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FEELING OUT NEW CONJUNCTURES: POST-LIBERAL AFFECTS AND COMMONS COMMITMENTS

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Crisis Scenes

The obituaries here are filled with young people. Heroin is ravaging our hometowns in Northwestern Pennsylvania. Sometimes laced with an elephant tranquilizer, it is killing a person a day around here. Like so many other communities these days, our social media feeds are dotted with homages to the dead; we find ourselves tallying up the people we knew, friends of friends, acquaintances. Here narcan has saved many, but quite a few others are fed up, calling for a three strikes rule. They ask, "why should we pay to save addicts who made the stupid decision to use? Let 'em all die, that'll solve the problem." The employees at the local methadone clinic are starting to think of themselves as hospice workers for the young.

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It's an old story. For as long as we can remember, our corner of the state has been falling apart. The downtown core slowly lost population, while the surrounding small towns, separated from the city by miles of small family-owned farms, lost local business to the big-box stores. Even the big boxes are now starting to shut down one-by-one. Like the rest of the postindustrial Rust Belt, good-paying steady jobs at the once-numerous manufacturing plants have slowly trickled away, replaced by minimum wage service jobs with unpredictable hours. Homes, deemed too expensive to maintain, became unlivable, and residents with some capital fled to the suburbs. Still, there's a kind of hardiness to the place. Winters are long and intense: snow rolls across the lake in white-out bands. Those in the rural areas are long-familiar with the composting and chicken raising that are now so trendy. Folks have always done what they have to do, working long hours, taking care of their neighbors. But there's been a kind of settling in, and the burdens feel heavier. So many young people are dying.

Standing in line at Walmart, waiting to purchase supplies for the elementary school Halloween party, Emily ignores a phone call from her brother. He texts: a friend's husband—a neighbor's son—has died. At least Facebook posts make it seem that way. Emily makes her purchase, Facebook stalks. Suicide. 28 years old. She starts to text her brother back and realizes their last three texting exchanges have been about a young person's death. It's not that they don't talk a lot. Official data tell the same story. A recent statewide youth survey found that nearly 50% of 10th graders in our county had felt depressed most days in the last year; nearly 45% felt they were 'no good at all'; and over 30% said they sometimes felt that 'life is not worth it.' The numbers were several percentage points higher than statewide averages.

Since 2016, there's been serious talk of shutting down public schools. The district serves the poorest students in the state, many of whom need services for English as a second language or special education, and it ranks in the bottom 4% of state funding per pupil. Desperate, the city school district, serving 12,000 students and facing a twelve million dollar deficit, launched a media campaign, releasing a YouTube video detailing the crisis. It lingers on a photo of six black teenage boys crumpled on a front porch after several of the district's high schoolers were shot in a string of incidents in July 2015. All of them hold their faces in their hands; one of them is kneeling, his head on the ground in despair: "Those are our children," the superintendent says. Another administrator reflects how he could send

his son to the nicer school, down the road in the suburbs: "But I don't, because I believe in our schools and I believe in our teachers." Suddenly, our town is in the national news, in a *Huffington Post* article about the death of public education. The article circulates. Suburbanites revealed that some of the well-funded schools in the area refuse to accept tuition-paying students from other towns: "Where will these kids go to school?," they wonder. Months later, after small wins for funding from Harrisburg, the district opts to combine its two high schools. Before they can start the necessary renovations at the school that will remain open, fire breaks out there, forcing the district to cancel the final few weeks of classes.

Blue Trump signs dot the town. Some of them are huge, ten feet by six feet, and they feel aggressive. Two Latinx students in our classes tell us that their nice next-door neighbors, the ones who help them out occasionally and always say "hi," put up a Trump sign. Our students, with their own Black Lives Matter sign, feel scared. And puzzled. Facebook posts seethe with anger about Trump signs and "cocksuckers" who steal them. Some suggest lining the signs with razor blades: thieves will need Obamacare now! The local paper asks, "Why are Trump signs dominating our area? Analysts say they've never seen anything like it." The local Democratic party chairman says the Hillary signs haven't been delivered yet, and really, it's not the yard signs that matter anyways: the important campaigning is on social media. A friend of ours is running for state representative, and door-knocking with him is so disheartening. Most all of the registered Democrats we meet are unwilling to even talk. They don't have signs; Trump v Clinton is a joke, they tell us. To top it off, our local Democratic field office isn't at all interested in the data we collect. Their algorithms focus on the wealthier turfs atop the hill where the professional classes live. Our friend loses, of course. The district has been gerrymandered to ensure it remains red regardless.

Very soon after the election, the national news shows up. We're at the center of it: a long-blue county that's gone red, a microcosm of the Trump story in our lost jobs, abandoned factories, broken dreams. The local labor union leader tries to explain to the reporters that folks make desperate choices during hard times; a middle-age white women fist-pumps while she listens to a Trump speech and tells the reporter, through tears, that her brother was one of five men who took their own lives during one round of layoffs. Another man packs up his house, details his low-wage prospects, and notes that the house has been tough to sell in the wake of the school district crisis. "This town is a sinking ship," he says, "you'd be crazy not to get off." This publicity is not good: the town's been pinning its hopes on tourism. The visitors' bureau launches a hashtag campaign. Social media

erupt with photos of vibrant sunsets—better than Hawaii!—and a local photographer highlights his talents with a triumphant montage of locals at work and play. Somebody starts a Facebook page called "Raise Our Town's Self Esteem!" and urges members to share positive news. Still, things feel bleak.

