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Scattered Forms: Affect and Critical Writing

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Scattered Forms:
Affect and Critical Writing

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

By
Sam Kiley

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2020

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Gratitude is of the PIE root “gwere,” meaning heavy.

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one of the tremendous insights of affect theory
has been its invitation to consider how structures
of domination feel, and to suggest that simply naming
structures fails to do justice to how they move against
(and inside of) our bodies.

- Jennifer c. Nash,
Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality

Nothing.

- Cordelia (1.1.91)
King Lear

Introduction: Feeling Critique

This past summer I was a teaching fellow for fifteen middle schoolers. We spent hot July days in an aggressively air conditioned classroom, working our way through Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.¹ Early on, we were attempting to learn more about the history behind Hansberry's play. There was a brief lecture portion, which covered Reconstruction into the implementation of Jim Crow Laws and ended on the localized practice of Redlining in 20th century Chicago. After, three questions were placed on large pieces of paper around the room. They read: "What is one thing that made you mad?"; "What is one thing that made you scared?"; "what is one thing that made you glad?". The students were given as many sticky notes as they wanted, and asked to spend eight minutes writing and posting their reactions. They then walked around silently, reading each other's responses. After the bell had rung, I took down the pieces of paper and placed them beside my desk, next to the pool noodle which was for energizing games, and a bag of sweaters for when students got cold (they had sweaters in their locker, but that trip meant them being gone for twenty minutes).

Later—I don't remember exactly when—I took off some of the stickies and read them. Most of the "glad" stories involved people like Lorraine Hansberry herself, as well as her Father, a successful real estate broker and political activist. Of the "scared" portion, all were about the racial violence which was enacted against black families moving into suburban Illinois households. A few simply read, "The KKK." Of the twenty young people who did the activity, all were typical middle schoolers—containing absurd amounts of energy, and a steady knack for

¹ Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

refusal. They also were mostly 1st generation citizens of the US, with parents who had immigrated to Manchester, New Hampshire, where the class was being held. In reading the stickies, and no longer immersed in the task of managing the class's abundant energy, the exercise became questionable, the end result curious.

After all, the “glad” piece of paper was intended to provide an ameliorative space of thinking. There were powerpoint slides of Lorraine Hansberry outside the production's debut on Broadway, the famed boxer Joe Louis, and the twisting and musical poetry of Langston Hughes. The “glad” section was an attempt to offset the difficult impact of the other topics—the broken windows of Hansberry's childhood house, cross burnings, and a recognition of the radical social and financial inequities redlining (a legislation enacted by the Federal Government) created. My intentions were not strictly to keep the classroom's affective balance intact, but because the mingling of various sentiments, personalities, flavors, or textures were, I assumed, conducive to a rigorous and interesting fifty minutes of learning. Either way, I don't think it fully worked. What Silvan Tompkins would describe as “strong” and “negative” affects—like humiliation, fear, terror, disgust, or paranoia—usurped, took over, diffused through the various channels of emotional movement. And so the exercise became serious, cool, distanced, gritty, the students' usual postures and distractions shifted into a mechanical silence.

This project asks what it would require for (just as the classroom) critical writing to more directly engage with affect—that is, how critique could benefit from exploring the varied character, the impact, the pros and cons of positive and negative affects in relation to critique. Each chapter focuses upon a single affective structure, exploring its utilization and impact upon a literary text and critical text. Implicit to this chronology is a continued suggestion that critique,

just like a work of literature, has an affective environment, albeit a largely ignored one. Thus a continued wondering is how attention to affect can enrich critical practices. With this in mind, each chapter studies a specific affective movement, and the way it interacts with a work of literature. From there, it reads a formally similar critical piece, and analyzes the affective impact upon the academic essay. Each chapter continues a specific hypothesis, that attention to affect would:

- (1) Allow academic essays a more varied affective environment
- (2) Allow more effective engagements with topics which are often resistant to representation.
- (3) Allowing more sustained engagement with ambiguity.²

The relationship between form, affect, and criticism has long been recognized. In broad strokes, “affect” might be defined as, in contrast to a drive like hunger, a phenomenological network of greater time freedom, as well as freedom of attachment. While the feeling of thirst is not a highly variable intensity, the jolted quality of joy can come and be replaced in an instant by the frigidity of terror; and, while thirst and water are fairly inevitable in their attachment, the way shame is evoked can be highly variable—different people can experience the intensity of shame through an almost limitless amount of objects or experiences. The theorization of affect can be traced to the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who predicted the differentiation between Freudian “Drives” and the affect system with his separation between “Passion” and

² A topic beyond the reach of this project, but essential to future study, would utilize texts like Matt Brim’s *Poor Queer Studies* (2020), and wonder about the politics of the critical essay. As Brim describes how commuter students become “student teachers of Queer Studies within their homes and home communities,” a more flexible critical essay could be a valuable tool toward making theory more efficacious, and less elitist.

“affect” [*affectus*].³ The influential French theorist Gilles Deleuze’s would utilize Spinoza’s theoretical framework to develop *puissance*, as the ability to affect and to be affected, and utilize affect and form in critical explorations of film, literature, and philosophy.⁴ For affect theorists, this has meant that affect describes dynamic processes, relations, and intensities rather than static phenomena. Deleuze’s work on “biophilosophy” (amidst many others) is a helpful bridge between Freudian psychoanalysis and the work of psychologist Silvan Tompkins (1911-1991),⁵ as well as a contemporary rejuvenator of Tompkins work, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

This project is littered with Sedgwick’s work, largely because of her interest in critical writing and affect. An individual often credited with founding contemporary Queer Studies,⁶ Sedgwick discovered Tompkins writing in the mid 1990s, while looking for effective means of theorizing Shame. With Adam Frank, Sedgwick would then publish *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tompkins Reader* (1995),⁷ which—with its utilization of Tompkins taxonomic, cybernetic characterization of affect—would become a critical interlocutor with Sedgwick’s penultimate

³ “17th and 18th Century Theories of Emotions > Spinoza on the Emotions (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).” Accessed May 2, 2020.

⁴ See *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (trans. 1986); *Foucault* (trans. 1988); and *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation* (trans. 2002).

⁵ Tompkins wrote three volumes of *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962, 1963, 1991), as well as many other texts on psychoanalysis and cybernetics (*Computer Simulation of Personality: Frontier of Psychological Theory* (1963); *Contemporary Psychopathology: A Source Book* (1943).

⁶ See *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) & *Epistemology of The Closet* (1990), as well as *Tendencies* (1993), for Sedgwick’s canonized “Queer Studies” texts.

⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick & Adam Frank, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tompkins Reader*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

book, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, and Performativity*⁸ before her death in 2009. *Shame* and *Touching Feeling* form a concise genealogy of thinking about criticism and affect. Note Sedgwick upon affect and stimulation—“If an individual lived in an environment in which there was only homogeneous stimulation, there could be a specific affect famine not unlike drive hunger in its urgency”⁹—which, while functioning as a summary of Tompkins theory of time and the affect system, also is a precise summary of the assumed “environment” of critical work, which Sedgwick would discuss directly in her influential essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” wherein she discusses the narrow affective range of critical writing. In this project then, I consider how that narrowed range applies to standard academic writing. I suggest that the value given to a piece of writing’s sensibility, mood, the way its movements construct an affective variety, is one of negative attention. In other words, most likely affective variety is ignored for a critical piece, if not, it is a teacherly reminder to keep an essay tight, to keep an argument concrete, focused, and logical. The problem of this is not that it is generally a bad writing practice (it isn’t), but rather that it ignores the fact that tight, focused, and chronological writing *has an affective environment*. Here is another bit from *Shame and Its Sisters*:

The critical differences between the drive system and the affect system are in large part a function of the difference in rate of change of events...The affect system of man operates ...within a much more uncertain and variable environment.¹⁰

⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003).

⁹ Sedgwick and Frank, *Shame*, 48.

¹⁰ Ibid, 47.

Here is a reiteration of this appeal to the sensitivity and variability of the affect system, except through the lens of intensity:

...the intensity profiles of affect are capable of marked differentiation. Interest may begin in a low key, increase somewhat, then decline in intensity, then suddenly become very intense and remain so for some time.¹¹

This character of affect marks the system by its sensitivity, the tendency (in contrast to drives, like hunger and sleep) to fluctuate rapidly in intensity, based upon an external form. Given this characterization, I would propose that it is unlikely that standard totems of academic writing—hook, thesis statement, transition sentence(s), the relating of evidence back to thesis, the provision of academic context, a conclusion which reiterates and extends an argument—somehow render an essay void of an affective environment. More likely, the common affects which academic writing are submerged within are highly familiar, if often unnoted: paranoid, hard headed, vigilant, distanced, cool, distanced, defensive.¹² A steady kind of knowing, to the tune of “x is widely known, but have we considered y?”

The problematizing I am interested in is not with paranoid reading, with prose, nor with clear, logical thought. The problem turns more on attention. The possibilities of critical writing, I would propose, are limited by an assumption of form: that the most effective way of performing a close reading is always with carefully organized sentence, paragraph, section, and so on. But what if attention could be (as opposed to diverted, relinquished, or diminished) scattered? If the tools with which critique was performed could be expanded into essays which equally perform

¹¹ Ibid, 50.

¹² Many of these descriptors are indebted from Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, which will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

and communicate an idea? The goal of each chapter of this project is consequently to analyze how a literary form engages the complexities of specific affects, and then wonder about how critique can learn from this formal construction.

A text of continuous value to this project was Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects*.¹³ Brinkema's text is written as a corrective polemic against the popular grain of writing about affect. As a topic that is "utterly fashionable," Brinkema proposes greater attention to close reading, and less attention to assuming *a priori* that x produces y. In other words, it is not about which theorist can be most "affected," but rather the ability of the writer of to be attentive and explicate "formal dimensions (as line, light, color, rhythm, and so on) of passionate structures."¹⁴ This is a critical step for this project, as it will be necessary for each chapter to identify the specific affective structure that is formally evoked by the literary text, as a means of wedding and exploring said structure in a critical essay. An exact language of affect will help specify *how* critique is enriched by greater attention to affect.

Pulling these respective strands together, each chapter unfurls within a stable form:

- (1) The defining of an affective structure;
- (2) wedding this structure to a formal, literary movement;
- (3) close reading the form within a literary text;
- (4) close reading a critical essay which utilizes the same form, and
- (5) analyzing the effect of this affective character upon critique, and how critique could benefit from attention to this character.

Chapter One reads for the relationship between a listing essay, and its capability for refuting the usurping character of anxiety. The chapter focuses upon the fraught relationship

¹³ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, (Durham; London: Duke University Press Books, 2014).

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 37.

between negative affects, and ingraining a critical text with an varied affective environment. It suggests that a listing form enables a “scattering” of affect, thus refuting the reflexive, controlling character of negative and strong affects. The literary text is Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping*,¹⁵ and Sedgwick’s essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, you’re so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you.”¹⁶

Chapter Two examines grief, with the affective challenge being its tendency to refute representation, whether in a literary or critical text. The affective structure is read as bifurcated, with grief moving a subject closer to the lost object, and thus “distanced” from a more practical reality. This renders a grieving text as defined by a failure to reciprocate communication, to represent through language the intensity of loss. In response to this critical dilemma, the chapter suggests the dialogue form as capable of remaining cohesive, even as a conversation crumbles. The chapter reads two dialogic texts—J.M Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*,¹⁷ and “What Survives”¹⁸ by Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman’s, a eulogy built as a dialogue which close reads the legacy of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—as a means of explicating how certain affects resist being held by language, and the stakes of this for critique.

Chapter Three concludes with the affect of care. The chapter focuses upon ambiguity, and the oft inability of critical writing to write comfortably through hyper-ambiguous topics or texts. Care’s ambivalence is held within a static worry (of hurting the cared for object, of failing to properly provide care), and a more productive and active “making,” as in writing a letter to a

¹⁵ Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (First edition. New York, NY: Picador, 2004).

¹⁶ This essay is from *Touching Feeling*, 123-153.

¹⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, (Princeton University Press, October 4, 2016,).

