institutional critique, both *I Love Dick* and *The Argonauts* announce the structures, hierarchies and blind spots that continually limit what is possible.

To study the intimate is not always to work in opposition to structures of dominance and terms of the dichotomy between the personal and the political, the scholarly and the subjective. But instead, to relocate the conditions of possibility and relations of production – production of a provocative mode of creative and critical inquiry, which has, and continues to be, instrumental in self-organized alternative politics. This gives way to an understanding of a selfhood emergent through cultural practice. It might not be stable, and it exists because of a multiplicity of manufactures of coherent and incoherent self-images. It changes state in different situations, and the degree and relations of its determinacy are fluid. ‘If one wants a new way of thinking, living, writing, etc. that isn’t founded on the exclusion or exploitation of others’, replies Maggie Nelson in an interview with Sarah Nicole Prickett, ‘one has to understand how the system comes to be, how it works, how one has been worked over by it, and how one has worked it’ (Nelson 2015).

I am reminded of how you once wrote that you fastidiously shirk power if it requires a defilement of others. How you also said that while you have never outright *lied*, that, in holding on to absolute power as well as absolute vulnerability, you might have employed a tone of *faux* sincerity. ‘You speak the language the system will recognize’, you said. You went on to state that while you rejected the premises of the

dichotomy, you were unable to offer a workable alternative. But it is perhaps a change in how one wills. In the same interview Nelson speaks of the ‘dichotomy that a lot of people are compelled by, [...] between the so-called personal and the so-called cerebral or critical – to me it’s just one flow’, she says (2015).

Recreating, cleaning out, starting over, again. The rapidly vanishing and the hastily erected. Not long after you moved you said that despite the good feelings of a new sense of possibility, you needed the institute of old friends and the sense of the historic to remind you of who you are, to see how you see the world. You told me this but your sense of place growing more and more distant was palpable, now not feeling at home in either *before* or *after*. It is not that you have found a sense of self in the nomadic, more like you have been left, and left to inexpressibly unravel.

‘To try to give testimony to lived experience is the most interesting language or way of thinking that I could find’, Maggie Nelson says in an interview for *Vice Magazine*. She continues, ‘to demonstrate thinking. You have to write what you have to write’ (Nelson 2015). To search out the fact of feeling and transcribe the everyday, its interrelated and inferential contexts and enmeshed reference library, collapses the distinction between the literary page and social exchange, between writing and living, between the public and the private, between the autobiographical and the theoretical or the abstract. Yet despite this dialogic ordering of signs, this fabric of writing has long been discredited. In *The Desire of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, New York School poet Bernadette Mayer writes, ‘someone once said to me I wanted to write without writing anything so it was just an idea, it was someone who can’t stand to sit still for it’ (Mayer 2001: 32) and Nelson reminds us of Victor Howes’ criticism of Anne Sexton’s

writing, complaining that ‘the confessional mode reveals that people with nothing to hide usually have little to confess’ (Howes cited in Nelson 2011: 119). The dismissal of one’s self as a signifying body and accusation of not being able to ‘sit still’ for the labour of writing evokes a related set of questions about gender, interpretation, value and authority. The first thing to be contested is the assumption of exclusive points of reference, the ivory tower cut off from everyday lived experience. ‘Life is not personal’, Kraus tells us, if this is so then there is no beautiful life of the mind only and there is no such thing as a private language, ‘I think it might be worth trying to make one’, writes Mayer (Mayer 1999: 68).

The testimony to lived experience and the resulting admittance of ‘you have to write what you have to write’ is representative of the resurgent interest in contingency, the everyday and the autobiographical that Jason Guriel identifies with his avowed irritability towards writers who speak *too* much – those *sentimental truthtelling fuckups* – like the words that matter least are the ones that *should not* get said (Notley 1980: 82). Yet a writer and an artist in the mood to share is not a new condition. Writing by women has routinely been read and received with very distinct assumptions and anxieties concerning radical subjectivity and verbal excess as challenges to literature, to art and to criticism. Writing the personal, the intimate, the quotidian, the domestic and the particular has long been a strategy in the dismantling of patriarchal ideologies and discourse and performs models for social reform. The ‘confessional criticism’, or the instrumentalized self-disclosure, that Guriel and Howes identify is part of a long chronology of provocation in writing as a site for recording subjective experience, transgression, emancipation, resistance and to complicate ideas about gender. A whole

new language has always been a temptation. And so the second thing to contest is the tired essentialist equation that denigrates and pathologizes women as matter, as detail, and men as form, as generality, and how this translates to the assumption that women write intimate liquid language that leaks and is punitory, emotional, dangerous and redundant and men write reasoned language that is epic, pragmatic, universal and significant, often their sentimentality going unrecognized as such. The phobia of saying too much, of wanting too much, of slipping between public and private realms and of transgressing ideologies of reason is often bound to paranoia regarding the rapacious desires, the labour and the leakages of the female body. It also casts the discussion of what women's writing might be in a negative light, restricting it to questions of content and tone, rather than form and language.

In 1994, Catherine Clément published *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, twenty years after the introduction of the French theory of *écriture féminine*. This work, an extension of the feminist urgency and political conviction privileging the female body and female difference in language and text, concerns forms of writing that arrive from an eclipse of thought and at, or rather *on*, the limits of control, where, at the edge of weakness, the body literally convulses or shuts down. Clément borrows the term *syncope* from music theory to advocate for a harmonious and productive discord where an 'absence of the self, [...] a cerebral eclipse' might allow for an interval, a new departure or even social change (Clément and O'Driscoll 1994: 1). This scenario, Clément describes, is both romantic and clinical and is typically diagnosed as an adverse women's condition. She who cannot be silenced because of what her body is doing, she who cannot sit still for the labour of writing is illegitimate:

[...] it is she who sinks down, dress spreading out like a flower, fainting, before a public that hurries forward; arms reach out, carry the unresisting body [...] People slap her, make her sniff salts. When she comes to, her first words will be, 'Where am I?' And because she has come to, 'come back', no one thinks to ask where she has been. The real question would be, rather, 'Where was I?' But no, when one returns from syncope it is the real world that suddenly looks strange.

(Clement and O'Driscoll 1994: 1)

The recuperative and citational act of self-writing, concerned with writing the backstory of history and unveiling the ways in which power relations are played out, is characteristic of *écriture féminine*'s 'nerve-based' approach to language (Elkin 2013: 141). Syncope is an acceleration, a skipped beat, an illegitimate epistemological rupture that comes in a flash – perhaps even a phenomena of the quotidian. This form of reverie, as it is presented by Clément, is an enlightening space of telepathic dissonance acting as a resistance to the technologies of capital and patterns of patriarchy that colonize reality. As an anecdotal poetics, the syncope breaks the duality of mind and body, and as memory, reality and fantasy blur, suggests how we might tell our stories and histories differently. The legitimates and illegitimates living alongside one another – what we might know to know and what we might know to feel. Much like gossip, this telepathic phenomenon of the quotidian creates a kind of phantasmal voice network and a sense of community – i.e. one woman to another, one writer to another – it also leads to an acknowledgement of the multiple within us.

And so the reprisal of personal writing (a resurgence of confessional self-writing to which Guriel refers) demonstrates a renewed depiction of feelings of political dissent and shattering cultural unrest – writing that expresses critiques of ideology and the hope for another future. Writing that signals that relations of power, and how they play out, is

still very uncertain. As an act of resistance, writing the personal offers the potential to retool critical practice – ‘remember what it was to be me’, writes Didion, ‘that is always the point’ (Didion 2006: 104).

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