Online, the feelings churn. Trump supporters cackle on their feeds: liberal snowflakes can suck it. Others mourn, registering their disbelief and anger at what's unfolding. The frantic search on the left for an appropriate response to Trump, while global, the pressure bears down on where we live with a decided sharpness. Our town's name is cast around dismally: uttering it communicates how hopeless the people and their politics are, how terribly behind it is, how much we all have to bear to go on living here. Endless chatter about our white working class voters, incessant arguing about race, gender, and class and what gets to matter, ongoing debates about diversity and social justice bolstered by casual snobbery or pedantry toward rural communities and the 'white trash' that live there: our daily lives are increasingly plastered with social media commentary. As the new (ab)normal sets in, our liberal friends post accounts of homophobic, sexist, racist encounters. They wonder, "why should we try to understand the white working class Trump voters if we have to endure stuff like this? Why should we have to be fair-minded?"

We do our best to abstain. The scene is bigger than Trump, and we know it. Yet he continues to eat up the space of our relationships and our sense of possibility. Little hands stand in for bigger problems: they overwhelm and overdetermine our scenes. Jodi Dean (2010) argues that we live in the era of communicative capitalism. Processes of capital accumulation now hinge predominantly on the production and exploitation of communication flows: share, comment, recommend, follow, link, like, love. The system is designed to maximize, capture, quantify, and monetize our collective sociality (Dean 2010). What is so frustrating about this situation is how completely inadequate our daily lives feel when we're stuck in communicative capitalism. What is so heartbreaking is that all this talking, tweeting, sharing about Trump only extends the conditions that made Trump possible in the first place.

And meanwhile the earth keeps heating up. Fossil fuels have pretty much destroyed everything. This realization hums in the background of everything.

Cultural Studies and Conjunctural Analysis

It is commonplace to assert that we live in an age of crisis. Indeed, for over four decades, neoliberalism has governed through crisis, and now it has reached its own impasse. The biggest symptom is Trump. As Nancy Fraser suggests, the political crisis of Trump is indicative of a more general hegemonic crisis (2017). Trump's victory marked a defeat for progressive neoliberalism, which was built on "a real and powerful alliance of two unlikely bedfellows": on the one hand, social movements focused on diversity and inclusion and, on the other, leading economic players like Wall Street and Silicon Valley. "What held this odd couple together was a distinctive combination of views about distribution and recognition," Fraser explains. "The progressive-neoliberal bloc combined an expropriative, plutocratic economic program with a liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition" (Fraser 2017). For a time, progressive neoliberalism won out over what Fraser calls, "reactionary neoliberalism." Reactionary neoliberalism is the right frontier of neoliberalism, which professes to care about small business and local jobs, and decidedly not diversity and inclusion, but was actually "committed to bolstering finance, military production, and extractive energy, all to the principal benefit of the global one percent" (Fraser 2017). But in-between the right's "reactionary neoliberalism' and the left's "progressive neoliberalism" was a growing gap where the mundane everyday brutalities of financial capitalism refract and fester.

Trump stepped into this hegemonic gap, exposing and exploiting it. We are interested in thinking about what might be done in the presence of this gap, in the face of Trump, in this moment of conjunctural breakdown. Cultural studies grew up within the cementing and advancement of neoliberal hegemony. How should cultural studies intervene, and what might it become, in this moment of crisis? So much of the story of this crisis is that people are checking out, cashing out, or digging in their heels and staking their claims. Ennui and political fervor seem to entwine. But despite the morass of our media worlds with boundaries drawn, stalemates reached, everyday life in the postindustrial Rust Belt is increasingly rife with "fissures and faultlines" that portend new potentialities, new conjunctures (Grossberg 1997, 257).

As Lawrence Grossberg suggests, the left itself seems ill-equipped to take on this world-building work, too caught up in "pessimism, 'hyperinflated' into moral outrage and panic" to see the cracks and gaps, much less productively intervene (Grossberg 2017, n.p.). When crisis is the backdrop to daily life, righteous refusal

dominates the narrative, and it has no taste or tolerance for conjunctural analysis. But, "[c]hange does not just happen," Grossberg reminds us, "[T]he new does not just appear and the old disappear. The ground has to be prepared, the work has to be done to reshape the old and give shape to the new" (Grossberg 2017, n.p.). To set ourselves up to participate in the hard and uncertain work that lies ahead, we need to figure out how to feel out new conjunctures, to be in the world in new ways, to experiment with more egalitarian forms of living that might be possible, and cultivate the materials we need to transform these possibilities into realities. We must double down on cultural studies' commitment to everyday life, specifically to what Melissa Gregg calls, a "desire for the mundane": an "urge to hear how cultural changes land in the context of people's everyday" (Gregg 2004, 369). In times of crisis, breakdown, and transition, honing in and acting on this desire for the mundane becomes vital groundwork: work that forces us to venture outside our 'echo chambers' and into unexplored territories and unknown relationships, inhabiting our own bodies and communities in new and almost certain to be uneasy and uncomfortable ways. Indeed, to prepare the ground, we need to begin "where people actually are" and approach them, as Grossberg puts it, "with a sense of humility, a willingness to accept that people may have different positions and beliefs, and that one's own positions might need to adapt to others' perceptions and demands. We have to seek ways of dealing with the complexities, ambiguities and uncertainties, of translating and living with our differences" (Grossberg 2017, n.p.).