¹⁸ From Reading Sedgwick, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2019), 37-63.

friend, or making an apple pie. I read this ambiguous movement as evoked by an “Essaypoem,” texts which meld clear, narrative prose, with quick switches to a more poetic line. The ability of this form—the texts read being a speech by June Jordan to Oceanhill Brownsville, I.S. 55, and Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love*—is to communicate through the clarity of prose, as well as the movement and breakage of a poetic line. Less a codifying of prose = bad and poetry = good, it is the movement between the forms that allows a critical text to travel more comfortably through an ambiguous environment, whether literary or ideological.

This project is a response to a nagging feeling of academic habit, that the commitment of ‘thought’ as represented through language is, in its strenuous commitment to richness and rigor, omitting attention to sources of intellectual plenitude. It is not a righteous polemic against antiquated totems of critique. Rather, just a gentle act of wedging, the subtlest of opening.

Chapter One: Lists and Anxiety

The typical evocation of “strong” is a capacity to lift, to carry something of great density, possibly across a great distance. When Silvan Tompkins and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick use the term “strong” however, they mean it more akin to flexible. The elasticity of strong, negative affects is grounded in the possibility of failure. The more a text “misrecognizes, imagines, sees, or seizes upon”¹⁹ the possibility of a mistake, each causal strand leads more often back to the specific negative affect. Another way of describing this is “To the extent to which the theory can account only for ‘near’ phenomena, it is a weak theory....As it orders more and more remote phenomena to a single formulation, its power grows.”²⁰ All this means is that when chunks of language more fluidly construct and evoke shame, humiliation, paranoia, fear, or terror, that working around the spreading power of these intensities requires an intentionality of textual structure.

Anxiety is conglomerative in its affective structure, and thus difficult pin down. The term is blunted and loosened by overuse. For Soren Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety*, he describes the varied “linguistic usage” of the affect, naming “sweet anxiety, a sweet anxiousness; we speak of a strange anxiety, a shy anxiety, etc.”²¹ This usage is reflected by Shame and its Sisters: “anxiety has come to include every variety of circumstances which is capable of evoking any variety of negative affect.”²² And these critiques of the variety of the term make sense, they are familiar to us. Anxiety is often wedded to panic attacks, another misnomer, as neither “panic”

¹⁹ Sedgwick and Frank, *Shame*, 21.

²⁰ Ibid, 134.

²¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation in View of the Dogmatic Problem of Hereditary Sin*, translated by Alastair Hannay, (1st edition, London: Liveright, 2015), 51.

²² Sedgwick and Frank, *Shame*, 236.

nor “anxiety” in their present usage touch upon the brutality and terror of what the terms attempt to describe. Simultaneously, it would make sense to call someone “anxious to please,” a description more suited for some mild jitters before a social event. Still, this chapter is upon the diffusive, spreading character of strong negative affects, and so the large width of reference for anxiety is helpful for talking about how strong negative affects usurp, supplant, reflexively control an affective environment. An affective structure is necessary, and we’ll return to Kierkegaard to locate one. Kierkegaard describes anxiety in contrast to fear, which he understands as more motivated by external stimulus, or a more material event. Anxiety, on the other hand, is “freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility,”²³ or a negative affect far more reliant upon memory, and imagining a repetition of a harmful past. Literally, any moment could end up badly. Anxiety will be read for anytime a text engages with past events which cause(d) harm, and describes the sudden intensity which follows an awareness that said harm could, possibly, repeat itself.

If, as previously identified, the flexibility of strong negative affects is grounded in their ability to permeate and control a textual environment, a form capable of refuting this movement would need an ability to spread, scatter, or fracture upon the page. It would require a form which concurrently allows a cohesive argument or topic while tending toward a more compartmentalized structure—that is, spread out the language, but retain a hint of cohesion. From this set of needs, as well as burrowing from criticism and literature, emerges the list. Lists place ideas beside each other, allowing a cohesion of thought. Lists construct pseudo-boundaries between different ideas or pieces of evidence, which allows for separation while retaining a permeable

²³ Kierkegaard, *Anxiety*, 51.

character. Imagine a grocery list containing sixteen different foods and a video game: it immediately becomes obvious what does not belong, does not relate, is less in line with the subject. Amidst this coherency, it is more possible for a section of text which evokes anxiety to exist in greater singularity, or, separate sections of a list can be more variable, if not always are. What if there's a GameStop right next the grocery store, and it's the 12 year olds birthday? More specifically, this chapter will locate lists within an *anaphoric* structure, when a phrase or word repeats itself through multiple, continuous clauses. Anaphora consists of the Greek “ana,” meaning *back*, and “pherein,” *to bear*.²⁴ As anxiety is structured as the return of a strong, negative memory, an anaphoric list is a literal persistence—a carrying of—through the potency of a moment. As a listing form scatters a page, it also renders a text more capable of transitioning between different affects (say, the plenitude of Sunday grocery shopping, and the joyful surprise of gift giving), as the possibility of harm can be recognized, and then things be gotten on with, rather than getting bogged down in the overwhelming character of freedom, the “the possibility of possibility.”

This chapter reads two texts—Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, and Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading”—which directly deal with the potency and respective refutation of anxiety. The former does this through the grief of Ruth, the novel’s teenage protagonist; the latter with Sedgwick’s wondering about methodologies of critique beyond paranoia. Both novel and essay contain lists, and utilize the form as a means of sowing their texts with an affective variety. *Housekeeping*’s lists are poetic, anaphoric paragraphs, where

²⁴ “Anaphora | Origin and Meaning of Anaphora by Online Etymology Dictionary.” Accessed May 3, 2020. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/anaphora>.

the narrative distance lessens, and the text opens itself to suggestion and possibility. For “Paranoid Reading...,” a descriptive list is inserted into a comparative essay.

Housekeeping’s Lists

Housekeeping is littered with death. And, amidst this, is a child protagonist. The impact of these deaths—of Ruth’s Grandfather, her Mother, her Grandmother—upon the text is subtle and immediate, as the language is a strange intersection between child-like, poetic wonder, and a practical if not cruel habituation to loss. The house that Ruth lives in was built by Edmund Foster, “an employee of the railroad, who escaped the world years before I entered it.”²⁵ In the adaption of *Housekeeping* into a film, it unfolds more like a comedy, and not a surrealistic one profiting off of tropes of female madness, but a practical story about the humorous, strange lives of three women—one adult and two children—living beside a lake in Idaho. I don’t offer this interpretation as revelation. *Housekeeping* is a very good novel, and an inclusion and recognition of humor is as Sigrid Nunez says: “try to think of a good book that, no matter how dark the subject, does not include something comic”²⁶ What’s curious is the relationship between Ruth’s continuous naming of anxiety—the way it stems from a loss that is simultaneous to the intolerableness of adolescence—and how the text smoothly transitions from the potency of realizing the reality of death, and moments of strange, curious delight. What follows then, is a reading of three lists within *Housekeeping*, and an analysis of how each list contributes to the

²⁵ Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 3.

²⁶ Sigrid Nunez, *The Friend*, (Riverhead Books; First Edition, February 6, 2018), 59.

scattering of an affective environment; a movement from the strength of anxiety, to a curious bit of laughter.

In the first thirty pages of the novel, Ruth's Grandmother dies. The reason that Ruth and her sister Lucille are cared for by their grandmother is because of their Mother's suicide, which passed when they were very little. The announcement of the Grandmother's death is akin in tone and style to "escap[ing] the world years before I entered it," reflecting the morbid habituation to loss that Ruth's voice contains. Chapter Two begins with "When, after almost five years, my grandmother one winter morning eschewed awakening..."²⁷ The sentence doesn't even pause, moving steadily on to the arrival of "Lily and Nona." This phrasing could be read as the text affectively positioning itself in relation to the topic. For Ruth, the broad difficulty of loss (both as idea and practical fact) construct and shape the textual environment which describes her state of being. Upon the disappearance of a third guardian, the impact is not exactly lessened, but more easily absorbed, as the shape of loss has spread beyond a singular wake. The house, lake, trees—the Idaho landscape which Ruth gently moves through, are viewed through the single, strong affective position of loss. This is reflected in the casual, familiar phrasing of "eschewed awakening," and "escap[ing] the world...before I entered it." Of course, what's curious and valuable and worthy of examination, is how the novel respects the aesthetic cohesion of this characterization, and distills the novel with an affective variety. In other words, the text swims gladly within the position of the anxiety of loss, while simultaneously evoking humor, gratitude, petty conflict and joy.

²⁷ Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 29.

Upon returning to *Housekeeping* throughout the years, a moment of continuous satisfaction for me are the scenes of Lily and Nona speaking. Their language comes a page after the death of the Grandmother; Lucille and Ruth have been put to bed and are wide awake upstairs; partially because Lily and Nona speak quite loudly, partially because they have been put to bed quite early, potentially because the two Aunts fed them dinner, and panicked. Lily and Nona are described as “enjoy[ing] nothing except habit and familiarity,” which leads the narrator to describe their conversations as “well-tended as a termite castle”:

‘A pity!’

‘A pity, a pity!’

‘Sylvia wasn’t old.’

‘She wasn’t young.’

‘She was old to be looking after children.’

‘She was young to pass away.’

‘Seventy-six?’

‘Was she seventy-six?’

‘That’s not old.’

‘No.’²⁸

The text generally is sparse with dialogue, opting for extended, poetic descriptions of creating women out of snow, walking along train tracks, or squabbles over pressed flowers found in dress making books. Note the slightness and rapidity of Lily and Nona’s language, the repetition of full stops amidst saying mostly nothing, the text gyrating around the topic of the Grandmother’s

²⁸ Ibid, 30.

passing without any pause for actual mediation. The text contradicts itself—“‘She wasn’t old.’ ‘She wasn’t young’”—but not antagonistically, more so the two characters provide a strange, humorous actualization of the beauty and comfort of “habit and familiarity.” What is being said matters less than the fact of form, of sharing and receiving speech with a familiar partner. While this could be described as a list, I am more interested in identifying it as a humorous, enigmatic moment within the novel, as the text successfully navigating a movement between the potency of loss and other, more varied affects. Also, this structure is clearly a dialogue, which will be the addressed in greater detail in Chapter Two. Beside this, I want to posit that an earlier textual moment, one that I would describe as a list, contributes toward scattering the affective environment, and thus helps lessen the slight, firm grip of an anxiety brought about by a multitude of loss.

A phrase Robinson repeatedly, in interviews and writing, used to describe the process of constructing *Housekeeping*, is a wondering about “what a book could be.”²⁹ It is an oscillation of possibility and consequence, or (more simply), growth and decay, that pervades the novel, occupied endlessly by the curiosity of Ruth. It is also this appeal to a formalist possibility that allows lists of repetition to pervade the novel. Pages before the Grandmother’s death and the conversations between Lily and Nona, a series of repeated phrases, each with the same preface and differing result, appears:

One day my grandmother must have carried out a basket of sheets to hang in the spring sunlight, wearing her widow’s black, performing the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith. Say there were two or three inches of hard old snow on the ground, with earth here

²⁹ Thomas Schaub and Marilynne Robinson, “An Interview with Marilynne Robinson,” (Contemporary Literature 35, no. 2 (1994): 231–51).

and there oozing through the broken places, and that there was warmth in the sunlight, when the wind did not blow it all away, and say she stooped breathlessly in her corset to lift up a sodden sheet by its hems, and say that when she had pinned three corners to the lines it began to billow and leap in her hands...In a month these flowers would bloom. In a month all dormant life and arrested decay would begin again.³⁰

This passage comes at the end of a recollection of the impact of the Grandfather's death, the father of Helen (Ruth's mother), and the husband of "my Grandmother." The beginning section speaks to the anxious attachment of Helen and her two sisters after their father's death, with the language one of an obsessive touch, of clustering around the matriarchal figure, and her attempts to "circle them all around with what must have seemed like grace."³¹ The ending of the description strikingly navigates the cruel sweetness of attachment, described as their Father's "sudden vanishing had made them aware of her,"³² their mother. However, the text now has recognized and named the anxiety of loss, presumably passed down from Helen to the narrator and daughter, Ruth. This has an affective consequence, putting the text in a bind in relation to distilling itself with affective variety. What follows in the chronological narrative is the death of the Grandmother / Mother, the figure capable of "circl[ing] them" with "grace." Chapter two will soon briefly pass over the Grandmother's death and transition into the strange humor of Lily and Nona, but the chronology cannot simply validate the anxiety of the father's death, and then move into Lily and Nona's eccentric talks.

