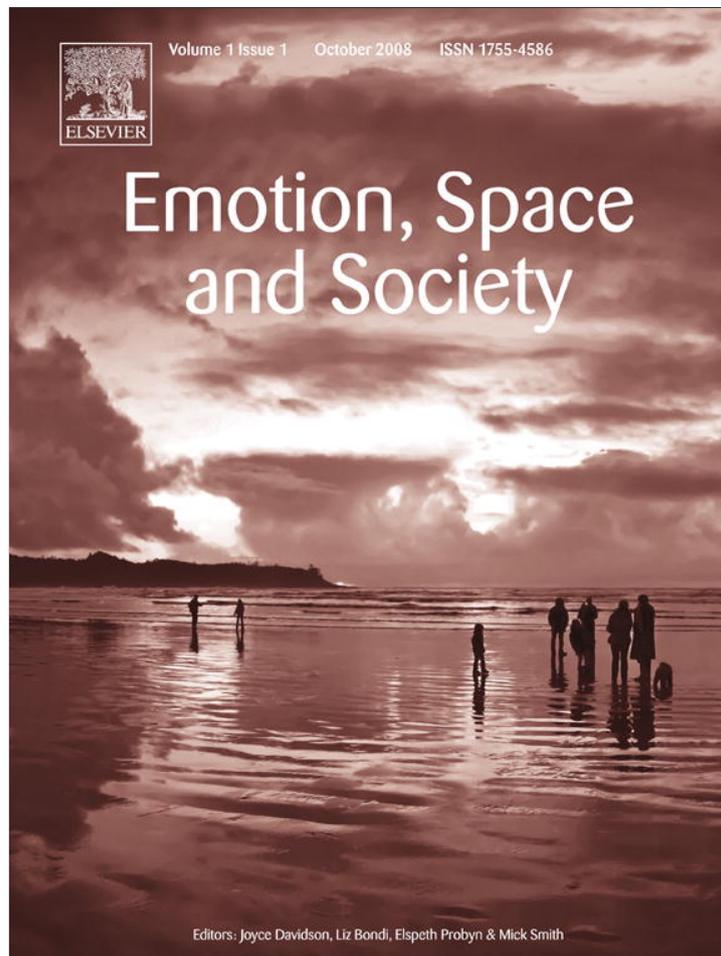


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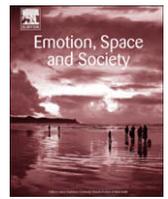
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## Thinking about feeling historical

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## ABSTRACT

This essay looks at the waning of melodramatic event genres in contemporary attempts to think historical experience. It telegraphs this engagement in four passages that pursue how to write the history of the present under conditions of crisis within the ordinary: in the first instance, AIDS/IRAQ are the goads, in the second, a more generalized but not apolitical atmosphere where the contemporary is encountered not as trauma but flatness.

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“These are not ordinary times.”<sup>1</sup>

If this essay were a polemic, it would argue that our current view of the communication of affect and emotion is too often simply mimetic and literalizing, seeing their transmission as performative rather than as an opening to all sorts of consequences, including none at all. It would aim to counter the unfortunate tendency in much contemporary affect theory to elide the difference between the structure of an affect and the experience we associate with a typical emotional event.

If one determines that an event or a relation is traumatic—that is, endowed with the capacity to produce trauma—does it follow that it communicates trauma to anyone who encounters it? If one determines that an event or a relation is shameful, must it produce shame in the subjects it impacts? Is the absence of this transmission a sign of some distorting or unethical defense? Is the presence of this transmission evidence that a subject or a society knows itself profoundly? Of course not. To impute a mirroring relation between affective activity and emotional states under-describes the incoherence of subjects—their capacity to hold irreconcilable attachments and investments, the complexity of motives for disavowal and defense—and the work of the normative in apprehending, sensing, tracking, and being with, the event.

So, where trauma and shame are concerned, many states can be engendered when the elastic snaps back on the subject who no

longer finds traction in the ways of being that had provided continuity and optimism for her (that’s the *structure*). Maybe the subject stops, just to let things sink in. Or to query: “What just happened?” Maybe the event disorganizes her, which means that she may feel strongly or messy or distractedly about it. The structure of an affect has no inevitable relation to the penumbra of emotions that may cluster in the wake of its activity, nor should it. To adapt Jean-Luc Nancy’s version of love: I may desire to break my own heart to become open to your capacity to repair it to a state better than what it was when I met you. But as I experience that relation, I may sense it as love, desperation, bitterness, ambivalence, a drive to competence, anxiety, spaciness, and/or simply as a pressure in my body that I need to discharge.<sup>2</sup>

What follows is another way of tracking affective intensities politically without presuming their status as dramatic or, indeed, as events. It imagines the affectivity of the social in registers alongside melodrama: it rethinks the sensing of history, and of the historic.