What follows is a modest proposal for how cultural studies scholars might orient ourselves, our teaching, research, and writing toward a conjuncture in transition. In some ways, what we have to say is nothing new, for cultural studies is defined by its interventionist orientation, 'radical contextualism,' 'intellectual modesty,' and commitment to meeting folks where they are, where things come to matter. But this project is perhaps more pressing and more difficult right now, and the stakes, in many ways, are higher than ever. As Trump and talk of Trump threaten to overdetermine our scenes, we need to be able to sense what else is happening, to feel out what else might be immanent and possible in social relations, so we can tell better stories. This feeling-out conjunctural work might take the form of what Kathleen Stewart calls "slow ethnography" (Stewart 2017a). Slow ethnography tunes into affective registers, stays with emerging sensibilities and everyday forms of falling apart and pulling together. This kind of ethnography rhymes with the intensities of its crisis scenes, the ways that things come to move and matter. It

resists the urge to land on a narrative, to figure writing and critique as a way of reproducing the world and representing our own authority. Or, as Stewart puts it, slow ethnography forgoes "the dualist dead ends of modernist, humanist social science and its unfortunate affective habits of snapping at the world as if the whole point of being and thinking is just to catch it in a lie" (2017a). Indeed, rather than marking down and solidifying events, locking them into place and laying out the boundaries around them, slow ethnography takes research as risk-taking, a humming-along-with the world. "Structure is prismatic," Stewart says in an interview. She continues, "agency is not the clear and intentional act of a subject but an energetics" (Stewart in Kenner 2012, n.p.). We must then, "hold attention to the pressure points of the compositionality of life in situations of all kinds. This is where new structures of attention….are begging new political questions" (Stewart in Kenner 2012, n.p.). As Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean (2017) write, "in the midst of these perilous and uncertain circumstances, ethnographic writing has a crucial role to play in setting loose other kinds of compelling tales" (7).

"Feel Out, Go Out, Try Out"

In a recent *Social Theory* post titled "Big Man," Lauren Berlant (2017) analyzes all the "flailing" around in the aftermath of Trump, as people struggle to find their genre of response to the crisis.[1] Of Michelle Obama's famous punchline, "When they [Trump supporters] go low, we go high," Berlant writes, "I hate its hygienic politics. When they go low, we 'feel out, go out, try out' is more like it."

So much of what we see in our newsfeeds, of what passes for critical or left discourse, amounts to some version of hygienic politics. Liberalism is built on hygienic politics: good citizens are clean and proper; they control their bodies and desires. Historically, black and brown bodies, queer bodies, working class folks, and unruly women were deemed not capable of good citizenship. Progressive neoliberalism, however, welcomes a diversity of good citizens, provided they are aligned with the new demands of neoliberal capitalism. Meritocracy (people get what they earn) and diversity (market access and inclusion) harmonize into a moralizing frame built on thick distinctions between virtuous subjects (those who work hard, make good choices, assume personal responsibility, and thus deserve to rise to the top) and 'deplorable' disposable subjects ('thugs,' 'white trash,' and others who have failed to take control of their lives and can thus be relegated to social death). After all, we still have to account for why some are winners and others are losers. We still have to find ways to make the dispossession of individuals and communities a rational, just affair.

We live in one of those places of "slow death," where populations, their capacities, and their investments have been worn down (Berlant 2007). It shouldn't be hard to understand why the hygienic, moralizing politics of progressive neoliberalism don't always resonate here, even with those who might, too, be up for something progressive, even new. Trump exploited that gap, and with his election something snapped. Life online and off intensified, felt more raw. People were "flailing." Trump was everywhere, consuming senses, opening up old wounds and broken promises, but also making new things possible. "When crisis is ordinary," Berlant asserts, "flailing...can be fabulously unimaginative, a litany of lists of things to do, to pay attention to, say, to stop saying, to discipline and sanction." But flailing can also open something up: "this is what it means to make elbow room amid crisis" (Berlant 2017).