³⁰ Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 16.

³¹ Ibid, 11.

³² Ibid, 12.

Note then, the varying prefaces which construct this final passage: “One day” and “must have” are wedded together, and then there is a repetition of “Say”—“Say there,” “and say she,” “and say that.” The character of the passage shifts from the firmness of fear to *suggestion*: gesturing, pointing, offering. Again, the etymology of anaphora—*back* and *to bear*. These subtle repetitions of form allows the language to work beside itself, opening and scattering the affective possibility of the topic. Prior to the listing passage, Ruth’s language is more definitive: “These things were known. Molly changed the beds, Sylvie peeled the vegetables, Helen washed the dishes.”³³ In the transition between this solidity and the porous quality of the listing memory, Ruth reflects on how “The disaster” had disappeared, replaced by “the dear ordinary”³⁴ The movement of the texture of the language, from solid to scattered, as well as the content, of Ruth reflecting on the ameliorating quality of the ordinary, reflects the formal characteristics of the list. Ruth ponders disaster and her thoughts turn to her Grandmother. The definitive language of before is not supple enough to spin a web of localized thoughts about the Grandmother. The anxiety of the memory of her Grandmother’s death, the loss of a second guardian, and the only death Ruth has ever experienced in person, evokes an momentarily strong and negative reaction, which threatens to overwhelm the specificity of the smaller details. So Ruth uses a grocery list of details about her Grandmother. Each fragment is conjured and provisional, the gesturing “Say” brimming with non-necessity. From here, differing affects—the ridiculousness of Lily and Nona one among many—may occupy the text.

³³ Ibid, 15.

³⁴ Ibid, 15.

Built into these different details is an assumption of necessity. The “rituals of the ordinary” are paired with the preface “must have,” as Ruth’s attempt to dislocate meaning away from the anxiety of grief is successful because of the persistence of the quotidian details which occupy her surround. Amidst the passing of generations, wind, corsets, the brief sunlight of spring—minute yet meaningful aspects of Ruth’s life remain. The next section of *Housekeeping* I want to allude to is where the prefaces work in opposite fashion. There is a single preface which reads “there need not be,” and then a list of phrases unfolds, each gesturing to different parts of Ruth’s experience. The moment comes when Ruth and Lucille have wandered across Fingerbone Lake, and the sun has set more rapidly than they expected. Getting back would be impossible, so they attempt to create a makeshift shelter on the beach. Unknown animals wander around them in the darkness, and the danger is palpable, if not present. The novel does not present Ruth’s anxiety as in relation to the external environment, instead opting to twist itself into an introspective movement, eventually brushing against thoughts of non-being, or the same decision as her Mother:

Darkness is the only solvent. While it was dark, despite Lucille’s pacing and whistling, and despite what must have been dreams (since even Sylvie came to haunt me), it seemed to me that there need not be relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track or trace, if only the darkness could be perfect and permanent.³⁵

As a means of speaking to the affective impact of this passage, as the morning does come, the text becomes blunt, and focalizes upon Lucille, the character who spent the night “pacing and whistling.” Another way of reading the kinetics of Lucille is as a rejection of the more sensitive,

³⁵ Ibid, 116.

formal movements of the text (in other words, the affective environment). As the text notes prior to the list, “Lucille would...say I fell asleep, but I did not. I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones.”³⁶ The way the novel pivots out of the impact of the “Darkness” upon Ruth is to wholly switch the focal point of the narrative. Where the earlier list scatters the anxiety of the father’s death, thus opening the text to a greater affective variety, here the formal language that describes Ruth’s state of being is opposite. Even the objects which move and surround her before the listing negation are characterized by their superfluity: “despite” the pacing of Lucille,” or how Sylvie (the eventual guardian of Ruth) haunts her dreams, she concludes the only solvent for the cruelty of attachment and loss is a “darkness” that is “perfect and permanent.” The ending form epitomizes the usurping character of anxiety; it functions akin to an anti-list, a foreclosure of affective variety. And the impact is felt and responded to, as the bluntness of Lucille captures the remaining pages of the chapter.

While this reading was certainly guided by the moments of strange delight in *Housekeeping*, this is not the rationale for this analysis. Rather, it is how—as the penultimate climax of the novel reveals—an affective variety allows Ruth to view loss in different, varying ways. In other words, how the moments of strange delight preface and loosen a viewpoint, which eventually allows for a new, (re)imagining of an idea. A repetition of the opening preface “say” eventually returns within the novel, as Ruth and Sylvie, the sister of Helen and eclectic guardian of Ruth, travel again across Lake Fingerbone. In contrast to the necessary fixation upon Lucille’s iron determination, the section begins in a flurry, with Sylvie urging Ruth awake and onward, all

³⁶ Ibid, 116.

—as we eventually discover—in the name of beating a fisherman to his rowboat. “Yes. Yes. We have to hurry” Sylvie says continually, until they find the hidden boat and cast it off, as the fisherman (“wearing one of those shapeless felt hats...with preposterous small gleams and plumes and violent hooks”) bawls and tosses rocks at them³⁷. Ruth suggests gently, “It must be his boat”; Sylvie shrugs: “Or he might be some sort of lunatic”³⁸ Sentences later, the sun comes up.

Eventually, in a subtle repetition of Ruth’s time spent with the “darkness,” she will find herself alone between the hips of a valley, near but beyond the edge of the lake, her only company a rotting house. The text returns to the prospect of loss, how it had impacted Ruth’s life, and the inevitability of its return. In other words, the text returns to the literal and affective environment of the anti, foreclosing list. And the singular, potent grip of negative affects appear and are identified: “Because, once alone, it is impossible to believe that one could ever have been otherwise. Loneliness is an absolute discovery.”³⁹ However, rather than silently following in the wake of Lucille’s separate, combative state, Sylvie awakes Ruth, putting “her hand on my back,”⁴⁰ and they begin to row back across the lake, toward the train tracks where her Grandfather originally perished. And here, the listing “say” returns, this time directly submerged within the affective environment of loss:

I toyed with the thought that we might capsize. It was the order of the world, after all,
that water should pry through the seams of husks, which, pursed and tight as they might

³⁷ Ibid, 147.

³⁸ Ibid, 147.

³⁹ Ibid, 157.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 160.

be, are only made for breaching. It was the order of the world that the shell should fall away and that I, the nub, the sleeping germ, should swell and expand. Say that the water lapped over the gunwales, and I swelled and swelled until I burst Sylvie's coat. Say that the water and I bore the rowboat down to the bottom, and I, miraculously, monstrously, drank water into all my pores until the last black cranny of my brain was a trickle, and spillet.⁴¹

A frequent interpretation of *Housekeeping* is as a bildungsroman, the novel's poetic form a restructured tale of the American west. The only character of this interpretation I wish to burrow from is that of a progression—the novel stages Ruth's movement through the anxiety of grief amidst a budding adolescence, and as the text unfolds, her reckoning expands. The "say" preface reappears in this passage, except without the safe boundary of Ruth imagining her grandmother dealing with grief. Ruth's mother died by drowning. She drove her car off a cliff into Fingerbone Lake. Thus in the above passage, the progression of Ruth's reckoning nears a center: imagining her death as the same as her parent, a thought capable of evoking the earlier "Darkness," where the value of "memento, bequest" or "memory" was naught. Yet the text's descriptions of Ruth's wandering thoughts plays out differently. The attempt to understand "the order of the world" turns on the more open and flexible "say": "Say that the water lapped over the gunwales... Say the water and I bore the rowboat down to the bottom." And, what follows this more open, listing of the description of her / her mother's death, is a question—"what is dreaming, but swim and flow, and the images they seem to animate?"⁴² Where earlier, the rejective list required a change

⁴¹ Ibid, 162.

⁴² Ibid, 162.

of focal point, here, upon the insertion of the listing form, the character of the following text—the wedding of dreams and “swim and flow...the images they seem to animate”—is more inquisitive, flexible, scattered. The list’s form refutes the usurpation of anxiety, it leaves itself to possibility. And, critically, that paragraphs later the text finds itself with a new imagining, a new mode of seeing, a new idea, of the only death that Ruth has actually witnessed—that of her Grandmother. Ruth mediates on how—

It was as if, drowning in air, she had leaped toward ether. What glee there must have been among the few officials who lingered...what a heart clapping of gloved hands, when my grandmother burst through the spume...so long after all hope of rescue had been forgotten. And how they must have rushed to wrap their coats around her, and perhaps embrace her, all of them no doubt flushed with a sense of the considerable significance of the occasion.⁴³

Note the allusion to “drowning,” and the overlap between the imagined capsizing of the boat Ruth is within, and the passing of her Grandmother. Note also the contrast of Ruth’s conception of death earlier upon the shore versus here. Death is more additive, more textured and filled with touch, more varied, still retaining the potency of anxiety—“so long after all hope of rescue had been forgotten”—but now more open to different affects as well. The description of Ruth’s imagining is more varied, and this comes after her pondering death through the listing “say.”

This is not to suggest an explicit causal link between these three lists, that Robinson intentionally formatted the text to open and close in this way. It is rather an attempt to trace and, potentially, show the way Robinson’s novel utilizes the affective potential of language through

⁴³ Ibid, 154-165.

form and content, and how different sentences, paragraphs, and repetitions either foreclose or expand the ideas which inevitably follow. Also that the novel is not only aware of these potentialities, but wields them to figure Ruth's progression through adolescence, through the passing of her Mother and Grandmother. This tracing is an appeal to the way language has a texture and temperature, and that the form that inevitably contains it is crucial to its capabilities. Robinson would call this being attentive to the "emotional coloration" of an "instant."⁴⁴ I would call it the unique capability of a literary language.



Sedgwick's Lists

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you," is written as a list.⁴⁵ More broadly, Sedgwick loves lists, or at least enjoys what lists and language can do. As Ramzi Fawaz notes in the introductory essay to *Reading Sedgwick*, lists appear in flurries throughout Sedgwick's work, whether to—as for "Paranoid Reading..."—name various elements which construct a single "idea, concept, or ideology," or to complicate, fracture, or defamiliarize a more digestible term.⁴⁶ Lists for Sedgwick are also political, tools of multiplicity which "counter the culture's genocidal 'desire that gay people not be.'"⁴⁷ Beside this, my own opinion is that Sedgwick's lists are an endlessly effective tool of opening, of multiplying a perspective, of placing ideas beside each

⁴⁴ Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, (Essays. New York: Picador USA, 2013), 7.

⁴⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 123-153.

⁴⁶ Fawaz, *Reading*, 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 17.

other in play, squabble, ruminate. With this in mind, this final section will focus upon the impact of lists upon “Paranoid Reading...” as a critical text. I will outline the relationship between the listing form and affective variety, then wonder about the impact, usefulness, and value of this variety for critique.

What’s going on then, with the list Sedgwick places in the center of the essay? While Sedgwick’s style and movements of text are intricately woven and endlessly generative, it is important to also note—as built into the title, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading”—that “Paranoid Reading” is, at its core, a comparative essay. It is placing two “positions” of reading beside each other: “paranoia,” the lineage of which can be traced back to Paul Ricoeur’s influential “Hermeneutics of Suspicion,”⁴⁸ which noted the impact of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Frederick Nietzsche upon critical habits, and which Sedgwick weds to the current state of critical theory in the United States⁴⁹. Paranoia means “suspicion and mistrust”⁵⁰ for people and their actions without exact evidence, and Sedgwick writes how “to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naive, pious, or complaisant.”⁵¹ On the other hand, the reparative position is marked by refusing to split objects (people, places, things) into absolute good / bad dualisms, which allows attention to the relationship between movement and solidity, to how an object may contain a multiplicity of characteristics, with each changing and bouncing off each other in a continual, kinetic network. In returning to the enabling language

⁴⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, translated by Denis Savage, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁴⁹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.

⁵⁰ “Definition of PARANOID.” Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paranoid>.

⁵¹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 126.

of Sedgwick and others writing on affect and reparativity, the reparative position has (for me) become akin to an attention to plenitude, in contrast to a more skeletal, serrated way of viewing. Simultaneously, the essay's task is not to disavow the paranoid position entirely. As Heather Love writes in her essay on "Paranoid Reading...", "For one thing, Sedgwick acknowledges throughout the essay the benefits of paranoid reading. For another, the essay itself is not only reparative—it is paranoid."⁵² Sedgwick's text is not a polemic, but rather a subtle, comparative exploration of the value of different ways of close reading. This returns the topic to the comparing form, the relationship between paranoia and reparativity, and Sedgwick's list.