It is 1988. Essex Hemphill faces Marlon Riggs’ camera and recites: “Now we think/as we fuck.”<sup>3</sup> It is 2005. George Bush faces the camera that records his news conference and blurts: “I think about Iraq every day.”<sup>4</sup> In these phrases, both men link thinking to being in the “now,” the ongoing present. A situation has forced

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Shattered Love*, In *The Inoperative Community*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, pp. 82–109.

<sup>3</sup> The poem he reads is a slightly altered version of “XIII,” the eighth book of Essex Hemphill, *Conditions*. BeBop Books, Washington, DC, 1986, n.p. The film is *Tongues Untied* (dir. Marlon Riggs, 1988). Hemphill died of complications from AIDS in 1995.

<sup>4</sup> George W. Bush said, “I think about Iraq every day,” on 20 June 2005. The transcript is available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/06/20050620-19.html>.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Rich, *It’s the Economic Stupidity, Stupid*. New York Times 20 July 2008. At <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/20/opinion/20rich.html?hp> (accessed 31 July 2008).

them to think. A situation has changed the ordinary into something they can no longer presume. The police conventionally say: “We have a situation here.” A situation is a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amidst the usual activity of life.

But, for these men, it is more than that. This disturbed time is a *historical* present and not just everydayness because the atmosphere suggests a shift of historic proportions in the terms and processes of the conditions of continuity of life.<sup>5</sup> Norms and intuitions suddenly feel off: a sensed perturbation of world-shaping dimensions impels recasting the projected impact of small and large gestures, noticings, impulses, moments. The reinvention of life from disturbance reemerges in cadences, rhythms, the smallest predictables.<sup>6</sup> To change one's intuition about it all is to challenge the habituated processing of affective responses to what one encounters in the world.<sup>7</sup> In this kind of situation a process will eventually appear monumentally as form—as episode, event, or epoch. How that happens, though, will be determined processually, by what people do to reshape themselves and it while living in the stretched out “now” that is at once intimate and estranged.<sup>8</sup>

You may find my coupling of these two thinking men a bit perverse, and it is, to put it mildly: one has been visited by death's imminence from within a community that includes himself, while the other speaks from a situation he created where the deaths he faces are the deaths of others whom he does not know. Hemphill's HIV-shaped community has to reinvent the ordinariness of its appetitive and intimate practices; Bush is scrabbling to recalculate the war by salvaging the emotional validity of a defrocked strategy. But in this present, both face the loss of the freedom to be unconscious about the internal limits to their sovereignty.

Being forced to think these things (fucking, Iraq) as part of an unfolding historic moment exemplifies the affective experience not

of a break or a traumatic present, but of crisis lived within ordinariness.<sup>9</sup> Amidst the rise and fall of quotidian intensities a situation arises that provokes the need to think and adjust, to slow things down and to gather things up, to find things out and to wonder and ponder. What's going on? As Kathleen Stewart would phrase it, why do things feel on the verge—of *something* (dissolving, snapping, wearing out, overwhelming, underwhelming, or just unpredictably different)?<sup>10</sup>

To think is not especially joyful or rational here, therefore. The ideation to which the men refer is unwanted, after all: I (must) think about Iraq, we (must) think as we fuck. Or else. Or else, what? Both speakers presume that their audience knows the fatal stakes. They assume that they are amplifying something about the collective condition: “Black men loving black men is a revolutionary act”; “They hate us for our freedoms.” Even the political register here, under the pressure of a destabilized historical present, reorganizes the relation of affect and feeling to knowledge about living. They are assuming that it matters to all of us, the public addressed by the phrase, to have fidelity to the event of being forced into thought about it. To think emerges not just as cognitive response in general or the responsibility of special people but as a general opening for cultivating attentiveness and an ethics of mindfulness for a public intimate because they're experiencing together a shift in the atmosphere.