Just days after the election, in the midst of an onslaught of commentary, prognosticating, and hand-wringing, an invitation to a secret Facebook group arrived. The convener was searching for a salve, a source of strength and inspiration to live on in a new era. She had been reflecting a lot, trying to figure her genre of response, and she realized that she wanted to gather close the women around her, open space for collaborative care of the self and community. This was to be a non-obligatory space, determinedly open to myriad ideas to both nurture members and generate plans for collective action. At once expansive (inviting new ideas, new members) and enclosed (espousing a clear ethos, emphasizing privacy), the group sought to offer both solace and empowerment. Members posted inspiring literature, ideas for political action, details of troubling encounters at work and in the community. These moments of digital connection, formed against the backdrop of more publically shared frustration and exhaustion with living in Trump country, come to represent a kind of safe space to which we can turn when the weight of Trump country is just too much.

Elsewhere, groups organizing against Trump multiply across the region, while local community efforts that had been humming along slowly suddenly got a jolt of energy. An investment cooperative is established to collectivize ownership of and rehabilitate neglected commercial spaces. Folks finally get to work building a teen center, a project that has been discussed for nearly a decade. Most noticeably, a group called True Grit forms. Inspired by a pop-up cafe that opened for a week the previous year on the town square, the small group starts organizing neighborhood clean-ups and free, family-friendly community events.

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They have no budget and rely on social media and the goodwill and resources of local businesses, government, and organizations to make things happen. True Grit organizes many of their events in public parks which have been neglected for years due to budget deficits and cutbacks. Hundreds of people (and sometimes over a thousand) show up to play games, eat food, and learn about different initiatives. At one event in a large, poorly kept field dotted by a small playground and shadowed by a hollowed out, defunct public school, hundreds of bodies linger, play, eat, talk. People line up with their kids and dogs for the free pizza, hot dogs, and ice cream that have been donated. These lines spill into crowds waiting to fill out a community survey about what matters to them. People from all over town are chatting it up, taking up dead space and making it live again. What was happening is hard to describe; it's somewhere between a janky fair and a serious meeting, and it feels unprecedented.

Just as social media seems suddenly overrun with Trump talk and commentary, local scenes feel suddenly overrun with groups, events, open-mic nights, fundraisers, meetings, projects, organizations. People are hungry for connection and doing. Folks are coming together in a multiplicity of ways to resist and try to repair what's broken.

Berlant's recent work addresses the affective life of conjunctural breakdown and repair and proposes the commons as a pedagogy for these transitional and troubled times. Berlant's proposal to "feel out, go out, try out," is the opposite of progressive neoliberalism's hygienic politics. In the face of Trump, instead of moralizing and drawing lines, let's see what else we might do, what else might be possible. What's at stake for Berlant is the problem of reproduction. Everyone senses the breakdown. Glitches are everywhere. Repair efforts multiply in myriad forms. Resistance feels more mandatory than ever. The question becomes: how do we ensure that our repairs and resistances don't reproduce the same structures, relations, and attachments that are wearing us down in the first place? Here's where the commons can help.

It is crucial to understand what the commons is and is not in Berlant's thinking. Berlant is wary of prominent left discourses of the common/commons; the commons is not a particular politics (anti-privatization) or ontology (living labor) (Berlant 2016). These approaches tend to be idealist and obfuscating, unable to deal with the "ordinary affects" (Stewart 2007) that attend to everyday life with other people. Berlant explains that, "[i]n order for the common and the commons

to be something other than pure abstraction or compulsive repair that collapses what's better into what feels better, we must see what can be done to the dynamics of attraction and aversion—the dynamics of attachment and attention—that mark and manage the overpresence of the world" (Berlant 2016, 399). For Berlant then, the commons is about experimenting with what new attachments and fantasies, and what forms and experiences might be possible:

> A genuine commons commitment involves a willingness to trash the fantasy that equality can be generated by redistributing money a little and having good manners. It involves embracing the discomfort of affective experience in a truly open social life that no one has ever experienced. It requires more adaptable infrastructures. Keep forcing the existing infrastructures to do what they don't know how to do (Berlant 2017).

Thinking about the commons as a pedagogy for feeling out, trying out, going out is about unlearning so we can sense and see what else might be possible in social relations. This unlearning of liberalism (and neoliberalism) at the level of everyday life with other people requires an affectively attuned, low theory of conjuncture, what Berlant calls an infrastructural analysis.

> An infrastructural analysis helps us see that what we commonly call "structure" is not what we usually call it, an intractable principle of continuity across time and space, but is really a convergence of force and value in patterns of movement that's only solid when seen from a distance. Objects are always looser than they appear. Objectness is only a semblance, a seeming, a project effect of interest in a thing we are trying to stabilize. Thus, I am redefining "structure" here as *that which organizes transformation* and "infrastructure" as that which binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself; and I am proposing that one task for makers of critical social form is to offer not just judgement about positions and practices in the world, but terms of transition that alter the harder and softer, tighter and looser infrastructures of sociality itself (Berlant 2016, 394, italics in original).

For Berlant infrastructures are affective. They are "structures of feeling": "one's obligation to show up to life in a certain way" (Berlant 2015). To realize new forms of living we must work at the level of infrastructure to explore "terms of transition," that might transform, "the dynamics of attraction and aversion" that manage and overdetermine everyday sociality (Berlant 2016, 399). We need to tend to and work on the rifts and run-ins, the encounters and scrapes that alter the landscape and move folks in new ways.