If "Paranoid Reading..." is not a rejection of the paranoid position, what is it, and what do lists have to do with it? An effective way of approaching this question is to burrow from Sedgwick's own imaginings of what the essays of *Touching Feeling* actually do. The introduction notes the stark difference between identifying or problematizing an idea, versus being able to actually "transmit how to go about it, the cognitive and even affective habits...involved."⁵³ Another way of putting this, is that the essays are attentive to not only language as a system of abstract representation, but also the aesthetic and affective impact of form. Sedgwick's list functions as a description—a "sketch"⁵⁴—of the paranoid position; the list functions as a naming of various elements of a single idea. Each element is first presented together, with a repetition of a single preface, each eventually opening into a separate, emphasized, individual characteristic. It looks like this—

⁵² Heather Love, "Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," (Criticism 52, no. 2 (2010): 235–41).

⁵³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, xiii.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 130.

Paranoia is anticipatory.

Paranoia is reflexive and mimetic.

Paranoia is a strong theory.

Paranoia is a theory of negative affects.

Paranoia places its faith in exposure.⁵⁵

—with the next section of the essay expounding on each point. After these differing, taxonomic descriptions of paranoia have concluded, there is a paragraph break, and Sedgwick transitions into the final section of the essay, which spends more time with an exploration of the reparative position. In other words, the comparative nature of the essay plays out in a standard, chronological order, except Sedgwick decides to structure the section outlining paranoia within the listing form. I would suggest that one reason for this formatting, is the relationship between the capabilities and character of the listing form, and the impact of engaging with topics that evoke a strong, negative affective environment.

As previously noted, “strong” for Tompkins and Sedgwick is more akin to “flexible,” this flexibility meaning capable of being evoked as events, topics, or ideas are engaged with. Another aspect (which Sedgwick’s list identifies as a character of paranoia) is the “reflexive” nature of strong and negative affects⁵⁶. What this means, is the only way of recognizing or engaging with a negative affect is to be submerged within it—that is, to write about paranoia, to describe it, to think through its mechanisms, requires a text to mimic its affective character. An example of this would be when, within “Paranoid Reading...,” Sedgwick reads Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*

⁵⁵ Ibid, 130.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 131.

as means of exemplifying how “Paranoia places its faith in exposure.”⁵⁷ The text moves through Butler’s text, identifying various fragments of evidence as a means of proving its point. However (of course), for the text to provide evidence for Butler’s reliance upon exposure, it itself must expose. The consequences of this reflexivity are the same that Ruth experiences the first time she travels across Lake Fingerbone. As she ponders the gargantuan, unfathomable fact of non-being, any appeal to variety, to alternative models of thinking through something, any ability to render her language as attentive to localized, non-reflexive, heterogeneous forms of representation, is usurped by the potency of the reflexive, negative affect.

With this in mind, I want to return to the fact of “Paranoid Reading” being a comparative essay. If we are to consider the character of strong negative affects as, when evoked, structurally diffusive through a text’s affective environment, this puts the latter description of reparativity at risk. To write about the reparative position with any kind of accuracy, as it stands in contrast to paranoia, would require a boundary being placed around the description of the paranoid position. In other words, the essay needs the formal impact of a list. As we have identified, lists:

- (a) place ideas beside each other, thus allowing a cohesion of thought
- (b) constructs pseudo-boundaries between different ideas or pieces of evidence, thus allowing separation, even while retaining a largely permeable character.

In this viewing of the essay, Sedgwick’s placement of a list is not as a means of opening the text to a more varied affective environment because it is a more enjoyable position than paranoia, but because the singularity of the affective environment cannot accurately analyze what she is interested in. In the same way of *Housekeeping*’s textual understanding of death being rendered

⁵⁷ Ibid, 139.

not only more open, but capable of engaging with more details of the Grandmother's death, for Sedgwick to write about reparativity requires an affectively neutral environment to begin with. And, if the text was formatted as is most standard academic writing, with each fragment of evidence chronologically organized and defined by its contribution to an overall thesis, the text's descriptions of reparativity would be impacted by the diffusive, controlling character of strong negative affects. So emerges the inclusion of the list. With it, the text is more capable of placing various ideas beside each other. It is more capable of transitioning between different affective positions. It performs a more interesting and accurate close reading of paranoia and reparativity.

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On Chapter One

A condensation of this chapter's attempt to read critique through literature, to allow critique to learn from a literary language, turns on the relationship between form and affect. An implicit goal of this chapter was to outline in greater detail what the terms "strong" and "negative" refer to as they relate to affect. Reading lists in *Housekeeping* was woven loosely around the potency of anxiety, even while the broadness of anxiety meant a less specific affective structure, a greater focus upon the usurping, controlling, and diffusive quality of anxiety. More formally, *Housekeeping* was examined for its utilization of the character of lists to expand, scatter, or loosen the affective environment of a piece of writing. From this, I suggested Sedgwick's insertion of a list into her comparative essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," uses the form in an overlapping manner as *Housekeeping*—to scatter the potency of negative affects while discussing them, and thus open up the affective possibility of a piece of text. Specifically, to perform a close reading of the "Reparative Position," which, to be an

accurate analysis, required an varied affective environment. Importantly, both wield the character of lists as a means of viewing an idea differently, to allow a more interesting and accurate analysis to happen. Insufficient to this chapter was attention to affective structure, and the concrete relationship between form, and the evocation of affect. To address this, the second chapter explores an affect repeatedly noted already, grief. As the chapter unfolds, grief will be read as largely defined by failure, as an affect resistant to representation. In this way, a text which grieves presents a new difficulty for a critical essay, a different but equally valuable kind of attention. Where anxiety wants to render a text entirely homogeneous, grief often refutes any cohesion, intimacy, or clarity of thought. In response to this, I will suggest a helpful form will be a dialogic one, which *holds a text together*, even as the legibility of a text collapses. This, beside a mediation on the relationship between grief and the dialogue, will allow greater attention to the relationship between affective structure and textual form.

(1st Intermission: A Tiny Dead Horse)

In the final episode in the third season of the cable television show Parks and Recreation, the small Indiana town's beloved miniature horse, Lil' Sebastian, dies. The episode dances between staging the town's reaction to the death of Lil Sebastian, and setting up the show for future plot-lines. The protagonist Leslie Knope is approached about running for City Council, romantic relationships are solidified and put at risk, and one ludicrous business venture—so coined Entertainment 720—is launched. The Parks and Rec department decides on a night time memorial service, which includes a tribute song ("5,000 candles in the wind"), the reading of an Italian poem, and a permanent, memorializing fire being lit. The service begins with a spectacle put on by Entertainment 720: an actor puts on a british accent, a picture of a galaxy zooms in, and the psuedo-anglo voice chimes in—"who are we?" Eventually the actor identifies the questions as useless to Lil Sebastian ("because he was a horse"), but the macro, existential, cosmic tonality of the moment is prudent to think about why the final episode of the season revolves around the passing of a beloved creature. The fake british accent notes the inability of Lil Sebastian to ask said questions, then identifies them as still meaningful, because "instead, he just brought us joy and happiness."

The trickiness of Pawnee's existential questions falls upon the "us"-ness of Lil' Sebastian's tribute video. After all, it is not the miniature horse which asked for nor required the elaborate memorializing that the town of Pawnee performs. Yes, the grieving town likely finds solace in the rites of ceremony, but these dramatic gestures likely are incapable of grasping or gesturing toward the character of grief as a day to day intensity.

There is a moment however, earlier in the episode, that gestures more aptly toward an honest representation of the affect of grief. Knope announces the news to the department, speaks to the ceremony, and says "but for now, I think we should bow our heads in a moment of silence." This happens for a well-timed beat, and then a separate worker enters to change over the trash, from his hip a speaker blares "Man! I Feel Like a Woman." The music is not synced over the picture, but actually dribbles into the recording in a chopped, muffled fashion; trash can rolling and "OH OH OH, we're totally crazy" and the quick glance upwards of the bowed heads, some angry, some bobbing their head, most simply not knowing what to do. The scene is foreign, awkward, the display of discomfort is vapid and stagnant. The humor of the staging is in the interpersonal break: the intended poignancy contrasts sharply with the ordinary movement through a normal day. The failure of the department's attachment to the dead Lil' Sebastian to touch a worker going about his daily duties, gestures more aptly the breakage of grief than any existential question. Something about a disconnect.

Chapter Two: Grief and the Dialogue

The affective structure of grief is a two part movement, a darting between attachment and distance. Stories of loss often attend to the suffering of the grieving subject, while less attention is given to the attachment of the lost object, and how this movement fractures social participation, especially at the level of language. By attachment, I mean a heightened wanting to experience the sensation of the lost object's presence; by distance, how this wanting is toward something which exists only in memory. Grief therefore poses a challenge to a piece of writing: how is a critic or student to most effectively explore a piece of literature that grieves, when the affective structure resists language? What forms are capable of writing within or about grief?

In this chapter, I examine two pieces that wrestle with this “undialectical” character of grief: J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, and “What Survives” by Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman. The former is a novella written by Coetzee for an invited lecture at Princeton, the latter an MLA talk, originally written as a critical elegy for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Both attempt to address the phenomenology of loss, and both settle upon the form of a dialogue. This chapter will analyze the formal similarity between the two. Both attempt to address the phenomenology of loss, and both settle upon the form of a dialogue. In these dialogues, voices come into a fricative tension, they drift away from each other, but inevitably the “conversation” falls apart, one way or another. Still, the form holds. What this chapter proposes is the value of the dialogue to write about / within grief, as the form can *stage* grief’s incommunicability, while remaining intact, cohesive, a singular piece of text. The dialogue holds even as it crumbles, thus opening a window onto the unintelligibly of grief.

While a broader genealogy of the dialogic form varies in affect and form, many historical instances exemplify its capability to hold tension. Different Platonic dialogues—*Protagoras*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, or *Laws*—vary in readability and pedagogical style, yet what’s striking is his choice to write dialogues, a form of multiple perspectives, instead of the more popular philosophical treatises.⁵⁸ A same attention to ideologies in contrast is in medieval philosophy, as—even without access to most of Plato’s works—people like Augustine, Ockham, and Nicolas of Cusa frequently wrote allegorical dialogues, with different voices standing in for different Religious sects.⁵⁹ A rigorous and pedagogical tone was plentiful for Early Modern dialogues, even while others constructed witty, satirical dialogues to mock the condescending grip of the pedagogical style.⁶⁰ Finally, the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin expanded “dialogic” to mean the different social tensions which swirl around language itself, especially within novels.⁶¹ The dialogue is a form of tension, of different movements, of breaks in ideologies.

What follows is a reading of grief as a continual breakage in systems of exchange and reciprocity, reliant upon the simultaneous movements of the grieving subject: an intimacy of attachment, the isolating character of said attachment. As Coetzee and Berlant/Edelman turn to the dialogic form to represent grief, I will posit the form being capable of staging a coherent collision and breakdown, and thus being conducive to writing about and within grief. Chapter

⁵⁸ Richard Kraut, “Plato,” (In The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/plato/>).

⁵⁹ Eileen Sweeney, “Literary Forms of Medieval Philosophy,” (In The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/medieval-literary/>).

⁶⁰ Encyclopedia Britannica, “Dialogue,” Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/art/dialogue>.

⁶¹ M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, translated by Vern W. McGee, (1st ed. University of Texas Press Slavic Series, no. 8. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

One identified how a language of anxiety requires a careful *separation* to refute the usurpation of affective variety. Grief rather, is more thorny and enigmatic, it is riddled with paradox. The intimacy cannot be close enough, as grief as affect renders a piece of language only wanting to crumble, become opaque, entirely illegible.