The event expressed by the two speakers is, then, not the event of thinking as such. In this kind of case, to think is primarily formal, an interruption. Thinking interrupts the flow of consciousness with a new demand for scanning and focus, not for any particular kind of cognitive processing. We are directed to see not an event but an emergent historical environment that can now be sensed atmospherically, collectively.<sup>11</sup> To be forced into thought this way is to begin to formulate the event of feeling historical in the present.<sup>12</sup>

This may suggest that the default or unforced state would be *not thinking*: but “not thinking” is not the opposite of thinking. It is true that under the pressure of an intensified, elongated present moment where affective, experiential and empirical knowledge norms seem in disarray there develop states of sociopathic disavowal and ordinary compartmentalization. See the sub-prime banking or “climate change” crises, for example. See systemic racialized, gendered, sexual and regional class inequalities whose evidence in ordinary subjectivity shifts between foreground and

<sup>5</sup> This essay distills claims from my forthcoming *Cruel Optimism*, whose focus is on redacting the historical present through proprioceptive shifts, or the rehabilitation of the lived sensorium (see footnote 7 as well). Teresa Brennan's work aids in this project by thinking of the activity of affect, always in the present, as producing discernment of atmospheres, the scenes one walks into and responds to, feels out, and judges. See Introduction, *The Transmission of Affect*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2004, pp. 1–23.

<sup>6</sup> This is more or less Sigmund Freud's argument in *The economic problem of masochism*, in: James Strachey (Trans. and Ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 19 (1923–1925). Hogarth Press, London, 1961, p. 160.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* deems intuition the work of memory that shapes the present. In the model I'm putting forth intuition is the subject's habituated affective activity, the sensorium trained to apperceive the historical in the present by a whole range of encounters and knowledges, not just memory. The memory/knowledge distinction could use a lot of work where affects and emotions are the scene of tracking the subject's feeling out of the historical. See Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, translated by N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. Zone Books, New York, 1991, especially pp. 66, 182–183.

<sup>8</sup> Some elaboration of this sentence's terms might be useful. “The stretched out now” merges an intensified present with senses of the recent past and near future: the temporal compartmentalizations of an ordinariness that can be broadly taken for granted are themselves suspended when the historic(al) sense is forced to apprehend itself. “Crisis ordinariness” is my preferred way of talking about traumas of the social that are lived through collectively and that transform the sensorium to a heightened perceptiveness about the unfolding of the historical, and sometimes historic, moment (and sometimes publics organized around those senses, when experienced collectively). See Lauren Berlant, 2007. *Slow Death* (sovereignty, obesity, lateral agency). *Critical Inquiry* Summer, 754–780. Tom Dumm's concept of the ordinary is sympathetic to mine, insofar as it is a domain that absorbs a variety of processes and happenings, but he draws a more stark distinction between the ordinary and the event than I do here, as I am seeing the process of eventization as that which shapes part of the consciousness of what's durable (predictable, reliable, tractable) about life in the ordinary. See throughout Tom Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary*. New York University Press, New York, 1999, especially pp. 10–31.

<sup>9</sup> These meditations on eventization and the historical sense respond to and engage without occupying in orthodox fashion either the Deleuzian model of event (in *The Logic of Sense and The Fold*), which (briefly) stretches the past into the future in the process of becoming, eliding the present; or Alain Badiou's model, throughout his work, in which the event forces a shift in the ethical subject's situation, or practice of inhabiting an ongoing present. Compare, for example, Deleuze, 1969. *The Logic of Sense*. Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 40–41 to Badiou, 2001. *The Ethic of truths*, in: P. Hallward (Trans. 1998), *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Verso, London, 2001, pp. 40–57. In my version, a situation occurs that becomes event as it becomes form, in the ongoing present out of which are refracted near pasts and near futures. These distinctions feel merely technical sometimes, but sometimes they matter, as the question of surviving—not taking for granted—the present intensifies.

<sup>10</sup> On everyday attentiveness as a scene of living, see Kathleen Stewart, 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC. On “something” as a placeholder term for the historical present tending toward crisis, see Lauren Berlant, 1994. 68 or something. *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1), 124–155.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Taussig, 1991. *The Nervous System*. Routledge, London and New York, 1991.

<sup>12</sup> When a rise in the sense of a shared collective atmosphere results from an occurrence, feeling historical may rhyme with feeling historic. But what we're witnessing here is what happens when a situation opens out problems in how to live that reveal a loss of trust in the historical future, threats to the sense of ongoingness in the durational present, and increased opacity within ordinary life. Life itself does not provide a ground for trust or solidarity but the sense of a shared affective management crisis does confirm belonging to a disturbed field, rather than a normative world.

background. Being overwhelmed by knowledge and life produces all kinds of neutralizing affect management—coasting, skimming, browsing, distraction, apathy, coolness, counter-absorption, assessments of scale, picking one's fights, and so on.