Despite the proliferation of commons desires, liberal infrastructures are not easily let go. For Berlant then the commons must be a commitment to experimenting with commons infrastructures, to working in and thinking from the hard work of being with others. Berlant's commons pedagogy asks us, "to break our own hold on the world" (Berlant 2017), and recognize that everyday life is, "actively null, delightfully animated, stressful, intimate, alien, and uncanny" (Berlant 2016, 399). For everyday life with others is difficult at best. People have baggage, wounds, desires, investments, histories, and positions that don't always, if ever, line up with our own. The commons asks us to engage the discomfort, rage, aggression, despair, and all the other unhygienic affects that surge in the course of being with others. The work of the commons is figuring out how to open possibilities for new, collective forms of living while reckoning with ambivalences that animate and complicate our desires for community and solidarity (Berlant 2016).

Post-election it seems that people are up for experimenting with commons infrastructures. The Facebook group fashions itself as a commons infrastructure where all women are actively cared for and can work together to resist and garner strength from collectivity. The group is also, though, a retreat from the commons. It desires a space that is safe, private, and protected. It yearns for the commons but also, and understandably, can't bear it. People are too frustrated, raw, and angry. The group remains stuck within liberal infrastructures, forging "individualized solidarities," where the aim of collectivity is buttressing individual capacities for resisting and surviving (Wilson and Yochim 2017, 137-168). As Berlant insists, though, commons work requires a "confidence in an apartness" (2016, 399) and a "decision to self-threaten" (2017); for the commons cannot be "a gesture of pastoral repair of the broken world, especially if you need repair to feel like repair, or solidarity to feel as likeness" (2017).

True Grit is also experimenting with the commons, trying to force "existing infrastructures to do what they don't know know do." Their commons commitment is public, fueled by what Lynne Segal (2017) calls moments of collective joy, "when we are most fully absorbed or lost in something clearly bigger than ourselves...caught up with others in public spaces" (263). True Grit is all about collective doing and experimenting with what people might be up for; they seem to be trying to work on the dynamics of community attachments and attention, of what we can do and who we can be together in this place. Yet, True Grit's commons pedagogy also easily slips back into an individual affair. True Grit's leaders quickly became local heroes and celebrities; their efforts are regularly featured in local newspapers and praised on the numerous local Facebook groups

and pages that have popped up over the past several years. The group's leader, a rambling local business owner, was given a key to the city and named the town's "Person of the Year." And to be sure, there is also something 'bro-ish' about True Grit. They are the doers, the movers and shakers, the men of action, though their group includes women (black and white) and they partner with the local Showing up for the Racial Justice (SURJ) chapter, as well as countless other local groups and programs. Ultimately, attributing a particular politics to True Grit feels strained and unproductive. Sometimes the efforts feel like "pastoral repair," but there's also a looseness and openness that seems to be reaching for a new sociality.

Meander and Attune

What might it mean for us, as cultural studies scholars, to also "feel out, go out, try out" in response to Trump? Amidst all the "flailing" and frantic efforts to repair and resist, how might we help to identify the terms of transition for a new conjuncture? How can we participate in the material production of post-liberal, commons infrastructures that people are working on?

To feel out what commons infrastructures and new social forms might be possible, we need to attune ourselves to ordinary affects and everyday compositions, to explore how things are hanging together for folks, or not. This attention to the compositionality of everyday scenes and the affective infrastructures that try to hold them together requires a willingness to meander through ordinary spaces, to check out the mood in different places and see what else might be happening. New ways of being in the world, Ben Highmore writes, "emerge out of unnoticed and unremarkable materials…, out of something that a minute ago seemed completely in the grip of convention" (2017, n.p.). Potentialities simmer – starting in ways that are hard to articulate – at the level of shared feelings, atmospheres, inklings. Stewart's work, especially, teaches us to linger on things that seem like they *might* come to matter. Careful and deliberate experimental work in ethnography, "fashions itself like a tuning fork that learns its note through small, incremental experiments made in fits and starts. It lurches or sails into some kind of capacity to be with matter-practice-thought-feelings that stretch beyond the representational register of signification to etch uses and forms, frictions, constraints, motions, and lines leading out onto a landscape of sociality and dream" (Stewart 2017b, 226-27).

Meandering and attuning might mean moving outside of the lines of our disciplines and our identities, opening up to experimenting with common infrastructures that we might not yet see or want to see. It might move us to reconsider boundaries and judgments and adjust our own attachments and attention. It also might mean approaching our work from a seriously playful place, trying out ideas, tracking potential new paths, following impressions that hint at something emergent. However, we inhabit a world where this sort of experimental work with the commons is difficult, at best, even as new dynamics and pressure points proliferate. Caught in the churn of neoliberal academia, we must hurry to build CVs and stake claims. Too often we turn away from what *might be* happening, too anxious to get things done to meander around and attune to the ordinary swells beneath our feet.