Animals & the Dialogue

The Lives of Animals is about a novelist named Elizabeth Costello, and her attachment to animals. Written by Coetzee (an Academic turned Novelist) for an invited lecture at Princeton, the plot turns on Costello being invited to speak at an imaginary college. Instead of speaking about literature, she opts to speak upon the post-industrial treatment of animals. The postmodern sheen of Coetzee's novella does not block the poignancy of Costello's grief: for animals raised to be slaughtered, for the condition of being brought up to be murdered. The dialogue is helpful for exemplifying the unspeakable nature of Costello's submergence in the two part movement of grief, as the narration continually structures a variety of interpersonal conversations between Costello and separate voices. These conversations diverge on spectrums of intimacy. A lecture, debate, and Q & A session are where Costello's opaqueness are most apparent, while in conversations between John and his mother, the text nears interpersonal overlap. In the many interactions Costello finds herself in, grief is and includes: disconcerting silence, the vitality of anger, a disconcerting relation between grief, and all those beyond it.

Costello's son, John, meets her at the airport. The narrative's focalization means his detachment from her is immediately clear to the reader:

He is waiting at the gate when her flight comes in. Two years have passed since he last

saw his mother; despite himself, he is shocked at how she has aged. Her hair, which had had streaks of gray in it, is now entirely white; her shoulders stoop; her flesh has grown flabby.⁶²

The attention to Costello's aging hints at a care John holds for his mother. However, this is diverted by the narrator's description of her: the word "flesh" repeats continually throughout the story, which stems from the Old English *flæsc*, meaning "meat, muscular parts of animal bodies; body (as opposed to soul)."⁶³ While flesh as word sketches the tension of what animality is, it also raises the question of the etiology—the symptoms and causes—of John's detachment from his mother. Soul in a Christian context reaches for holism, which for medical practitioners means to view the body / mind combination with respect to mental, social, historical, and personal factors. John's shock at Costello's aging, the simultaneously crude and comic alliterative quality ("flesh" / "flabby") of the last sentence, stems from a distance of comprehension than an outright disdain; he lacks the ability to reach for a holistic viewing of his mother. In other words, the word flesh positions Costello as a pseudo-animal—not in a derogatory sense, more that John is aghast at his incomprehension. What John cannot understand will soon be vocalized by Elizabeth. The success of these vocalizations will remain muddy.

A section of Costello's lecture provides the reader a hint at what her movement through the town is like:

I was taken on a drive around Waltham this morning. It seems a pleasant enough town. I

⁶² Coetzee, *Animals*, 1.

⁶³ "Flesh | Origin and Meaning of Flesh by Online Etymology Dictionary." Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/flesh>.

saw no horrors, no drug-testing laboratories, no factory farms, no abattoirs. Yet I am sure they are here. They must be. They simply do not advertise themselves. They are all around us as I speak, only we do not, in a certain sense, know about them.⁶⁴

Costello's grief is for the industrialized treatment of animals, the packing in of cattle and sheep and other farm animals into thin metal carriers, at the end of which they will—often hanging by their feet—meet some combination of bolt pistol, knife, or saw. How are we to read the “certain sense” that Costello speaks of? Grief as *Gravis* (meaning “weighty,” “heavy”⁶⁵) smoothly folds into Costello's experience in moving throughout Waltham. In an unfamiliar environment, she will speak and be scrutinized, be an active social participant in an unknown place. In this circuit of experience, she drives “around Waltham” with her attention fixated on the presence of “drug-testing laboratories...factory farms...abattoirs,” which (strikingly) she does not see, but is “sure they are here.” We could imagine John and her mother driving around Waltham, hours after he has picked her up from the airport. Crucial to this scene is the ordinariness: there would be no dramatic arguments or debates (not on the first day of her stay anyway), just pointing out minute landmarks, and small talk about this or that. Yet Costello's attachment is not to her physical surroundings. Rather, she thinks of the settings of animal cruelty which exist in the nooks and crannies of her son's home town. The attachment of grief is not a pathos-infused repetition of dramatic utterances of suffering. It is Costello driving around, with her son and in his small Massachusetts town, and her mind casually and continually occupied by the animals which she cannot see.

⁶⁴ Coetzee, *Animals*, 119.

⁶⁵ “Grief | Origin and Meaning of Grief by Online Etymology Dictionary.” Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/grief>.

In the same way that the airport reads partially like an interpersonal collision, the staging of Costello's engagement with the dialogic form sketches out her thoughts on animal - human relations, and so deepens an understanding of her grief for the reader. At the end of her lecture, a man stands to remark, "'What wasn't clear to me...is what you are actually targeting,'" Costello's response—"I was hoping not to have to enunciate principles...I am more interested in what lies behind them"—leaves the questioner to merely "give a huge, expressive shrug and sit down."⁶⁶ At the dinner later, which includes Costello and senior faculty and administration of the college, eventually Costello's murmuring comments create "a certain amount of shuffling...[an] unease in the air."⁶⁷ Costello's final commitment is a debate between her and a university philosopher, which John ends up describing as ending with "acrimony, hostility, bitterness...not what [Dean] Arendt or his committee wanted."⁶⁸ Put another way, the distance John feels in relation to his mother is not a fluke—the distancing effect of grief, the inability for others to find traction with Costello's attempt to communicate herself, is a consistent variable in the story.

The impact of social isolation upon Costello is apparent, even while *Animals* shows the inadequacy of pathos to represent the ordinary nature of grief as affect. To portray a dramatic suffering leaves little space to view how this distance also becomes habitual, is yet another ordinary intensity acting upon someone. Another intensity is anger, which Costello eventually moves to. Her final statement is a response to a philosopher. He has concluded that animals have no memory, and so no conception of time; therefore, the death of an animal is less meaningful. A reader of Costello's response (this reader at least) finds little to pity:

⁶⁶ Coetzee, *Animals*, 135.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 140.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 164.

‘Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life. The whole of the being of the animal is thrown into that fight, without reserve. When you say that the fight lacks a dimension of intellectual or imaginative horror, I agree. It is not the mode of being of animals to have an intellectual horror: their whole being is in the living flesh.’

‘If I do not convince you, that is because my words, here, lack the power to bring home to you the wholeness, the unabstracted, unintellectual nature, of that animal being. That is why I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language; and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner.’⁶⁹

It is unsurprising that Costello moves to poetics to explain herself. Costello overlaps with Nathaniel Mackey here, her argument of poetry’s ability to “return the living, electric being to language” of the same modality as Mackey’s characterization of poetry as always “A sign of estrangement, [and thus] to poetize or sing is to risk irrelevance, to be haunted by poetry’s or music’s possible irrelevance.”⁷⁰ In this way Mackey and Costello both return the subject to writing and space and loosening; small portions of resisting absolute comprehension. If the prior moment of Costello’s distancing allows a viewing of the ineffectiveness of being over-reliant upon reason for knowledge seeking, then Costello’s vital, angry, potent language (her urge to “walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner”) exemplifies the necessity of “risk[ing] irrelevance.”

⁶⁹ Ibid, 166.

⁷⁰ Nathaniel Mackey, *Splay Anthem*, (New York: New Directions Book, 2006), xvi.

Note the disclaimer which Costello provides, about “If I do not convince you.” The kind of convincing that Costello partially refutes is the same as the man requesting for Costello to make clear what she is “targeting.” The common understanding of the task of an essay is to “convince”: ask a debatable question, provide a clear answer. But this methodology does not solve the problem that Costello presents. She remains unsatisfied with its ability to brush against what she seeks: “the unabridged, unintellectual nature, of that animal being.” Her account of a more physical and visceral hermeneutic overlaps with the affect of grief, even affect in general. The description of the animal touches upon her attachment to it, as the phrasing of “unabridged, unintellectual” epitomizes the attaching character of the distance of grief. If Costello had resorted to the trusted, reason-based hermeneutic that those in the academy she entered are so bound to, then (either) her suffering for animals would be intertwined with pity, compassion, and sympathy (unnecessary and unhelpful), or she would be met with a more blunt version of what happens: debate, rhetoric, the utilization of fact and logic to disagree.

In my critique of grief as suffering, a reasonable objection would be within my attempt to reorient the affect, I have tossed aside the intensity of it. To focus on the distance of grief means to be oblivious to the viscosity of the “anxiety, sorrow, or pain” of it. This thought is echoed in Eugenie Brinkema’s *The Forms of the Affects*. Brinkema’s critique largely falls upon theorists attempting to salvage loss, as she argues to overly-metamorphosize mourning is to endlessly create “a negation that is conservation, a surpassing that remains”; and simply “erasing the painfulness of pain does not re-theorize pain.”⁷¹ To over examine grief, even in trying to find amelioration, is to deprive it of practical meaning. Brinkema attempts and settles on a liminal

⁷¹ Brinkema, *Form*, 69.

division between melancholy, mourning, and grief, with the latter being the most resistant to language:

Grief will be the term for that which resists the relational dimension of loss; the form for that suffering of a general economy in which not everything can be made to mean and things escape systematicity without return, labor guarantees no profit. At the peculiarly painful dimension of loss, grief resists mediation and ongoing processual struggle. It takes a different form altogether, and it is undialectical.⁷²

Brinkema connects the “undialectical” character of grief to “things escap[ing] systematicity without return.” This is helpful to finding a balanced characterization of the affect: pain as an active variable that (eventually) becomes habitual, pain contributing to the fracture of the “relational” ability of a subject, the capability of the grieving person to participate in systems of social reciprocity. It is from this position, with a nod to the practical validity of grief’s horror, and its characterization being that which resists a “relational dimension,” an affect which refutes “processual struggle” and is “undialectical,”—from here we can return to the dialogic structure of *Animals*.

Costello is being driven to the airport by John. It is raining, and the tone is one of weariness for everyone involved. The position of a soon departure allows honesty; both characters are soon to return to familiar places. This—combined with a deflation of consequences for honest speech—engrains the end of the novella with an earned validity, free mostly of melodrama or sentimentality. John apologizes for the antagonistic behavior of his wife,

⁷² Ibid, 71.

tentatively bringing up “the animal business.”⁷³ (166). I want to quote the rest of the novella’s final page, as it underscores the more salient characteristics of the dialogic structure as a means of representing the undialectical and relation-resistant character of grief:

She watches the wipers wagging back and forth. ‘A better explanation,’ she says, ‘is that I have not told you why, or dare not tell you. When I think of the words, they seem so outrageous that they are best spoken into a pillow or into a hole in the ground, like King Midas.’

‘I don’t follow. What is it you can’t say?’

‘It’s that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money...Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this?’

‘Yet I’m not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma’s, into the children’s, and I see only kindness, human-kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you?’

Why can’t you?’

She turns on him a tearful face. What does she want, he thinks? Does she want me to answer her question for her?

They are not yet on the expressway. He pulls the car over, switches off the engine, takes

⁷³ Coetzee, *Animals*, 166.

his mother in his arms. He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. “There, there,” he whispers in her ear. “There, there. It will soon be over.”⁷⁴

In the hypothetical movement or arc of the plot, the final conversation could contain a well-knit, language based resolution. This does not happen. While the question of whether John’s embrace is a resolution at all is fairly opaque, any relational overlap between the two characters happens outside of language. John has two answers to Costello’s question of “Why can’t you?”. The first he doesn’t vocalize (“What does she want?”)—perhaps not wanting to push his mother away—and the second, “There, there” is steeped in banality, a response of someone uncomfortable with the task of providing comfort. The setting of the academy also provides space for longer speeches—the dialogic character of *Animals* is not small bits of exchanged language, but rather extended speeches and polemics fill the story. I wonder about the attention span of other characters within the continued shift from dialogue to monologue; whether if Costello had opted to speak with greater economy, if this final conversation could have remained unfractured, maybe even contain a reciprocity of language. It doesn’t, and so the story’s slow sketching of grief as the breakdown of reciprocity within language is not finished, but simultaneously crumbles and is held together within the dialogic form. Brinkema observes of reading affect for form that it is “neither immediate nor strictly visceral”; rather conglomerations of “changing details, features, and qualities of a decaying form.”⁷⁵ Costello and John’s final interaction is, in a variety of ways, one of decay. The ending phrase of “It will be soon over,” the one-sided taking of “his mother in his arms” and “inhaling her “old flesh”—neither of these are reciprocation or

⁷⁴ Coetzee, *Animals*, 165-166.

⁷⁵ Brinkema, *Form*, 178.

exchange. Similar to the first greeting, care is briefly apparent in the physicality of Costello's son moving toward her, yet little of his language or action presents Costello as comprehensible to John. Even as he moves physically closer, Costello remains beyond him.