Indeed, most of social life happens in such modes of lower case drama, as we follow out pulsations of habituated patterning that make possible getting through the day (the relationships, the job, the life) while the brain chatters on, assessing things in focused and unfocused ways. People are, of course, always thinking, in the sense of making sense of things, when they apprehend what fluctuates without challenging very much the procedures of living. But they are not thinking in the precise sense implied by our exemplary men, Hemphill and Bush.

Hemphill and Bush are not just thinking, but *stopping to think*. When these speakers intuit the present moment in proximity to a word like *think*, they denote not a stream of perceptions, flaneur-like collections, or the activity of a mental intestine of sorts, but an idiomatic shift. Under duress from changes in the conditions of life, their thinking jams the machinery that makes the ordinary appear as a flow that we shape mildly, often absentmindedly, which is not the same thing as thoughtlessly. In situations like the ones on which they dilate, to think is precisely to begin to develop an architecture for apprehending the perturbed world with all of the kinds of knowing to which one has access, from the neuro-affective to the rationally processed. Amidst this process of recalibrating intuitions about the intensified present, emotion and affect are not more telling than cognitive processing: in reassessing the conditions of ongoingness, the thinkers involve all possible knowledge, however incommensurate the idiom or source.

To be more concrete, in the conjuncture of these two statements to think is to point to a forced interruption of the dreamy activity of sex-in-progress and the post-intentionality of a war once set in motion. It is to confront the physics of eventalization, Foucault's term for the becoming-overfixed of historical process.<sup>13</sup> Such interruption slows and makes more reflexive the activity of the nervous system that perpetuates itself endlessly in reciprocal activity with the world; most importantly, though, it counters the intuitive sense that the world proceeds independently of the human activity that makes it.

But when I think about Iraq, when we think as we fuck, when we stop and think, those things seen historically do not stop. They keep going. Stopping to think puts on minor breaks, making alternative agency and affectivity imaginable but not yet achieved within the shared world of the present that is in intensified suspension. To our case study men, to think is a thing of necessity, ethics, and slight optimism: in the near future that's just a step ahead of the right now, stopping to think about fucking and war might shift the shape of something definitive that seems pretty imminent.

Hemphill:

Now we think  
as we fuck  
this nut  
might kill us.  
There might be  
a pin-sized hole  
in the condom.  
A lethal leak.

We stop kissing  
tall dark strangers,  
sucking mustaches,  
putting lips  
tongues  
everywhere.  
We return to pictures.  
Telephones.  
Toys.  
Recent Lovers.  
Private Lives.

Now we think  
as we fuck  
this nut might kill.  
This kiss could turn  
to stone.

Bush:

I think about Iraq every day – every single day – because I understand we have troops in harm's way, and I understand how dangerous it is there. And the reason it's dangerous is because there's these cold-blooded killers that will kill Americans or kill innocent Iraqis in order to try to drive us out of Iraq. ... I think about this every day, every single day, and will continue thinking about it, because I understand we've got kids in harm's way. And I worry about their families; and I obviously, any time there's a death, I grieve. But I want those families to know, one, we're not going to leave them – not going to allow their mission to go in vain; and, two, we will complete the mission and the world will be better off for it.

Thinking under the pressure to respond publicly to death not desperately but with an attachment to life also sums up what these men have in common. Here, to think is to figure out how to live in a heterotopic now that's affectively sensed, amassed in a scene that they are already living as a new ordinariness that requires a new realism. We sense the intensity of the pressure to improvise a new intuition about how to live in the historical present, to move affect and the political away from their conventional relation—for similar and different reasons.

The situation induces a focus on kisses and kinship: “We return to ... Private Lives”; “and I worry about their families.” It reminds us that the affective turn emerges within the long neoliberal moment of the attrition of the social, expressed in Margaret Thatcher's claim that “There is no society”—just individuals, families, and neighbors”.<sup>14</sup> Attempting to break the circuit of accountability between persons and political worlds, phrases like hers elide the difference between “public” and “society” in the hope of privatizing everything, including the experience of collective emotion. But for Hemphill and Bush, our case study men, circling back to an affective atmosphere provides a starting point, not a place of rest. They have no place else to go and, a bit lost, they're responding a high drama of orchestrated emotionality by trying to nudge a new phase into

<sup>13</sup> For Foucault on eventalization and the historical present, see Paul Rabinow (Ed.), 1984. *What is Enlightenment? The Foucault Reader*. Pantheon Books, New York, pp. 32–50 and throughout Michael Foucault, 1969/1989. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Routledge, London and New York.