We want to suggest that this sensibility of meandering and attuning might also require demediating, turning away from or refusing the logics of media culture. Mark Andrejevic (2013) has brilliantly analyzed information glut. But communicative capitalism also creates mediation glut, as we find ourselves caught in ever-churning affective networks of mediated communication. Everything feels directed at *us*, begging our response, prodding our commitments, investments, attachments, modulating our feelings and sensibilities. Everything gets explained, worked over, reworked—it is affect overload and opinion overload. The speed of it all is disorienting and overwhelming. This mediation glut lays down shifty but stern boundaries; it charts out "mattering maps" (Grossberg 1992) designed specifically for us, tightening our senses to the point that it's hard to feel anything else. One way to think about communicative capitalism is as a giant tuning fork, one that is constantly doing the tuning for all of us. This tuning fork runs on feedback loops to create "feed-forward loops," feeling out the future for us (Hansen 2015).

Pursuing the sense that something *else* might be happening—something other than what a disciplinary or digital conversation might have us believe—is work that requires us to slow down. Slowness is not about time per se, but a sensibility of drawing out the ordinary, of giving mundane moments—where life is happening and keeps going—their due. This slowness can shift us away from the deluge of communicative capitalism and toward fermenting matters, new connections, shared feelings. It demands that we renounce what the Paper Boat Collective identifies as the "defensive irony and detachment" in so much critical scholarship. Instead, they urge writing that "is captivated, vulnerable, and implicated, writing

nurtured in pain and fear, writing that courts joy and seeks knowledge in the uncertainty and excess of attachment, writing that puts its authors, its readers, even itself, at risk" (Paper Boat Collective 2017, 14–15). This sensibility pulls back on the angling to argument in order to pay attention to the earnest and productive tensions that make up everyday life.

Slowing down is also the work of apprehending new worlds. Highmore (2017) reflects upon how:

> writing that is endlessly attracted to the frayed edges of our attachments and purposefully attuned to the simultaneity of irreconcilable realities, might foster a range of moods. It may flirt at times with wistfulness, often it will be perplexed, sometimes anxious, but it will always, at heart, be a forward-leaning kind of striving … It would doggedly search out the insignificant, not out of a desire for obscurity, but as a working strategy for loosening the normative grip of a world already marked with significance ... In that refusal to meet the world as it is already revealed to us, there is a modest gamble that another incipient world is, perhaps, already with us (n.p.).

A pursuit like this requires that we are open to failure, to false starts, and the painstakingly slow work of finding the right words for something not yet articulated. We need to let go of the desire to make things hold together, to master a world or scene, and instead listen for and experiment with how things might move, or might hang together more loosely.

This slow sensibility of meandering and attuning is akin to Jenny Odell's idea of doing nothing, which she describes as, "a series of movements: 1) a dropping out; 2) a lateral movement outward to things and people that are around us; and 3) a movement downward into place" (xi). For Odell, doing nothing is "resistance-in-place" (xvi). When we immerse ourselves in our places, we refuse to have our worlds defined by communicative capitalism's feed-forward loops. By redirecting our attention "outward to things and people that are around us," we find new frames of reference, new social forms.

In urgent times, "doing nothing" might seem frivolous, even irresponsible: when things are breaking down and falling apart, do we really have time to feel things out?[2] But, as Highmore (2017) puts it, "the knowledge of what will help you survive and thrive and what won't, isn't given in advance, or not with any certainty" (n.p.). Sussing out what might help us build common lives with others, while seemingly incomprehensible and immovable forces bear down, takes opening

up to what people are trying out and tuning into shared encounters.It understands that looking at and listening to those things with care *is* the work of the commons.

Increasingly, we find our own work to be preoccupied with meandering and attuning. We also try to pass this sensibility along to our students. We've been spending our summers collaborating closely with a few students on our research. Much of our work with them is exploratory, taking advantage of the slowed-down, quieter time on campus to talk through new theories and feel out what's happening in town. In Summer 2017, two of our students started interviewing, tentatively reaching out to, community members and asking to sit with them and talk through how it's been, living in the Rust Belt. Throughout this process, our students started moving through town in new ways, spending more time off campus than on, recognizing community members, and spending time with them in their apartments, at the local coffee shop, and in our new games store, more a hangout than a place of business. So much of what these students were doing was about coming to inhabit their community in new ways. Moving away from the comfort of campus, up on a hill above town, and situating themselves in the hubs of local encounters, in the thresholds.

Occupy the Thresholds

In *Transformation Now!: Toward a Post-Oppositional Politics of Change,* AnaLouise Keating draws on womanist thought and indigenous science to argue for threshold theorizing—claiming it as critical work that: "facilitate[s] and enact[s] movements 'betwixt and between' divergent worlds, enabling us to establish fresh connections among distinct (and sometimes contradictory) perspectives, realities, peoples, theories, texts, and/or worldviews" (Keating 2012, 10). To engage in this threshold theorizing, though, we need to be willing to occupy the thresholds, those, "transitional, in-between spaces where new beginnings, and unexpected combinations can occur" (Keating 2012, 10). Thresholds are spaces of deborderization where common infrastructures can be sensed and constructed. For as Achille Mbembe insists, "[t]he political cannot be reduced to the painstaking management of emotionally safe spaces and shared atmospheres. Radical agency is not about the sharing of boundaries. It is about deborderization….The political in our time must start from the imperative to reconstruct the world in common" (Bangstad, Nilsen and Eliseeva, 2019).