It would be possible to hone in on Costello's language, especially "Am I dreaming?", "I seem to move perfectly easily among people...have perfectly normal relations with them," and "It's that I no longer know where I am," and read this passage as Costello, in admitting her inability to come to terms with her grief, so achieving some relationship or reciprocity to another. This would problematically fit into standard narratives of grief and catharsis: the dramatic speech act frees the grieving subject from her gravis, her physiological weight, language grasps feeling and tosses it elsewhere. While I do not mean to refute verbal communication as a means of amelioration, the ending of *Animals* does not support this understanding of texts which grieve. Costello and John's conversation is a monologue, then John awkwardly comforting his mother. Costello's catharsis leaves John puzzled. However, Brinkema's notion of the formal construction of an affect being slow, methodical, and through repetition and variability, allows a viewing of the ending of *Animals* as a return to the most common element of the story: a break in reciprocity. As the weary tone of the final car ride brings an assumption of resolution, the lack thereof punctuates the story as defined by the affect of grief: a slow, resolutely held decay.



What Survives & the Dialogue

The second layer of this chapter's argument is the value of the dialogic form for writing upon grief, as the affect can be gestured to within the simultaneously flexible and solid dialogic form. It is characterized by a social distance which makes relation and communication largely

unobtainable, this outcome caused by attachment to the passed object. The dialogue can contain this form, even as conversation repeatedly crumbles. From here, prudent questions emerge about reading incomprehensibility in critical writing. Yes, sometimes an essay needs to be “tightened up,” but is critique which defies outright comprehension always in need of clarity? What of reading, thinking, and writing through texts which resist an outrightly rational connective tissue? A text which grapples with these questions is “What Survives,” a critical, dialogic essay between Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman. The piece was originally written for a conference titled “Sex without Optimism,” and was first presented at a commemorating panel for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, nine months after her death.

While the piece’s abstract presents it as a reading of Sedgwick’s work and legacy, “What Survives” formally exemplifies the limits of standard critical writing to travel through affects which resist representation. “What Survives,” in obvious contrast to *Animals*, is not a work of fiction. Berlant and Edelman are the only two speakers, and we are left with an extreme narrative distance: nothing but their voices, and the oscillation of them separating and coming together in their rumination on Sedgwick and her work.

Berlant chooses to begin the dialogue by considering her inability to wield the tool of a narrator as an implicit voice. As she begins to write within the position of grief, she admits of the difficulty of finding a coherent genre:

Lauren Berlant: Lee and I muddled for months over how to structure this—but what is it we offer? A talk, an elegy, a conversation, a literature review, a tribute, a convoluted

apostrophe. While unable to figure out a genre in relation to our friend who continues to be absent, we managed to write an abstract that we believed we intended.⁷⁶

Berlant tackles the undialectical character of grief through an appeal to failure. Most pieces of writing stem from scattered thoughts— things read, written, heard, and spoken which eventually come together within the writing act itself. Revision happens. Re-reading. Eventually something coherent and reflective of the author's thoughts are transcribed. Berlant's language reckons with the assumption that this transcription is concrete and mimetic. Her beginning is an appeal to their respective failure to conjure "our friend who continues to be absent."⁷⁷ Put another way, the gathering and organization of ideas to structure Berlant's writing process ran up against grief, and so a coherency of thought was fractured. Berlant's beginning has whiffs of Costello's refusal to "enunciate principles," even while being more generous, beginning in a more vulnerable state by communicating the difficulty she has had expressing the loss of her friend. Note Berlant's casual looping in of her dialogic partner: "Lee and I"; as well as the repetition of "we offer," "our friend," "we managed." The effect of not only the plurality of the pronouns, but also the surrounding words and phrases, is a sort of balancing between failure and connection. Berlant examines her collection of failed attempts and constructs a cohesive thread. In doing so, the beginning grasps at the repetition of breakages and, in a similar fashion to the ending of *Animals*, renders the communicative failure as what *can be* coherently communicated. This is only possible through the flexible, solid, dialogic form.

⁷⁶ *Reading Sedgwick*, 37.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 37.

Edelman's response furthers Berlant's beginning thread. He praises "those tentative approaches to shaping the sundered moment we live as this dialogues 'now,' and so in evoking as failure the want, the wanting, that relation presupposes the rupture across which it takes its shape, the break...that alone enables its bond."⁷⁸ Edelman's response does not posit a successful rendering of grief. His speech formally stands in as vacillation, a shift in voice that is separate yet connected to Berlant. Alone, Edelman's text is an equally failed attempt. Yet as a response to Berlant's beginning failure, aided on by the solidity of the dialogue form, it is confirmation and extension. Both the respective evocation of "wanting," and the description of this want's "rupture," grasps Berlant writing of failure and reflects it back and refracts it elsewhere. Just like a mirror's impact, the echo of Berlant is present but immaterial in Edelman's response.

Edelman then describes the inevitable continuation of speech which the dialogue supplies. He describes this construction as "a space between us, that gap of our want, the place of the no."⁷⁹ The language is geometric and spatial, similar to grief's distanced structure. The dance of reflection and refraction continues throughout the essay: at times outright disagreement splits their thoughts, in others one follows a topical urge, and wanders away. Content continues, all the while building an atmosphere of working through failure, an inability to locate exactly what either means.

Both *Animals* and "What Survives" exemplify different symptoms of attempting to write through an affect which resists representation. An example is how Costello and Berlant each wander or avert from their original topic, as the double movement of grief defies each figure a

⁷⁸ Ibid, 38.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 38.

concrete attachment to a logical chain of thought. In Costello's first lecture, she eventually begins talking about Franz Kafka, and spends a little too much time working through his thoughts about animals and God. John's wife, Norma, whispers to him, "She is rambling. She has lost her thread."⁸⁰ And, within the model of standard academic writing, with clear, signposting transitions between different topics, she has. A similar aversion happens to Berlant, except, in a more academic vein, she explicitly identifies why. In the beginning of the essay, Berlant finishes her part, and Edelman literally picks up Berlant's final word, "failed," and begins his response with the same: "fail."⁸¹ The two voices thus begin pressed against one another, the chain of logic concrete and clear. Yet in Berlant's next response, Berlant switches from failure to loneliness, a topic Edelman did not mention at all. The only qualifier for the topical change she offers is "Not feeling the failure as a happy confrontation with the rupture within reencounter, my mind turned away both from Eve and Lee."⁸² As Berlant's continues the conversation, she not only averts herself from the localized and structured topic ("failure...Lee"), but also the source of grief itself, "Eve."

In thinking about the different encounters of grief that this chapter has moved through—Costello driving through Waltham, John's continued inability to comprehend her, Berlant beginning their essay by admitting her inability to locate even a genre of thought—I would posit Costello and Berlant's respective aversion from the practical topic before them is understandable. The attachment of Berlant to Eve Sedgwick, or of Costello to murdered animals, does not have the same character for the audiences which they stand before. Grief itself is unpleasant enough.

⁸⁰ Coetzee, *Animals*, 129.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 38.

⁸² *Ibid*, 39.

Trying to vocalize it as Berlant and Costello are doing, as these texts have shown, is nearly impossible. Therefore, in the difficulty of communicating the affect, it would be logical that the speakers would occasionally wander off topic. The breakage in communication is not about the object of grief at all. Rather the movement is about the sensitivity of the affect, its resistance to expression leading to the grieving subject averting her gaze entirely.

Conversational fractures about the point of grief consistently appear in both *Animals* and “What Survives.” Here are two beginnings, one from Berlant, the other from Edelman: “I don’t know if loss is the best name for what survives, or what relation it has to your similar observation about failure”⁸³; “I am not sure that being erotically knowing, in Eve’s work, is trumped by a vitalizing...”⁸⁴ These breakages make total sense within the grief paradigm: Edelman and Berlant are attempting to converge with, as they themselves note, “memories failed.” Or, their individual attachment to Eve only exists in the porousness of memory—of course they diverge in their understanding of Eve and her work. For *Animals*, recall her polemic against the Philosopher, specifically her critique of the abstraction of the animal by human rationality: “Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life...I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner.” Costello’s disagreement is not with the logic behind the philosopher’s statement, but, like Berlant and Edelman’s disagreements, with the tangible, practical, affective truth the language reaches for.

The attempts of each may fail, but, held with the dialogue, will not crumble.

⁸³ Ibid, 49.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 54.

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On Chapter Two

This juxtaposition of *Animals* and “What Survives” offers a paradigm of formally reading grief as an affect. The schematic of grief as a continuous series of breaks in communication not only becomes apparent, but also spawns greater specificity for reading form and affect within literature and critique. As Brinkema points out for reading high formalist films for affect, an incorrect assumption is “a rigorous formalism [being] flat, glacial, and devoid of affect.”⁸⁵ Instead, “high formalist films are suffused with affects.”⁸⁶ This overlaps with a central thesis of this project: that “critique” in literary studies is understood as “flat, glacial” and therefore “devoid of affect.” Critique is, as Rita Felski points out, some combination of “suspicious, knowing, self-conscious, hard headed, tirelessly vigilant.”⁸⁷ It is “paranoid.” These are affective descriptions—just as a text can be infused with grief, it equally can be read for the paranoid intensities which leak from it, or a conscientious commitment to concrete organization of proofs. The stakes are how opening up the possibilities of writing critique from different affective positions, would allow for enriched engagement with texts which resist representation.

An example of this is how *Animals* and “What Survives” each require the multiple voices which the dialogue provides—a kind of radical collaboration—to properly represent grief. This textual structure dislocates the idea of “writing”—close reading, peer review, in class practice—as a solitary activity. That, given attention to the way a text evokes certain affects, different critical forms might be necessary.

⁸⁵ Brinkema, *Form*, 179.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 179.

⁸⁷ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 6.

This category of affect is different from the reflexive and controlling character of anxiety, which was read for alongside the scattered affective environment of the list. The final chapter will address the way critique handles ambiguity. It will suggest that a necessary step is moving from relying entirely upon clear and concise truths, to texts which oscillate *between* clarity and ambiguity. The form will be an essaypoem, which I will describe through the affect of care, which is ambiguous in how it contains both concern and optimism.

(Second Intermission: Knobby Shivering Legs)

I remember vividly everything but the name of the person who taught the first aid lifeguarding course the summer after my freshman year of undergrad. The instructor was in his late 30's, constantly fluctuated between a solid array of cargo pants, worn flannel shirt and earthy toned Merrells, and was a vegetarian (most certainly, the instruction also did go on at a New England summer camp). He had a solid tone and rhythm to his lectures, and always tried to get the class moving as much as he could. The pool practice was joyful. The lake practice was freezing.

The section I remember most was tending toward the end of the second to last lecture of the first day. We had discussed the best practices of visual scanning, what two blows of a whistle mean versus three, and the various ways to properly transition from the lifeguarding chair to a break. I was sleepy. The instructor took a breath, and put down the white board and marker. Now standing, he turned off the presentation. In the way a powerpoint can occasionally induce a drought-like stupor, the erasure of the screen gave the room the smallest jolt; especially as there was five minutes until dinner. He stared around at us. "Honestly, with respect to doing this job any kind of well, the best bit of advice I can give you can be summed up in one word." He said it a little dramatically, but not so much to lose us (swimming is dangerous, I was nervous). "That word is care." He wrote it on the white board, all capitals. We ate lentils and meatball subs for dinner.

Chapter Three: Care and the Essaypoem

The word and affect of “care” is ambiguous. Equally entrenched within the affect are feelings of concern, and those of anticipation and optimism. Definition(s) of the word as a noun lean toward the former, presenting care as an outrightly negative affect: “suffering of mind: grief”; “a disquieted state of mixed and responsibility”; a person or thing that is an object of attention, anxiety, or solicitude.”⁸⁸ Yet care is also a verb, and to care for something entails taking actions to improve the condition of something. Care thus turns on a material proactivity, on what this chapter will call *making*, the term considered broadly—cooking a cherry pie, bringing a cup of juice, writing a letter of hello. The ambiguity of the making is held within the *anticipative* character of the verb. It is possible that an act of care will evoke, in the future, some flavor of validation, gratification, pleasure. It is equally possible that an act will fail to do anything, or do harm to the self, other, or both.