<sup>14</sup> “I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation.” Prime minister Margaret Thatcher, talking to *Women's Own* magazine, October 31, 1987; <http://briandeer.com/social/thatcher-society.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> For Foucault on eventalization and the historical present, see Paul Rabinow (Ed.), 1984. *What is Enlightenment? The Foucault Reader*. Pantheon Books, New York, pp. 32–50 and throughout Michael Foucault, 1969/1989. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Routledge, London and New York.

being, phrase by phrase. By thinking, they open other registers into which they step gingerly, pensively, haltingly, wandering around to get a handle on what to do in the question-marked now.

We witness, here, then, not “the waning of affect,” but the waning of genre.<sup>15</sup> Life can no longer be lived even phantasmatically as melodrama, as Aristotelian tragedy spread to ordinary people, as a predictable arc that is shaped by acts, facts, or fates. Their take on the present oscillates among affects and emotions: it transmits as worry. At root, “to worry” is to strangle, to choke, to bite;<sup>16</sup> for our case study men, worry—the repetition of anxious unwanted ideation about the state of a thing—is a sense that responds to a situation that’s unfolding, that needs to be moved toward refuting death as the only scene where life’s meanings add up. Gathering up affectively and emotionally-saturated knowledge processed in so many different ways, demonstrating fidelity to the openness of the event that is not yet “stone,” there is otherwise only so much grief. This grief for the lost ordinary is the default feeling that they’re refusing, of being historical in the present.<sup>17</sup>

This essay has described the performance of thinking and intuitive recalibrating as signs of troubled knowing and living in a historical present whose occupants sense it as distended. I now contrast this scenario of ordinary life’s interruption by a worried thought with the strategies of two recent poems that model some quite different practices of feeling out the unfinished situation of the present. What follows also tracks how they notice a contemporaneity disorganized by the kind of crisis in the ordinary that forces one to invent (for oneself, for the collective) an “ignorant” pedagogy<sup>18</sup> that holds off grief, that doesn’t distinguish between cognitive and other kinds of knowing, and that produces a way of grasping and inhabiting a collectively significant “unthought known” that has been in some way apprehended.<sup>19</sup> But the affect of the crisis they encounter begins not with drama but its absence.

Charles Simic’s “Encyclopedia of Horror” and Bill Hicok’s “A Primer” use traditional genres for making literacy possible.<sup>20</sup> They worry aloud about how to find one’s way analytically and affectively amidst the noise of the political and the non-place of the

social in a present moment in which survival presents itself as a problem.<sup>21</sup> Both poems perform the problem of developing a practice of rootedness in processual awareness that can give shape amidst the unpeaceful, uninhabitable, and unknowable state of crisis in which living on is also taking place.<sup>22</sup> Giving shape is not the same as solving the problem of crisis, or having the right emotions about it. Indeed, both poems confront a tone—an atmosphere, feeling, sense—of flatness in the world, as though affects and emotion themselves are exhausted from adjusting to all the intensities. This response is a structure with barely any energy for ornamentation. But the encounter with flatness in the world does not produce identical flatness in the poems. The ethical and political question is how to live managing overwhelming materials with an overtaxed awareness; the aesthetic question is how to find form without distracting from the gravity of the real.

In “Encyclopedia of Horror,” the state of awareness is one of sleepless hypervigilance:

Nobody reads it but the insomniacs.

How strange to find a child,  
Slapped by his mother only this morning,  
And the mad homeless woman  
Who squatted to urinate in the street.

Perhaps they’ve missed something!  
That smoke-shrouded city after a bombing raid,  
The corpses like cigarette butts  
In a dinner plate overflowing with ashes.  
But no, everyone is here.

O were you to come, invisible tribunal,  
There’d be too many pages to thumb through.  
Too many stories to listen to,  
Like the one about guards playing cards  
After they were done beating their prisoner.

There’s a lot to say biographically about Simic’s observations, the relation of this piece to his long career of capaciously dark historicism and modernist conventions of apocalypse or wasted life. But for our purposes the epistemo-affective work of this poem, with its narration of the insomniac’s compulsion to encounter “too many pages” of unbearable, unmanageable evidence of historic and historical horror that is lived in the ordinary, resides in the flurry of rhyming in its last stanza: the eruption of “oo” sounds (too, to, through) and the piercing cliché of “guards playing cards.”