Working on and in these thresholds requires what Keating calls a post-oppositional sensibility. Being post-oppositional is not about ignoring political antagonisms or forgetting histories of exploitation and oppression; nor is it about empathy or forgiveness. It is about orienting ourselves to our shared vulnerabilities, our interdependencies, and our radical interconnectivity, and being open to exploring these. Occupying the thresholds allows us to become uncertain, bridging between existing worlds and common infrastructures.

This post-oppositional orientation is not easy to cultivate, much less sustain, as opposition to one another is what we learn from what Keating (2012) calls "self-enclosed individualism" (171-175). We draw increasingly hard and fast boundaries around the self in order to secure it, amplify it. We walk around feeling "mutually exclusive" to the world, "evaluating all action in egocentric terms" (Keating 2012, 171). Indeed, while the neoliberal conjuncture swells with untenability, we've internalized "neoliberal reason," accepted our fates as "competing human capitals," and that's hard to shake, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty (Brown 2015, 17-45). Competition has become commonsense, a powerful structure of feeling that shapes how we experience our world and our sense of what's possible to do and be, alone and together. This infrastructure hardens the socially constructed, liberal, humanist lines between self and other, and self and world, making opposition feel inherent and necessary. It chokes collective imagination and doing: it's me against you, me against the world. Our desires for commons infrastructures and our capacities for alternative forms of attachment and relation run up against this oppositional sensibility.

Occupying thresholds is inherently risky work. One of our students, a child of immigrants, a Muslim who'd ventured to the college from a large cosmopolitan city, had spent most of his college career volunteering in the community. He knew the surrounding area well, had fallen in love with the non-profits where he volunteered, was self-possessed and charismatic in his interactions with new people. But moving his body through the white rural Rust Belt also felt so precarious. His name marked him right off-the-bat, called attention to this ethnicity, to the Islamic religion and culture that both felt in his bones and not-quite his own. His interactions with strangers bore that mark, set him to the task of placing people at ease, using his easy smile and gentle demeanor to connect with folks beyond the surface.

CAPACIOUS

During our work together with him, we stumble upon Common Threads, a "Youth Café" advertised by a simple sign on the state highway on the way into town. It felt promising, this space for young people. We searched online, found their Facebook page, read their vision: "[t]he mission of Common Threads is to be a gathering place where young people can socialize free of negative influences and where they connect and find [a common thread]." And also, its "cafe setting" is a place, "to have conversations with young people and ultimately offer them the hope of Jesus Christ." We're not so sure about this, but we decide to check it out. Our student shares in his research journal that he's excited but nervous. He's been outside of the town proper before, volunteering, and he has dealt with so many microaggressions. Determined to go in with an open mind, he thinks it better to show up in person—emailing ahead means that he'll have to use his full name, which, in his words, "can often be a deterrent." We drive over together, talk on the way about how it might go, how to think about a space that claims to be both "common" and evangelical.

To enter the space, we all need to work on altering our aversions and attention. As Berlant insists, a commons commitment means "losing one's ground" (2017). Julie and Emily feel a bit bad: are we placing this student in too many uncomfortable situations? Are we asking too much, evoking emotional strain? All of the talk of community-based work, challenging the town-gown divide, opening up to uncertainty, feeling out, trying out—is it just asking this student, and others, to take on too much risk? We opt for honesty, talk about it, take care. What is it that these folks are looking for as they seek common ground? What's happening there? What are they trying out, and how is it going?

When we arrive at Common Threads, a genial couple, white, smiling, gray-haired, greet us in the gravel driveway, offering lemonade and ushering us to sit at a picnic table on the covered patio. Before Emily can even ask a question, Earl begins, "God put us on a vision for a cafe in this area." We settle in to listen. Common Threads began to germinate after a teenager in the small town a few miles from the college took his own life. The adults got together, talked about how their kids didn't have much to do; drugs and alcohol were filling in the void. Earl and Denise had been hosting thirty-five kids for youth ministry in their home every week, and they thought it was time to start looking for a bigger place. Eventually, the community raised $150,000 to purchase and renovate the 11-acre property we're sitting on. It's tree-filled, bordered by a large creek, has a large field where kids play football, basketball hoops, barbeque pits. There are two buildings filled with comfy furniture, pool tables, games. The couple started host-

ing "fifth quarters" after Friday night high school football games. The gatherings "just explode with kids," and on Monday nights, they host "more serious" youth group meetings with young people who "want to know about the Lord." They emphasize, though, that Common Threads doesn't require church-going; it's a safe space for everyone. Denise elaborates, "It's cool how God has always involved us in community efforts, it's just hasn't ever been about 'come to our church,' it's, it's, it's about coming together and doing the work of the Lord together."