In the history of philosophy, a relationship between care and language is well documented. In Ancient Rome, the term “Cura” was largely ambiguous, connoting both being “burdened,” while simultaneously the provision of welfare for another.⁸⁹ The poet Virgil wrote “vengeful Cares” into the entrance to the underworld, while the stoic philosopher Seneca saw human’s ability to outwardly enact good as what made them closest to the gods, above all other living creatures.⁹⁰ In the 19th century, care was returned to as the Danish Søren Kierkegaard wrote against what he saw as an “excessive objectivity” within European philosophy.

⁸⁸ “Definition of CARE.” Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/care>.

⁸⁹ Warren T. Reich, “History of the Notion of Care,” (Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://care.georgetown.edu/Classic%20Article.html>).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Kierkegaard opted rather to wed care to consciousness, arguing a personal relationship between self and world was necessary to grapple with the contradictions inside truth. In Germany, Martin Heidegger would utilize shreds of Kierkegaard's assertion while also turning back to the Romans, arguing that care contains both "anxiety and solicitude," and within both are two "conflicting, fundamental possibilities."⁹¹ Finally, contemporary understandings of "self-care" can be traced back to the 1980's, when psychologist and feminist Carol Gilligan explored a "care perspective" in woman's development, a productive juggling of responsibility, and radical self acceptance.⁹²

My own sense of things is that care in relation to language is helpful exactly for its ambiguity. Often an idea, author, poem, novel, even a whole body of work, is resistant to a stable system of meaning. After all, how often does a person sitting down to write about a text find the path clearly paved? A valuable character of literary texts is their knack for tending toward characters, situations, or environments that, just like care, cannot easily fit into systems of meaning. However, just as literature finds joyful comfort by swimming within uncertainty, literary criticism does not. While there is a whole sect of writers I could pull in (and often have up to this point) as reference for partial support of this claim—Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of "Paranoid" habits, Heather Love's call for "Close but not Deep"⁹³ readings of texts—it will be more simple and efficacious to point to the way Language Arts is taught. Somewhere around the beginning of high school, the material that is

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² "Care Ethics | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.iep.utm.edu/care-eth/>.

⁹³ Heather Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," (New Literary History 41, no. 2 (2010): 371-391).

most heavily graded in Language Arts classes is the organization of evidence as a means of supporting an arguable thesis. Creative assignments sometimes happen, but what is codified as academic valuable (what most impacts a grade) is critical thought. From this foundation, this value-system is related to most sects of literary criticism. For example, Professors may write subversive, form fracturing, or polemic books, but often only *after* they have published a more “classical” work of literary criticism, defined by the organization of often hundreds of minute details of texts, all organized into a single, overarching thesis.

What if there were, when needed, other options? That is, what if the forms that literary criticism utilized were at times more conducive to ambiguity? What would happen if someone sat down to write about a work of literature, and were able to douse their language, rather than in the cool, distanced tone that is taught, but in the curious ambiguity of care? To wonder this would require thinking through the relationship between care as an ambiguous affect, and providing a critical form that would allow this kind of writing to flourish. To explore this question, I have picked out two texts which require an engagement with hyper-ambiguous topics, and write through them with a formally hybridized essay, what I call an “essaypoem.” The first is a graduation speech written by June Jordan to the Oceanhill Brownsville School, the second Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love*. Both exemplify the making quality of care, and I organize my discussion of them in terms of their increasing hybridity: Jordan’s speech, then Sedgwick’s *Dialogue*. The critical form they utilize is an overt resistance to a single form, as each piece switches between prose and poetry.

In Ancient Greek, poetry is *poiēsis*, meaning “to make.”⁹⁴ Amidst the overwhelming mountain heap of texts which can be utilized to think about poetry and care, I would invite a reader to get literal, and simplify. By “prose,” this chapter means language that intentionally is written for the paragraph, in the tradition of narration. Poetry then, is writing focused on the line. That is, writing that understands a line as partially sovereign, as a fragment equally individual as connected to a network of other lines, with a uniqueness of syntax abound. This idea is reflected by Sedgwick enjambment: “I visualized enjambment very clearly as not only...the poetic gesture of *straddling* lines *together* syntactically, but also a pushing *apart* of lines”⁹⁵ A collection of poetic lines is more capable of playing with space and movement, it can dart between perspectives, pushing *a* and *b* apart for a single second, just to see what *b* and *c* manifest. For my purposes then, the form of “care” inheres in the form of the line break—or the breaking of a paragraph into a poetic line. The connection between poetry, prose, and care, is how care’s making turns on anticipation, on a consistently ambiguous present. Care exists in a liminal, teetering space. The actions— making—of the caring subject can quickly swerve into a flurry of positive sentiments. Just as quickly, they can lead to disappointment, failure, anger, anxiety, grief.

The tendency of academic prose is to value the worth of a single line, paragraph, or section, in how capably it contributes toward supporting the overall thesis. An essay is considered a single narrative, each word assumed to be bringing the reader along with a firm and careful hand toward a single point. Of course, this means ambiguity is not only unpopular, it is

⁹⁴ “Poetry | Origin and Meaning of Poetry by Online Etymology Dictionary.” Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/poetry>.

⁹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “A Poem Is Being Written,” (Representations, no. 17 (1987): 110–43).

often simply considered bad writing. Into this space enters texts like Jordan's and Sedgwick's, which utilize *both* the valuable coherency of prose, and the ability of a poetic line to play with methods of communication that rely on resisting absolute comprehension. Consider how enjambment, rhythm and rhyme scheme, suspension, or meter rely on sound and movement just as much as the signification of a word. In the relationship between care and language, concreteness is not all bad, just as care is not valuable because of the impossibility of locating a coherency to the affect. Rather, it is the solidity of the ambiguity, the consistent possibility of a change or movement, that is valuable in thinking about writing which evokes care. This is also not to accidentally wander into another dualism: poetry = good parts of care; prose = bad parts of care. It is instead the transition(s) between the different forms, the consistent possibility of that formal breakage. The presence of possibility, and the occasional fulfillment of poetic making, allow a text to bend, crack, and loosen the capability of its language to contain ambiguity. This I would suggest, is a helpful mode of wandering through a hyper-ambiguous literary text, arguably more helpful than a collection of paragraphs, each contributing to a single, answerable point.

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June Jordan's Essaypoem

In 1970, the poet, activist, and essayist June Jordan gave a graduation speech at Ocean Hill Brownsville, I.S. 55. Ocean Hill was the origin of the New York City teachers' strike of 1968, where in response to pressure from continued complaints about the adverse inequities of the NYC educational system, Mayor John Lindsay passed legislation titled "community

control.”⁹⁶ The government action decentralized specific school systems (one of them Ocean Hill) from the larger educational system, and gave the community full control over hiring practices and curriculum. Ocean Hill, a minority community in Brooklyn, utilized this agency to entirely restructure the administration, faculty, and curriculum. The result was an educational experience which actively helped minority children learn, largely because people from their own communities were teaching them. The teachers union became fearful that the precedent set by Ocean Hill would lessen the job securities of teachers across the country, and thus they fought back, with eventually every New York City public school teacher going on strike. The community control was eventually repealed by Lindsay. Jordan’s speech comes two years after power was given and quickly rescinded to the Ocean Hill community, and it is in the wake of these events that she must speak.

The text’s beginning declares itself a poem: “This is a poem for all the children.”⁹⁷ What will follow is paragraphs of prose, at times with underlined phrases, other moments with the repetition of key phrases, but prose nevertheless. Then, eventually, Jordan will request for the children to ask themselves about the “truth of” their lives. The text breaks, the space around the language expands, and the text (briefly) becomes a poem. After, onward with prose. In some kind of culmination, the prose then breaks at the end of the text, this time erupting into four stanzas of text written for the line—“Tell the whiplash helmets GO...”⁹⁸ Why do this? What capability does the movement between prose and poetry have that Jordan enjoys, or finds useful? Can care,

⁹⁶ This summary is indebted to the “School Colors” Podcast, as well as the “Code Switch” podcast.

⁹⁷ Jordan, “Graduation,” 30.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 35.

when structured as a consistently ambiguous present, offer a window into the effect of the essaypoem? If so, how?

The beginning of the text questions the relationship between language and representation. It also provides context: “This is a poem for all the children.”⁹⁹ The emphasis upon “all” refers to the necessity of emphasis, that a(ny) gesture of educational inclusivity in the United States is a contradiction. In other words, the text raises a problem of the abstract character of language, and the discontinuity between that abstract communication, and practical impact. Say swaths of white educational school board members continually promise the Ocean Hill community a commitment to academic excellence. This language is spoken, written, put to paper, all amidst the schools that serve minority populations continually having fewer resources than those in predominantly white communities.

Language as a concrete mode of communication is therefore not an effective tool (at least alone), when writing against the social, psychological, and historical forces that swirl around the text. This is one inference we can make from the emphasis of the text’s first line. From this foundation, the text jumps into a highly stable narrative:

Two days ago I went visiting over to the Countee Cullen School in Harlem: P.S.

194. We were having a creative writing workshop there, and one of the little girls took longer than anyone else to put something down on paper. But, finally, she wrote something that she let me read. She had written this simple sentence:

‘I hope that I will live to be twelve.’¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Ibid, 30.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 30.

There is a movement here between prose as a straight-ahead chronology, and the compact line that the “little girl” writes. The prose epitomizes a “mov[ing] straight ahead”-ness: a quick provision of time and location, introduction of a subtle tension (the little girl not writing), and a resolution. The prose is exact and descript, it flows quick and easy. On the other hand, the sentence of the little girl is compact and rhythmic. Where the prose is colloquial and practical, the little girl’s sentence—which I will not call a poetic line, but a preface for what comes—is a collection of four iambs and ninth, punctuating syllable. The tone and rhythm is thus more mythic or classical, with a final syllable that lands. Between the prose and little girl’s sentence there is a kind of dissonance, a rapid switch between tempo and tone. This formal movement between a prose reliant on comprehension, and a more poetic fragment with a distinct meter, creates a more ambiguous aesthetic space. In other words, within this movement between prose and a poetic line, the text contains the affect of care.

The phrase “ambiguous aesthetic space” is a tad confusing. The prior paragraph argued for relating care as an affect to the formal movement between prose and poetry, the overlapping variable being ambiguity. The ambivalence of care is grounded in how it is both cruel and remarkable, as it consistently can hold a slew of negative feelings (anxiety, grief, suffering of mind), and simultaneously perpetuate productive making. In Martin Heidigger’s “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” he provides a more specific language to speak to language, poetry, and the construction / deconstruction of an affective space:

A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary...A boundary is not that which something stops but...the

boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.¹⁰¹

A word begins the process of “building” as Heidegger understands it, which is equivalent to “dwelling” (146). This is not to overly value the impact of a single word, but rather to understand a sentence as ingrained with a tone, rhythm, texture, and erotics. A text like Jordan’s therefore plays off the aesthetic “boundar[ies]” that different forms of language are capable of constructing. And, through a convergence of prose and poetry, Jordan’s text explicitly constructs a coherent presencing—chronological narrative, colloquial speech—then shatters it with the musical suspension of the little girl’s line. The movement between forms constructs an ambiguous aesthetic space, and care, as a method of understanding the formal effect of Jordan’s speech, steps gladly into such a space.

The beginning movement of Jordan’s text constructed the affect of care as a means for speaking to the ambiguity of educational inequity. It’s not ambiguous whether it’s true or not, but how to speak to the children about the possibility of their lives, is. From this environment, the text localizes itself, and reckons with the stakes of the children’s lives. “But education must be about the truth” she begins with, in other words, education must be about the lives of (“all”) the children. It is from this textual location where the critical prose splits open:

Ask this question, again and again, and again:

How does this study,
how does this subject, relate to the
truth of my life?

¹⁰¹ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 2009), 152.

You may find, too often, that the answer is: either ‘not enough’ or ‘not at all.’ If the study and if the subjects do not positively and usefully relate to the truth of your life, then you will have to watch for the differences between knowing and believing.¹⁰²

Note the enjambment of: “relate to the / truth of my life?” The line will eventually become a question (“truth of my life?”), but the breakage renders the ending of the second line as a pseudo-wonder, a question inside a question. Yet this wondering is left far more isolated. The fragment is without ending punctuation. The poem at this point has no given subject, a reader merely knows the prior context is the beginning of a question: “How does this...” / “how does this”. The fragment contains only an active verb and an unfulfilled noun. of relationship. The question is without punctuation, subject or object, and is left further open by the untouched space of the enjambment of the second line. What is the effect of asking upon relationship (“relate to”), yet doing with a stripped form, the words without a grammar, subject, or object?