Rhymes provide some kind of comfort, but the method here is frottage: consonance rubs up against the flatly and frankly phrased assertion of the uselessness of knowing what the couplings emphasize. Prior to the last stanza, the poem lists random horrors that might be around any corner—from acts of bad parenting and annihilative bombing (it’s for your own good) to the spectacle of a fatefully mad homelessness that is concealed in both of those other examples too. The encyclopedia makes no assessment of the exemplarity of or connection among its little portraits, but rather provides a gathering up of instances, episodes, and scenes that make an atmosphere that constitutes the present right up to the moment of reading—the slapped child was added “only this

<sup>15</sup> Fredric Jameson, 1991. *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, pp. 10–11).

<sup>16</sup> Worry: OE. *wyrðan* = OFris. *wergia* to kill, MLG. *worgen*, MDu. *worghen* (Du. *worgen*, *wurgen*), to strangle, throttle, OHG. *wurgan*, *wurkjan* (MHG. *wurgen*, *würgen*, G. *würgen*), to strangle, worry, kill by violence:—OTeut. \**wurgjan*, related to \**werg-*, a strong vb. stem found in MHG. *irwergen* to throttle:—Indo-Eur. \**wergh-*. The  $\alpha$ - and  $\beta$ -forms (*wirry* and *werry*) are normal ME. developments of OE. *wyrðan*: cf. the forms of MERRY a. The  $\gamma$ -forms apparently represent a late WS. \**wurðan*, with later graphic substitution of *wo-* for *wu-*; see the note to WORM n. The original u-sound of this form is indicated by the late spellings with *woo-*] OED.

<sup>17</sup> I use the language of grief because George W. Bush uses it, and not to refer to Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life*, with its argument for a metric of justice in the idiom of appropriate grief. Nonetheless: my argument here (and in *Cruel Optimism*), is that we can over-respect the work of emotional justice, equating idealized forms with the complexities of grounding and ungrounding that are set loose when we find ourselves in the middle of an emotional event that shakes the sureties. When the world is tipped over, habits, meanings, and resonances of emotional self-possession go with everything else. The structure of grief (reorganizing subjectivity in response to the loss of something important) would not be the same as the emotion of grief (which is just one option in the range of ways to inhabit that structure, since people live loss differently, and are differently shattered and inflated by its effects on them). For her account of the clarities of political emotion, see Judith Butler, 2006. *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, London and Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, 2007. *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics and Belonging*. Seagull Books, Calcutta.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Rancière, 1991. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, CA.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Bollas, 1987. *The Shadow of the Object*. Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known. Columbia University Press, New York.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Simic, 2008. *Encyclopedia of Horror*. *Harper’s Magazine* 316 (1895), April, 21; Bob Hicok, 2008. *A Primer*. *The New Yorker* 19 May, 48–49.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Augé, 1995. In: John Howe (Trans.), *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso, London.

<sup>22</sup> I say state of crisis rather than state of exception because I don’t think it is a state of exception, but quite the opposite, a state of intensification within history that points to a project of forced adjustment. On the unexceptionality of exception, see Nasser Hussain, 2007. *Beyond norm and exception: Guantanamo*. *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Summer), 734–753.

morning” and “everyone is here,” both readers and subjects of the book.

The insomniacs are historians of the present without a project or profession. Perhaps they are pressured into sleeplessness by free-floating anxiety, or perhaps there is a reason. Reading the *Encyclopedia*, though, won't provide clues for the causes of their condition. The process of encyclopedia reading is closer to counting sheep or pure seriality, as each episode is its own emblem and singularity, not a link in a chain. Things are bound together—it is a book, after all—but they are not internally bound. Each punctum is an item in a collection whose principle of inclusion is at once so visceral and general that it is simultaneously piercing and numbing—the tone is, literally, matter of fact. Perhaps one ought to say that the bombing and decimation of a population is the poem's main event, but the metaphor of cigarette butts and ashes in a dish smudges its devastated referent, stretching out the catastrophic moment into a space in the ordinary that might not be of horror. Who knows whether, in smoking, the smokers were exercising more of their death drive or their life drive, their drive to pleasure?

The explicit point of articulation is that from a certain distance, bombs and cigarettes produce ashes, the trace of lives and ways of life passed by: Dresden, Kosovo, London, Iraq, the appetites, conviviality. What's left for the living? Not even grief. The *Encyclopedia of Horror* is not an archive providing prophylactic wisdom, enabling knowing subjects to prevent the repetition of traumatic history. Nor can the damage to the ordinary apparently be undone by a “tribunal” of readers who can provide emotional justice in a magnificent performance of sentimental recompense.