Earl and Denise spend Friday nights hanging out casually with the kids, sitting down for conversations when they look lonely, answering questions that they bring up. Earl involves some of the young men in projects around the grounds, teaching them to use tools. They feel "heartbroken" listening to young people who say they just don't like to be at home, with their families. For Earl and Denise, the central problem to tackle is the lack of familial "stability" and a loss of core values: "It's our only true hope," Denise explains. In a culture of instability, everyone feels empty, and "Jesus Christ is steadfast…. He is the only thing that can fill that hole." We have spent entire semesters critiquing "family values," and so we have to work to keep listening. Denise goes on, "Our hearts' desire is that we're always, unapologetically, willing to share what this is truly about here … [B]ut we know full well that, that's going to prevent some people from coming here, but at the same time we haven't found that happening yet." Earl explains the inspiration for their name, referring to the Bible to explain that in Romans, Paul says that the common thread between Christians and non-Christians is a "yearning … to get back to God." They're trying to fight the perception among some around town that they're "the Christian place," though. A few have asked what they're going to do if "the bad kids" show up, and they're adamant: they want the bad kids too. If they're of legal age, they can smoke on the grounds, and Earl and Denise tread cautiously as they work to support kids while giving them—and their parents—space to make decisions about what's best. Denise says, "it's about love and grace and forgiveness. It's not about judgmentalism and we only want certain kids here."

Our student is curious and inspired by the unfamiliar, uneasy connection we have made. Deborderization, turns out, is intriguing, even exhilarating. He wants to go back to Common Threads for the Friday night gatherings, but public transportation is nearly non-existent, so getting there feels impossible. Earl immediately offers to drive out to pick him up; it's probably 30 minutes, round trip. The

next day they drive over together in Earl's old blue pickup truck, chatting about all the ways the community has donated to Common Threads, time, money, materials. Our student returns from this experience awakened. He can't wait to spend more time with the kids from the Youth Cafe. Cameron, one of the Friday night regulars, was waiting to welcome him and immediately took him under his wing, introducing our student to the other youth, telling him about his passion for Common Threads, and simply sharing his experiences. A few other youth joined Cameron and our student, and they spent the evening chatting about their lives. Our student reports back, he can't believe how nice and welcoming everyone was, and he learned so much more about this community. He's floored. A new energy hovers around him: he feels tuned into this place, more familiar with the people, intimately allied with their worries. The group wanted to talk, were ready to relate. Their community feels under siege. Money problems are everywhere, folks are burned out, heroin has stolen too many lives.

Make Kin

Our flailing about in response to our crisis scenes—Trump, the slow and unbearable death of youth, schools, jobs, cities, the planet, hope itself— is sometimes, as Donna Haraway (2016) points out, what Kim Stanley Robinson called in *2312*, "The Dithering … a state of indecisive agitation" (Stanley Robinson cited in Haraway 2016, 102). In exigent times, though, what's called for is "staying with the trouble." "Staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present," Haraway explains, "not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (1). For the incomprehensible devastations we are witnessing, human and nonhuman alike, demand an unwavering commitment to the ongoingness of life, to this thick and transitional present.

Haraway tells us that staying with the trouble is about nurturing our capacities for "making kin":

> Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplace, entangled and worldly. Alone, in our separate kinds of expertise and experience, we know both too much and too little, and so we succumb to despair or to hope, and neither is a sensible attitude. Neither despair nor hope is tuned to the senses, to mindful matter, to material semiotics, to mortal earthlings in thick copresence (94).

What we were doing at Common Threads was "making oddkin," finding ways of tuning into "thick copresence," even as our theories and infrastructures summoned us to turn our backs. As Haraway insists, we must become what she calls chthonic ones: "[r]eplete with tentacles, feelers," and having "no truck with ideologues" (2). "Kin is an assembling sort of word," says Haraway (103). New conjunctures need new assemblages, demand a slowed-down becoming-with that leaves us vulnerable, uncertain. This work is the opposite of developing a thick skin. But it also envelops us in the thick ongoingness—protective, murky, promising, like hot compost piles.

We are living and working in troubled, transitional times: "unnecessary killing" and "necessary resurgence" are happening before our eyes (Haraway 2016, 1). In the brokenness of the world, previous affiliations and attachments are coming unhinged. Folks are "flailing," "dithering," trying to figure out what might make for a more liveable life, open, perhaps, to new forms, genres, common infrastructures. But emerging conjunctures aren't readily nameable; they must be sensed and nurtured before they can be known. The most vital work to be done, therefore, is feeling work, care work, temp work. Desiring the mundane, meandering and attuning, stepping out of(f)line, occupying everyday thresholds, staying with the trouble, making kin in the heart of ambivalences and uncertainties that make up everyday life with other people—this is how we might cultivate the materials we need to make a new world.

Endnotes

1. See Berlant's excellent discussion of "genre flailing' and "critical humorlessness" in Berlant, L. Genre Flailing. *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*. 1 (2), pp. 156-162.

2. This essay was written well before COVID-19. Currently we are wondering how this prolonged moment of uncertainty and crisis might be engendering new sensibilities of interconnection, of what might and must, be possible. How might shutting down have opened up new spaces for attention to shift and worlds to reshape?

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