I would suggest the line is formally similar to the little girl’s sentence. The sentence also turns upon a present ambiguity: “I *hope* that I *will* live to be twelve.” In the future tense, the sentence constructs a net-positive out of a mostly unknown circumstance, the only guarantee an ambiguity of result. There is questioning of the future, and that question turns on the material result. The question inside a question of Jordan’s poetic line gives little as an answer. But what if, in partial response to the original ambiguity the text presents, it formally provides a kind of map for seeking an answer? That amidst the cruel ambiguity that living in an overtly racist country provides, a necessity for survival is a refutation of the superfluity of grammar and subject, and a radical acceptance of any object which “relate[s]” and brings gratification, pleasure, satisfaction.

¹⁰² Jordan, “Graduation,” 31.

Like Ntozake Shange's "don't wanna write / in english or spanish / iwanna sing make you dance...i done forgot all abt words,"¹⁰³ the movement between prose and poetry shifts attention from meaning to movement, and thus partially refutes the text's reliance upon language as merely an abstract tool of communication. This is the kind of effect the essaypoem can play with, which dives into ambiguity rather than avoiding it, thus evoking the affect of care.



Sedgwick's Essaypoem

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *A Dialogue On Love* wonders and riffs upon the worry intrinsic to care. It is a narrative story of Eve building a relationship to her therapist, a man named Shannon. Of Sedgwick's life, there are many flavors of loss which surround her. Deeply immersed in the queer community during the AIDS crisis, and just recently diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, the topic of learning to care for her surroundings amidst the knowledge of loss are at the forefront of her writing. Like Jordan's speech, in Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*, the prose sporadically, occasionally and sometimes often, breaks, and becomes lines of poetry, specifically Haiku. Sedgwick writes elsewhere about, after her diagnosis, struggling to find a "strong sense of gravity"¹⁰⁴ amidst the ambiguity of a near-present death. The fact of attachment—caring for things which inevitably will cease to be—moves her in various directions, as a "sound confiden[ce]" is replaced with a wanting to "invoke the art of *loosing*," as a textual space where "life, loves, and ideas might then sit freely, for a while, on the palm of

¹⁰³ Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide, When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem*. 1st Scribner poetry ed. New York: Scribner Poetry, 1997.

¹⁰⁴ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 2.

the open hand.”¹⁰⁵ This is the sort of intellectual space that *A Dialogue on Love* struggles through, a movement between care as noun—“uncertainty, apprehension, anxiety”—and a more generative, active, positive mold of the affect. Akin to Jordan’s speech, a different but similarly ambiguous topic is taken up. And again, the writer opts to construct a language which moves between prose and poetry. What follows is a reading of care in *A Dialogue on Love* which allows a suggestion that even across these differing chapters, it is the movement between form which often allows affective variety. Not avoiding all negative affects and wanting positive ones, but a greater provision of space for language to be built, extended, and rendered cohesive.

In an article written by the sociologist Cindy Patton on *A Dialogue On Love*, she proposes and identifies a page of the text as being where Sedgwick attempts to outline her fantasy of relationship(s) to others.¹⁰⁶ The text appears like this, as she riffs upon her childhood fantasies of romance and adultery:

—always involved a kind of narrow sexual triangle, or at least a

circuit small enough
that its allure was, you would
eventually

get back all of the
erotic energy you’d
sent around¹⁰⁷

Sedgwick’s rapid-fire prose breaks, and slows down. Each stanza nears a haiku format: five syllables, seven, five again; the first two lines orderly, the third breaking rank, not entirely

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 2-3.

¹⁰⁶ Cindy Patton, "Love Without the Obligation to Love," (Criticism 52, no. 2 (2010): 215-224).

¹⁰⁷ Sedgwick, *on Love*, 114.

following the seven syllable rule. Patton focuses upon a single phrase that will appear upon this page: “trans-i-ness.”¹⁰⁸ For Sedgwick, “trans-i-ness” means rejecting a single way of comprehending the relationship between the obscure, dualistic “caring subject” and “cared for object” that I have continually made reference to. Rather than trapping the ambiguity of care—all of the potent anxiety, also the wanting for gratification—into a single relationship, Sedgwick expands it to include a multitude of surrounding objects of nurture.

Formally, this is also the relationship between the communicative prose and the haiku. Sedgwick does not rely upon a weaponized prose, a collection of highly organized paragraphs and pages which utilize a logical narrative to grip the single, imagined reader’s hand tightly, and force them into a comprehension of the communicated idea. Or, more so, even the compelling prose she does write cannot help but do what prose does: communicate with clarity, blend narrative sentences together to move a story forward.

Sedgwick’s haiku requires reading slowly. They rely on returning to what appears simple, and recognizing it as eventually less so. On attention. On letting an idea be communicated slowly, bit by bit, the language gradually washing over the reader’s cognitive functions. And, the language breaks mid-sentence. These breaks are not poems alongside prose. The page is a textual mix. Its ambiguity stems from changes in speed, rhythm, sound. Communication changes from semiotic (what the words mean) to more about form and movement. The capacities of the text to communicate turns on making. The idea is stretched, loosened, and scattered.

A stumble I’m uninterested in within this reading is implicitly saying positive affects are the goal. That is, these readings of Jordan and Sedgwick hope to find ways of getting the good

¹⁰⁸ Patton, “Love,” 217.

stuff and avoiding the bad. This is incorrect. Rather, my interest is avoiding allowing negative affects—anxiety, fear, paranoia—to usurp the capability of a piece of writing to become exploratory, to make interesting choices, to blend genres, to be transcendent and/or interesting to read. The stakes of reading care then, are that it is an affect which overtly, continually, contains both. For a text to evoke care means having a generosity that lacks an unearned optimism, and refutes the various ways—suspicious, distanced, pretentious—writing can become fearful.

The final example of Sedgwick switching between prose and poetry is about dreading this kind of event, which much of the beginning works to demarcate this specificity of experience. Sedgwick writes, “it’s not so clear to me that ‘depressed’ is the right word for what I am...I think I know depression.”¹⁰⁹ A haiku lightly speaks to the curious difficulty (and subtle banality) of a depression known since being very young: “what everyone says— / I’m weeping in a lot of / offices these days.”¹¹⁰ The topic of something being “bearable” is raised. Shannon notes “And yet, you’re crying now.”¹¹¹ Sedgwick still insists she is unworried about her cancer treatments, nor the prospect of dying. Rather:

I shake my head many times.

Those are not my deepest dread. I dread

every bad thing
that threatens people I love;
for me, dread only

I may stop knowing
how to like and desire

¹⁰⁹ Sedgwick, *on Love*, 3.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 3.

the world around me.¹¹²

To slow this down, note the prose to poetic break between “I dread // every bad thing /.” The language before the poetic line, is attempting to find a specificity to a network of negative affect(s). Sedgwick is shaking her head, she is attempting to find with words the feeling. The prose rejects a possible explanation, then the first line unfolds, a dreading of “every bad thing”. This line alone, as a surface, contradicts the prior sentiment. However, I wonder about the tangible phenomenology of dread. At times the cause of a physiological event, a tightening chest, a subtle freezing of the throat and arms, all much akin to treading water, is entirely unknown until an aftermath . All that’s known in the present is a “bad thing” has come. Then, the poem focuses: “that threatens people I love;”. However, Sedgwick refutes allowing the text to focus and latch on to loved ones. The semicolon enacts a forceful pause, and the text returns to the self, “for me, dread only;”. The movement of the poetic subject is feeling, intuitive answer, then a pause and return to a slow moving circuit of self. The semicolon places emphasis upon while differentiating the connection between the many and the “trans-i” self. And, as the poetic content moves, the rhythm is slowed, a weepy and strong kind of curious.

The movement between “dread only” and “I may stop knowing / how to like and desire” plays upon elision. The fragment “me, dread only” scrambles a typical description of feeling (i.e. “I dread only...”). The comma works akin to a colon, as if taking a pause after the phrase, with the entirety of what follows in implicit connection to the prefacing words, while more isolated, fragmented, the connection more gradual more then the directness of “I dread only.” In other words, in response to the intensities of feeling that are continually attaching themselves to

¹¹² Ibid, 4.

Sedgwick, the text scrambles the presumed hierarchy of understanding a sentiment. It is not the primordial “I” which begins the attempted description. Rather, an acknowledgment of self (“for me”), and a fragment of text which begins with the feeling, “dread only,” and then the stanza ends.

This form has a similar resonance to Jordan’s “relate to the”. Both lines take a middle pause, and then leave a fragment of the line alone, enjambling the sentence, and so leaving the communicated fragment as a pseudo, subtle, minute kind of opening up. The enjambment emphasizes and suspends both: “relate to the”; “dread only”. A reader’s eye (or at least this reader’s eye) requires a pause, a sitting with, an allowance of the idea—in contrast to moving toward it—to move itself forward, around, beside the rest of the page’s language. Either way, the relationship between “dread only” and the second stanza is one that places the integrity, validity, and complexity of the affect before an essential understanding of the self. Or, even more so, with an understanding that the self tends to get in the way of understanding the affect at all. The second stanza then, is a highly coherent, concrete haiku. Where prior poems performed minor breaks in the 5-7-5 form, the second stanza has an exact rhythm. Syllables two, three and four of the first line are emphasized, creating it as an iamb, a punctuating and cacophonous “stop,” and then a trochee, providing the language with a concrete and stable impact. From that foundation, the final two lines—in contrast to the jumbled syntax of the first stanza—unfurl with clarity.

Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love* does, performs, is shaped as, makes the idea that it is attempting to represent and communicate. A side affect is that the affective space that the text generates, shifts. The writing is drenched in a care that is erotic, careful, fearful, anxious, loving, gleeful, sad. It is an ambiguous care, reliant on the text formally moving between prose and

poetry. In the breakages between the forms, the text can play with speed, rhythm, the potential(s) of suspension and enjambment. The text can move, become like music, and then return to concrete communication. The various meanings the text hopes to communicate can scatter, and be woven together in new ways.



On Chapter Three

Care's ambiguity raises valuable questions for critique, that arguably strike at more of a center than the first two chapters. The texts read for are evasive of genre, are far less stable than the novelistic form of Robinson's *Housekeeping*, or the concrete, dialogic essay of Berlant and Edelman's "What Survives." Reading for care within the essaypoem renders an essay a more capable tool of travel through an ambiguous text or idea. While the necessity of avoiding the controlling character of anxiety, or pinning down a text spooked by grief, are occasions which many students will come up against, the topic of ambiguity is an endless occasion in an English class. A critical essay capable of handling ambiguity would be a useful, interesting, and critical tool for a writer. While close readings of what I've coined an "Essaypoem" are one attempt to do so, the fact of attention to affect as a means of better engaging with ambiguity, is a more practical and invaluable takeaway of this chapter.

Conclusion: White Glasses (&Bagel)

Another way of saying this, which spares you, reader, of my romantic fairytale about literature and critique. In Language and Thinking, or my first week of College, my professor was Carolina Gomez-Montoya. She didn't tell us her name until the third day, and wore the most fantastic translucent white glasses. She led us through Borges and Stein, and made stern voices and cow sounds while reading out loud. After a week and a half, it was time to begin drafting our essay: five to seven pages, on a topic of our choosing, required was using three sources from the anthology. She carefully mapped out what the assignment was, then explained the course the drafting process would take. It was Friday, and an August kind of hot. She had earlier recommended we get outside during the weekend. She herself would be "going back to the city, to get a real bagel." We began wrapping up, and as the tight mold of attention began to loosen, Carolina looked up from her bag—"And, please, by God, make it something interesting to read."

A way of speaking to this project with any kind of brevity would be an attempt to take this frame of writing—the way it provides space for the students to engage, while requiring an eventual organization; the way it is without coercion but endlessly effective; the way it is serious and funny all at once; —and formally build it into a critical essay. That, rather than the experienced poise of Carolina rendering academic writing as something varied, difficult, humorous, sad, and satisfying, the form would structurally open itself up to these possibilities. Not throwing out the manual. Just a little more open.

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