The poem enacts most powerfully the undoing of the fantasy of liberal emotional due process when it runs into “guards playing cards.” This classic image of casualized discipline relates the guards to the purveyors of the bombs, in that the state's disciplinary force aims to protect life and ways of life by destroying what's potentially inconvenient to it. It doesn't matter who is beat up or who does the beating up. No person or happening can represent the pervasiveness of violence. The despair of not mattering that is expressed in the final stanza's expression of surrender to the *whatever* of skimming one instance of horror and the one after that is inverted in the play of the stanza's surrender to rhyme. “Guards playing cards” is funny and aversive, ironic and not reparative. “Guards playing cards” inverts the tendency of think/fuck, think/Iraq: in the newer case, the jolt of extra verbal pleasure interrupts nothing nor contributes to the production of a new potentiality. Think/fuck, think/Iraq, on the other hand, wants to pace out a new sensorium. “Encyclopedia of Horror” stretches the imprinted scenes of clotted reading into a thin membrane. It witnesses the wearing out of the old emotional and intellectual supplements, including the comfort in the fantasy of learning as a necessity for personal and collective flourishing.

For the poem's flatness speaks to the end of a *habit* of knowledge, not a habitation in it: the insomniac reader is not only sleepless but, as a scholar or collector of fact, homeless. The narrator's tone remains unanimated while thinking about going with the flow, browsing and learning: there is no trace of hope that knowing something will stop something else. But the poem's discussion of horror is not horrifying or sensationalist. It is collecting instances, seeing what there is. It is talking about ordinary life. Ordinary life “is what it is”—flat, post-vital, exhausted but not dead, a card game in an ongoing present where we are trying to assess whether the episodic return to episodes of horror amounts to the contemporary situation of survival.

Hicok's “A Primer” also tells the story of the present organized by flatness: the atmosphere and tone of his US Midwest is so gray that you want to “kill the sky” when you look around for and receive no relief from the landscape of “corn corn corn.” But, overwhelmed by finding itself amidst the multiple middles of so many emerging, ongoing histories, this poem sees *resignation* to

flatness as a “backup plan.” Plan A: to reroute the present situation, where “we” move along without getting along, into a condition of ongoing collective liveness fueled by riding the wave of collectively recycled affective knowledge. This new pathocartography uses emotional mapping to tap into the exuberance, the non-mereness, which radiates from the activity of surviving. It rides the release of energy in sociality that comes from finding someone and telling her what happened. It may be a low bar, but it's humming.

I remember Michigan fondly as the place I go to be in Michigan. The right hand of America waving from maps or the left pressing into clay a mold to take home from kindergarten to Mother. I lived in Michigan forty-three years. The state bird is a chained factory gate. The state flower is Lake Superior, which sounds egotistical though it is merely cold and deep as truth. A Midwesterner can use the word “truth,” can sincerely use the word “sincere.” In truth the Midwest is not mid or west. When I go back to Michigan I drive through Ohio. There is off I-75 in Ohio a mosque, so life goes corn corn corn mosque, I wave at Islam, which we're not getting along with on account of the Towers as I pass. Then Ohio goes corn corn corn billboard, goodbye, Islam. You never forget how to be from Michigan when you're from Michigan. It's like riding a bike of ice and fly fishing. The Upper Peninsula is a spare state

in case Michigan goes flat. I live now in Virginia, which has no backup plan but is named the same as my mother, I live in my mother again, which is creepy but so is what the skin under my chin is doing, suddenly there's a pouch like marsupials are needed. The state joy is spring. “Osiris, we beseech thee, rise and give us baseball” is how we might sound were we Egyptian in April, when February hasn't ended. February is thirteen months long in Michigan. We are a people who by February want to kill the sky for being so gray and angry at us. “What did we do?” is the state motto. There's a day in May when we're all tumblers, gymnastics is everywhere, and daffodils are asked by young men to be their wives. When a man elopes with a daffodil, you know where he's from. In this way I have given you a primer. Let us all be from somewhere. Let us tell each other everything we can.

“A Primer” is both a lesson book and what makes paint more likely to adhere to a wall. The whole poem primes us for the final couplet— “Let us all be from somewhere./Let us tell each other everything we can.” This is a couplet because of how the line begins (“Let us”) and not how it ends, and so too it is a poem about where to begin, now, making connections. We learn to begin being in the life through which we are already moving by absorbing new phrases into our stock observations: “When I go back to Michigan I drive through Ohio./There is off I-75 in Ohio a mosque, so life/goes.” Life goes when events change things. This reconception of

a seriality that cannot be taken for granted but is crucial to catching up to the historical present has been forced on us “on account of the Towers.” On account of the Towers the corn is newly punctuated and the landscape intimacy of “we” with “Islam” is just technical, a statement about proximity. The landscape absorbs what he has not yet. “There is off I-75 in Ohio a mosque” is accordingly all grammatically unsubordinated, for the American English speaker.

It is not a harmonious time, as “we’re not getting along.” But while not getting along, we are still moving along. Now the old landscape is new as we pass through it, “Then Ohio goes corn corn corn/billboard, goodbye, Islam.” It is impossible to read the tone of this list. Goodbye Islam? Goodbye Ohio? The politics of the plural “we” is not left unsaid, and for the better. But it is changing as and because we speak: we have the US produced by the Towers, the “we” produced by association with Islam; the “we” produced by pooling and spooling what we have seen and what we know; the “we” of the speed of movement; the “we” of trying to catch up with life *as it is happening*. By the end the poem reveals its desire for the “we” to be other things than the effect of an event, enjambment turning each phrase from the referent to a fishing line.

We used to know how to live as well as we knew the landscape. Yet on reconsideration, what did we know? Some version of that “we” was from Michigan. We carry deep bodily knowledge of how to fish, too. The weather made us so regularly crazy, though, that when it released us from just getting by, we became all kinds of disregulated, ruled by whim and whimsy. But that crazy mandaffodil love spurred by the sudden sun is continuously supplemented and transformed in the new post-traumatic landscape that forces us constantly to re-find and re-tell the story of where we are from. Meeting the present is like meeting a new lover: telling the story of how you got to be this way in the present moment suddenly changes its usual cadences because of the occasion of the telling. Where you are from is suddenly a different “somewhere” else, underdescribed or even hidden by the idiom of nation or state: the state’s name becomes a ridiculous sound that reminds you of where you were ridiculous and unsound. It is a handle on something historical barely yet experienced. It used to matter, where you came from, because you felt akin to the other people who lived there, since they knew what you knew—the landscape that the highway skims and random facts associated with patriotism. But now the enmeshing of global power and ordinary life has turned the scenic route into a situation.

However, unlike Simic, Hicok refuses to see the gathering of the old and new knowledges as regression, attrition, or a flat recitation of ongoing losses. The view seems to be that the social never made sense, that the cycles of the seasons were always affectively laden

by crazy magical thinking and elated interruption of the exhaustion produced by the atmosphere of the present we live in that is the sum of history and the weather. The right hand did not know what the left hand was doing, which was both uncanny and ok. He sees a potential solidarity wrought from narrating the confusions and stacking the irreconcilables. The solidarity of talking and listening requires only affective consonance with the mere contract to show up and participate in the couplet or coupling that ends and begins. “Let us.”

Is “Let us” an order in the imperative or something softer, like a plea? Is it the desperate good manners of “Let us go then, you and I?” Let us now tell something: we don’t have to think about it, we don’t have to feel anything, we don’t have to express our deepest self and wait for a recognizing response. This nascent solidarity is solipsistic first, and not performative. Telling is a state of bodily practice whose performance opens intuition to surprising rehabilitations, though, by making where you are from into something you can rely on only if you tell about it to someone who hears it and produces your thereness as a warmth of presence in the historical present. Solidarity happens prior to intimacy or the contents of your auditor’s subjectivity. This is not about recognition, letting in the other, etc. But in fantasy there will be transactions of telling and hearing, in the genre of sound, streaming.

“A Primer” teaches a history of the present that is in the idiom of normative bodily and factual life recast as a mode of tourism and curiosity that acknowledges how out of our native element “we” all now are. “The state joy is spring,” aspiring to sprung rhyme. The present is all mixed-up and intense; its emotional map is lightly manic and surreal; it does the best it can to narrate what it doesn’t comprehend while sensing so much that’s coursing through it. But this is the new realism that absorbs grief not into wars of emotion or the imaginary end of sexual self-abandon or flat seriality but into love and fishing and daffodils and the register of an affective optimism about the sharing of *whatever*. It’s post-event.

“A Primer” is a dreamy poem, performing affectively a world as a magnetic space ruled by a reliable absentminded rhythm. It is as though the fact of circulation can produce a present that interrupts the atomizing flatness of mass not mattering by gently folding the political words into the other ones without the intensities of sentimental transmission that have for so long provided refuge for scoundrels and their wounded.

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